



Pray the Devil Back to Hell Discussion Guide

Director: Gini Reticker

Year: 2008

Time: 72 min

You might know this director from:
In the Company of Women (2004)

FILM SUMMARY

People can get used to living with anything, adjusting to the most inhumane circumstances. For the women of Liberia, however, enough was enough. They had known civil war since 1989, and by the early 2000s they “were so desperate for peace,” as the leading figure of the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement Leymah Gwobee stated.

After having a vivid dream of bringing the women of her church together to pray for peace, Gwobee did just that. The domino effect of her non-violent, all-encompassing approach sent waves through the community, across the land, even extending outside of Liberia. Christians, Muslims, mothers, grandmothers, homeless, wealthy, even the politically unengaged joined forces to demand peace for the people of a war-torn nation.

Through archival footage and interviews with many of the women involved in the movement, PRAY THE DEVIL BACK TO HELL charts the progression of peace in Liberia, from initial church meetings to the women’s involvement in bringing both the corrupt government of Charles Taylor and the unruly rebel forces to the negotiating table, to their support of Africa’s first elected female head of state in the form of Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. At times horrific, the film presents the brutal implications of war and the heroic, life-altering capacities of coming together to create change.

PRAY THE DEVIL BACK TO HELL is essential viewing for anyone doubting women’s potential, as well as for any individual wondering if non-violent efforts are in vain. By finding power and wielding it peacefully, the women of Liberia set a global example that through devoted, non-violent actions the course of history can be altered.

FILM THEMES

VIOLENCE VS. NON-VIOLENCE

In an incessant quest for power, prestige, and wealth, the Liberian government and opposing rebel forces turned to violence, taking up arms against one another and sucking the country's citizens into a whirlwind of suffering. At the mercy of other's greed, the average Liberian was subjected to insurmountable violence. Along came the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, a non-violent movement aimed at turning the tide by subscribing to an entirely different rule book, one where peace is the goal, equality the keyword, and non-violence the way. Violence breeds violence, thus nothing but continued war is inevitable until the cycle is interrupted. True peace, as shown by these women, is only possible through non-violent actions.

UNITED WE STAND

Regardless of religious affiliations, political views or social class, every woman in Liberia was subjected to the brutalities of war, the effects of which had far greater implications than any differences in belief. People were starving, children ordered to kill, women raped, thousands dead, all in the name of war. By gaining a holistic view to the situation, setting aside individual differences, and coming together in the name of peace, Liberian women proved that even the unthinkable is possible. In the words of Etweda Cooper, "If we had not had different women from different walks of life banding together, we may not have been able to solve the problem." Under the banner of peace, the masses moved mountains.

PEACE, THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE

As the women fighting for peace sat day in day out at the fish market donning white, holding their placards, making a stand against the insanity of war, people questioned how they could be sacrificing their work and families. In their minds, all had already been taken from them and absolutely nothing was possible until a true, lasting peace was implemented. There was no food to be eaten, school to be taught, homes to be maintained, or work to be done other than striving for peace for all throughout the country. For them, war had taken away all dignity and left the nation in a state of fear and desperation. If they were to carry on to the best of their abilities surviving in such an environment, they would continue be pawns in the game of war. Peace was their ultimate sacrifice.

MEN VS. WOMEN

From a conventional standpoint, men are more prone to violence than women. Historically, men are the ones to wage war and control new political or geographical territory. On the other hand, women are historically caretakers, nurturers, and life-givers. With this in mind, the power of men is quite visible, a clear force physically expressed throughout the world. In order to bring about change in this male-instigated, male-dominated world, women had to locate their power. Men had started the war and women saw themselves as the only possible agents to end it. By acting in direct opposition to the examples being set by men, women peacefully came together and rewrote the rule book.

“We did the unimaginable.”

Leymah Gbowee

“Can the bullet pick and choose? Does the bullet know Christian from Muslim?”

Vaiba Flomo

“Peace is a process. It's not an event. When the guns are put down, we have to continue to build peace. We have to accept our combatants into our midst.”

Women's peace movement activist

FILM FACTS:

- PRAY THE DEVIL BACK TO HELL was nominated for a number of awards, including a Black Reel award, two awards from the International Documentary Association, and a Satellite Award. The film won Best Documentary at the Tribeca Film Festival and an Alliance of Women Film Journalists' Award for Humanitarian Activism.
- While visiting Liberia to see if there was any way she could support President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's leadership, Producer Abigail Disney learned about the women's involvement in the peace process, which gave her the idea for the film. She approached Director Gini Reticker, a filmmaker known for her focus on women's issues, particularly in Africa. Disney self-financed the film and was set on not having a narrator, stating "I was absolutely militant against it because these women have seen themselves spoken for in so many ways and so many times, and often not in a way that reflects who they really are and what they're really about."
- Leymah Gbowee received a Master of Arts in Conflict Transformation from Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia in 2007.
- 85% of Liberians are Christian, 12% are Muslim, and the other 3% practice traditional religions or uphold no religious beliefs. The Liberian Constitution provides for religious freedom.
- President Sirleaf assumed office in 2006 and remained in power as of 2015. She is a Methodist.
- Since the 2003 peace deal was struck for Liberia, the United Nations has maintained a peacekeeping presence in the nation. An initial 15,250 military personnel were sent to Liberia in September 2003. As of December 2014, that number had been reduced to 5,838 uniformed personnel, along with 397 international civilian personnel and 194 UN volunteers.
- PRAY THE DEVIL BACK TO HELL featured as one of the films in a five-part PBS series entitled "Women, War & Peace." The other films were "I Came to Testify" about Bosnia, "Peace Unveiled" about Afghanistan, "The War We Are Living" about Colombia, and "War Redefined," a collection of interviews with women challenging the view that war and peace is a man's domain, including interviews with Leymah Gbowee.
- In 2011, Leymah Gbowee was one of three women awarded the Nobel Peace Prize - the other two were Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Yemeni politician Tawakkul Karman - "for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women's rights to full participation in peace-building work."
- As of 2015, Africa had seen three women elected as heads of state: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia, Joyce Banda in Malawi, and Catherine Samba-Panza in the Central African Republic.
- There were approximately 250,000 child soldiers in the world as of 2015, the majority in Africa.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Invest your energy and attention in putting women in more positions of power. The National Democratic Institute works on an international basis on numerous female empowerment programs.
2. As the women of Liberia demonstrated, non-violence is a very effective and long withstanding way to peace. Get involved with the Non-Violence Project Foundation to help expand upon their mission.
3. Join Child Soldiers International to put an end to the recruitment of children as agents of war.
4. Help extend peace throughout the African continent by joining the international community behind the Coalition for Peace in Africa. They offer plenty of ways to get involved.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.