

Oral History Interview with Hafsat Abiola

Conducted by Anna Kaplan

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Lagos, Nigeria and Washington, D.C. via Zoom

Human rights, civil rights and democracy activist Hafsat Abiola talks about the dynamics of privilege between Westerners and Africans within NGOs and academia, as well as her work leading the Women in Africa organization. She shares how her mother Kudirat Abiola, a democracy activist, and her father Chief Moshood Abiola, the uninaugurated president of Nigeria, instilled in her a commitment to African solidarity, women's rights and democratic governance. She also discusses the endSARS movement, police violence, COVID-19's effect on Nigeria, Nigeria's ongoing development, and the continuing fight for women's economic and political participation.

Keywords: Nigeria||civil rights||Human rights movements||women's rights||Non-governmental organizations||Privilege (Social psychology)||

Places: Nigeria

Anna Kaplan: So today is October 23rd, 2020. I'm Anna Kaplan. In Washington, DC, it's 8:00 AM my time. And I'm interviewing, please state your name?

Hafsat Abiola: Hafsat Abiola.

Anna Kaplan: Thank you. And we are here to talk about your sort of trajectory and career in politics, but also advocating for women and getting women involved in politics and making sort of shaping country development and community development. So do you want to start off just sort of telling me a little bit about yourself?

Hafsat Abiola: Yes. My name is Hafsat. I'm from Nigeria and right now I'm in Belgium, in Brussels. I've lived on the African continent. Right now, I'm living in Europe but I've also lived in America, the United States and also in China. So I feel like I've seen quite a lot of the world. I like to think of myself as a humanist and I'm not so much of an activist because my temperament is not very active. It's not a very active temperament. I mean, I tend to do things but I'm more reflective and I'm wanting to do more thinking about the right things for people and for all of us to do to make the world better instead of just rushing ahead to do them. And many times we look back and we see that we're very far from where we'd wanted to be.

Anna Kaplan: Oh, wow. I love that. Can you tell me a little bit more about how you think that perspective has shaped the work that [02:00] you do?

Hafsat Abiola: Yes. Well, it's made me very slow. Which makes it frustrating for people, I think, that work with me. Also, because you go into life in the forward direction. If you had a sense of deadlines. You have deadlines in school, they tell you something is due by this date but in life, you create your own deadlines. And I think that a lot of times, it's only after the fact that you realize that the opportunity to do something has passed. So I do think that I would be well served by having a sense of the windows of opportunity that exists for different things. And then it could help guide and speed up and motivate action because I'm not just by my temperament. I like to cultivate the energy of the ocean and the ocean is so kind of serene and still. But I didn't always used to be like that.

I think I've gotten more like that as I've gotten older. When I was younger, I was very much about doing things. And, that was when my organization, we used to do a lot of training of young women and things like this, but as I get older, I start thinking about the contradictions even in the work that we do. My first organization that I founded in my early 20s, was to empower women and I thought it was a bit of a contradiction that we're talking about empowering women, and then we are always writing grants, making requests for funding, and essentially begging for funds. So we want to have women be independent. We want them to be very [04:00] dynamic and powerful in their space. And then we're going around begging for money to make women that way.

To me, that was a contradiction between our goal and our approach. And the more I thought about that contradiction, the less able I became to get involved in the efforts to secure the support for the work. Because, I just think that you create the change you want by being that change on a level. And, I think it's important that we look at the means by which we're doing things. And we also look at why we are using those means. What is the philosophy, the rationale behind the structures? And are there other structures that we could use that are more consistent with what we're trying to achieve? So right now, I'm president of a group called Women in Africa. And I think we should use my role as president with a small P. We have a founder who is very present in the organization and our vision is still very present and it's called Women in Africa but the founder is a French woman, which not to be racist in the way you talk or think, but who is a white French woman.

And I think that's problematic because I really value globalization in a way. In the sense that I think that all groups are valuable and all groups should cooperate and coordinate and work together. But I think that if the driving vision for a group like Women in Africa is coming from a white French woman, it's problematic. And so I think she [06:00] also understood that it was problematic and that was why she identified me to come and be president of the organization. And I've been president now, maybe going on more than about almost two years but not quite two years, it'll be two years next year, June. And I think that it's just slowly having the authority to imprint on the organization. I wouldn't say that I'm all the way there. I think it's a long process and also because I'm sure that maybe I could also be more imposing of my thinking and vision and all of that but I think that it's very difficult, if you become the leader of an organization that you didn't found, then there's a long process, I think, in establishing trust.

And that's not often a straightforward challenge. So all of that combined, I think that we're slowly getting to the point where the vision for Women in Africa is not going to be one from Europe. But will be from the continent itself, or at least from the Women of Africa. I think that's important for Africa. And I think that if the African women are central to the vision, then we can engage the world to work with us on our vision that we have. But I think that it's problematic when the vision is from elsewhere, and it's almost like wearing a mask. So that's the work that I'm doing. And because of the [8:00] way that my personality is, which is very non-reactive, very slow, the process has been possible.

I think that it would have been more volatile with other kinds of personalities and maybe that would have been better. I don't know. But I don't have that kind of aggressive, confrontational personality. It's more slow and steady and building slowly for the kinds of changes we want because in the end, I think that the goal should be to have a healthy dynamic between Africa, Europe, America, Asia. And because the DNA has to express what the phenotype, what you want the outward appearance to look like, by which I mean, the internal dynamics have to align and reflect what we want the external dynamics to be, then I think that the slow, steady way is actually, ultimately, I think will be better. Now. I don't know if any of that made any sense, Anna.

Anna Kaplan: Oh, it did. I was just like enthralled listening to you talk about that. Can you talk a little bit more about the particular dynamics between Europe and Africa and why it was problematic for this white French woman to lead this organization? Why it's important to have Africans leading Africa. And I'm thinking of this particularly about the conversations that we're having in the [10:00] United States as well about representation and who is leading. And so I just wanted to hear your perspective on that.

Hafsat Abiola: Okay. So what first happened was that the particular French woman comes with a lot of influence in the field of women. She's been an advocate for women's leadership for decades in Europe and in the Western world and African women approached her when she sold her company that was a leader in this field. She sold it in the 2008 financial crisis. And so then African women approached her thereafter and asked her if she wouldn't consider providing the same kind of platform for African women. Now the people that approached her were largely from South Africa. And so she took up the challenge. She said she took up the challenge because well, everybody knows she has a background in that area, but also because she's a little crazy, which she said can be a good thing.

And I think it can be a good thing to have somebody be a little crazy because crazy people will do something that sane people will think, "Oh, this might be too much work or this would be very difficult." But a crazy person will think, "Oh, this might be interesting, Why not try?" So she took it up and created Women in Africa.

Now when she created Women in Africa, there was a lot of interest but there was also a lot of pushback from especially Francophone Africa because within the continent, there's a long history with France especially for the Francophone the former colonies. And some of that history is highly resentful, [12:00] highly problematic. So she got emails, some really insulting emails, from people in Francophone countries attacking her saying that she's trying to take space that belongs to African women and that she is an imposter and she doesn't have the right to be running that particular company. And that essentially that they, these African women were tired of France trying to feed off the continent. And that this was one more example of that. So she actually would get quite upset reading this emails and I think it was because of those emails, she now started thinking about finding a president, somebody else, an African woman to be president of Women in Africa.

Now that's when I come in. Because she was largely attacked by Francophone African women. I think somehow in her subconscious, she didn't want a Francophone African woman. She wanted maybe an Anglophone African woman because she probably thought Anglophone Africans were not... If you study colonization in Africa and decolonization, the Anglophone and Francophone African countries were colonized differently. The mentality of the people in both groups of countries is different [14:00] about England. Nigeria's mentality about the British is not hostile. It's not viscerally hostile. Whereas the Francophone Africans really can be quite hostile about France and about the French. So it's a tricky situation that the French and the country France and

its government are trying to navigate. So in any case, or decided that she wanted somebody maybe from Anglophone Africa.

And I was suggested to her by a very good friend of mine who is close to a French woman. So we met and I had a series of meetings with her. And in a space of about a year or more, she then decided that I should run Women in Africa as president. Now it's been very interesting, Anna, because, I'm very quiet by nature. I like to spend more time observing, and I said before, I'm not so quick to react. So, as I took on the role, I study the position that I've been given and all of that and also the authority. And I knew this is a public document, but essentially I think that what I can say because it's a public document is that, you can not assume [16:00] what your authority is, essentially.

So you have a position, you have a title but you cannot assume what resources of the organization you can call on. You cannot assume anything. So in the worst case scenario essentially, it could just be a shell. This position you have. And if it's more than a shell, you have to work to make it that. And I think that might be the position for a lot of black people who get into certain roles, that they find that they wanted for- but not really for substantive purposes. And if there's going to be any substantiation of the role, it has to come through continual and ongoing negotiation, and how they do that will depend on the individuals. And I think that it's actually worth studying the options for actually expanding a role so that you can actually deliver on the promise and the potential of the role.

Which brings me to something that I saw from one of the New York universities. They had brought in an African woman from England, no from South Africa, but I think, the woman, I don't know- she's originally from one of the other African countries. She's not originally from South Africa [18:00] but she was teaching in South Africa and they brought her to become the Dean of an architecture school in the US in New York. And she just resigned. So I'm going to try to find her details to share with you because I found it very interesting. She shared her letter of resignation where she said, she just realized that it was very much even a matter of survival. I mean, life and death that she should resign. I don't know how challenging the environment could have been that she felt like it was a matter of life and death for her to resign, but that was how she described it.

She said she felt that the support was inadequate, that she was working round the clock and just exhausted and maybe overworked and under supported. And she just felt that "Look for the sake of my health, I have to go." And I think that a lot of women often... I have a sister that is working for this major American company. One of the few companies making a huge amount of money in the midst of this pandemic. And she works in the recruiting unit as a senior recruiter for this company. And one of the interesting things about her experience there is that she's been there for over 10 years.

And you should know that as a family, we're very pro-Black, we're very pro-African and both pro-Black and pro-African, we don't really understand and see a distinction between the two

really, although we know that most black people in America and all of this left the continent in the 17th [20:00] century and thereabouts. But for us, where we're just about black people and black power, not in opposition to anybody, but we just want African black people to rise and not be, I don't know. I feel like the whole global structure is like a vampire structure, sucking the blood out of black people and Africa. And I think that they should be able to rise without soaking our blood. I mean, it should be possible. So anyway, my sister agrees, but it's so interesting that I think she's probably the top performer in the company at a level there about maybe 60 or so recruiters, she's the only black one.

And she has never, in the 10 years that she's been with the company, she's never been able to get them to hire a black person for- she recruits for a very senior level. And the people she recruits are paid millions, a million euro or more even, not just even a million much more than that. So they're really very top level for the company. She's never been able to get one black person hired for that level because there's always some kind of problem. Whenever she puts positions forward for them to consider, and it's a black person, there's always something that goes wrong in that process that the person just doesn't get hired in the end. But going back to the point of the Dean resigning from her position, my sister was up for promotion recently and they told her and as I said, she's the best performer among all their team that she was not going to get promoted.

They said, because that after she's based in England, they'd asked her [22:00] to help fill roles for their US operation. The a parent company is U.S but she just moved recently with her family to the UK. And they wanted her to fill positions with the U.S. Now, if she's filling positions for the UK division of the company, you think of time difference and the US division the headquarters is in Seattle. So the time difference between Pacific time and England time, and imagine somebody working from morning in England and what time she would be able to shut down if she's also working with Seattle. So she told them that it's not quite possible for her to fill roles for the UK and Seattle just because of the time difference. It would just mean less sleep, less time with family and all of this. So, when they told her that she wasn't going to be promoted, they told her that the next step was for her to ask a supervising officer, how she can regain their trust.

And I don't know how your best performer loses your trust, but so the question was, "How can I regain your trust?" And and I told her that I didn't even think we should be asking that question. I thought we should be looking for a new jobs so we can move on to a fairer environment. But for other reasons about things going on in our life at this time, she doesn't want to look for a new job right now. So she now asked them, "How can I regain your trust?" And they said, "Could you take on some more US roles?" Now, keep in mind that this girl is already in the spectrum of diabetes, [24:00] the doctor is saying you have to lose weight. She probably needs better work-life balance because she works incredibly long hours as is. Because to search for the roles of this company, search for candidates qualified for the roles that this company wants is such hard work anyway, talk less of now trying to match your time zone to the Seattle time zone.

Which reminds me that I should share the report of the woman resigning with her. Just so that she can see just the craziness of this racist global economic system and racist corporate culture in which black people probably just have to understand that they're essentially slaves and drive themselves like slaves would to deliver results and not have any sense of being in any way respected or valued as a human being by the company in which they work.

Anna Kaplan: And what do you think is sort of the value or the change that women can bring to these systems in order to sort of revolutionize them, to rework them so that they are not these extractive systems?

Hafsat Abiola: I think one of the big things we should be looking to do is even simply to build new companies, and not just companies. Because it's not just the companies, the whole architecture around the companies, the whole ecosystem, because the companies are in the system and it's the system that produces certain behaviors. And it's not enough for you to just build a new company because you're going to be in the same system. [26:00] And it's not enough even to... I think part of it, I mean, part of the things that we should be thinking that women should do is to be infiltrating all the decision-making all the powerful institutions. But I think even that's not enough because that's something that has to be done and it will move the needle.

But I think that we also even just have to think better. To see the nature of the challenge and to use pattern recognition, because the challenge is actually quite invisible. It's not something that you look out the window, you see a house, you could see trees, you could see people walking, you could see maybe someone walking the dog or something. These kinds of things that I'm describing is more like gravity. It's so much part of a system but it's not visible. And so you have to study it in a different way. And I think we need to spend more time on that. The other day I was listening to a lecture by this man who has died now, Buckminster Fuller, a futurist. And he was talking about how the world came to understand about gravity and about all of that.

And it was so very fascinating because essentially, they used to pay attention to the stars and how long... I think they were trying to map movement and essentially, how the earth was orbiting the sun. And I don't even know how they [28:00] figure that out. He explained but I still don't get it. And I think we have to do it the same way, because a lot of the energy driving the systems that we complain about are like gravity. They're not visible to the naked eye, but they are visible to careful study. And I think that's what we have to do because if we want to change it, we will have to even understand it to change it.

Anna Kaplan: I wanted to go back to something you said earlier about your family being pro-Black, pro-African. And I was wondering if you could think of any examples of this and maybe your family's connection to politics from your childhood that really sort of stand out to you about how you grew up in this environment of pro-Black and pro-African.

Hafsat Abiola: I think it's a lot of it has to do with my dad. Because he was the Pan-Africanist in the family. He was such a big champion of black people and African people. So growing up with him in his house, in the family, and hearing him talk about...

Hearing him talk about the [30:00] different opportunities that had to be created to help black people advance in their lives and all of this. He was involved in different opportunities to set up scholarships in historically black colleges and universities in the U.S. also within Nigeria and across the continent and different things like this. So it made it very, very, not easy, but natural. It was just the water we drank in that house was about that, was about being proudly African and proudly black. So I think that one big thing for him was that he thought that black people needed to unite, and he was very big on this. He was very big on African-Americans uniting with Africa. Within Africa we have about 54 countries. Even within ourselves that we should unite, that the Africans should come together.

He used to invest a lot of money in the what? Now we have something called the African Union, which is the political entity for all of Africa. But when he was alive, it was called the Organization of African Unity. So he used to donate money to them, he used to attend the annual general meetings, things like this, because he felt that... because when you're weak, as many of the African countries are, and when you have the kinds of challenges that the African-Americans and Africans in the diaspora have, [32:00] it's good for you to build a strong community so you can pull resources, you can support each other and actually tackle the problems, and get resolution because otherwise it's too much for an individual person or individuals to take on. But as communities, there's very little communities can't do. They may not be able to do it all at once, but they can keep going and building on their successes. So he was very big up on that.

Anna Kaplan: Where were women in all of that? What part of strengthening Africa did women play?

Hafsat Abiola: But you know, it wasn't my dad that so much helped me consider the role of women for that, because he was male, and in many ways it was a typical male for the society, which is not all good. He was a polygamist, and all of these things. But it was more my mom because she was a champion of, well, even by her very example, she was just very much about the achievements that women can have and the need for women to actually set aside the traditional expectations, because the traditional expectations were that women would stay in the home, take care of their husbands and children, [34:00] cook, clean, all of this silly things. I mean, not silly, but traditional things. She just felt that we needed to do more than that, that we also have the responsibility to go out into the world and make that world conducive for the children we're rearing at home.

So she was the one that made that clear to me. When she died, when I was about 20, I try to continue along the very clear lines that she gave, the very clear values that she inculcated. It's just that the Pan-African part is just a marrying of both parents, because my father was a Pan-African champion, but he was also a women's champion, because he thought that women,

that there was so much that women can contribute and that you have to invest in women the way you invest in men. So he was investing in his daughters the way he invested in his sons. But it was more my mother's example that made me not a conservative Stepford wife type. She really was very clear that we're not here just to be answering to men as if men are our masters and that we have our own ideas and our own responsibilities and our own legacy to form.

Anna Kaplan: Can you tell me a story about how she showed this to you?

Hafsat Abiola: In many, many ways. [36:00] I remember when I was first coming to the United States, I was about 15 years old and we flew together my mom and I to the U.S. to New York from Nigeria, from Lagos. Then we had to take a plane from New York to Boston. So on the flight from New York to Boston, I was sitting beside her on the plane. It was just the two of us. She wrote on the back of an envelope four schools that she wanted me to apply to when I get to that point. Because I was first going to do 11th and 12th grade in the U.S. in a high school and then apply for university in the 12th grade. So she wrote on this envelope, Harvard, Princeton, Wellesley, and Yale I think. They were the four schools that she wrote. She wrote Wellesley because I think at the time Hillary Clinton had just become first lady of the United States, and she was very impressed by her. She thought that I should go to the school, that, that should be one of the options is the school that groomed her.

So I applied to those schools and I got into some of them, and then I sent the list of the ones I got into to my parents, and my dad said, "Then you can go to Harvard." Actually, I had applied also to Georgetown on my own, it wasn't on the list. But when I did my research, I wanted to be a diplomat, and I found out that Georgetown had [38:00] the best school of foreign policy in the United States. So I applied and I got into the school of foreign service. In fact, I think I applied early and I got in early admission and my father said, "What kind of husband will you marry gallivanting around the world?" So that was a big, no for Georgetown, and I ended up going to Harvard. But I just liked the fact that she paid a lot of attention to her children, and she wanted us to be able to do pretty much whatever, to excel in the world. Not just her sons, she had four sons, three daughters, but for all, all her children, she felt the same way. Another time I remember I had my first boyfriend came to the house and we were hanging out and then the topic of his best friend came up. Now his best friend was also, we we were all mutual friends, but his best friend had done some, talking about one person to one person, talking about me to my boyfriend, talking about my boyfriend to me, all in a bad way, not in a good way. I think he didn't want us to be dating. So he was trying to get the relationship to fail. So this guy, the guy that I was dating then wanted to talk to me about... he just mentioned his best friend, and I said, "No, no, don't mention your best friend to me." That guy is always saying things to people and he shouldn't be behaving like that, and my boyfriend said to me, " When we are at a point in our relationship, [40:00] when you can tell me about my best friend, I will let you know."

So I said to him that, "I can call the security, that's the security guards of my house, to escort you out, or you can escort yourself, because if the reward for being in a successful relationship with

you is that we will get to a point when I can express my thoughts about your best friend it's not a reward that I really value. So I don't know that we should continue this relationship, because whatever you offering me as something that will reflect the great success of our relationship is not useful to me. I don't want it. So why don't we end it now? And why don't you see yourself out." So he left. Then one day my mom and I we're walking, and she said, "Oh, I have not been seeing X, the guy around, did something happen?" I told my mom what happened, and then she looked at me, and she smiled, and she said, "Well done." But she was just a very strong and dynamic, nice lady. I really liked her. She didn't suffer fools gladly.

Anna Kaplan: Can you tell me a little bit more of what it was like growing up in Nigeria?

Hafsat Abiola: Yeah. Nigeria is lovely and very different today from when we were growing up. When we were growing up, it was like a small... [42:00] even Lagos where I grew up, which was the commercial center, and for much of my early life was also the political center of the country. Even Lagos was just a wonderful, quiet, not so busy place. I mean, it was bustling even then, but I think then we were about maybe 5, 6 million people in Lagos. Today Lagos has about 20 million people. So it's grown by leaps and bounds from then. We had one, The National Television Authority, which was the national television station, and they used to have on TV, there was no programming until 4:00 or 5:00 PM, and then they would have programs. They would start with programs for children and the children's programs would be about what we call Tales by Moonlight, because we're Africans. Africans are very much about tales, folktales and things like that.

So they would tell different stories, but the dramatization of cultural stories and the stories were always folktales teaching moral lesson. So they will have different stories. Like a girl was sent by her parents to fetch water. Then on the way she would come across an old person who would offer her three calabashes. He would say she should choose one. If she chose the biggest one, that was always a bad thing, and it was always leading to problems because that was a sign of greed. But of course, if she chose the smallest one, which is very humble and considerate, then it would turn out that the smallest one was actually the most valuable one and it would bring benefits for her [44:00] and her village and all of that. There were so many different stories like this, and that's what we grew up watching because we didn't have international television systems.

But I also remember that it was also on this network, this national television station that we first watched Eye on the Prize and the stories of Roots, and all these other stories about slavery and civil rights issues in the U.S. So it wasn't completely disconnected from the rest of the world, but it wasn't completely connected as well. So I think it was a nice balance. Of the international entertainment that we had access to, it wasn't just the American or British. We also had access to Indian movies and Chinese movies. It was so fun growing up like that because they're saw all of the four genres, and maybe to some extent, three, if you take the English-speaking films as one

group together. There were so different from each other, and so it were like windows into other worlds.

At the time our public school system, because I went to a public school for primary school and high school were quite good. I mean, they were as good as any of these schools. Unfortunately now it's not the same. But when I was going to school, the public school system was quite excellent, and you didn't have to pay a lot of money. I don't know if my parents paid up to five Euros, five dollars for a term, it was so affordable. Now families are really squeezed to find money to pay for, even if their children are going to public schools which are meant to be [46:00] tuition free, it ends up that they're hidden fees that they have to pay, and it makes it hard for a lot of poor families. But my family wasn't so much even a poor family, and my father was a very successful businessman, but paying for his children's tuition wasn't one of the headaches that he had, it just was very affordable.

The public services were quite good because the education was good, healthcare was good. The roads at the time were enough and were adequate. The unfortunate thing is that subsequent in the years that followed, we didn't invest as much as we should have in all those areas. In all those areas, the country is fairing worse than it was when I was a child. But when I was a child, given that the environment was so supportive, I could just be a child, and not just me. I mean, no matter the class of children, the socioeconomic circumstances of their families, people did pretty well, and you didn't really have a sense of... you could just play. We weren't very socially aware. There was very little to be socially aware about, that we were kind of sheltered. So I grew up in a very sheltered environment, but I was growing up in the Southwest, in the urban center of the country.

Now, if you are growing up in the rural areas, it would be different. But at that age, when I was young, I didn't even know that. I don't know that very many [48:00] people knew that. So there was a lot of innocence in the childhood. My father had four wives, so I was surrounded by a lot of siblings when I was growing up. In the end, we didn't even really socialize because my father was well known and popular in the country, and he had friends, my mother also, and my stepmother's had their friends. When you already have so many children in the house, you can just play with each other, and that's what we ended up doing. Also my father didn't even really like us to go out. So we didn't go out that much. He didn't want his children growing up with a sense that of privilege.

He didn't want us to feel superior to other kids because of socioeconomic circumstances, which is why I went to the public school because, he could easily have afforded to send us to private schools where the wealthier families often sent their children, but he didn't want us to grow up with that kind of mindset. Actually, now that I'm older, I really value that, then because he also kept us away from our peers. I think that what it translated into as I've gotten older is the ability to think for myself. So I don't really get so carried away by what people say. I'm able to create distance between the general energy of around issues, the [50:00] general pressure to conform to

some ideas around issues and what my own perception is. I can see the distinction, and I can protect it because I think my point of view is important. It may not be right, but I shouldn't be pushed into something because that's the prevailing point of view because sometimes the prevailing point of view is wrong.

Anna Kaplan: You mentioned that the experience or experiences growing up, that it was different in rural Nigeria. Can you tell me more about that?

Hafsat Abiola: Yes. Well, in rural Nigeria, so my mom had grown up in the rural area parts of Southwest Nigeria, my dad as well. She was the head girl of her high school. My father was not allowed to be head boy because he was from a Muslim family and his school was Baptist, it was a Christian school. But he was by far the most brilliant student in the school, and he should have been made the head boy, but it didn't matter anyway, because he was still able to get a scholarship to go on to university in Glasgow later, even though he wasn't the head boy. But imagine that in my mother's case, she was the head girl of her school, which was a Muslim girls high school in Ijebu Ode, and her parents didn't send her on to university. So when she graduated from the high school, she was sent to Lagos to work, and she got a job and started working.

Her immediate [52:00] older brother, who was like a failing problem child and problems student, the parents preferred to put money to send him too university, where of course he didn't pass even the first year, but they wouldn't send their daughter. So what you have in the rural areas is just more conservative values. It's also in the rural areas by and large, that you still have 13 year old girls getting married, you still struggle to get the girls into high school and to be able to stay through high school and then to go to university. So the more you get into Nigeria, so it's not just a matter of rural, it's a coastal country. We're on the Atlantic coast and Lagos is right on the Atlantic coast, but then the more you go into the inter-lands and the more you get away from the coast where you could have maybe the most modern values, you start to see more and more conservative values, less and less rights for women and girls and less powerful women and girls, less opportunities for women and girls.

So, that's the situation that we have in the country now. One of the ways that we have to tackle it is that we have to make the government, the kind of custodian and protector, custodian of the rights of the women and girls, protector of their rights and promoter of their rights, and also to put the government in the position that it has to criminalize anybody violating these rights, if we want the dynamic to change. I mean, they're problems even on the [54:00] coast, they're problems even in the cities and in the towns, but there's more recourse for women and girls in the cities and towns than there are in the rural areas.

The biggest challenge I think in the rural areas is that, it's like if a tree is cut down in the forest and nobody's there, does it matter? Because it's in the rural areas and the women and girls, they don't have access to the same technologies for getting the information across, getting their voices heard. If they cry, does it matter? Nobody hears them, which is why we need the government to build the capacity to hear. We need the governments to use laws and to equip the governments at

state and local level to protect those rights. It's very tricky because you can say states and local governments to protect the rights, but those states and local governments are populated by people who are themselves embodied, who embody a lot of these conservative values. So to get them to make the change begins with even agreeing to change themselves and that can be quite tricky.

Anna Kaplan: Yeah. So this sort of reminds me of the, one of the things that Georgetown is working with is the Women Peace and Security Index, and one of the things, it measures a lot of the experiences of [56:00] women across the world. What you're describing just brings to mind some of the things that they've reported recently. For example, the index says that 11% of Nigerian women have reported that they experienced intimate partner violence in the last year, and the percentage of women 15 years and older, who felt safe walking in their communities alone at night, actually fell from 55.5% in 2017 to 47.8% last year. I was wondering if these numbers, these statistics resonated with your experience or your knowledge of women and girls experiences?

Hafsat Abiola: So I think that a big driver of people's feeling of safety and security in the country is the economic circumstance of the country, how the country is doing. Unfortunately, especially this year with COVID-19, the country has been in an incredible economic crisis. It's not the only one, all countries in the world are in a crisis by and large, but when you don't have much of a buffer to begin with, it makes everything even more difficult, and so then it puts more pressure on women and girls, because here's the thing is that, women and girls were already the poorest, not just women and girls, women and children make up the bulk of poor in the country, even in the best of times. So when things start getting bad, the [58:00] women's jobs are the first jobs to go. They're the last ones to be rehired.

They often work in the informal sector so that when the governments rescue packages that they're designing now come into effect, it's a real challenge to even identify the women that should benefit from it because they're not registered anywhere. So now when the women are weaker, if they're economically weak, because of all the crisis and things that are going on, it means that they're more vulnerable to violence because they have less power to protect themselves, so it's to be expected and we've been seeing rising violence, because the families are under pressure, because things are harder. I think in a way the women almost serve as a pressure valve for some of these men, that when they're under a lot of pressure, they just hit at their wives and their daughters, it's almost like a coping mechanism that harms women.

So these are some of the challenges, and of course, because ours is not a country that does very well in criminalizing all of these kinds of violations against women, it makes the violations even more. We need to do better to criminalize it. But, as you know, the current movement, the End SARS movement shows, even expecting the police to respond properly to some of these issues is a big ask. I think the big challenge for the police is they're not well paid.

They're not [1:00:00] well-trained. So, it's like you're just putting guns in the hands of people who don't know the first thing about policing. And they turn out to have criminal tendencies. So,

there's a lot of work to do. The good news is that the women's groups in Nigeria are beginning to take this on. Not just women's groups, there's a government national plan that they're developing called Agenda 2050, and they have a women's technical working group that I'm part of that is looking at all of these issues from the perspective of women and girls. So, we are looking at women in the economy, women in governance, education of the girl child, and health issues, the four areas, and so that we can make sure that the Nigerian government can respond adequately to women and girls' needs in these four areas.

And so, we've already made recommendations also around how we tackle police harassment, how we tackle domestic violence, and all these other kinds of issues. Our plan for 2021 is now being considered within the government. And then it should be used to develop the budget for next year and then taken to the national assembly to be voted on. So hopefully, we will see progress because certainly in the end, that's what women need is the right actions to be resourced and implemented.

Anna Kaplan: What, to you, does a government look like that is accountable to women and protecting women and [01:02:00] responsive to women? What does that look like?

Hafsat Abiola: I mean, I think such a government begins with the new year address of the leader of the country laying out their vision for the year and then focusing in on what that means for men and for women, to say, "Okay, this is our vision for 2021, and this should be done January 1st, 2021, and for us to achieve this vision, this is what it means for men, and this is what it means for women," and very clear understanding that women are citizens and that you have to identify their role and empower them to play their role. I think that that's the first step.

Then all the other steps, then we now need the national assembly to look at the plan and say, "What's missing?" For example, the Nigerian national assembly, I just think they're a little bit strange because when you talk to them about Nigeria's women, they'll tell you that, oh, women need to contribute. Women need to vie for office on their own terms. It's like they think women should just go out there and compete like they did.

I think if they understand that government is supposed to represent people and that women are half the population and that in no country that has been able to really bring decisive numbers of women to 30% and above into government hasn't been [01:04:00] done without an affirmative action quota, then I think they should be looking at how to design the Nigerian affirmative action quota and how to implement it. They shouldn't be talking about oh, women should get out there. Women should have confidence in themselves. No, that's all nonsense. Just make a law and come up with how that law is meant to enable the women to be 30%, 40%, 50% of the decision-makers. I think that's what a responsible government that is concerned about equal inclusion should be doing.

Then they should be making sure that they really, that they build in place something called an agenda management system at federal level, state level, and local level because you can say you

want women in the economy. You want women, girls going to school in equal numbers to boys and going to university. But you need to have a system for tracking all of that and making sure that it happens and addressing bottlenecks that stand in the way of those targets. And a responsible government should have those things at the minimum. So, you should have the leader express the vision. You should have the assemblies define the laws. And then you should have the implementing arms of government, the civil services trained and able to implement and track, monitor their progress.

Anna Kaplan: What do you think are some of the biggest barriers for women running for office and getting these positions [01:06:00] in politics?

Hafsat Abiola: Well, because I think that there's a general mindset that women work and that men wield power. Power in our countries, in these kinds of countries, is like a reward. Women are just supposed to work. They're not supposed to be rewarded, or they're to be rewarded by their husbands saying, "You've done really well." That a woman is even asking for other kinds of reward, it's like in the mentality of those kinds of countries, it's an overreach. It's like asking for too much. And it's not asking for too much. It's just asking for your rights.

So, I think that the challenge is that women are citizens, but in the mindset of a large proportion of the population, they're subjects. They're just, they're to be used. They're not equal. And they're to be given what you decide. So you actually need a mindset change, a shifting mentality to have society and men and women engaging with women as if they're equal.

Anna Kaplan: You mentioned that the large part of this feeling of security is financial security, of having jobs. And the index said or reported before the pandemic that [01:08:00], actually, 63% of women in Nigeria over the age of 25 were employed but that only 27.3% of women in that same general age group actually had a bank account or any kind of mobile money service in the past year. And I was wondering what you thought about that, of women having jobs but not being part of this financial system.

Hafsat Abiola: Well, the problem is if they're... I think most of them, the money that make is not even that much. And if they wanted to be part of the financial system, they can only be part of maybe a digital finance system because the cost even of keeping their money in the banks and then going to the banks to make withdrawals or to use their account, it will wipe out the money that they put in. And the different bank charges, the banks in Nigeria are notorious for their bank charges.

But with a digital financial solution, those are more cost-effective. But the Nigerian banks have not been... They've been resisting the introduction of digital financial tools because it serves almost as a competitor to them. At the same time, they're not providing financial solutions to women at that level, at the working class and poor level. They're refusing to provide solutions because it's not really economically as profitable for them.

At the same time, they're [1:10:00] also resisting the introduction of alternatives. So one of the recommendations we made in our plan for the government was for the central bank of Nigeria to override the resistance of the private banks and to democratize access to digital financial tools so that it can have the same kind of impact that we see in countries like Kenya.

The challenge in those kinds of countries is that the vested interests are very strong, and you need the government to back the people and override a lot of the vested interests because the vested interests are strong, and they'll resist changes. But if you push through on those changes that are pro-people changes, it actually stabilizes the country, expands the economy, and it's a win for everybody in the medium to long term.

But for a lot of private companies, they think in the short term. They're not thinking about expansion of the economy. They're thinking about whether they are ready to take advantage of an opportunity, and if they're not, how to stall the opportunity so it doesn't come on stream at all. And that's kind of like almost holding the whole economy and the whole country hostage. So, the government has to be strong enough to just bypass those kinds of obstacles and do what needs to be done to grow the country's economy.

Anna Kaplan: And how do you see education opportunities for women playing a part in this?

Hafsat Abiola: It's central because all the studies... So, Nigeria's great opportunity is [01:12:00] its people, but by that, it also requires that those people should have the right skills. So, the government has to find a way. Now, when I was growing up, what I described to you was a government that had in place a way to enable access to education to people, of a high quality education to people no matter their socioeconomic background.

Unfortunately, what we have now is the rise of private universities, private high schools, private schools, primary schools. And the majority of Nigerian people and especially the working class, the working poor, can't afford that. And the public schools have become deteriorated over the decades. And that's a problem for the future because yes, we have people. We have 200 million people, but those people can become entrepreneurs. They can become technicians. They can work. They can become productive members of an economy only if you invest in their education and their skills.

And I think what we're operating now allows us to invest in the skills and the productivity of only a minority, maybe 30% if we're lucky, and that's not good for the country. So, a big thing that needs to be the focus over the next years is how to ensure that we can educate the vast majority. And a lot of people focus, when they think of education, on young people. And that's important because 65% of the country is under 30. But I think it's better [01:14:00] to focus on people that are, yes, some of them are young, but even people in their 30s because those people still have decades of years of working ahead of them. And likely, many of them don't have the right skills to be able to take advantage of opportunities.

So, we need to focus not just on children's education but even in adult retraining and re-skilling and up-skilling to make sure that they can take advantage of the opportunities that the country has. The country has a deficit in construction. It has deficits in pretty much every area. We have 11 million out of school children. We need to provide education for them. So, we should be training people to meet those needs and make sure that we paid a decent salary for people to do that. Then that allows the hope of a decent life to be realized for a large swathe of the population, which isn't the case right now.

So, these are some of the things that I think, and then we should make a shift from a focus on theoretical education to more skills-based education, vocational education because we have so many people who are going to the universities to study law and things like this but not enough plumbers, not enough builders. And we need that. We need those people, professionals, technicians.

We need to also move women from women's work. There's some areas of the economy that women dominate, but they're often the lowest paying areas of the economy. And we have to move women through the entire chain, [01:16:00] the value chain in industry, in agriculture, in all the sectors of the economy. They should play a more active role. So for them, yes, up-skilling, yes, re-skilling and education but also mentoring too so that they're empowered to know that they have a right to be in those spaces as well.

Anna Kaplan: This is reminding me of some of your work of traveling around and supporting women, helping women build coalitions, organizing themselves in order to make their voices heard. Why do you think it's important for women, particularly those who are survivors of terrorist attacks, to tell their stories and make their stories heard?

Hafsat Abiola: I think the problem, nobody even look at a little bit... When I studied the terrorist attacks, I find it so interesting what the... I think in a way, it's a kind of revolt from young people against police brutality, very much like what is happening today. But what is happening today in Nigeria is peaceful protest. But the people that became Boko Haram around actually started out peacefully. But when the police killed their leader, it radicalized the movement, and then they became quite violent.

But what's interesting is that when I went to Borno and I was meeting with the women's groups, they were talking about the terrorist gangs kidnapping large communities of women and girls. [01:18:00] So, the Chibok girls, everyone knows that they were kidnapped. But it was much more than that. There were thousands of girls and women kidnapped, and those women and girls were kidnapped to become like sex slaves for the gangs.

And I think one big... So, I think that just because you have a just cause, a legitimate cause, doesn't really matter that you have a good vision for society because those young people that became Boko Haram, they were justifiably angry at the excesses of the Nigerian military. But if the kidnapping of women and girls is any indication of what they think a good society should

look like, you can see that, and even the violation of women and girls is any indication of what they think what their vision of the kind of society that they're trying to create is, then it just tells you that we need to defeat them because that kind of mentality has no place in a modern society.

And I think that you have a lot of misguided young people and a lot of misguided men wielding power in different ways as we've seen. And I think that the counterpoint to that is organized women, women organized into communities and speaking about their vision and what they want to bring about because what you inevitably find out is that the women's vision is often a much more functional, healthy, sane, [01:20:00] not really about domination, but really about empowering people in communities. And I think that what's lacking in Nigeria is that absence of women's voices. Because if we had more of those voices and we gave more authority to voices like that, then we could really bring about a better society. I think that the silencing of women's voices through lack of education for women and lack of empowerment for women is really a disservice to the country and to the future of the country.

Anna Kaplan: So, can you tell me a little bit kind of related to that about your role as a cabinet member and special advisor of the Ogun State government?

Hafsat Abiola: Yeah. So when I was a special advisor to the governor of Ogun State, I was in charge first of the millennium development goals. And we had a budget. It's good not just to have a portfolio but to have money, but money was coming from the federal government, from the debt. When Nigeria paid its debt to the... I think, no, it was some of the money looted from Nigeria that was kept in Switzerland. When it was returned to Nigeria, it was returned on the condition that the money would be used for development of poor people. So, it was used for the MDGs. So, we had money to use for our work.

And I wanted us to give conditional cash transfers to poor pregnant women [01:22:00] because now, Nigeria is among the highest maternal mortality rates in the world. But there's a distinction between north and south. So in the north, you have so many young girls marrying very early, and that is making the rate higher there because their bodies are not developed enough for bearing children. And they're already pregnant and having children. So, it produces a higher maternal mortality rate. So, their rate in the north is about 1,500 a few years ago when I was in my position. That was about 2007. No, it was about 2015. So, it was already about 1,500 then. And no, no, sorry, 2011, sorry, it was 2011, my first appointment.

But in the southwest, in my state, Ogun State, it was about 265 women per 100,000 births. Whereas in the northeast and northwest, it was about 1,500 women per 100,000 births. So, it was a difference of, I don't know, five times or more the maternal mortality rate. But in places like the U.S., like in Belgium, it's less than 20 per 100,000 births. So, I knew that even though Nigeria was doing really well, we could do better. Not Nigeria, but Ogun State and southwest in general, the region I'm from, we could still do much better because we were still [01:24:00] 200 women more than many Western countries.

And the only challenge is about access to medical facilities. So, we came up with a program for poor pregnant women that would give them money if they would access antenatal care, if they would have that baby in a hospital, and if they would continue with postnatal care, and also immunization of their children. And one of the big challenges is that since this program was helping women in rural areas, the question was, how do you get the money to them? Because you don't have many bank branches near these women. That's part of why it's financially costly for women in rural communities to open bank accounts because there are no... To make your way to a bank is a bit of a schlep, and by the time you get there, you've spent too much money so it's not really worthwhile.

So, we had to work with banks to figure out how they would set up a structure, agents closer to the women like corner stores so the corner stores that serve a village could then serve as an agent of a bank. And so, that corner store would give the money to the women. And then the women would use cell phones that we provide for them to let the bank know that they've received the money. We had to come up with innovations like this. And also, we had to design some food and other kinds of support that we wanted to get to these women to address the problem.

And the program was a huge success in Ogun State. The uptake was very good, [01:26:00] and we became a model for the rest of the country. The model that we set up was used and replicated in 12 other states in Nigeria. So, Nigeria has 36 states. So in a third of the country, it was replicated. So, I'm very proud about that because I think it was just the experience that convinced me that women have a role to play in public service.

I remember when we sat down to decide this area of work with the MDG funds. It was either we allocate the money to poor pregnant women or we allocate the money to children, school children. And I was the one actually that pressed for us to allocate it to poor pregnant women because I explained that when the children have challenges in school, their biggest champion is their mother. And if the mother is already dead because she died while giving birth to a child, then that child is... It has a major disadvantage in life. So, we should focus first on saving mothers' lives and then securing their children.

But it's so typical. I was very proud of the community, the team that we worked with on the project in Nigeria to even decide on the project and all of that because in Nigeria, children are the most important thing. So, I was very proud of them that they wanted us to allocate the money for children. But I think sometimes, somebody has to look out for women and make sure that women aren't dying because yes, it's good to champion children, but there's no greater champion for children than their mothers. So if we can protect their mothers, it gives the child a lot of support as well.

So, we did that, and it [01:28:00] was a success and also an indication of why we need more women in public office because they can keep making sure that we don't forget the women, we don't forget to address their very critical needs and use public resources, public office, to ensure progress for women and girls.

Anna Kaplan: So I just had two or three more questions, so hopefully we won't take too much longer, but I was wondering from your perspective, what resilience and wisdom do you think women in particular bring to dealing with the pandemic?

Hafsat Abiola: I think women just get on with things. They don't get bogged down by debates. They just want to know what's the problem, what do we know about how to solve it? And then they get on with it, they start to do it. I think that for a pandemic, we need leaders that are practical, focused on what needs to be done. And not keen to make excuses, just want to see how to make sure it gets done. And that's probably what we need for the pandemic and pretty much for anything else. [01:30:00]

Anna Kaplan: So, what are some of the things you have learned that you would want other women or girls to learn from your story?

Hafsat Abiola: I would wish that in my life I'd even focused earlier. I think now I'm very focused. But for a very long time, I think it's strange that my mother was clear that women are more than vessels for giving birth to babies and taking care of families. But still after I got married, I think I got into that world and thinking of being a good wife, how to organize the home and being a good mom. And these things are not unimportant, but I think we should do more what men do and have a place for those things, and a place for other things as well.

I've not done so very badly because I mean... But I was pushed in a way, because not all the steps are steps that I necessarily plan to take, but [01:32:00] life led me there. But I'm glad that I was serving in the cabinet in Ogun State for two terms. I learned a lot also, and I could make some contribution, not as much as I would have wanted, but certainly more than if I wasn't there at all. And I have a better understanding of the challenge of public office in Nigeria, so that I can be part of people will prefer solutions that make sense, that can actually make a difference. So I think that saying yes to opportunities that are not necessarily even good timing for where you are with family, is one big lesson, I think, about my life. Because when I first became involved in the movement for democracy in Nigeria, my mom had just gotten killed and we still had the... My youngest sibling at the time was nine years old, and the one older than him was 11. And I was just what, maybe 20. It was '96, I was 21.

She was killed when I was 21 and within months I was 22. So yes, I had to get a job so we could eat, but then I could also get involved in the movement and not just get a job and be helping kids with homework, which was important. But luckily, since my mom had so many kids, we were able to divide a lot of the tasks within our brood. But now when I think of [01:34:00] the challenges that my brothers have, the younger ones, they're not children anymore. I think maybe if I had spent more time, maybe they wouldn't have those challenges. But I think that's typical, women... Women think that way, they always think of consequences and what ifs. But I would like us to continue thinking about what ifs, and still stepping out there and claiming and colonizing more public spaces. Because it makes a difference when we're there, because we focus on outcomes and we bring a unique perspective.

And it's not to say that that perspective that we bring will always be unique, I think that it could be that as women become the norm in public spaces, we will start to see some of the same problems in the way in which women wield power and the way men wield power. There's enough to suggest that it wouldn't be all a glorious period for humanity, that there will be some challenges. But I think even so, it's not about whether we're going to be better or whether we're not going to be better. It's that, we have every right to participate and that by participating, there's a possibility that we could make sure that our critical perspectives and needs are not marginalized and ignored. And that's something worth fighting for, and I want women to fight for that.

Anna Kaplan: [01:36:00] So thinking about some of the things that you've experienced, the loss of both of your parents and also the struggles or challenges that Nigeria has faced at different times with its government and with elections, and then also speaking to other women about their struggles and experiences, what thoughts or advice in terms of resilience for enduring hard times, would you give to the United States as it's going through its own struggles with political polarization and thoughts about whether or not its democracy is going to continue?

Hafsat Abiola: Hmm. I think that the world that we live in today is radically different from even 10 years ago. Because I think that, with the internet and digitization of information and communication, so many new opportunities are present in the world, but also new risks and threats. I don't doubt that America was among them because America has formidable intelligence skills and capacity to resist and [01:38:00] defeat any attempt to undermine its elections and its government and things like this. But I do think that, America's biggest challenge is the threat from within not really any threat from without because America sold itself and it had sold the world a vision of what it is, as a place that stands by certain values. And I think that the big challenge now is that, there is question about its image of itself, if it's really viable for all people in America, or if it's to be only valuable for some select people in America. I think that's the fight and the tension at the moment.

And I think that the only reason that even some people are thinking of restricting the community that will benefit from the American Dream is because there's even a question as to whether America has the financial capacity to meet the dream and to make sure that everybody can benefit from the American Dream. So there's this sense, I think, among the people that people call white supremacist. They may have a sense that, "Look, this is not something that can apply to everyone. So it should at least apply to us because we are part of the communities that people that came and set up the system." I think that's really what the struggle is about. [01:40:00] So you could address the struggle by talking about the justice that they have a right. Everybody as a citizen has a right to benefit from the American Dream and to claim it.

And you could also address it from the point of view of what is the economic model, and how do we make sure we have an economic model that can distribute benefits to all Americans? Because I think that we can approach it from the point of view of looking at Americans saying, "We have

a right." It's great to have a right, but is it possible within the current economic model that the US operates? And if it's not possible, is there an alternative model? I think that between Trump right now... President Trump maybe represents those that think, "Well at least let's make sure that there's a group that is getting what they should get, because they're the people that this country was originally intended to benefit." And I think he represents that, then president Biden is representing the idea that it should be open... The potential presidential candidate represents the notion that it should be open to all Americans. And yet I think that even the economic model cannot be open to all Americans. It's not a model that is actually inclusive.

So what the two men are offering, one is offering that the people that [01:42:00] should definitely be in that inner benefiting community are the people for whom this country was originally intended and Biden is saying it could be a small community, but it should be open to any group. And I am thinking that we actually need yet another movement to get us to a point where it should just be a more inclusive model, not an exclusive model that is only for white people, or an exclusive model that is diverse. Whether it's only for white people or it's diverse, if it's exclusive and it's by minority, it's an unacceptable model. And we need to be jettisoning the model, and I'm hoping that women come into this fight with the agenda to look at how they're going to do that.

How are they going to address this issue? Because if they address that issue, they address the Trump supporters and they address the Biden supporters. Because they've now made it bigger than both Trump and Biden and they're bringing something positive that is necessary for the United States. Because if you've looked at the United States trajectory from the '90s, from '89, after the fall of the Berlin wall, with the triumphalism of the Western model, there has been a retreat of the social welfare element of the democratic social pact in America. There's been a retreat of it and a rising new liberal ideas, which I think is not good for the United States. And if you track inequality and all of that, it starts to shoot up from that time and the point where it is right [01:44:00] now in the United States, it's unprecedented in the history of the United States.

And that was what was fueling the support for Senator Bernie Sanders. So, I think that there's a credible concern that America at this point is too much to the right and whether it's Biden or Trump, we need the economics of the US going more to supporting middle class Americans and working class Americans. That is where the women should come in. They shouldn't get involved in a fight between men and between establishment, but a fight for people to make sure the country works for the people of America.

Anna Kaplan: So my last question builds on that. What do you hope for? What are your hopes for women, both in Nigeria, but also around the world, going into the future?

Hafsat Abiola: There was this guy, Tesla. The original Tesla, the Futurist. He wrote some of his thoughts about women, and he felt that there will be a time when the world will see the rise of women and that the rise of women would come about in such a way that it would also signal the decline of men. So women's power would rise just at the time that men's power starts to decline.

I actually would prefer the partnership model because I think men and women together, it would [01:46:00] make things better. Not necessarily the rise of women or the rise of men. Because I think that it will be foolhardy for women to believe that there's something intrinsic to us that makes us better than men. I think that what makes men problematic now is just their proximity to power. And the more we get proximate to power, the more we can expect to see distortions also in women as well, and women leaders. We may not be seeing it so much now, but we should expect to see it more and more.

And the interesting thing that we should be focusing on as women is, what should be in the ecosystems? What is present in the ecosystems where women do best? Or in the ecosystems where men do best, or where leaders do best? What is present? What is the nature of our engagement with the people, between the governed and the people that govern them? What is the dynamic in that engagement that allows for us to see progressive outcomes? So that we can start to know what we want to... So that when we push for women in office and women in decision-making positions, we should know also what are the enablers of excellence, so that we're pushing for that as well, or we're alerting those women that, "Usually, studies have shown that if you could have this and this, you would really be able to make a difference." Because we want women in power, yes. And we deserve to be in power because we're part of the planet. We're the second part of the human system. And so we should be jointly working with men in power.

But we also, more than just having women in power, we want [01:48:00] progress for humanity. So we should begin to focus in on this, how we achieve progress for humanity as a serious project. How do we bring about humanity that is more responsible, relative to the environment, relative to inclusivity in economics? We're talking now about building back better. What should that mean, and what should women be saying about that? Should we be having a world of so many billionaires and so many people? I mean, how is it that 22 men in the world have the same wealth as 650 million African women? What kind of global system supports and allows for that? And what ideas do women bring to the table for transforming it? How is it that we've brought about the extinction of 70% of life on earth? You know, all the different forms of life, the fauna, flora, the fishes, all kinds of things we've caused the extinction because... I mean, what are we doing that makes that make sense? And I want women to bring about the return to sanity of humanity. Because I think we've completely gone to an extreme and the extreme doesn't even serve us as a human race.

And so, women should play a bigger role in redefining all of that, and we should do so fearlessly and consistently with the idea that, even if we fail, we should be willing to leave a compelling and impressive legacy for our daughters and our sons to pick up. And let it be clear what that legacy is, let them not have questions about what we stood for and what we valued. [01:50:00] Because that was really what my mom did for me, and it made all the difference in my life. And I see it as a gift. And I think mothers should do this, women should do this for the generations to come.

Anna Kaplan: Thank you. Are there any last thoughts that came to your mind that you want to say before I stop the recording?

Hafsat Abiola: I have two poems. Can I share them?

Anna Kaplan: Yes, absolutely.

Hafsat Abiola: Oh, you [inaudible]. Okay. So I have two poems, let me get them. One is called My Brothers and one is called My Sisters. So in the end, we will listen to this, is it just likely men and women? We will listen to this recording. Is it largely women or men or both?

Anna Kaplan: I think primarily women, but we hope that everyone listens to it. Because I think, as you said, we can all benefit.

Hafsat Abiola: Yeah, I'll share the two poems. The first I'll share is My Brothers, and then I'll share My Sisters.

So my brothers, rise and welcome a world where law protects those your strength used to. The female no longer seeks your role, your listening ear, and your respect will earn you more. Rise and rejoice the end of an era, no need now to hide your fears or tears, to bury your weaknesses beneath battle gear, your mortal soul is safe here. Rise and shake off the need to always put yourself ahead. The truth now widely known is that humanity does best when both men and women are abreast. So rise and ditch [01:52:00] the old cloak of tradition, that garment no longer fits the time, end the quest for control and seek instead to take up more household roles. For rising beside you are women who now claim their place. The past may have been yours to call, but the future, the future will belong to us all. Prepare yourselves, a new day has come.

And for the women, I have one called My Sisters.

My sisters through all that you've faced, the dangers, the lack of support, the rejection, you've remained unbowed, I bow to you. On the path that you've chosen to carry love to work for much needed change, in spite of the lonely road, the bleak prospects you've remained committed, I commend you. For the way that you move in this flawed world, always looking out for others, whether or not you had someone look out for you, you've remained your sister's keeper, I salute you. At last a new world beckons, you, me, all of us together are called to usher it in. You may stumble, I may fall, but if we stand side by side, we will rise to this task as one, I count on you.

Exactly two hours, Anna, thank you for the time.

Anna Kaplan: Thank you, this has been so amazing talking to you.

End: [01:53:49]