

## THE CHIBOK GIRLS – THE LATEST

Interview with Betty Abah, Child's Rights Advocate, Executive Director of Centre for Children's Health Education, Orientation and Protection (CEE-HOPE), Nigeria



Photograph by Toner Photo Agency

**YOU HAVE BEEN VOCAL IN ADVOCATING FOR THE RELEASE OF THE CHIBOK GIRLS SINCE THEIR ABDUCTION BY BOKO HARAM ON 14 APRIL 2014. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE RECENT RELEASE OF 82 GIRLS IN EARLY MAY 2017 ?**

Yes, I joined in the general outcry about a week after their abduction when the picture of the gory and unprecedented mass abduction became clear. Remember, there was an initial cover-up by the powers that be supposedly because the abduction threatened to impact their 're-election prospects'. Sadly, what is involved here are almost 300 lives of innocent girls whose only 'crime' was seeking formal education to better their own lives, those of their families and their communities. Thus, utilising protests and a vigorous social media campaign, I believe I did my best to add my voice to the global outcry and call for the return of the Chibok girls. We also mobilised young people in the urban slums, especially in Lagos where most of CEE-HOPE programs are based, and used the opportunity to encourage them to stay in school rather than being cowered into submission because of Boko Haram's threat. It's been three hectic, depressing and anxious years.

However, with the return of Amina Ali, the first Chibok girl to be rescued, our hopelessness turned to expectation with the return of 21 girls last year, then the recent 82! Wow! No doubt, these very promising developments reinforce our greatest hope that every one of them will be found and brought back. Undoubtedly, they have lost three years of schooling, suffered three years of disconnection from their parents, who have endured an equally harrowing time (some girls returning with amputated limbs and pregnant) and the sad realisation and acceptance of stolen childhoods. But then, better late than never. With this development, truly, our hope endures.

**THE 'BRING BACK OUR GIRLS GROUP' REMARKABLY KEPT THE CAMPAIGN FOR THE RELEASE OF THE ABDUCTED GIRLS ALIVE OVER THE PAST 3 YEARS. MANY HAVE SAID THAT IF THE PREVIOUS GOVERNMENT HAD ACTED PROMPTLY AT THE BEGINNING, PERHAPS WE WOULDN'T HAVE THE SITUATION IN THE FIRST PLACE. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THIS?**

We must all give unreserved credit to the Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) group for helping to create and maintain the global momentum by constantly keeping the issue front of mind. Of course, we have an unfortunate knack of slowly becoming impervious to an outcry, no matter how horrendous the issues may be. We have the propensity to move on to the next issue and so many important issues are buried in the debris of our short attention spans, but not the BBOG. They literally held both the previous government and their successors by the jugulars, demanding the return of the Chibok school girls. They have truly carved their names in gold in the immortal book of history for their sheer perseverance. I liken them to the Italian Catholic nun, Rachele Fassera (aka Sister Caroline), who single-handedly rescued 109 out of 139 school girls abducted from a Catholic school in Uganda in 1996. They are true heroines.

Of course, it is glaringly obvious that for some curious reason, the whole unfortunate turn of events concerning the girls was badly handled by the government of Goodluck Jonathan. The Federal Government of Nigeria had, and still has, the military wherewithal to rescue the girls or at least make an attempt (reportedly they were still within the periphery of Sambisa Forest a couple of days after their abduction and

could have still been rescued). The government chose rather to embark on a cover-up, to engage in the intimidation of the BBOG and others agitating for the girls' release and then hiring an international PR agency to stifle the outcry and attempted to rewrite the narrative. From what we know now, the government also turned down offers of help from western countries, as well as the offer by renowned Australian hostage negotiator, Stephen Davis, who had negotiated with Boko Haram to release about 100 or 120 of the girls. The entire failure of government still defies imagination, but again, we are happy that significant progress has now been made and the rescued girls can resume their lives after comprehensive psychosocial support and a reintegration process while we await the return of the 117 others. They deserve their freedom. We all deserve a good closure.

**BEING IN CAPTIVITY FOR OVER THREE YEARS IS EMOTIONALLY AND PHYSICALLY DEVASTATING. WHAT TYPE OF REHABILITATION DO YOU THINK THE FREED CHIBOK GIRLS NEED TO SUCCESSFULLY INTEGRATE BACK INTO THEIR FAMILIES AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY?**

According to government reports, I am happy to say they have already embarked on a process of rehabilitation comprising comprehensive psychosocial support under the guidance of experts. I have no doubt they are on the journey to recovery.

Incidentally, just two days ago, I received a call from Mr Yahy Bwata, an uncle and guardian of Comfort Bulus, one of the 82 Chibok girls, who said he had just returned from visiting the girl at the government facility where she, along with the other 81 and the first group released, were kept. Yes, there have been a lot of conspiracy theories flying around, including the wicked and completely inhumane one that no girls were kidnapped. I admit that President Buhari's hostile body language, general antagonism towards the BBOG group, indifference to the girls' issues, lack of adequate information and all the initial bungling, tended to reinforce the so-called conspiracy theories and feed the rumor mills. My personal position is that if the kidnap had any political undertones, or if there was any conspiracy or collaboration especially by the people currently in power to ostensibly discredit the previous government, then I have no doubt that the truth shall ultimately prevail. Truth is like pregnancy, it is always a matter of time before it shows. But for now, I believe that with the present government in the hot seat, it has no choice but to ensure everything is handled well. I personally believe there have been some general improvements and we look forward to the girls resuming school this September. So much time has already been lost.

**THERE HAVE BEEN REPORTS THAT THE NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT PAID A HUGE RANSOM TO BOKO HARAM, IN ADDITION TO THE RELEASE OF SUSPECTED BOKO HARAM MEMBERS, TO FACILITATE THE RELEASE OF THE GROUP OF 82 GIRLS. THE NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT HAS, HOWEVER, DENIED THESE REPORTS. PARENTS OF ABDUCTED GIRLS YET TO BE RELEASED HAVE APPEALED TO THE NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT TO PAY MORE RANSOM TO ENSURE THE SPEEDY RELEASE OF THEIR DAUGHTERS. IS THIS A SOLUTION TO THIS SITUATION?**

Yes, I learnt that a ransom of millions of dollars was paid. It is a collaboration between the Nigerian government, the Swiss government and the International Red Cross. I don't believe that any ransom is too high a price for a precious life. Even powerful governments such as the USA and Israel, who profess to

uphold the 'we don't negotiate with terrorists' stance, have negotiated with Al-Qaeda and Hamas to secure the release of their citizens. These negotiations sometimes involve a prisoner swap or payments of large sums of money, so there is nothing really new here. Our only regret is that what is being done now could have been done three years ago but the former government failed to act, with unfortunate consequences.

**SOME CYNICS HAVE CONTINUED TO HOLD THE VIEW THAT THE ABDUCTION OF THE CHIBOK GIRLS IS A SCAM. WHAT DO YOU SAY TO THIS GROUP OF PEOPLE?**

It is annoying, really. I haven't much to say to them except that they accuse, doubt and criminalise people who are victims. Their only crime is being born girls, born poor and into a region suffering insurgency. It is not the credibility of the Chibok girls or their parents on trial here, it is rather the humanity of those who have, against all reason, shut their hearts to compassion, sensitivity and indeed, common sense.

**WITH THE RELEASE OF THE GROUP OF 82 GIRLS, CONTROVERSY ENSUED ABOUT A GIRL WHO ALLEGEDLY REFUSED FREEDOM AND OPTED TO REMAIN IN CAPTIVITY. WHY DO YOU THINK SHE ACTED THIS WAY?**

I am not surprised, it is called Stockholm syndrome. A situation where a kidnap victim gradually bonds with his or her abductor, where he or she begins to empathise with, and perhaps falls in love, with the captor. This can also be expected because she was a young, impressionable girl who may have been brainwashed. It is up to the government to help deradicalise the victims and bring them home. Their parents and relatives, Nigerians, and indeed the entire world ask for nothing less. The demand remains 'Bring Back All Our Girls'.

**ZANNAH MUSTAPHA, ONE OF THE NEGOTIATORS THAT FACILITATED THE RELEASE OF THE GROUP OF 82 IN MAY 2017, WAS QUOTED IN A RECENT BBC INTERVIEW AS SAYING THAT NONE OF THE GIRLS WERE RAPED OR TOUCHED BY THE DREADED TERRORIST GROUP. HE REVEALED THAT IT WAS ONLY AFTER THE GIRLS "AGREED" TO GET MARRIED THAT THE MILITANTS HAD SEXUAL RELATIONS WITH THEM. WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THIS?**

The statement attributed to Zannah Mustapha is contradictory even if it has to do with the recently released 82 girls. This is because one or two of them returned with babies, so how then can they give birth if they were not 'touched'? Also, even if he claims that those who were 'married' or have children were not compelled to do so but did so of their own volition, I suspect that he might not be familiar with the Nigerian Child's Right Act that forbids marrying a person under the age of 18, and the section that refers to parental consent. How can we call this coercion a marriage? But we will choose to rather concentrate on the way forward than get entangled or distracted by such details.

**THE ABDUCTION OF THE CHIBOK GIRLS AND THE CHALLENGES OF THEIR REHABILITATION AND REINTEGRATION INTO NIGERIAN SOCIETY ARE UNCHARTERED WATERS FOR THE COUNTRY. HOW CAN THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SUPPORT THE NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT AND THE CHIBOK GIRLS?**

I believe that the country has received a great deal of international support on this issue already, right from the early days of the abduction in 2014. The governments of Norway, Switzerland, Britain and others have offered to help in this area especially. Norway and Switzerland even made funds available as have international development agencies such as UNICEF and the Malala Fund, so I am happy to note that the Chibok girls have tremendous support.

However, the 57 who escaped haven't received much attention. While 24 were taken in by the American University of Nigeria (AUN) in Yola, 10 were taken to the USA by a friend, Emmanuel Ogebe of Education Must Continue Initiative (EMCI) to further their education. Both interventions were without government support and, in the case of Ogebe, accompanied by outright antagonism. The rest have basically been left to their own devices. This also highlights the plight of the 'invisible abduction victims'. There are thousands of abducted women and girls who are still missing or have been rescued but receive very scanty or no attention in terms of rehabilitation and reintegration because they are not the Chibok girls, or their abductions obviously didn't make headline news. Let us not forget about the 500 children reportedly abducted in Damasak in the North East to be used as child soldiers or Boko Haram's sex slaves and 'wives'.

I really think it is wrong for the government or anyone to place a premium on people or issues only because the international media spotlight is directed on them and/or because the government wants to be seen in a good light by the outside world. Every single life should count, and motives, whether by government or individuals, ought to be essentially altruistic and true.

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