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## Seven Who Topple Tyrannies

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WeNews correspondent

Profiles of seven outstanding leaders dedicated to improving women's lives: Leymah Gbowee, Sharon Hanshaw, Cristi Hegrans, Joan Holmes, Kate Kendell, Daisy Khan and Rebekah Kiser.

(WOMENSENEWS)-- 21 LEADERS FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

### Leymah Gbowee, Mobilizer of Peace

"War erupted when I was 17, fresh out of high school," says peace activist Leymah Gbowee of the brutal conflicts that shook Liberia in the past two decades. "The anger, the pain, the trauma, was not just for one year or one month. I needed to do something to make a difference."



Leymah Gbowee

Credit: Matt Styer

Gbowee brought together several dozen women in 2002 to form a group to end the war. "Women are the ones that bear the greatest burden," she says. "We are also the ones who nurture societies."

The women were determined to have peace and made their sit-ins and blockades a constant reminder to the government of Charles Taylor that they would not stand down. Eventually, Taylor agreed to a meeting, and promised to enter peace talks with rebel groups.

Gbowee and the women followed the negotiations and stood vigil outside. But seven weeks passed and no cease-fire. The women lost patience, so they surrounded the building, locked their arms, and informed the men with a steely resolve that they would be held hostage until a deal was struck. The women continued their work during the transitional period, becoming actively involved in the disarmament of fighters and preparing for elections.

One of Gbowee's proudest accomplishments was getting Muslim women and Christian women in Liberia to come together. They mobilized activists in nine of Liberia's 15 provinces, encompassing over 2,000 women, and their efforts to support Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's successful campaign to become president of Liberia and the first elected female head of state in Africa.

After the elections in 2005, Gbowee earned a master's degree in conflict transformation and peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University, in

Harrisonburg, Va. In 2006, with two colleagues--Thelma Ekiyor and Ecoma Alaga--she started the Women Peace and Security Network Africa, based in Accra, Ghana. The organization promotes women's strategic participation and leadership in peace and security governance throughout the continent.

They work with women in Liberia, the Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Sierra Leone--four nations wracked by conflict or clashes--on peace activism, literacy and electoral politics.

"The classical idea of security is a threat to the state," she says. "What we are saying is in order to address security issues and peace issues we need to look at the human component and women need to be involved in these discussions."

But the peace work also shifts gender dynamics. "Women have the drive to do things that never have been done before. It is the springboard that enables them to say, 'I want to go back to school, to be economically empowered.' A lot of women can eloquently say what their needs are now."

### **Sharon Hanshaw, Take-Charge Responder to Katrina**

After Hurricane Katrina hit Biloxi, Miss., a group of 50 women began meeting at a funeral home. Sharon Hanshaw had owned her own hair salon, which was damaged beyond repair, and she didn't think of the group's meetings as a long-term arrangement.

She devoted herself to repairing the damage and drifted toward activism.



Sharon Hanshaw

Soon, the women at the funeral home formed Coastal Women for Change and the members asked Hanshaw to be executive director. Although daunted by the skills she'd need to run a nonprofit, she was humbled and took the chance to learn, drawing on her own childhood as the daughter of a respected Baptist preacher who instilled in her an ethic of helping others in need.

The hurricane is gone, but Coastal Women for Change remains. Hanshaw hopes that as their profile rises and they raise more money she will be able to go out into the street more and speak with people about their problems, leaving the organizing to others. She also wants to offer a decent salary and insurance to employees. The group is currently funded by a small grant and the efforts of volunteers.

The Coastal Women for Change office is in Biloxi's Ward 2, a place Hanshaw says has been "left behind" since Katrina. The group offers support groups for the elderly, teens and single parents, and facilitates training for child-care providers. Hanshaw finds that when she speaks with people in the community about what's needed most, it's often such basics as employment and a roof over their heads.

"The government doesn't want poor people to survive," says Hanshaw. "People come in with nowhere to live."

Women have a special mission and a special opportunity in the wake of the crisis, she says. As much as it is about repairing the coast, it's also about enabling a new group of voices. "Men didn't always listen to women. We have to put our foot down and say, listen!"

The women in her group, she says, never thought they could have access to the mayor, to official forums, to lawmakers. But now, among other victories, members have gained several seats on the mayor's subcommittees in Biloxi.

"I want voices to be heard," Hanshaw says. "I want women to know that people hear them."

### **Ida B. Wells Award Winner Cristi Hegranes, Raiser of Women's Voices**

Cristi Hegranes couldn't escape the idea that her definition of journalism was different than the journalism she had practiced on a daily basis as a foreign correspondent and reporter in San Francisco.

She recalled a moment in Nepal when she was talking to a local woman and decided to hand her pen and paper over, asking her to narrate her own story.

From encounters like these, Hegranes dreamed up the idea of a nonprofit that would enable women in developing regions to become reporters and produce fair journalism that accurately reflected their lives and issues.



Cristi Hegranes

"I realized a women-centered program would do the most for disseminating information and empowering the community," she says.

With only her determination, she founded the Press Institute for Women in the Developing World in 2006, running it out of a loft above her Bay Area apartment.

Hegranes quit her job at the San Francisco Weekly and put together a business plan, surpassing her initial goals by raising \$250,000 in 18 months, more than twice what she planned.

"It's an idea whose time has come," she says. "Globally, people are hungry for information that comes with no strings attached."

A board of 12 volunteers helped her start a journalism training program in rural Mexico serving mostly indigenous women and later another program in Nepal. When they interview applicants for the five slots in each location, Hegranes says there is a "line around the block."

Hegranes designed a weeklong journalism curriculum that emphasizes the basics of news and feature reporting as well as developing self-awareness and eliminating bias. The women then have a six-month period of beginning reporting, where they work extensively on their first stories--writing, reporting, editing and re-writing--and a sixth-month advanced stage. After that, they are hired as senior reporters by the Press Institute.

Their reporters give stories away to local radio stations to help spread news beyond the literate and have gained access to space in some national and local media. They also have a newswire online.

Hegranes says the Press Institute also changes women's lives and lifts them out of poverty. "The unemployed, street workers, domestic laborers; they live in a society where they are utterly disrespected," says Hegranes, who is 27. "I'm blown away every day to see them choose journalism and use it to elevate themselves."

### **Joan Holmes, Feeder of Women's Futures**

In the mid-1990s during a trip to India for The Hunger Project, Joan Holmes read a report called "The Asian Enigma" that changed her life. It detailed how child malnutrition rates are highest in South Asia and the reason "was rooted deep in the soil of inequality between men and women," she recalls.

From that time, enabling women to have a voice in decisions that affect their own lives became the top priority and a driving force for Holmes, the founding president of The Hunger Project.



Joan Holmes

Founded in 1977 in New York, The Hunger Project works with women and men in the developing world to end their own hunger on a sustainable basis. For the past decade, recognizing and empowering women as the key change agents has been its main focus.

For example, in Bangladesh, National Girl Child Day was created by The Hunger Project. It is celebrated every year on Sept. 30 when "the entire country is mobilized to recognize and honor the value of little girls," says Holmes. "There were 2,500 events last year."

In India, The Hunger Project trains rural women who serve in local government. Holmes recalls standing at the door of a meeting and watching women come in with their faces covered by their saris, women who were normally identified as the "mother of," the "sister of" or the "daughter of" someone else. As they were addressed by their first names, they cried at finally being recognized as an individual in their own right.

The Hunger Project has also created the HIV/AIDS and Gender Inequality Workshop in Africa. More than 400,000 people have participated in these sessions that enable women and men come to understand how gender inequality fuels the spread of the deadly virus.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Holmes pioneered a training, credit and savings program for female farmers, who produce 80 percent of Africa's food. The small loans allowed them to provide for families and change their lives.

"The good news is there is a lot of rhetoric about the importance of women," says Holmes, "but a vast majority of programs aren't consistent with the rhetoric."

The challenge to the international community is clear, she adds, when the world only targets 0.1 percent of international aid to directly assist women and girls. Holmes says that rural women in the developing world must be directly targeted as agents of change, otherwise hunger and poverty will persist and hopes and dreams for a world community will never be realized.

### **Kate Kendell, Galvanizer for Lesbian Equity**

Growing up in Utah, where religion was entwined with government policies, Kate Kendell learned to "appreciate the importance of the state and the oppressiveness of the state."



Later, as a staff counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union, Kendell fought for separation of church and state and litigated on behalf of prisoners and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth. She felt inspired by the way the progressive movement of the late '80s and early '90s worked.



Kate Kendell

"Any one community is too small to have any impact on social justice or political discourse," she says. "So gay folks work with poverty advocates or pro-choice activists; we all worked on racial issues."

She found her lifelong calling in 1994 when she moved to San Francisco to work for the National Center for Lesbian Rights. She became executive director in 1996. In the 11 years since, the center has taken on some of the most pivotal cases involving LGBT rights, with both victories and losses that alerted the nation to obstacles facing LGBT citizens.

In one case in 1996--a custody battle between a lesbian mother and a father who was a convicted murder--the court sided in favor of the father.

"That case really galvanized a national conversation and put a human face and unbelievable narrative around how deep-seeded homophobia can be when it comes to parents and custody," said Kendell, who believes such a decision would never be handed down today.

Another high-profile case came by representing the partner of a woman killed in a notorious dog-mauling in California in 2001. "It was the first time ever in this country that a same-sex partner had been granted the legal recognition to sue for a wrongful death," says Kendell. The gruesome, tragic nature of the case captivated Americans' attention and "was important in educating the public about how marginal lesbian and gay relationships were under the law."

In 2004, when San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom issued marriage licenses to same-sex couples, the National Center for Lesbian Rights jumped into the fray, fending off legal assaults by anti-gay groups and mounting a defense after the marriages were halted. The case is now pending before the California Supreme Court.

Kendell says she is optimistic that the passage of time will only help her cause.

"The more Thanksgiving dinners made lively by gay and lesbian family members coming home and being themselves, the more we move public opinion," she says.

### **Daisy Khan, Uniter of the Wise**

"I felt that 9/11 forced the 'Muslim woman' identity on me," says Daisy Khan, executive director of the New York-based American Society for Muslim Advancement. "Before, I had simply been a professional career woman. But the American public increasingly saw me through a politicized lens."

Her response was to create the Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equity, known as WISE. In November 2006, the American Society for Muslim



Daisy Khan

Advancement convened over 175 women to launch WISE as a global Muslim women's network and movement.

"Many Muslim women around the world are denied their God-given rights. Literally," says Khan, who was born in Kashmir, India. "We wanted to show that Muslim women are active in their communities and that Islam positively inspires their activism. We then wanted to convene these women on a scale that would draw worldwide attention to their efforts, which have been going on throughout the world, but which have not received the notice that they deserve."

To that end, Khan ensured that WISE would represent the diversity of the Muslim world and include women from different backgrounds--national, professional, economic, ideological and theological.

Members include secular Muslim authors, Muslim women's rights activists, traditionalists and a few women from other religions. Khan says the journey of Jewish and Christian women in America can provide some lessons for Muslim women who want to express their faith in a modern context while living within a traditional religious framework.

WISE plans to create a Muslim Women's Fund for Social Justice to financially support projects aimed at empowering Muslim women at the grassroots level. WISE also plans to establish a global Shura Council comprised of Muslim female scholars and activists well versed in the language of Islamic law. This Council will generate a space in which Muslim women are able to actively hold dialogues, debate and collaborate with scholars on issues of Muslim women's rights and responsibilities.

The other important task of WISE is to positively influence the Western, non-Muslim perception of Muslim women. Khan says that many female Muslim activists and scholars feel overlooked when the media questions the lack of moderate Muslims in society. But WISE's short history gives her tremendous hope that they can successfully tackle a "crisis of global magnitude."

"I am deeply inspired by the women of faith before us. Their triumphs give me hope that Muslim women today will drive the movement for positive change forward," she says.

### **Rebekah Kiser, Healer of the Wounded**

Becky Kiser celebrated her birthday in December 2003, by taking a trip to Ethiopia, eager to see the ancient sites. She ended up close to death, battling typhoid. A tour guide saved her life by taking her to get medical help. When she later returned to the country, she wanted to thank him.

It turned out he needed some help in return: His sister had developed a fistula, a post-pregnancy tear in the excretory organs. "It broke my heart," Kiser recalls. Fistulas are easily repaired but millions of women in the developing world have been debilitated and left incontinent for lack of medical treatment.



Rebekah Kiser

After Kiser took the guide's sister to the only hospital in Addis Ababa that treats fistula, she was impressed with the facility, and was inspired

to help other women waiting for care.

Back at home, Kiser, a regional sales director for Mary Kay, told her story to colleagues and friends; they agreed to help raise money to aid women with fistula.

She returned with several thousand dollars and "realized it was illegal to do that without being a nongovernmental organization," she says. "It took me 13 trips to Ethiopia until we got that last signature we needed. Everyone thought I was insane."

The first phase of her project opened two years ago in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital. Kiser called it "The Trampled Rose."

It's a group home that so far has served over 600 women waiting for surgery, providing them shelter, food and, most important, basic literacy and education, including how to care for their fistula and preserve their hygiene.

Some of the women learn how to "spin silk, sell baskets, open a beauty salon, run a chicken farm," says Kiser, and they can earn a livelihood. They also learn that their condition is purely medical, and not a curse or something worth a stigma, and they bring that idea back to women in their rural towns.

Kiser splits her time between Ethiopia and her hometown of Colorado Springs, where--in between selling makeup and training other saleswomen--she holds occasional fundraisers for The Trampled Rose, directing all funds to the staff in Ethiopia.

Next, she plans to implement running buses from rural areas to the hospital in Addis Ababa.

"These are brilliant women with hope for the future," says Kiser. "I think it's a stroke of luck that we were not born there."

*Sarah Seltzer is a writer for Women's eNews in New York City.*

Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at [editors@womensenews.org](mailto:editors@womensenews.org).

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**For more information:**

Women Peace and Security Network Africa (WIPSEN):  
<http://www.wipsen-africa.org/>

Coastal Women for Change:  
<http://www.cwcbiloxi.org/>

Press Institute for Women in the Developing World:  
<http://www.piwdw.org/>

Joan Holmes, The Hunger Project:  
<http://www.thp.org/people/jh.htm/>

KENDELL: National Center for Lesbian Rights:  
<http://www.nclrights.org/>

American Society for Muslim Advancement:  
[http://www.asmasociety.org/index\\_splash.html](http://www.asmasociety.org/index_splash.html)

The Trampled Rose:

<http://www.trampledrose.org/Index.htm>

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