

Hauwa Ibrahim
believes one person
can make a difference.
Here's why you
should believe her.



photo by Jay Fram

the lifesaver

You've never met Amina Lawal. She isn't your neighbor and you didn't pass her in the grocery store. A poor woman from the state of Katsina in northern Nigeria, she isn't anyone you'd have any reason to know. Yet because of one woman, the world became wrapped up in Amina Lawal's life, watching her fate unfold like a foreign soap opera. Because of one woman, this otherwise faceless individual became an instant poster child for injustice, bringing to light the suffering of countless others just like her. Because of one woman, Amina Lawal did not die.

BY STEFANIE ELLIS

She could have, though. She was, after all, sentenced to be buried up to her neck and stoned to death for having a child out of wedlock. Because she lives in a part of Nigeria where Islamic Sharia law was adopted for criminal cases in 2000, that's what the Sharia Penal Code of her state, Katsina, says should happen. One woman, however, had other ideas.

That woman is Hauwa Ibrahim, a human rights attorney from Nigeria, and she had plans to try and save Lawal's life by finding provisions in the law that would overturn the existing sentence. The plan was easier said than done, though. Ibrahim would not only have to stretch the scope of her research to determine what those provisions might be, but she would also have to stretch the minds of those in charge of upholding the laws by finding acceptance as a woman attorney in a Muslim court.

Many people might cave under such pressure, but Ibrahim approached the

challenges before her with an uncanny resolve. She isn't easily intimidated, though when you first meet her, it's difficult to imagine she could have within her the strength to stand up to thousands of years of tradition. Perhaps it's her unassuming demeanor, her soft-spoken voice or the fact that she never volunteers an opinion unless asked. Nothing about her screams "listen to me." If anything, she is more interested in helping others find their voice.

She has found some success in that endeavor, devoting most of her professional career to bettering the lives of those who, like Lawal, have been sentenced to unimaginable forms of punishment (and often death) under Sharia law. Ibrahim has served as defense counsel in over 90 pro bono Sharia-related cases since 2000. Lawal's case is, perhaps, her most famous, as it was the severity of the punishment that caught the attention of human rights organizations across the world.

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Soon, everyone from Texas to Tunisia learned about the woman lawyer from Nigeria who wanted to save the lives of people who had no voice. Opposition for Lawal's sentencing was so strong, that several campaigns were launched in an effort to convince the Nigerian courts to overturn their ruling. Even the Miss World beauty contest, which was to have been held in Nigeria in 2002, was cancelled as a form of protest. Despite having been interviewed hundreds of times in national media, Ibrahim has never kept a single clip. She doesn't hang her hat on past successes. She concerns herself, instead, with today rather than yesterday.

Still, yesterday, for Ibrahim, is both far away and uncomfortably close. Her upbringing in Hinnah, a village in the northern Nigerian state of Gombe, and ultimate rebellion from her prescribed way of life, follows her everywhere she goes. The memory of her father kicking her out at the age of 13, when she refused to marry in exchange for a 50-pound bag of salt, is, at times, as vivid as if it had just happened. So too is the day she realized, with aching certainty, that she didn't want to sell vegetables for the rest of her life. Instead, she wanted an education — an elusive concept for someone who was never even given a glimpse into what a better life might look like. When her father kicked her out, Ibrahim was sent to live with an uncle who allowed her to attend elementary school and later, a teachers college. Perhaps most vivid in her chronological memory, however, is the day she went to live with her sister in a town that had electricity — and a television. One evening, while watching television, she saw a woman (the state's information commissioner) who mentioned an interest in helping girls from Nigeria receive an education.

Armed early on with the knowledge that nothing worth having would be easy, Ibrahim would end up visiting the commissioner's office more than 30 times. She was never allowed inside. One day, though, after declaring her a "nuisance," the security guard granted her access if she promised never to return. Once inside, Ibrahim's doggedness eventually convinced the commissioner to send her, with a business card, bus money and no promises, to the registrar at the University of Jos. Though her grades in English were poor, she was relentless in her ability to persuade university officials, just as she persuaded

the commissioner, to give her a chance.

She was accepted into a remedial program, then the university, then law school. The credentials just kept coming after that. So too have the accolades. Already she's become the first non-American woman lawyer to receive the Margaret Brent Women Lawyers of Achievement Award from the American Bar Association's Commission on Women in the Profession, the Eleanor Roosevelt Global Women's Rights Award from the Feminist Majority Foundation, the Italian Government Human Rights Award and the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

Still, a little persistence with information commissioners and university officials proved no match for those responsible for upholding northern Nigeria's strict Sharia penal code. Despite post-law school jobs as a police detective, a prosecutor at the Ministry of Justice and, later, as a solo practitioner serving the poor, Ibrahim was still miles away from being accepted for her work — particularly in Sharia court, where women are not recognized as equals.

When she began work on her first case in 2000, she wasn't allowed to speak in court, so her defense was based on notes she passed back and forth to a man who read her words aloud.

After several weeks of frustration, Ibrahim did something unheard of — she decided to speak.

The judge was dumbfounded, yet allowed her a moment to make her point. Not wanting to push the envelope, Ibrahim said something innocuous and then sat back down, happy enough to know she was the first woman lawyer ever to be recognized in a Nigerian court under Sharia rule.

With time, and unprecedented acceptance addressing the court, she was able to defend Lawal herself, arguing that some of the charges against her were not fully proven under the Sharia Penal Code. She made a case for the fact that Lawal had not understood the charges since they were not given in her dialect, had not been caught in the act of adultery and was not represented by an attorney during her trial. On September 25, 2003, the highest Sharia court in the state of Katsina discharged and acquitted Lawal, and she was a free woman.



photo by Jay Fram

Victories like this are what Hauwa Ibrahim lives for, but even after all the lives she's saved, her own must surely be shadowed by a tiny black cloud. No one in her family has ever acknowledged her efforts.

"I know I'm operating in an environment that doesn't accept what I'm doing," says Ibrahim. "I'm quite used to it. My family thinks what I'm doing is wrong. I rebelled to go to school, to get something done in my community. I rebelled and married a white man, an act that has never been mentioned in my community (it's taboo because of the color of his skin). I have done everything on the negative of what I was brought up to do. If they don't accept me, I perfectly understand."

Despite her lack of acceptance, she refuses to turn her back on her culture.

"I don't spite my people," she says. "When I go back, I behave like a typical villager. I drink the water, eat the food and dress like my people. I want them to know I came from this place and have not changed. I want to send a message to the girls there that they can become something. My people fear they'll lose their values and culture like many people have in western society. I'm showing them you can have a western education and still be a part of your culture."

Ibrahim's message has not fallen on deaf ears.

"When I was growing up, when a woman gave birth, the men would say, 'Your wife has put to bed. Does she have a prostitute or a soldier?' A soldier is a symbol of strength and that's how people classified a male child. Now you don't hear that, which I think is a huge change. I've

even known a few people who have named their daughters after me. Some have even been insulted by the fact that they have boys. 'Look at Hauwa,' they say, 'I wish I had a girl like her.' These are all slight, but powerful changes. I hope that will help more of my people come to accept that women are not bad as they were once thought to be."

If just one thing can be learned from Ibrahim's tortuous path through life, it's that anything is possible with hard work and a lot of faith. And while everything we know about the world seems contrary to her belief that all of us are armed with the power to make the world a better place, when you hear the words escape her mouth, the idea seems perfectly possible.

"We, as individuals in any country, really do have what it takes to change the world for the better," she asserts. "I believe I'm one of the billions of people across the globe that can play my part. One part I've played is to speak out. I act. I do. I don't live for past glory. I always ask myself, 'What can I do today that is different?' All of us play different roles in our little corners of the world by either making the world a good place or a bad place."

You don't need ten or two or three people to make that difference, Ibrahim says. All you need is just one person to change their perspective.

"If you just smile at a person, even if he doesn't smile at you, you can be responsible for giving someone a good beginning to their day," she notes. "We need to know the power we have and we need to use it. We all have it. When we keep on doing that, the world will get better."