

## CHAPTER ONE

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# A DRIVING FORCE OR SENSE OF MISSION

INTRODUCED BY THE  
HONORABLE  
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EXPERIENCE HAS TAUGHT ME THAT THERE IS NO limit to what women can accomplish. A sense of mission compels me to believe in the possible. The quest for peace, human rights, dignity, and equality, which guides the work of the United Nations and UN Women, provides a sense of mission to millions of women and men around the world. We are united in a common cause for freedom and justice.

A leader always looks to the future. This does not mean forgetting about the past. On the contrary, the need for a better society is derived from lessons learned. In building a democratic nation, one builds on the past, moving forward with a sense of mission for a future that includes everyone and ensures rights and opportunities for all.

When I was minister of defense in Chile, before I became president, my mission was to further reform the defense sector and continue working to ensure the rule of law. During the military regime, human rights had been violated and the military was a symbol of fear for the people. By approaching this duty with hope instead of anger, it was possible to support the people and the armed forces to move forward in a spirit of national identity and determination. We were driven by a shared sense of mission to overcome authoritarianism by creating institutions to uphold democratic values.

Democracy is rooted in peace and justice, and democratic reform requires leadership with conviction.

Those who lead with conviction include the women you will come to know in this chapter—Marina Pisklakova, Hafsat Abiola, Anel Townsend Diez-Canseco, Sunitha Krishnan, and Dr. Hawa Abdi. They can and do realize extraordinary accomplishments. As I always say, the most important thing is to never give up. Democracy, justice, and peace demand the full and equal participation of women. Justice is a long-term undertaking.

During my life, I have had the privilege to live in service of shared goals for democracy, equality, and justice, first for my country of Chile, and now for the women of our world through UN Women, the first United Nations agency dedicated to advancing women's empowerment and gender equality.

I continue on my journey with hope.

I had to go. In August 1995, all I could think about was the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China—widely predicted to be the largest-ever gathering of women leaders and activists in history. Women from every corner of the globe were expected to attend, representing different generations, religions, cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and professions; all united around one common goal: improving the status of women in our world.

I was twenty-one years old at the time, coming of age in an increasingly interconnected world and desperate to understand my place within it as an American woman. I saved and borrowed money and bought the cheapest airline ticket I could find, one involving four layovers before touching down in Beijing. As it turned out, buying the ticket was the easy part.

After I'd mailed in my registration forms, photograph, and \$50 application fee, the Chinese Organizing Committee denied my request for a conference visa. For two straight weeks, I went to the Chinese Consulate in Los Angeles every morning, demanding an explanation. Later, I learned that more than a third of those who registered for the conference were never granted visas. A young Chinese consular officer took pity on me, or maybe just grew tired of my visits, and suggested that I apply for a tourist visa under the guise of a traveling student. Once I had made it to China, he thought I'd be able to get into the conference itself.

Tourist visa in hand, I reserved two nights at a hotel in Beijing I couldn't afford, telling myself I would figure something out when I arrived. It would be an adventure—and though I didn't know it then, a life-changing experience.

For me, the conference began on the last leg of my journey into Beijing. The plane was filled with women attending the conference, including my seatmate, a warm and enthusiastic human rights activist from South Africa named Gertrude Fester. She seemed so upbeat that I was sobered later to learn that she had been arrested and imprisoned for nearly three years because of her efforts to fight apartheid.

Gertrude had followed the UN's world conferences on women since the inaugural gathering in Mexico City in 1975. She told me how, at the time, the issue of domestic violence wasn't recognized as a public issue. It was seen as a private issue, not to be discussed outside the home, but women around the world were talking about "the problem that had no name." At the third UN Conference in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1985, advocates pushed to have domestic violence included in the official document coming out of the conference. "We each returned to our home countries pointing to the fact that our government and nearly every other nation in the world recognized it as a problem," Gertrude explained. "From that place of authority, we started pushing for legislation to outlaw domestic violence."

The Beijing conference would be the fourth in the series. I learned from Gertrude that official delegations planned to join in signing on to a "Platform for Action" to improve the lives of women in twelve critical areas, from health to economic status to political participation. Meanwhile, as many as forty thousand nongovernmental leaders, advocates, and activists would gather for the parallel NGO Forum in Huairou, a sleepy northern suburb.

The more I learned, the more I realized that this would truly be a historic gathering. Still, I knew my participation wasn't guaranteed. I confided in Gertrude about my awkward visa situation, and my fears that I would be turned away. "Well," she said, leaning back confidently in her seat, "we can fix that."

As we left the plane and collected our luggage, a flock of enthusiastic students holding signs with the forum logo ushered women onto buses headed to Huairou. Gertrude and I attempted to board, but I didn't make it far. A nervous young woman checking passports at the door alerted her superior, who told me I could not join the group because I did not have a proper visa. In an act of sisterly solidarity, Gertrude disembarked as well, as if to say, don't worry, we will figure this out together. We took a taxi to a hotel in Beijing for the night, and plotted our next step. The following day, we returned to the airport and scoped out the convoy of buses once again.

This time, we made a detour and Gertrude headed toward the road, dragging me and her suitcase in tow. She led me about a quarter of a mile, just beyond the sights of the officials. Soon we saw a bus heading toward the conference. Without warning, Gertrude jumped out onto the road right in the path of the oncoming bus.

"Stop!" she shouted. "We are all sisters!"

The bus screeched to a halt; the doors opened and we climbed on, to the surprise of the Russian delegates inside. Gertrude greeted each of them with a "Thank you very much," as she led the way to some open seats in the back. From Gertrude, I learned how to get things done.

The Chinese government's decision to move the conclave of nongovernmental leaders from Beijing out to the countryside was motivated, in part, by their desire to shelter the citizens of the capital city from what they imagined would be converging activists and radicals. I later discovered that taxi drivers throughout Beijing kept white sheets on hand for the duration of the conference, in case, I was told, any attendees decided to strip naked and march in the streets.

It took about an hour to get to Huairou. Local farmers and their families lined the road to watch the convoy coming to town. Finally, a barracks-like series of hastily built dormitories came into view. Our bus rolled up at the registration building. This was the moment of truth. As I waited in line to pick up my badge, my heart was pounding and I had to catch my breath just to tell the young woman my name. She examined my passport. Flustered, she called for help. After a few minutes one of her colleagues came back and said, "You need to go into Beijing and register there."

"I've been there." (I had been told by my consulate friend in Los Angeles that the authorities wouldn't want a jilted young feminist hanging out on the streets for ten days; that it was likely they would let me in on the spot to avoid greater protests.) "They told me that I should come here to register and pick up my badge." A few minutes later, the young woman returned, my badge in hand—complete with the photograph of myself I'd sent in with my registration.

I reunited with Gertrude, who was just as excited as I was at the sight of that precious badge. "Beautiful, my dear, beautiful!" One of her friends had taken one look at the

stark dormitories and decided to stay elsewhere. Gertrude snatched the housing form out of her hand, put it in mine, and said, “And now you have a place to sleep, my dear.”

The Chinese Organizing Committee had decided to separate women by region: the Eastern Europeans with the Eastern Europeans, the women from Latin America together, another set of buildings for the women from the Middle East. With my borrowed papers, I found myself in a tiny dorm room with two African women.

I learned that one of them was from Eritrea and the other from Ethiopia, two countries that had been at war for decades. Despite the differences in their backgrounds and perspectives, they immediately started looking for points of connection and commonality—their children, their families, their work. Watching them together was fascinating.

After dinner, hundreds of women loaded into buses to ride into Beijing for the spectacular opening ceremonies featuring speakers and performances from around the world. The African women wore handmade, embroidered dresses in vibrant colors—some adorned with intertwining symbols of the UN peace dove and the universal woman symbol. My bus was just one of what seemed like a few hundred buses full of women activists. Suddenly, I felt very small. These women hadn’t come to Beijing to understand their place in this world. They came here to fight for it.

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The African women were buzzing over breakfast the next day. Aung San Suu Kyi was to deliver the opening keynote

address. Perhaps the best-known political prisoner since Nelson Mandela, she had recently been released by the military dictatorship after nearly six years of house arrest. Though no longer under guard, she couldn't leave Burma without running the risk of being denied reentry. So a video of her speech had been smuggled out to Beijing.

Suu's father, the great general Aung San, was a hero of Burma's fight for independence. In 1947, when Suu was just two years old, her father was assassinated by political rivals. As a teenager, her family moved to India, where her mother served as Burma's ambassador. Later, while studying at Oxford, she met and married Michael Aris, a British scholar; they had two sons. She rarely returned to Burma during those years except for holidays. Still, she could not forget her people and would often tell her husband that one day she would return if they needed her. That day came in 1988.

Suu was in Burma nursing her dying mother just as prodemocracy protests broke out. After twenty-six years, General Ne Win had stepped down as chairman of the Burma Socialist Party. Mass demonstrations for democracy were brutally suppressed by the military, and nearly four thousand Burmese people were killed.<sup>1</sup> At a rally of an estimated one million Burmese citizens at the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, Aung San Suu Kyi took the stage, calling for a new democratic government. As her father's daughter, she had the attention of the entire nation.

Nevertheless, a new military junta took power the next month. In response to the military's ensuing violence and oppression, a political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), was formed, and Aung San Suu Kyi



became its general secretary. Like her father, she aimed to help her people achieve a “second independence,” this time from military rule. But she was determined to bring about change through nonviolent means.

In 1989, Aung San Suu Kyi was detained under martial law without charge or trial. Even in detention, she connected with the people of Burma, who were hungry for democracy and for a fair and just society. When the regime allowed elections in 1990, the NLD won 81 percent of the seats in the National Assembly, even with the leader of the party under house arrest.<sup>2</sup> The junta annulled the election results and refused to hand over power. Aung San Suu Kyi was offered her freedom if she would agree to leave Burma. She declined, even though it meant she might never see her sons or her husband again.

The treatment of Aung San Suu Kyi was internationally condemned. In 1990, she was awarded the Rafto Memorial Prize and the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, and in 1991 she became the eighth woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. The Nobel Committee’s chairman declared, “Aung San Suu Kyi brings out something of the best in us. We feel we need precisely her sort of person in order to retain our faith in the future. That is what gives her such power as a symbol, and that is why any ill treatment of her feels like a violation of what we have most at heart.”<sup>3</sup>

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Although the video in Beijing was grainy and the sound slightly muffled, Suu’s message was clear. She spoke about



tolerance and inclusion, and how women bring these values to the world. She highlighted women's ability to defuse conflict through dialogue, rather than by resorting to vengeance or violence. And she spoke of her own responsibility to strive for the release and the return of those who continued to suffer for a democratic future that she had helped to champion.

As a young feminist, I was mesmerized by her quiet strength. She was intently focused on her vision for Burma's future. It seemed nothing could diminish her sense of purpose, or rob her of her conviction; she spoke with clarity and focus, inspiring others not to give up hope.

This was the first time I had been exposed to leadership based on moral legitimacy rather than official authority. Aung San Suu Kyi was the elected leader of her country, and yet she had spent the last five years confined to her home. Stripped of her freedom, let alone the ability to govern, she was still more powerful than the junta, because she had something they would never have: the hearts and minds of the people.

Fellow Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said when speaking of Daw Suu: "The people are not stupid. They know who are their real leaders. You can throw them in prison. You can ban them. You can send them into exile, but the people will always know, 'Those are our leaders.'" The people of Burma certainly knew. Daw Suu started a movement that has sustained the hope of her people for more than two decades.

As enthralled as I was by Suu's words, I was also acutely aware of the reactions from the women around me. They all



seemed to have an unwavering sense of purpose, a focus and determination that gave them energy against the odds. These were qualities that easily transcended culture or geography, and seemed to me to form the bedrock of women's leadership. Soon, I would see an example from my own country that reaffirmed this ideal.

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On the final day of the conference I woke up before dawn and joined the thousands of other women headed to the amphitheater where U.S. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton was to speak. Back in Washington, D.C., it was no secret that many were unhappy about the First Lady's participation in the Beijing women's conference and parallel NGO Forum. For months leading up to the conference, U.S. government officials had debated about whether it would be "appropriate" for the First Lady to speak at a human rights conference in China, given the country's poor human rights record—including its treatment of women and girls. For instance, the practice of infanticide or sex-selected abortion was a widespread response to the country's one-child policy; 100 million baby girls were "missing" from the population.<sup>4</sup>

When Mrs. Clinton was named honorary chairwoman of the U.S. delegation to the conference, her attendance became fodder for the 1996 presidential campaign. From the presidential campaign trail, Republican Senator Bob Dole announced that he didn't see any "useful purpose" in her trip, particularly since China was holding an American

human rights activist, Harry Wu, as a political prisoner.<sup>5</sup> Even within President Clinton's own staff, officials could not agree whether the First Lady should go. The only one who seemed certain was the First Lady herself. As she later wrote in her memoir, *Living History*, "I sympathized with their cause, but it disappointed me that, once again, the crucial concerns of women might be sacrificed."<sup>6</sup>

In the eleventh hour, Harry Wu was released from prison and the White House approved the First Lady's trip. Pundits speculated about a last-minute diplomatic quid pro quo, in which the Chinese had agreed to release Wu if Mrs. Clinton would refrain from criticizing the government. This was not the case. Mrs. Clinton was clear that she would not be deterred from her purpose in going to Beijing: speaking truth on the rights of women everywhere in the world.

As I stood in the dark, early morning hours, the queue of women waiting for Hillary grew. The theater could hold only a few hundred people, but I was standing near the front, and I was certain that I would be able to enter. But the hours ticked by, and the throng of women and I could only watch as a number of U.S. delegation members arrived; then members of the media, followed by Chinese government officials. Only a handful of spectators were allowed in before a Chinese Organizing Committee official announced that all the seats in the theater were full.

Most of the women at the conference never saw Mrs. Clinton at the podium. Only a fortunate few, including me, got

to hear her remarks in real time, in rooms aside the theater, where the audio was piped in. But even in a pre-social media era, the First Lady's message spread like wildfire. Her speech in Beijing was electrifying for its focus and its forcefulness. With moral certainty, she cut through the vagueness of official language, laying a course towards women's full participation that changed the game for all players.

She spoke about the particular ways that women come together and share ideas. She spoke about how work performed by women is too often overlooked and uncounted in both public and private spaces. And then she proclaimed, "It is no longer acceptable to discuss women's rights as separate from human rights."

Jaws dropped. In China, in Washington, all around the world. At a time when recognizing women as equal and worthy human beings seemed a radical notion, something yet to be decided—or summarily denied—Mrs. Clinton's declaration was a clarion call, one that perfectly captured what the women at the conference felt. Women should not have to beg for the right to be safe and secure, to enjoy freedom of expression and equal access to opportunity. Women, as human beings, are entitled to these basic rights. And when governments classified the particular challenges faced by women as a special category of "extra" rights, it was just a way of relegating those challenges to a kind of special-interest limbo.

Mrs. Clinton brought that hypocrisy into sharp relief before every government represented in the room. Her



words became a rallying cry among the activists assembled. Scores of women have told me since that they returned to their countries armed with the phrase “Women’s rights are human rights,” strengthened by the power behind those words.

From China’s perspective, the First Lady’s message was an embarrassing breach of protocol, drawing attention to the host country’s human rights abuses. At home, she was criticized for making foreign policy statements beyond her authority to do so. But for those of us who had traveled to Beijing, the First Lady was a shining beacon of light. She had precisely identified the struggles women faced, and had articulated them before the entire world, demanding that the world take notice.

Though at the time she was not an elected official herself, she understood that she had a platform from which her message would be heard, a position that could not be ignored. She knew the power of her voice, and she used it to speak out for those whose voices were silenced.

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All the women who made indelible impressions on me in Beijing—from Gertrude and my African roommates to Aung San Suu Kyi and Hillary Clinton—were cause-driven leaders. Each had a strong vision for what she wanted to accomplish, and an unwavering commitment to that vision. They had journeyed to Beijing to find new ways to move those visions



forward, and they infused every roundtable, speech, and conversation with clear, focused direction.

In the personal encounters I had with Gertrude and my roommates, I was struck by how vividly they embodied some of the common traits in women's leadership—the capacity to lift up others and reach across lines that commonly divide us. In listening to Aung San Suu Kyi, I was in awe of her readiness to sacrifice her freedom and safety for what she believed to be right. She saw beyond personal risk, beyond persecution, beyond enforced indignity, to stand up for the principles of nonviolence, equality, democracy, and justice. She held firm to her belief in a better future—knowing that a world built on a foundation of injustice cannot stand. And when I think of Mrs. Clinton's participation in Beijing, I can't help but admire her certitude. Even before it was clear she could go, she was adamant that she had to be there. When protocol dictated that she choose her words carefully, she instead spoke honestly about abysmal human rights records. When she had the world's attention, she used that opportunity to give credence and validation to the ongoing contributions of women in every village, town, and city around the world. She knew exactly what she was there to do, and she used her power to lift up and to empower others.

My experience in Beijing taught me the first lessons in leadership that would change my life's trajectory. True leaders, I learned, have heart and noble purpose. They draw strength from within to effect change in the wider world.

At Vital Voices, we call this internal compass a *driving force*. For some, it is a personal mission statement. It is the reason for getting up after being knocked down. It inspires and humbles you simultaneously, providing focus in the face of great adversity *and* great success. It is a force so strong that nothing and no one can distract you or deter you from your path.

Leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi can often seem as if they were destined for leadership. But most leaders are not *born*; they're *made* from opportunity and experience. Statistically, in almost every country of the world, women come into leadership later in life than men.<sup>7</sup> Women often find their voices as leaders through a series of events and experiences that change the way they see the world. For some, their driving force may be formed in one defining moment that has served as a call to action; for others it may be a traumatic event that they are able to turn around into a powerful force for good; for still others it is a series of small events that add up over time to something life-changing. But by the time the most effective women rise to leadership positions, they have already cultivated a deeply held conviction. They become leaders because they know what they have to do—and they feel compelled to act on it.

Indeed, most of the leaders with whom Vital Voices works, like the inspiring women in the examples below, describe their own driving force as something that took hold of them so fundamentally that they had no choice but to embrace it, and follow wherever it required them to go.



## MARINA PISKLAKOVA

### Russia

*“I think for me, there is not one moment that I can point to and say that’s when I knew that this was what I would commit my life to. Honestly speaking, I fell into it. A woman came to my Moscow office and said, ‘I’m afraid that my husband will kill me, and no one will know.’ At that time in Russia, there was no name for domestic violence. Women were suffering silently. They were invisible and had no voice.”*



When I think of the founding mothers of Vital Voices, I think of Marina Pisklakova. In 1997, Marina was a member of the Russian delegation of women handpicked by the U.S. embassy in Moscow to attend the first Vital Voices in Democracy conference in Vienna, Austria. The collapse of the Soviet Union was still fresh. Democracy and free-market economies were just starting to take root. Swanee Hunt, the terrific maverick U.S. ambassador to Austria at the time, had traveled across the region, where she saw the changes unfold, and she was struck by an idea. Like Mrs. Clinton, she believed that democracy would not flourish unless women’s voices were heard. So she decided to bring together emerging women leaders from across the former Soviet bloc with women from Europe and the United States. The U.S. government-sponsored conference highlighted the high cost of excluding women from economic, political, and social development throughout the region.

The participants in that first conference came from a wide spectrum of cultures and issue areas such as political

participation, economic development, and human rights. Marina Pisklakova was identified for her efforts to speak out against the growing problem of domestic violence in Russia that, according to police, did not exist.

Marina's work had begun in 1993 while she was working as a researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences. Her task was to measure the primary concerns of women across the country. Among thousands of responses to a survey she developed, she received two letters from women describing an issue that she could not classify. Marina knew that they were describing what we would now call domestic violence, but back then there was no word for it in Russian.

She spoke of her dilemma to two women she saw every day while dropping off her son at school, and they both confessed to her that they, too, had been victims of domestic violence—something she would never have guessed. She soon realized that this was a massive problem resting just below the surface of polite society. Women kept the abuse hidden out of shame and guilt or to protect their children.

Word of Marina's survey spread in quiet conversation between women, and before long, Marina was receiving calls from women across the country. She confesses that at the time she didn't know what she was doing or how she could help them. She knew she needed support and guidance.

As part of Marina's work with the research institute with the Russian Academy of Sciences, she traveled to Sweden. There she asked her Swedish colleagues to connect her with people working on the issue of domestic violence. That's how she met Ritva Holmstoron, the director of the Crisis Center for Women of Gothenburg. Marina told her what she

had uncovered, the overwhelming data of women in abusive home situations. “I remember telling Ritva, who led the center, that when I returned back to Russia, I would try to decide whether I could really help.” Ritva looked at Marina and said simply, “Do you think you have a choice? You know you have to, and you will.”

So in a one-room office with a single telephone, Marina started the very first domestic violence hotline in Russia, which later became Center ANNA, National Center for the Prevention of Violence. She worked there alone for six months, taking calls and counseling individuals. Soon she started taking cases.

It was only a few months before Marina began receiving threats from the abusive husbands or partners of women she was helping. She knew she would get nowhere going to the police; domestic violence was considered a private family issue. As a single mother, Marina was scared—constantly weighing her safety and the safety of her son against the voices of these women—but there was no doubt in her mind that hers was a mission that could not be abandoned. As the ANNA Center grew, Marina became increasingly overwhelmed by the calls for help. She felt like she had opened Pandora’s box. She thought, *This is not sustainable. Not for me and not for these women.* She needed something bigger.

Her initial strategy was to push for passage of an anti-domestic violence law. It had worked in other countries, but in Russia’s political climate, she found it was unlikely to succeed. So she shifted her focus and started reaching out to law enforcement agencies within the framework of

existing law—initiating trainings with police, prosecutors, and judges.

Though the police did not understand the epidemic of domestic violence as such, they had been frustrated with its symptoms—namely, murder cases, assaults, complaints—which they didn't recognize as patterns of abuse. Marina brought them together with crisis center counselors. She identified interested and compassionate police officers, prosecutors, and judges who would become allies and trainers. Step by step, they worked together to build trust and mutual commitment to fighting violence against women.

Yet even as the movement grew, Marina barely slept. No matter how hard she worked, she couldn't get ahead of the problem. Every hour, a woman in Russia was dying at the hands of a relative.<sup>8</sup> Behind every name there was a story. Too often it was the story of a woman desperate to be a perfect wife and mother. From the outside, the all too common view was that these women were somehow flawed and deserving of discipline. Marina knew she needed to shift the way that people perceived the issue and to increase awareness of domestic violence as a social problem in Russia.

In 1997, the ANNA Center launched a national education campaign called "There Is No Excuse for Domestic Violence." The campaign demonstrated that domestic violence wasn't a private concern, but a public problem. Marina reached out to survivors of domestic violence, offering hotlines and safe havens to which they could turn when violence occurred. The first time she saw a victim of domestic violence speak openly in a television interview about her

experience was a milestone for Marina. The woman did not cover her face, and the audience did not blame her. Public education was working.

By 1999, Marina had established eleven crisis centers throughout Russia and a network of thirty-five organizations committed to combating domestic violence. Working in partnership with ANNA, the Russian Ministry of Social Affairs also began opening crisis centers and shelters, and ANNA formed a broader network that included not only NGOs but also state-run organizations. As of 2012, that network comprised more than 160 organizations. Beyond Russia's borders, the international women's movement has helped as well. International laws, such as the Beijing Platform and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), have served as important tools, as have international organizations like the American Bar Association.

When Marina began her work, her objective was to help one woman. Nearly two decades later, her center and its network of partners have helped more than 200,000 women. "I know now," she said, "that if I were to stop, perhaps retire, the work would not stop, it would continue. I imagine pushing a large boulder up a steep hill, and then one day that boulder begins to roll on its own. To me this is success."

Even in those early days in 1994, there was a force inside, driving Marina's work. "My driving force has always been to give the invisible a voice," she says. "It took hold of me and, as I was warned, I had no choice. It has been something that I have been trying to live up to for all these years."



## HAFSAT ABIOLA

Nigeria

*“I can remember the exact moment that it all came together for me. I was walking across the quad at Harvard in 1996. A group of students were collecting signatures for something. ‘Oh, what is it this time?’ I thought. ‘Perhaps fighting for the right to walk barefoot in the quad?’ But when they approached me, I realized they were collecting signatures to free an elected President in Africa from prison. They were talking about my father.”*

In 1993, Hafsat Abiola’s father, Moshood Kahimawd Olawale Abiola, a successful, self-made businessman, was elected president of Nigeria on the platform, “Hope ’93, Farewell to Poverty.” The son of a poor farmer, Moshood Abiola was the first of his father’s seventeen children to survive infancy. Known for his charisma and as a man of the people, he was a pioneer in philanthropy and believed that Africa should be a place of opportunity for all.

Nigeria had been under military rule for nearly thirty years, but in 1993 the military’s ruling council had decided to hold democratic elections. Moshood Abiola won a landslide victory, setting in motion a prodemocracy movement that the military never anticipated. The election was swiftly annulled

by the council, and Hafsat's father was incarcerated for having declared himself the winner. At the time, Hafsat had no interest in politics. She was planning to earn her PhD at Harvard and then return to Nigeria to do what her mother had done: get married and raise a family. But in 1993, everything changed.

When Hafsat's father was imprisoned, her mother, Kudirat Abiola, began campaigning for his release. Hafsat remembers rushing back from class for daily phone calls with her mother, who would relate her efforts to keep hope alive for democracy and to keep pressure on the military for Moshood's release. "What can I do to help?" Hafsat would ask. Her mother always replied, "The best thing you can do right now is to stay in school."

On the afternoon Hafsat was approached by those students, she realized that perhaps there was something she could do. Her impression of Americans, to that point, had been that they didn't know very much about anything going on in countries outside their own. But suddenly, here were Americans who cared about her father's plight, half a world away.

She rushed back to her dorm room to call her mother. "Mom, there are some students here on campus from Amnesty International. They are campaigning for Dad's release. They want to have me come and speak to some people about the situation. Mom, I think there is something I can do here to help."

Over the next few weeks, Kudirat coached her by phone, helping her daughter find her voice and the courage to speak in public. They both looked forward to Hafsat's graduation ceremony, when they would see each other for the first time

in over a year. But then one day, Kudirat missed one of their regular calls. “I knew something wasn’t right,” Hafsat recalled, “but I assumed she was sick or that she got caught up with her activism work that day.” An urgent call from family friends revealed the terrible truth: Kudirat had been assassinated—gunned down following a labor strike that she had helped to organize.

With her mother gone and her father still in prison, Hafsat felt she had no choice but to carry on their legacy. “I realized I had to be their voice,” she says. “I started traveling across the United States speaking to church groups, student groups, politicians, corporate leaders—anyone who would listen and who would help my cause: the release of my father and the honoring of democracy.”

I met Hafsat through a mutual friend in 1997. At the time, I was working at the State Department, and Hafsat had been pushing to meet with State Department officials to engage their support in calling for her father’s release. By this time, she was an experienced and impressive advocate, a powerful and persuasive speaker who had incredible potential to bring change to her country. But what struck me most was her resilience, even after having experienced such tragic loss at a young age. With quiet intensity, she focused her energy on making change in Nigeria.

In 1998, Under Secretary of State Thomas Pickering and Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Susan Rice traveled to Nigeria to meet with Hafsat’s father in prison and to encourage the military to allow a democratic election. On the eve of his scheduled release, Moshood Abiola collapsed in the presence of Pickering and Rice. Hafsat



and her family believe Moshood was poisoned, though the official cause of death was given as a heart attack. The military government promptly announced democratic elections within nine months. “My parents never saw democracy come to Nigeria. They died for this cause.”

After the deaths of her parents, many people asked Hafsat if she would carry on their political legacies. She clearly embodied the Abiola vision, charisma, and commitment, but her approach was more strategic. She told me, “in Nigeria we don’t just need one or two good leaders—we need a sea change.”

Three decades of military rule had fostered a dictatorial style of leadership in Nigeria. Hafsat explained, “Our government became synonymous with theft of public resources; \$12 billion in oil revenues from 1988 to 1994 could not be accounted for,<sup>9</sup> likely doled out to those few in power.” Despite its natural wealth, Nigeria had become one of the poorest countries in the world.<sup>10</sup> In 1999, the United Nations noted that two-thirds of Nigeria’s population of more than 100 million people lived below the poverty line.<sup>11</sup> Life expectancy had dropped to fifty-three years, which is ten years below the average for developing countries;<sup>12</sup> and nearly half the population did not have access to clean drinking water and sanitation.<sup>13</sup> “The soldiers cannibalized the economy and they ruined us politically and psychologically,” wrote Gbenga Adefaye, editor of the independent, Lagos-based *Vanguard* newspaper. “We are hoping to sort out our lives after they leave.”<sup>14</sup>

Hafsat believes that Nigeria’s women, who gained least and paid most under military rule, offer a strong possibility

for change. They have preserved the culture of consensus, positive values, and partnership, and are therefore uniquely positioned to dismantle the violent political traditions that hinder democracy. Unfortunately, Nigerian women are rarely given the opportunity to hold positions of political leadership.

“Bad leadership has crushed the potential of my country. The best way to honor my parents’ legacy is to be part of creating that sea of change—a new reality,” Hafsat explained. In 1999, she founded the Kudirat Initiative for Democracy, KIND, to honor her mother by helping thousands find their voice. For over a decade, she has trained young women to play a leadership role in shaping the future of her country: “to lead we have to look for places where humanity is stuck and help fashion the lever that lifts us out of the rut we are in.”

KIND trains young women to take responsibility for their personal and professional lives and to participate in politics and decision-making at the community and national levels. While the graduates are still young, they get involved in community issues, from efforts to end violence against women and ensure the enforcement of the 30 percent quota for women’s political participation, to promoting self-employment initiatives and other strategies to alleviate poverty.

“To me, they are future Kudirats,” Hafsat says. “They are pioneering women in Nigeria’s political life. I am working to ignite a flame in the hearts of a new generation of Nigerians that says, ‘Nigeria can be good again. We can make it happen.’”

Hafsat describes what drives her with quiet confidence, resilience, and strength: “There is enough. We are enough. Those are the words I live by. There are enough resources for everyone and they will expand as they are shared. We are enough. We have the ability within us to solve all the problems that plague our world.”

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ANEL TOWNSEND  
DIEZ-CANSECO

Peru

*“When the people overwhelmingly reelected me to Congress I took this not as a prize but as a challenge to continue to make their voices heard through the halls of government.”*



During the 1990s, Peru, like many Latin American countries, suffered from widespread corruption and organized crime. The economic implications of corruption—drug trafficking, labor exploitation, tax diversion, and illegal purchases in the defense sector—was calculated at nearly a billion dollars. Meanwhile, the quality of social programs and institutions such as hospitals and schools deteriorated. Fifty-four percent of Peruvians lived below the poverty line.<sup>15</sup>

During those years, the regime used intimidation tactics against its opponents. As a journalist working to expose corruption, Anel Townsend’s phone calls were tapped, she

was often followed, and threats were made against her son. At the time, it seemed there was no way forward. But politics are in Anel's blood. Her father was a well-respected politician who fought for increased government transparency. And in the early 1990s, as she was traveling throughout the country reporting stories of corruption and human rights abuses, she began to feel that she could no longer simply report on Peru's troubles—she needed to act to resolve them.

In 1995, Anel joined Javier Perez de Cuellar's presidential campaign against Peru's incumbent president Alberto Fujimori. A few months later, the party asked her to run as a parliamentary candidate. She knew she would have to commit to political and social change as never before. "I was aware it would be a constant battle to maintain a career fully committed to fighting against corruption as well as fighting against those who don't want to give political space to a woman," she said.

In Peru, polls showed that young people and women were disengaged and had no confidence in politicians. As a new leader, she wanted to earn back their trust and participation. Anel became one of the strongest voices for change. During one of Fujimori's speeches to Congress, which was televised to the nation, Anel, a new congresswoman, approached the president's podium and placed an empty pot in front of him. The audacity and symbolism of her gesture drew attention, as it represented both Fujimori's empty promises and the fact that Peruvians were starving.

In November 2000, engulfed in a corruption scandal and an outcry over human rights abuses carried out by his government, President Fujimori was impeached and

removed from office. As Peru began to transition away from an autocracy that controlled business, the media, the judicial and legal systems, and at the same time a network of crime rings, Anel saw an opportunity to create a more transparent and decentralized government—a true democracy for Peru.

On my first trip to Peru in February 2003, I heard about the fierce young congresswoman who had won the highest number of votes of any member of Congress in the country. Anel was dedicated to combating corruption—working with her colleagues to expose the links between corruption and drug violence and to mandate that the government disclose budgets and other information for public oversight.

The U.S. embassy in Peru arranged a meeting for me with Anel in a small coffee shop in downtown Lima during that first visit. Speaking with great conviction, at a rapid-fire pace, Anel tells me that she has just been appointed minister of women's affairs. She plans to focus on building dialogue between the government and NGOs to foster transparency and new partnerships. On occasion she pauses, almost overcome with inspiration, or perhaps to catch her breath. She is a visionary and dreamer, but also equally focused and unrelenting in her cause. She tells me how she has already taken the initiative to draft new legislation to protect the rights of women at home and on the job and pushed it through Congress. In collaboration with local and international NGOs, she has been able to persuade the Constitutional Affairs Committee to add an amendment to the constitution that says the state must respect and promote gender equity in political participation.

Anel may have been one of only a few women legislators in her country's Congress, but she has not been afraid to

champion women's equality. For her, equality is not about favoring one group over another. It is about helping her country as a whole. "Women are the backbone of our communities," she said. "For many years they did the work that the government was not doing—organizing community centers and educational programs, providing food to the hungry and healthcare to the sick. It seems only fitting that as government authority is decentralized, increasingly women are running for new local council and regional government positions."

In 2001, Anel worked to pass a law mandating a 50 percent quota for women on a party's candidate slate for Congress. Since then, more and more women have risen to positions of political leadership at both the local and national levels. She is confident that as more citizens—women and men alike—begin to take an active role in the political process, corruption in Peru will continue to decline and the economy will prosper. Anel has continued to promote gender equality and public transparency in Peru and Latin America, serving as an advisor to organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank, the Inter-American Commission of Women of the Organization of American States, and the World Bank.

Anel can see that change is slowly making its way through Peru—and the region as a whole. She believes space for women's voices in politics is finally opening in Latin America, led by a few women who have defied the "givens" of traditional politics as she did. Michelle Bachelet, the former defense minister, was elected president of Chile in 2006; as the first female head of state in Latin America she blazed a new trail and transformed the region's vision of what power

looked like. Dilma Rousseff became president of Brazil in 2011 and announced during her inaugural speech that she would fight for women's rights so that electing female leaders would become "a natural event." Since her election, an unprecedented wave of women have entered politics in Brazil in what has been dubbed the "Dilma Effect" by the media. Peru has yet to elevate a woman to the country's highest position, but each woman who stands up to lead in an ethical and transparent way, like Anel, brings that eventuality a little bit closer. Anel's driving force is, *Women will be the change; I will be their voice.*

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## SUNITHA KRISHNAN

India

*"Amita was only three years old when her mother was tricked by traffickers. They promised that her daughter would have opportunity—a better life. Instead, they sold Amita. That's when her mother reached out, desperate to find her daughter. Together, we risked our lives. We confronted the traffickers, and rescued Amita. Thirteen years later, Amita is a teenager—an aspiring doctor. She is at the top of her class in school."*



Sunitha Krishnan has devoted her life to breaking the violent cycle of sex trafficking, the slave trade, and the spread of HIV/AIDS in India. Standing just over four feet tall, she has taken on a monumental task as the founder of Prajwala—Eternal Flame—a nongovernmental organization that rescues children like Amita from brothels and helps them to rebuild their lives.

“Amita was inspiration, because even after her rescue, she remained vulnerable—there was nowhere for her to be safe, protected. Thirteen years ago, I decided that I would build a shelter,” Sunitha recalled. “I built it for Amita.”

Sunitha Krishnan’s driving force was born of a trauma of her own: when she was fifteen years old, she was gang-raped by eight men. In the aftermath of the attack, Sunitha struggled to make sense of what had happened. She refused to see herself as a victim. Instead, she transformed her pain into fiery commitment, a vow to help end the sexual exploitation of women and children.

When I first met Sunitha, she told me that more than 90 percent of the children in her shelter are HIV-positive. I thought she meant that the virus had been passed from mother to child. “No,” she explained. “All of the children in the shelter are survivors of sex trafficking. These are children who have been rescued from pornography, sex tourism, and prostitution. They are children who have been kidnapped, lured by false promises of employment, sold by their own parents, or trapped by debt bondage.” At the time, the youngest child in the shelter was just three and a half years old.

Prajwala operates according to five pillars: prevention, rescue, rehabilitation, reintegration, and advocacy. Each



pillar plays an integral role in a strategy Sunitha has developed with partners and staff over fifteen years.

First and foremost is prevention. To stop commercial sexual exploitation before it starts, Prajwala operates a network of eighteen primary schools in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The schools are open to children of women in prostitution and other kids who live in the neighborhoods surrounding the brothels. The goal is to equip these children with the skills and knowledge to choose a different life from what they see at home. The schools are a safe place for the kids to be during the day, which also keeps them out of the hands of brothel owners and traffickers. Sunitha leads community-based efforts in the slums, villages, schools, and colleges where her team works to identify and connect with at-risk women and children. They operate with the knowledge that prevention is far more effective than a cure.

The second pillar is rescue. Prajwala's rescue and recovery teams coordinate with the police to infiltrate unlawful brothels; as of December 2011, they had rescued more than 6,436 women and children. Several members of Prajwala's team are former sex workers who were themselves rescued. They aid police in sorting the victims from the perpetrators hiding in their midst, and are able to connect with the victims with genuine understanding and compassion.

Rehabilitation is slow work. Many of those rescued have been drugged to the point of addiction, brutalized, and brainwashed. Their ability to trust another human being is almost nonexistent, and recovery can be a long and painful process. In the care of social workers, medical staff, and peer counselors, victims slowly become survivors over time.

Many continue to live with HIV. They must overcome daunting physical, psychological, and economic challenges, and they face ongoing threats from traffickers and social stigmatization by the community.

Victims of trafficking are frequently ostracized by society. The reintegration process is the most challenging part of Sunitha's work. She developed Prajwala's economic recovery program, which offers sustainable and viable livelihood options and reintegration services. Hundreds of survivors receive training as welders, carpenters, masons, security guards, cab drivers, camera operators, and screen printers. Corporate partners provide additional training and job placements that pay wages well above the national average.

Advocacy is the fifth and final pillar. Sunitha and her team realize that their work alone will not be enough, so they collaborate closely with partners across sectors. She works with state authorities to shape antitrafficking policies that help survivors access rehabilitation services and financial restitution. In 2010, the state of Andhra Pradesh adopted a policy that she drafted, establishing minimum standards of care that shelters and service providers must meet.

"It has not been an easy road. I have had to pay a heavy price," she said. Trafficking in persons is a lucrative enterprise, and there are many who would like to silence Sunitha. She has been brutally attacked more than a dozen times because of her work. She receives death threats frequently. But she always shows up for work the next day because she wants to send a powerful message: "I am not a victim. They do not intimidate me. They cannot stop my efforts."

This commitment took shape years ago. “When I was violated I could have decided to see myself as a victim. That is the easy way out. I looked to others to pull me out of the darkness I felt, but they could not. I felt isolated and ashamed. I wondered if it was my fault. But then I looked inward.” What she found was a wellspring of strength, her own personal fire.

“I see so much pain, so much suffering. Sometimes it is too much,” she confessed. “But there is great power to be found in pain. I believe you must *harness the power in the pain*. That is the driving force of my life.”

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## HAWA ABDI

### Somalia

*“If I stop working, the women will have nowhere to go. The women are essential to stability.”*



Since its founding in 1960, Somalia has been ravaged by war and scarred by decades of poverty and turmoil. Territorial disputes and clan conflicts have undermined any kind of centralized control over the country. The result is a patchwork of autonomous regions overseen by clans, who have each formed their own ruling governments. As a result of ongoing

violence, much of the central government has been forced to operate outside of Somalia in the neighboring countries of Kenya and Djibouti.<sup>16</sup> While peaceful elections in 2009 provided some hope for progress, interclan hostilities and instability persist, along with pervasive poverty. And while there are virtually no official data, violence against women, rape, and domestic violence are known to be common practice.<sup>17</sup> UNICEF estimates that 98 percent of women have undergone female genital cutting (FGC), which often leads to serious health complications.<sup>18</sup>

In much of Somalia, health care is rudimentary at best. At a young age, Hawa Abdi witnessed her own mother die in childbirth, and she made a promise to herself to someday support Somali women's medical needs. At age seventeen she won a scholarship to study medicine in Ukraine. After being trained as an ob-gyn, Dr. Abdi returned to Somalia to work as one of the country's first female gynecologists.

At home in Somalia, Dr. Abdi got married, had three children, and worked in the government-run hospitals. Acutely aware of the consequences of famine and war on women and children, she sought then-President Mohammad Said Barre's permission to open a single-room clinic in Lower Shabelle, a village outside Mogadishu, to assist nomadic women in childbirth. In 1983, the clinic opened on her family's 980-acre farm. She was convinced that in order for the country to progress, there must be people on the ground promoting change.

In 1991, the Somali government collapsed, famine struck, and foreign aid groups fled the country out of fear of the emerging violence. Dr. Abdi stayed. Instead of pulling back

her services, she expanded them. Her family farm turned into a hospital, school, and refugee camp, where 78,000 people found refuge and medical treatment for war injuries, severe malnutrition, and disease.

The once one-room clinic has since become the Hawa Abdi Hospital, where Dr. Abdi works with her two daughters, Amina and Deqo Mohamed. The hospital has three operating rooms, six doctors, forty-three nurses, four hundred beds, and an eight-hundred-student school and adult education center offering literacy and health classes for women. The education curriculum includes the discouragement of FGC. Her commitment is desperately needed: as of 2011, in a country of nearly ten million people, there were only 365 doctors.

At times, that commitment has meant risking her life. In May 2010, the camp was overrun by hundreds of Islamic militants, and Dr. Abdi was held hostage for a week. Rather than submit to her captors, she stood up and asked them, “What have *you* done for society?” Under pressure from the United Nations and other international supporters, the invaders finally gave up and left the village. Dr. Abdi immediately resumed her work.

Although we had been following her efforts for years, my first meeting with Dr. Abdi was in 2010, when Vital Voices joined *Glamour* magazine to honor her and her daughters with *Glamour*’s Women of the Year Award, for their tireless efforts to save and better the lives of women in Somalia. The partnership was in more than name: together Vital Voices and *Glamour* initiated a fund that directly benefits the Hawa Abdi Hospital. Following a 2011 article that Nick

Kristof wrote about Dr. Abdi in the *New York Times*, we raised close to \$200,000 in a matter of days to help Dr. Abdi continue to provide refuge, medical attention, and education to approximately 78,000 Somalis in need.

Dr. Abdi is insistent that her camp is not just about serving urgent needs; it is about creating a new paradigm. A generation of boys growing up in the camp has been taught to respect women as their equals. They also serve on a security force to protect the camp. Domestic violence and FGC have been outlawed, and there is a jail on the property for men who engage in violence against women.

Dr. Abdi's driving force is *Finding hope in hopelessness*—and the belief that she has no choice but to lead.