



Empowering Women to Lead
Hafsat Abiola-Costello
Nigeria

From an early age, Hafsat Abiola's parents had instilled in her the importance of sharing, and of helping others. Her father, Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola, came from humble beginnings, but when he became a successful businessman, he vowed to give back to people in communities like the one he had grown up in. He promoted equality and empowered people from different ethnicities and backgrounds by helping them to buy farms, start small businesses, receive an education, and take care of their families. During his life, he gave more than 3,000 scholarships to Nigerian students.

For her part, Hafsat's mother, Kudirat Abiola, had taught her that she must always take care of others and show people that she cared for them. "For her, simple things—like the way you greeted people and said goodbye to them—told a lot about a person's character," Hafsat remembers.

In 1993, when Hafsat was in her second year of study at Harvard University, her father became the first president to be elected after nearly a decade of military rule in Nigeria. Shortly after, he was sent to prison by Nigeria's junta government. Although he had won 60 percent of the vote, the military annulled the results and charged him with treason. His imprisonment triggered a wave of uprising and demonstrations, led by Hafsat's mother. Then, in 1996, when she was traveling through Lagos, the capital of Nigeria, in a car, she was assassinated.

Hafsat and her siblings were all in the United States when they heard the news. "We stood in a circle, and held hands," she remembers. "We just stood there, crying; then I said to my siblings 'We won't let her down.' And ever since that time we've been trying to make sure that we keep our word."

Two years later, Hafsat's father died in prison. Now it was completely up to Hafsat to look out for her younger siblings. And with both of her parents gone, she became even more motivated to fight for the rights of people everywhere. She decided that she wanted to focus especially on the vital work of empowering women that her mother had devoted her life to.

She created an NGO in her mother's memory, called the Kudirat Initiative for Democracy (KIND), with the purpose of empowering women to become successful leaders. KIND trains and supports women who want to run for public office, and provides resources for women who are victims of violence. Over the years, through her work, Hafsat has championed many initiatives for the women of Nigeria. For example, because of the high cost of prenatal care, many pregnant women do not visit doctors: and the maternal mortality rate in Nigeria is 630 per 100,000, more than 20 times as high as the rate in Europe or the United States, according to the World Health Organization. So Hafsat created a cash transfer project that helps poor women find healthcare facilities that will help them have safer pregnancies. KIND also strives to incorporate women into local, national, and global economic systems, transforming the power structure of the economy and empowering women.

Today Hafsat is one of the most prominent civil rights activists in Nigeria, and her leadership has grown to include all of Africa. She is the president of Women in Africa, an organization founded in 2017. This organization identifies and supports female entrepreneurs in all 54 African nations by giving them access to resources and training, and helping them to invest in female-led economic initiatives. In just three years, the initiative has had a tremendous impact by enabling women to come together and coordinate economic initiatives to drive an agenda.

Every year, WIA nominates one female entrepreneur from each African nation, recognizing their work reshaping Africa's economies. Zoussi Isabelle Ley is a female entrepreneur and the CMO of Complete Farmer, a Ghana-based farming platform that uses technology to help support innovative and ethical farms. Through an online site, consumers can connect directly with farmers, disrupting the current supply chain and ensuring farmers are treated better. Madina Youssouf Ismail created her own clothing business, Recy'design. The brand gives a second life to discarded fabric and materials, turning trash into trendy clothes. Her initiative has helped decrease waste from the textile industry in Djibouti.

In her role as president of Women in Africa, Hafsat focuses on initiatives to help women participate more fully in the economy. "The economy is the engine that powers the modern world," she says. "When women are involved in economic systems, we see greater gender equality in all other spheres. Women who have their own money are able to make healthier and more independent decisions. And they are able to more easily walk away from unsafe situations or relationships."

Hafsat likes to tell the story of Eleni Gabre-Madhin, an Ethiopian woman who decided to do something when her country was suffering famine in the late 1990s and early 2000s. She went to the United States to pursue a doctorate degree in agricultural management. After she had received her degree, she returned to Ethiopia and set up the country's first agricultural exchange. This program helps farmers meet directly with buyers, who purchase their products in a series of warehouses. With this direct connection, farmers are able to receive money for their products within 24 hours. Eleni's work has transformed the food system economy in Ethiopia, and has had a profound effect on the well-being of Ethiopian farmers. "This is the kind of change that I would like to see for women: building economies in a sustainable way," Hafsat says.

The Women in Africa initiative is preparing a new project that involves connecting indigenous communities, scientists, and government officials, to ensure that women's local and scientific knowledge shapes laws. This kind of coordination is especially important when combating climate change in African countries, since women and children are most affected. While it is generally accepted that it is important to listen to scientists, indigenous people can also help by sharing steps they use to minimize the damages caused by climate change. Enabling better communication can help to ensure that climate solutions take account of the different forms of knowledge within countries. "Within a given country, each community has a wealth of knowledge," Hafsat explains. "By connecting women's local and expert groups to their national governments, we can help ensure that climate legislation draws from all available sources and follows from an inclusive process of engagement." She adds, "Women are often good at having these kinds of conversations and at engaging communities, but in politics we're often sidelined."

As the president of Women in Africa, Hafsat has developed several targeted initiatives to help women in African nations respond to the challenges and dangers of COVID-19. "Africa's challenge is going to be very different than it will be in the rest of the world," she explains. "The economies are weaker. There are fewer hospital beds, less medical equipment, and insufficient tests." She is working to counteract these deficits, by encouraging people to adopt the practices that prevent disease, like hand washing, through public awareness campaigns. "This pandemic is going to bring about monumental change in African countries because people will realize that the cost of complacency on corruption is poor public healthcare systems, which in a pandemic means death," she says.

Hafsat's work continues to focus on ensuring that future leadership in African nations will include many more women. She believes that female leaders offer the possibility of being a counterweight to the current unequal balance of power in many African nations, and a force for economic improvement. And she believes that pushing hard for this kind of change is important. "It's better to push hard," she says. "That way even if there is push back, at least we would have made progress."

Hafsat has never forgotten the lessons she was taught early in her life by her parents: by her mother, who taught her to care for others and fight for equal rights, and by her father, who showed her how economic equality could both transform individual lives, and generate systematic change. Through her work she is carrying out their legacy, and she expects future generations to continue whatever work she is not able to achieve during her lifetime.

“By uniting women and creating a force for change, future female leaders will be able to continue the work of today’s activists,” she says. And she adds, “I really believe that women offer a different kind of leadership. We’re in a world now that is finally ready for female leaders.”

If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

African proverb

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