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Alumni Profile

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ALUMNI PROFILE

Courtesy of Jeff Watts, American University



Ms. HAUWA IBRAHIM graduated from the Washington College of Law (WCL) in 2004. She studied international human rights, earning an LL.M. in Humanitarian Law and Human Development, and received a certificate from WCL's Academy on Human Rights and International Law. During her time at WCL she was also a Humphrey Fellow. She currently works for the Aries Law Firm in Abuja, Nigeria as a senior partner, as well as serving as a visiting professor at the Saint Louis University School of Law. She has been a practicing attorney for over 19 years. Since becoming a senior partner in 1999, Ms. Ibrahim has served as defense counsel in over 90 pro bono cases related to Shari'a law, including those of Amina Lawal and Safiya Hussaini. Ms. Ibrahim's many other achievements include authoring the first draft of the Constitution of the Pan African Lawyers Union (PALU) and serving as a consultant to the United Nations Development Program on widowhood practices in northern Nigeria. In 2005 Ms. Ibrahim was a Yale Fellow and during the same year won the European Parliament's top human rights award, the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

Ms. Ibrahim comes from a small village in the Gombe region of northern Nigeria.

Northern Nigeria — in contrast to the southern regions of the country that are religiously and economically diverse — is characterized by remote, agricultural villages and an overwhelming adherence to Islam and Shari'a law. Ms. Ibrahim was born into a culture that did not encourage education for girls beyond elementary school. Challenging the cultural norms, Ms. Ibrahim continued her education after high school by attending the University of Jos in Nigeria's middle belt, a teachers college for women, and law school. Regarding her education, Ms. Ibrahim says, "Knowing the law is a good thing. You can't fight for the law without knowing it. You have to be hungry and thirsty to know more." Ms. Ibrahim is one of only a few female lawyers practicing in northern Nigeria.

Shari'a law is the body of Islamic law based on Muslim principles of jurisprudence. For cultures that operate under Shari'a law, it is the system within which public and some private aspects of life are regulated. Much of Shari'a law, especially principles governing the rights of women, is extremely conservative, prohibitive, and even brutal. The traditional penalty for a woman found guilty of adultery is death by stoning.

In this context, Ms. Ibrahim represented Safiya Hussaini, a Nigerian woman convicted of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning on October 9, 2001. Ms. Hussaini received this sentence even after alleging that her pregnancy resulted from rape. The Shari'a Penal Code considers pregnancy outside of marriage sufficient evidence for a woman to be convicted of adultery. Ms.

Ibrahim obtained an acquittal for Hussaini by successfully arguing that the Shari'a law requires the Shari'a courts to respect the procedural and substantive rights guaranteed by Shari'a law and the Nigerian Constitution.

Immediately following the Hussaini case, Ms. Ibrahim learned of Amina Lawal's case. A Shari'a court in the Katsina State of northern Nigeria convicted Ms. Lawal, a 30-year-old Muslim woman, of adultery in March 2002. The court sentenced her to death by stoning as punishment for bearing a child out of wedlock. Ms. Ibrahim argued that the Shari'a Penal Code established certain rights, including the right to understand the charge in one's own language, the right to receive a properly constituted trial panel, the right to representation, and the right to recant a confession. Ms. Ibrahim ultimately won Ms. Lawal's acquittal by proving through her arrest and conviction that these rights had not been respected.

Ms. Ibrahim has represented, for free, more than 90 individuals in cases concerning Shari'a law. Although there has been tremendous international recognition and offers of support for Ms. Ibrahim's work, she has never accepted money or other assistance. "When I go into court all I have is my credibility," she explained. If she were to take money from western or international organizations, Ms. Ibrahim's credibility would be put in jeopardy in a Shari'a court. "The environment is different at home in every respect. It is unusual for a Northerner to leave. Most people don't know they even have a right to a lawyer and most of the cases I take are on appeal." When

asked if the Gombe region understands her international reputation, Ms. Ibrahim laughs, "My parents don't know."

Ms. Ibrahim has spread her desire for knowledge to others through her work as a part-time lecturer at the University of Abuja in Nigeria and, this year, as a visiting faculty member at the Saint Louis University School of Law. She says teaching in the United States is very different from her experience teaching in Nigeria. For instance, in Nigeria she taught a class in contract law to an average class size of 250 students. This year she is teaching the first class offered by Saint Louis University on the West African legal system.

Apart from her work as an educator, Ms. Ibrahim says her true passion will always be defending the voiceless. She has an ultimate calling, in a vocational sense, to represent the marginalized members of society. Although she enjoys her time as a professor because it allows her time for reflection, she says she is eager to return home and resume her practice. Ms. Ibrahim's work as a human rights attorney in northern Nigeria assists the region in embracing a culture of human rights in which the rule of law is respected. In addition to the 2005 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, Ms. Ibrahim's distinguished list of accolades includes the Eleanor Roosevelt Global Women's Rights Award, and the Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award from the American Bar Association's Commission on Women in the Profession. *HRB*

Jerald Hess, a J.D. candidate at the Washington College of Law, covers the Alumni Profile for the Human Rights Brief.