



Liberia's joint Nobel Peace Prize winners - activist Leymah Gbowee, centre, and President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, right - met earlier this month in the country's

capital, Monrovia. The pair shared this year's peace prize with Yemen's Tawakkul Karman.

Photograph by: Issouf Sanogo, AFP, Getty Images, Montreal Gazette; Postmedia News

For a moment earlier this month, the announcement of one of the world's most prestigious awards felt more like a quiz: how many women does it take to win the Nobel Peace Prize? Three, this year.

If there was a quiz, it would have to be about how many years it takes between female laureates for the Nobel committee to notice again that women exist.

Bertha von Suttner was the first woman to be awarded the peace prize, in 1905. Twenty-six years later, the American Jane Addams won. Then there was a gap of 15 years before peace activist Emily Green Balch, also an American, received the prize. It took another 30 years before the Nobel committee elected to highlight the contribution to peace of Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan of Northern Ireland.

Starting in the 1970s, the pace picked up a bit. Mother Teresa won in 1979 for her missionary work in India, and Sweden's Alva Myrdal, who fought for arms control, won in 1982. Twice there have been back-to-back female laureates: Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in 1991 followed by Guatemalan human rights activist Rigoberta Menchu Tum in 1992; and Iranian lawyer Shirin Ebadi in 2003 and Kenyan conservationist Wangari Maathai the following year. (U.S. anti-landmine campaigner Jody Williams won in 1997.)

But this year's winners - Liberia's Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee and Yemen's Tawakkul Karman - emerged only after a seven-year gap. Maybe that's why there were three of them - to make up for the prolonged snub of women.

Thorbjorn Jagland, the former Norwegian prime minister who is the head of the Nobel Peace Prize committee, was at pains to underline the importance of women in promoting peace. "We cannot achieve democracy and lasting peace in the world unless women obtain the same opportunities as men to influence developments at all levels of society," Jagland said. To its credit, the committee used the prize deliberately and politically, saying it hoped it would "help to bring an end to the suppression of women that still occurs in many countries." Countries caught up in the Arab Spring, where women first led but now are being pushed into the background, could not mistake this message. It was a warning that the world is watching.

Also to its credit, the Nobel committee chose three inspirational laureates. Africa's first democratically elected female president, Johnson Sirleaf in 2006, took over a country with a government mired in corruption and infrastructure verging on collapse, and kept it from sliding back into chaos. She stayed true to women as she governed. As Matilda Parker, vice-chair of the Liberian Unity Party's women's congress, pointed out last week, Johnson Sirleaf, currently fighting for reelection, established a special court to hear rape cases and made rape a crime for which an accused could not be freed on bail. Rape was a favoured means of oppression by Liberia's ousted warlords.

Leymah Gbowee is a grassroots organizer who mobilized Liberian women "across ethnic and religious dividing lines," the Nobel committee wrote. If Johnson Sirleaf is an example of a politically powerful woman, Gbowee shows the ability of ordinary women to take on the rebuilding of civil society, working with refugees and former child soldiers.

Tawakkul Karman is the committee's stand-in for all the women who took to the streets in the Arab uprisings against totalitarian regimes.

The Nobel committee's message is clear: without women's participation, peace and democracy remain elusive. The danger is that with this prize, the onus has shifted onto women to make sure they are included. It is a battle women cannot win on their own. They need the help of institutions such as the United Nations.

But there is little reason for optimism here. No women have been appointed chief peace mediators in UN-sponsored peace talks, according to UN Women. And despite the fact that women and girls are targeted as a tactic of war, out of 300 peace agreements since the end of the Cold War, only 18 have addressed sexual violence. Of \$77 billion the UN budgeted to meet

post-conflict needs in eight areas, less than eight per cent was allocated for women's needs.

Praise is fine; concrete reinforcement is better.

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