

Testimony by Hauwa Ibrahim
Visiting Scholar, Radcliffe Institute
Harvard University
before the
U.S. Senate Subcommittee on International Operations and Organizations, Human Rights, Democracy and Global
Women's Issues

Hearing on: Combating Violence and Discrimination Against Women: A Global Call for Action
The Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room 419
June 24th at 10:00 am

I want to begin with my sincere appreciation for this invitation to testify before your Subcommittee this morning not only because of the recent tragedies in Northern Nigeria but also because of my longstanding commitment to combating discrimination and gender based violence on an International scale. My presence here is meaningful not simply because I have the opportunity to speak on behalf of the "Chibok girls" – but more so, because serendipity and age are the only two things that distinguish me from the 219 still missing girls. I was born and lived most of my life in Gombe state in northern Nigeria. I was a child in a poor family and raised in a Muslim home. As was the local practice, I was given away in marriage at age 10. Being the "stubborn" child in my family, at 11 I ran away from home to a boarding school for girls. My family told me not to come back but I was determined to get an education. I eventually became a lawyer—the first woman from my state and returned there to practice law. However, since the courts in northern Nigeria use sharia law women were not allowed to speak, so I had to pass notes to male lawyers to represent my clients, including women sentenced to death by stoning for adultery. Most of my cases were pro bono helping women and children gain justice primarily through informal negotiations outside the courts. Today I am a visiting lecturer at Harvard University but all this happened accidentally. The life situation of the kidnapped schoolgirls, who are most likely enduring living hell, is one for which my empathy and concern is boundless.

On April 14, Boko Haram came to Chibok with the intention of kidnapping the girls. To distract attention from this nefarious purpose, the Boko Haram first attacked the village and a nearby military base. They arrived at the school at 11:45 at night, the girls were all in bed and the men had official uniforms and trucks and buses. They told the girls that Boko Haram was about to attack the school and they should leave with them. Then they proceeded to steal all the food and kitchen equipment and burn down the school. This is how Boko Haram operates. As has been reported, there were 330 girls boarding at the school in order to take the national exam for higher education. 219 of these girls are still missing. 130 boys also took exams at the school but did not board overnight. I am serving on the President's Commission along with government representatives and representatives of other non-governmental organizations. I was one of the few people appointed by name as a result of my experience of living and working in the North, helping women in the community to secure justice under Shariah law.

In order to fully understand the situation of the kidnapping of the Chibok girls, it is important to note the vast differences between the southern and northern parts of Nigeria. The South has benefited from development and local resources with infrastructure and modernization, including a greater public role for women. Girls receive an education and while challenges persist, the opportunities for a girl growing up in the South are vastly different than in the North. Though I don't have exact figures, I can report that the majority of boys in the North receive an education but the proportion of girls in school is precious few. Girls are expected to marry young and as I was told at home, "The heaven for a woman is at your husband's feet." That is partly why these girls and their families were so determined to take the national exam which is the gateway to higher education. And that is also why I have been determined to use the opportunities and education that I have received to help the people in the region, particularly women and girls.

Violence against these girls, against women, and our children, is simply *unacceptable*. I am glad and hopeful, as the United States has not left the issue unresolved. Both in response to our own hearts and minds that refuse to accept violence against the kidnapped girls and to the mourning and grief of the girls' families and friends, the

United States has continued and will hopefully continue to fight against violence and for peace. Especially the comprehensive leadership by the United States to support efforts to build the capacity of local women's and other human rights organizations to fight violence against women and girls by committing financial resources to such efforts. Future joint efforts by the international community should not simply fight violence - they should insist on full transparency, accountability and willingness to share intelligence, and uphold integrity of budgetary decisions.

Beyond the scope of the Chibok kidnapping, the northern region of Nigeria is undergoing its toughest moments, with over 70% youth unemployment, widespread abject poverty, desolation and hopelessness. In adverse situations, religion and religious extremism become dangerous opium to the hopeless. It is clear that perverse religious indoctrination by Boko Haram, among others, is anything but Islamic. We have seen atrocities. We have witnessed horrific incidences, slaughtering of fellow human being in the name of doing God's work. We are shocked by this high scale destruction and perverse terrorism. We have grieved at the loss of loved ones. A situation where the abducted girls were separated from their parents, friends and love ones as well as from their religion has no place in Islam. In fact, the Quran 2:56 says "There shall be no compulsion in religion."

Against the various issues that we as an international community face, one goal we can support and reinforce is that of reduced violence. Amongst the various types of violence that undermine stability today, gender based violence has yet to be freed from the shackles of silence and suppression. The recent kidnapping of over 200 girls in Chibok, Borno State in northeastern Nigeria illustrated the scale of such gender-based violence and prompted a global call for action. Who is better suited for such a call to action than the United States of America? I believe that, as a *city upon a hill and a beacon of hope*, the United States has the full capability of combatting the recent rising tide of violence against women both domestically and internationally. And it is not only myself that sees the United States as a *city upon a hill* - throughout a meeting with people from 17 countries in Amman, Jordan last week at the invitation of HRH, Prince El-Hassan Bin Talal, no single moment passed without a positive reference to the United States.

In looking forward to long-term peace and stability, the various countries interested in peace and freedom should invest in cooperative technology pooling. Furthermore, the dire deficiency of manpower and appropriate counter terrorist training were both key issues during the Chibok kidnapping, and I believe that directing resources and funding towards military training and personnel recruitment (especially in countries facing such high terrorist activity) will reinforce stability and global peace.

I also believe that at the local level in Nigeria our human resources could be better used to stop the violence. When members of a village unite towards one cause, the commitment and love put forth by each individual member become a force to be highly reckoned with. I believe that, just as local intelligence and reliance on other local means of counter terrorism such as the civilian Joint Task Forces (JTF), comprising hunters, fishermen, cow rearers, should be fully utilized in future pursuits of stability and peace, establishing a communal safety net that would focus on the correct upbringing and teaching of children would both mitigate current insurgency manpower and principles and limit future influence of fundamentalist indoctrination.

Yet while even a single candle can defy the surrounding darkness, the international community has a rising sun and beacon of hope. While I believe that combatting gender-based violence should not end with just the passing of IVAWA and CEDAW, which I believe is sorely needed, the leadership of the United States in ensuring the passing of the International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA) and the ratification of CEDAW will undeniably pave a smoother path for future work against violence and will certainly make our hands-on work lighter. I strongly believe that ratification by the United States will make the treaty stronger and give it a higher status that will provide a greater incentive for Nigeria and other countries to make a more serious effort to end discrimination and violence against women and girls.

That though it looks dark and hopeless, and we are grieved by our inability to get the girls back, we will not give up, the sun will rise again, may be, even brighter.