

Hauwa Ibrahim: A Champion of Human Rights

By Hannah Hayes

In 1999, the civilian government in northern Nigeria introduced Shari'a law into the courts. This strict Islamic code has affected women in particular, as well as the poor and the illiterate.

Human rights lawyer Hauwa Ibrahim of Lagos, Nigeria, received international attention when she defended Amina Lawal, a woman sentenced to be stoned to death for adultery who was eventually acquitted in September 2003. Ibrahim is the 2004 recipient of the ABA Commission on Women's Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award. She was a Humphrey Fellow at the Washington College of Law, American University, where she spoke with us about human rights in Nigeria.

You are one of just a few female barristers in northern Nigeria. How did you get there, and do you see more young women following in your footsteps?

I think it's changing slowly. I got there by accident; it was not in my family's plan that I should be educated.

I was supposed to get married just like any other girl who was religious. But my mother always complained because her own parents removed her from school at the age of 12 to be married, and that left a mark on me.

When I was a child in the small village of Hinnah, Gombe State, Nigeria, I saw for the first time [a photograph of] a woman with a graduation mortarboard and gown. The image of that young woman—educated, confident, and worldly—was burned into my conscience and became my living dream.

The case of Amina Lawal received international attention. How common is her situation?

Amina is like many women—powerless, voiceless, illiterate, vulnerable of the system, and very poor. Amina's case was one of 47 cases I have been involved with, and I've always asked myself why hers became so well known. I think one [reason] has to do with the fact that, after 9/11, there was a lot of focus on fundamentalists and people who were doing things beyond what people understand. Another is the involvement of international organizations, especially Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and television host Oprah Winfrey, who came here to interview me. But, generally speaking, Amina was just one of many cases, and it wasn't the worst. The other 46 cases I've been involved with started in 1999 with the new Shari'a in Nigeria that introduced the criminal element. We always had Shari'a in the northern part of Nigeria, but it was limited to issues of Islamic personal law—divorce, marriage, inheritance—and only applied to civil matters, not criminal matters. In 1999, we had the introduction of the criminal aspect of Shari'a, which introduced offenses and punishments. Now, if you if drink alcohol, you will be flogged; if you steal, you will have your limb amputated; if you kill in the process of stealing or any other way, you will be crucified; if you commit adultery, you will be stoned to death.

A lot of the sections of the new law conflict with the Nigerian Constitution. As in America, there should be a system of checks and balances.

We have a judiciary, a secretary, and a legislative position, but no one has gone to the legislative authority or the judiciary to ask what this section of the new law means in connection with the Constitution. I found myself a lawyer in a society where women are not allowed to say anything—they are just subjects and have little voice. As lawyers, we play our part, but I don't have any illusions that we've started anything yet. We still have so much to do, and we must continue what we started. And that's what I've set out to do.

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