THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

# BENEATH THE TAMARIND TREE:
# A DISCUSSION ON NIGERIA AND THE RESILIENCE OF THE CHIBOK GIRLS

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**Introduction:**

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. COULIBALY: So we can get started while they are setting up the microphone. Good morning, everyone. Good morning, everyone. I'm Brahima Coulibaly. I'm the senior fellow and director here of the Africa program. It's good to see so many of you again. And thank you for joining us at this important event on the abduction of the school girls in Chibok, Nigeria some five years ago by Boko Haram.

You will recall, when the news broke it really sent a shock wave across the world, galvanizing millions of people, including some really prominent figures, and social media through #BringBackOurGirls showed a lot of support and a lot of pressure to find and return the girls. But then all of the sudden, it all went quiet, even as the girls continued to go missing. But clearly one person that hasn't remained quiet was Isha. She started covering this for CNN when the news broke and then subsequently in 2016, when some of the girls were released, she dropped everything she was doing, including even the hard personal decision to leave the bedside of her own mother, to be able to be the only journalist to accompany the girls back on this emotional journey.

Over the years, she has developed really close ties with the girls, interviewed many of them, and was able to capture their stories in a unique way, in a way that has never been told before in her book, "Beneath the Tamarind Tree".

So we are honored to host her today for this conversation, which along with the book will really serve to keep the pressure and remind everybody that some girls are still missing and that we shouldn't stop until the very last one is returned.

So congratulations, Isha, on this incredible piece of work. It will ensure that this tragedy is appropriately filed in the history of humanity, so never again girls whose only goal was to get an education and get a fair chance at life to improve it for themselves and their loved ones, are not prevented from doing so.

So I first heard of this book project when you came to Brookings in January to moderate the launch of our flagship project, Foresight Africa. And as she talked about the

project, I could really sense the passion in the voice, some anger and frustration with the whole situation. So it was clear to me that to Isha, clearly this was not just a story, it was really personal and, frankly, should be personal to every one of us who put great value on equal opportunity and equal rights for women and girls.

But the tragedy also tells an impressive story and powerful story of optimism, determination, and resilience of the abducted girls, even in the face of tremendous hardship. And here at Brookings our Center for Universal Education has been undertaking some studies to kind of look at what type of educational system could be appropriately designed in terms of skills and how to even approach educating the girls that have faced this kind of trauma. I'm told the study will be released hopefully next month. So stay tuned for more reading on this.

If you don't already have a copy of the book, it is available outside, so you can pick up a copy. And unlike some of our previous book launches, this one is not free. But I trust that it's going to go to a really great cause because, as you know, since Isha stepped down last year from CNN she has been devoting her time really to nonprofit work through her organization, Women Everywhere Can Lead, kind of molding the next generation of women leaders across Africa. So any support we can give her will go a long way toward that cause.

And we are also honored and grateful to have with us Travis Adkins to moderate this conversation. And by way of introduction, Travis is a lecturer of Africa & Security Studies at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service. He's an international development leader with two decades of experience working in government and civil society, humanitarian area in over 50 countries across Africa and the Middle East. He's also an advisory member of some nonprofit groups, such as Global Kids and Women of Color Advancing Peace and Security. He is also the host of your podcast on Africa.

So please join me in welcoming both to the podium. (Applause)

MR. ADKINS: So, Isha, one of the things that I wanted to do first is just start

off with a thank you to you. Coul had mentioned this 20 years of experience that I've had kind of traversing the continent, and for those of us who are Africanists and who participate in that kind of work, not only your face and your voice and your reporting has been with use through airports and hotels and all kinds of different situations that we find ourselves in as that kind of cool, confident, and persistent presence. So thank you for that work.

MS. SESAY: Thank you. Thank you.

MR. ADKINS: I want to just start off by saying that I've spent the last week kind of reading this book from cover to cover, and what I drew from it first and foremost was that it was a kind of heartbreaking and hopeful and painstakingly detailed account of not only what happened to the Chibok girls, but also kind of part memoir, part call to action about what is happening to women in this world, women of color in some very particular senses.

So the first question I had for you was why you felt compelled to write a book about this at this particular time?

MS. SESAY: First of all, thank you to you for taking time out to sit with me, to everyone here, and of course to Brookings. It's really a thrill to be here talking about this book, because the issues are so close to my heart.

The book I felt it needed to be written, I felt that when it comes to -- and I say this in the book -- the atrocities perpetrated against women and girls, particularly black and brown women and girls, the world is very quick to look away. Or if they look, it's for the briefest of moments and it doesn't register with the same import, the same intensity as when it happens to quite frankly white people, westerners, if you will. And having worked at CNN for 13 years, I felt that this story, like a couple of others, like Ebola and other stories like that, when they'd come to the forefront Africans and women of color hadn't been -- they hadn't been serviced well.

MR. ADKINS: Yes, yes.

MS. SESAY: I felt that particularly with this story, in comparison with other where they're victims of crime, nobody went deep. And, look, I was part of the team that

won the Peabody for CNN for the coverage of this story of the Chibok girls being taken, but we never got their interior lives, we never got a sense of who they are. They remained, as far as I was concerned, just headlines. And no one took the time to draw out their humanity. And with that, there wasn't a connection to them, and with that, people were able to move on so quickly. And that was something I wanted to correct with this book.

MR. ADKINS: Yeah. You know, one of the things that I thought was so powerful about the way that you told that story is there's one particular scene in the book where the daughter of one of the activists says no one would look for me because I'm not American. And one of the things I thought you did a great job in is talking about how this dynamic essentially plays out in the United States as well as abroad.

MS. SESAY: Absolutely.

MR. ADKINS: And so you look at some of the statistics and numbers as astounding as 64,000 black women and girls missing even in the United States. So I was really compelled by that.

The next thing I wanted to ask you about is this idea of kind of why you were gripped by the story of the Chibok girls. And you have a line in the book where you say of all the stories I've ever covered, I knew that I would have to cover this one differently.

Could you share kind of what you meant by that?

MS. SESAY: Yeah. I mean first and foremost, I mean the fact that his happened in Nigeria, which is an incredibly difficult place to operate in -- I've covered Nigeria for well over a decade and I was aware of the dynamics, how the political apparatus kind of controls everything and people can be reluctant to speak. I knew that the fact that this was happening -- as it emerged, that this was happening in a place called Chibok, which is so far off the radar, and the victims were from poor families. Knowing, again, Nigeria's dynamics when it comes to class and wealth and influence, I knew automatically that they were on the losing end of this deal, that basically they were somewhat invisible. And that made me feel that, okay, I'm going to have to step up for them. But also because they come from such a

poor background, because they come from a place where more than 50 percent of girls before 16 are married off, because they come from a place that has the highest out of school population in the world. And my mother, who is from neighboring Sierra Leone, grew up in the town that is not that different from Chibok. She comes from a home where her father, my grandfather, had multiple wives, where there was no power, there was no water, where she studied by lamp and candle. The beginnings, the origins, were similar, so it spoke to me in that sense.

But it also spoke to me that these girls were stolen from a school, a place they should have been safe. And I felt, and I still say, these girls were on the same journey my mother had taken previously, the journey of education. Because my mother went on to become as educated as she is, even though she came from such humble beginnings -- my grandmother sold goods in the local market, most of my mother's siblings are uneducated to a high degree. From that background my mother rose to gain a Ph.D. in the English language and linguistics, to become the first woman to run for vice president in Sierra Leone, to help rewrite the constitution. All of that, that's education. That's education that changed her life and therefore changed my life. So for me, the girls were on the same journey, same trajectory that my mother had taken. So I felt they had been robbed.

And so, for me, there was that anger, there was that upset that compelled me to stand for them.

MR. ADKINS: Yes, yes. Could you talk to us a little bit about the fight that you had to take on to tell the story? And so there are a few vignettes of some parts of it were advocacy kind of inside CNN where you received a lot of support, but also had to advocate internally. And the other part was the irony that you were pushing against the Nigerian government on behalf of marginalized women and girls, and yet you were also being marginalized yourself --

MS. SESAY: Totally.

MR. ADKINS: -- for being an African woman --

MS. SESAY: Totally.

MR. ADKINS: -- for issues of age in terms of that society. If you could talk about that a little bit with the audience.

MS. SESAY: Yeah, I mean so a little background to the way CNN came to the story. I mean when the story broke April 14, 2014, when the girls were taken, everybody knows the story didn't immediately catch fire, if you will, because it was so hard to get information out of Chibok, because it is so far away. It was under state of emergency. Journalists couldn't get in. So for CNN, we had a correspondent on the ground, a dear friend of mine, Vladimir Duthiers, who did the best he could to get information. But it was slow to come out.

Nonetheless, I still committed to the story. But I don't think we understood the government's recalcitrance or their refusal to kind of share details until I got to Nigeria about two and a half weeks later. And this is what I say to people, sometimes even with the best sources on the ground, until you're on the ground you don't know the full story. Ike sometimes that kind of satellite reporting doesn't really give you the full picture. So I didn't realize until I got to Nigeria -- and actually I posed on Twitter that I'm in town and people started messaging me saying are you here for the Chibok girls, what's happening to these girls. And that's when I thought there's something not quite right here.

I had flown in to cover the World Economic Forum, I hadn't flown in to cover the Chibok girls, for full transparency. But once I realized that -- because I mean the Nigerian government in those days, those early days, said all of the girls were back, apart from aids and they said we're mounting an investigation to fine them. We thought they were doing everything until I got there.

So once I realized -- and it was more a hunch that something wasn't right. I mean more sense that we need to dig. Full credit to CNN. I was there to cover World Economic Forum. We had crews on the ground to cover World Economic Forum. And I made the call to them and I said this is not the story, there is something wrong here. We

cannot be covering a gab fest, you know, a bunch of (laughter) celebrities and world leaders kind of swarming around talking about how Nigeria has got the biggest economy when there are 276 girls -- in fact we don't even know how many girls are missing. And CNN said okay. They were like, okay, if you feel -- and I really respect them. They went with me on that.

And it also just played out in terms of timing that when I got there just a few days later, Goodluck Jonathan spoke for the first time. And then it all kind of kind of kicked into being. The Nigerian government immediately I think took particular umbrage with me telling the story. For them it was like -- and I say this in the book, if Christiane Amanpour had asked the same questions I had asked, it would have been received differently. But because I'm black, because I'm African, because I was younger than the people I was interviewing, it was seen as a huge like disrespect, to the point where somebody said to me live on air, listen sweetheart, in response to a question.

So I was dealing with that on a day to day basis, but CNN, they stuck at it, they stuck at it.

MR. ADKINS: So given your passion for this story, I can probably anticipate the answer to this question, but when we think about this dynamic of the balance of stories that we hear about Africa, positive versus negative stories, disease, warfare, famine, I'm curious about some of the reception that you received from Nigerian high society for foregoing this ability or this moment in which they wanted to be highlighted during WEF to take a different direction and cover this story of the Chibok girls.

MS. SESAY: Some have never forgiven me for that. To this day, some feel that CNN's reporting had a hand in Goodluck Jonathan not being reelected that we -- I mean I don't see how holding a mirror up to a government that has failed its people is our fault. I mean people saw what they saw -- that they failed. They failed to protect them. We didn't do that, they failed. And not just the federal government, but also, you know, the local government. To be fair, Governor Shettima kept the school open and there was insufficient security around those girls while they knew that they were using that school as an

examination center.

You know, some in high society, even when I landed were like you're here to cause trouble. Also because I have a bit of a reputation in Nigeria (laughter) for being problematic, I think is how they see it from interviewing the President Goodluck Jonathan in a rather spiky interview. And so for them they just thought that I was making trouble. I think they thought that as a fellow African I was breaking ranks, that I was showing them at their worst. But I say this, and I stand by it, someone had to stand for the girls. I stand for them, I don't stand for these people in power.

MR. ADKINS: Yes, yes.

MS. SESAY: They are government, let them do what they have to do, but these families have to this day been abandoned.

MR. ADKINS: Yes. You know, on that point, could you highlight maybe for us a little bit the way in which the girls actually became a political issue in terms of presidential elections, in terms of Buhari versus Goodluck Jonathan, and how really the disdain for this issue actually still spread across administrations?

MS. SESAY: Totally. And I think that's one of the things that bothers me the most, the fact that these girls to this day are political pawns. These are people's children. And just because they're poor doesn't mean they don't matter. And to this day, the feeling I get from people in government, from some people in government, that they're just a problem that some of us won't let go. But when they were taken, Goodluck Jonathan's wife, Patience Jonathan, said no girls had been taken, discounted the voice of Bring Back Our Girls activists and had some of them arrested -- even though I should also say they deny that she issued the order. And President Goodluck Jonathan didn't speak for almost three weeks on it. And they created this vacuum which they fed into by suggesting it was a political hoax orchestrated by the people in the north of Nigeria, which is predominantly Muslim, where they knew the next president -- because of the way Nigeria works, the north is predominantly Muslim, the south is essentially Christian. The power structure, the fault

lines in the country. Jonathan is from the south, the election was coming up, they knew the next contender, the major contender would come from the north, and they felt that this had been orchestrated.

First of all, there are two lines. There's one, it didn't happen. The other line is if it happened, it happened because people in the north orchestrated it. And these girls in all of this are just -- they're just pawns. And it became an election issue and Buhari campaigned on it. And it became a failing issue for Jonathan because he failed. And to this day, even with this book, the Nigerian government's response has been to say well, we're not the government that was in charge when the girls were taken.

MR. ADKINS: Well, two final questions before we move to the audience, and you kind of hinted at one now. This idea of the international Bring Back Our Girls movement obviously has largely been a focus in the west. But what I wanted to take a minute to do here is to highlight the endogenous origin of that movement, to say the name of Aisha Yesufu and Oby Ezekwesili in this type of forum. And for you to maybe talk to us a little bit about the way that that movement originated and how it ended up spreading.

MS. SESAY: Yeah. I mean everyone knows Bring Back Our Girls and the hashtag and the understand it in the context of celebrities here in the United States holding up pictures and the hashtag, but really -- and it pains to say this in the book -- that the effort for these girls, the advocacy work started in Nigeria, by Nigerian women and men, who immediately -- in terms of Oby, Oby was actually at a book fair in Port Harcourt where she made a comment essentially about they need to bring back our daughters. And it was re-tweeted and reformatted as bring back our girls, and then she also followed up and it caught fire. It started with Oby's statement in Port Harcourt, the hashtag, which we all think for some reason -- or many people think started here.

MR. ADKINS: Over here, yeah, exactly.

MS. SESAY: And Oby and Aisha and Hadiza Bala Usman, who's now part of the government, I mean these people literally grew Bring Back Our Girls and did the

marches in the early days. And, you know, one of the earliest marches, at the end of it -- I write about this in the book -- it was the Chibok community that said you cannot drop this issue. If you don't stand with us, the world will forget what has happened to our children. And then these women in Nigeria and some men said we remain committed to you and we will not stop calling for your girls to come back. And to this day, they still have sit ins at the fountain in Abuja. To this day, I don't know what time it is now -- it's plus 7:00 -- but around 5 o'clock you will find a couple of them. The numbers have dwindled. But Aisha Yesufu, who I write about in the book, she's there with a couple of people to this day having a meeting, saying the girls are not forgotten.

MR. ADKINS: Yeah, absolutely. Speaking of the girls not being forgotten, my final question before we move to the audience, you go to great depth to tell us about the horrors that the young women faced in captivity of Boko Haram, but one thing you don't leave us without, which I'm so happy about, is a notion of the agency that the girls found, even though they were horrified, the ways in which their faith and collaboration allowed them to survive, and even the ways in which they found varying forms to resist deprivation by Boko Haram.

And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that.

MS. SESAY: Well, I think that when Africans are portrayed, generally speaking, in the media there can be the tendency to remove agency to portray them or draw pictures that exclude their -- particularly African women and girls -- their strength. And I felt that what I wanted to show -- because that's what I learned from speaking to them -- was that strength that they had, that resilience. And so for me it was important to kind of counter the general narrative around how we're shown.

But what I also didn't want to do -- and when you read the book you'll see, that as much as I speak to what they went through I didn't want to -- for want of a better word -- luxuriate in their agony. I didn't want to make it so that the focus became the awfulness. Because that's also to strip them again in some ways of not necessarily the

agency, but the kind of dignity. And I want this book to be somewhat of a love letter to them, in a way to kind of say we see you, we know what you went through, we have some understanding of that. And so for me it was important to bring out their strength, to bring out the ways, the very clever ways they defied their captors, and just to bring them out as rounded individuals, which just no one has -- and maybe not for want of trying. I want to also say that. It's hard to gain access to them and it's hard to also get them to speak. And it took a lot of time. I did the first interview for this book January -- well, actually I did the first interview for the initial treatment for the book in 2016. I began the real interviews for the book a few days before my birthday actually, which is why I remember, January 2017. And it took, you know, almost two years to really build relationships and go back and forth to get a sense of them and to really write this book that I hope honors them.

MR. ADKINS: Yeah, I think it does. It shows. Thank you for that.

So, with that, we'll open it up to the audience for questions. We will take three questions at a time and we will ask for short questions that get right to the point so that we can have as many people as possible have a chance to engage.

QUESTIONER: Hi, good morning.

MS. SESAY: Good morning.

QUESTIONER: I've read your book.

MS. SESAY: Thank you.

QUESTIONER: It was very moving. Oh, thank you. Thank you so much for coming. I've read your book --

MS. SESAY: Thank you.

QUESTIONER: -- and it's a very moving and compelling and actually riveting book.

MS. SESAY: Thank you.

QUESTIONER: I was very active in the Bring Our Girls Back here in the States and we were pushing for the United States Government to do its part in providing

equipment, reconnaissance, whatever they needed to do to help the Nigerian government.

And I was wondering if you could speak to any efforts by the U.S. government to assist the Nigerian government in recovering the girls.

MS. SESAY: Thank you for the question. I mean the U.S. government, along with Britain, France, China, all offered help to the Nigerian government. But also they're a sovereign nation, they're only going to take the help that they want to take. So the U.S. did send assets, they did send intelligence officials. Many times they didn't really get very far -- i.e., they never left the embassy. So for whatever that's worth. And they offered technological help. But the Nigerian government, for reasons that are too many to go into, doesn't really want anyone getting involved in this because they really want to prosecute this war against Boko Haram the way they want to do it. And so because of that and because there are so many issues in terms of the military in Nigeria and how they operate and soldiers and corruption and low morale. And they just don't want people digging into all of that, which they feel getting foreign help may expose.

Also, there's also the issue that Goodluck Jonathan said there was this sense that no girls had been taken or there was a hoax. It made any offer of help difficult. They just weren't willing to take the help and they weren't willing to do the deal. I mean initially they were like we're not going to do it, we won't negotiate with terrorists, we will negotiate with terrorists. I don't think we can -- I don't know whether I want to say you can't blame the international community. I think first and foremost they are a sovereign nation and they are going to accept the help that they're going to accept, and I don't necessarily feel that they were willing to accept everything they could have to have facilitated a faster release of these girls.

MR. ADKINS: So we'll take two more questions to couple with that one and then we'll have Isha answer those two together.

QUESTIONER: Good morning. I'm Scott Morgan I'm a freelance analyst covering African security issues.

I know several people right now that are advocating for Leah Sharibu. What type of advice would you give them, besides reading your book?

MR. ADKINS: So we'll take just one more over here and we'll do those two together.

QUESTIONER: Thank you. Good morning, everyone. Good morning, Isha.

MS. SESAY: Hi.

QUESTIONER: Yes, I think my question connects to Leah's story because I am a Nigerian-American and I actually lived in Nigeria for the last two years and I covered some of the Chibok girls story.

My question for you is with your experience working in Nigeria, working with the government, covering these stories, how -- because the Chibok girls I think it awakened the world to understand the vulnerabilities that girls face.

MS. SESAY: Absolutely.

QUESTIONER: So I'm just wondering how you think moving forward in your work, what do you think are the best strategies to help governments, especially understand the vulnerable positions that many girls continue to face and making it a priority. And you mentioned earlier about how they were kidnapped in school. So this also speaks to a larger conversation around education for girls and how can we protect the sanctity of education.

So I'm just wondering how you plan your work moving forward will address some of these key issues and even help governments understand that girls are really vulnerable and we need to do more for them.

MS. SESAY: Thank you for that question.

In the case of Leah Sharibu, for those of you who don't know, Leah was part of a group of about 100+ plus girls, 112 girls who were taken from a town called Dapchi last year. I think it was in February or March last year, so early last year. So basically everyone came back. Some sadly died, but those who survived, almost everyone came back, apart

from Leah who was Christian and refused to convert. And so they've held her from then until now.

Now, the thing about Leah -- and it's most troubling right now in this particular moment -- is because a number of aid workers were kidnapped a couple of weeks ago and a video was recently released last week in which one of the aid workers, a woman named Grace, says -- and I don't know if any of you have seen the video -- but she says basically that they were taken by a group called Khalifa and she also says Leah and another aid worker, Alice Lochture, who was taken after Leah was taken -- so I think in March 2018 -- she says in this video that was released a few days ago that Leah and Alice are dead. We don't know if that's true. I'm reaching out to contacts to try and find out what they know, people who have deep sources. The Nigerian government is refusing to speak out about it. And this comes to the heart of my big issue here, the fact that they refuse to engage even with the families to provide any solace, to say we're working on this, this is what we know. These people are in the dark.

So when it comes to Leah's situation, Boko Haram had said they would hold Leah and Alice as slaves for life. That was the last statement they made about them. We don't know anymore other than we continue to -- I'm heading to Nigeria shortly. It's publicly known the government invited me to go so that they can talk to me about their efforts to find these girls, including Leah. So I will go and ask those questions. But in terms of public knowledge, not much more is new. And I do know someone who is working as part of efforts for negotiating, who had been working to secure her release. And I know this person had expressed confidence that they were getting close, but now we get this news and we just don't know. We just don't know.

In terms of safe schools and getting girls in school and keeping them there, in the wake of Boko Haram taking the Chibok girls, a safe schools initiative was started with the help of Gordon Brown. What is it doing? Eh. That's my answer to that. Listen, I think the Nigerian government knows as well as you and I do what needs to be done in terms of

how to secure schools, in terms of the level of protection that needs to be placed on the ground.

The problem in Nigeria right how is Boko Haram is just one of many problems in Nigeria right now. Anyone who is following Nigeria can tell you that in the northeast you have Boko Haram and even though they control less territory, they do still control territory in that Lake Chad area, the Cameroon -- they still have pockets. Boko Haram, some of you may know, has splintered. That's another issue. The northwest is rife with kidnapping and banditry and vigilantism and the farmer-herder crisis that is moving to the south. I mean where do you want to begin?

So in terms of priorities of them keeping women and girls safe and advocating to get girls in school, you know, I think right now they're just trying to keep the country together. I mean if you read Obasanjo's open letter a few weeks ago, he says Nigeria is on the brink. Now, his motivations for writing that, that's to be debated at another time, but it has serious problems. So I fear that the issue of girls going to school is somewhat low on the agenda. I think that's just the truth.

For my part and the work that I'm doing, I'm working with UN Women, and part of the work I'm doing is to go around and really advocate for more girls to be in school and for the funding and the resources to be put in place. So I'm going around and beating my drum.

MR. ADKINS: Excellent. So we'll take another round of three questions.

MS. SESAY: The gentleman in the back.

MR. FANUSIE: My name is Yaya Fanusie; I'm with the One Nigeria Today, One Nigeria Forever group.

I said to Jonathan when he was in power that he should copy what we did in Sierra Leone and the (inaudible) when we set up the civilian defense forces. I'm going to be saying that again to (inaudible) and if he doesn't take it, he'll be out of power.

MS. SESAY: Well, it's an interesting take. I mean he's just been reelected,

so keep me posted on that.

MR. ADKINS: Anyone else? Right here in the center.

QUESTIONER: Thank you so much for your talk this morning.

So I was curious about thinking about the role of kind of social media and journalism more broadly in coverage of the incident. Were there any kind of unexpected like effects or outcomes that you kind of attribute to the social media?

MS. SESAY: It's a good question. There's a debate about, you know, social media activism, hacktivism, or hashtagism, or whatever you want to call it. And some people have been very dismissive of #BringBackOurGirls. I'm not one of those people. I don't take such a harsh line on it because I honestly do think that -- and I've said this before and it's known -- I think that the hashtag kind of had a ripple effect, it kind of brought people in, it engaged people. Sure it was led by celebrities -- and I would hope that it doesn't take a celebrity to get people interested in things, but this is the world we live in today. And I think that that hashtag and the fact that it was Tweeted and it was trending, and therefore because it was trending it made it onto more newspapers and news shows, put a kind of heat on the Nigerian government. Because it's real proof that there are lots of people -- like the numbers, it's kind of critical mass. And the Nigerian government, as I've said, is incredibly sensitive to criticism and particularly sensitive when the criticism is coming from outside. And so I think that the hashtag was useful. I think the social media efforts were useful in keeping the story going for as long as it did. Now all the girls aren't back, 112 are still missing, but I don't know about unintended consequences, but I don't think it can be dismissed. I think it played a role. I mean certainly most Americans know of the story because of the hashtag. It created a level of awareness which still exists to this day. They may not have all the facts, but they all -- if you say Chibok girls and you say Bring Back Our Girls, they know what you're talking about and I don't think that's a bad thing. I don't think people should rely on it, I don't think people should say let's get a hashtag and just sit with a hashtag and tweet all day. It has to be coupled with real world diplomacy and efforts and

pressure. But I think it's useful. I mean I'm starting another one, so I would say that. Because I think we need to start again another effort for critical mass to build a community around the fact that there are 112 girls missing.

MR. ADKINS: And I would also say on that, I happen to be the staff director for the House subcommittee on Africa during this time period and could talk about the way that the hashtag played out in Congress. So you had women like Representative Karen Bass and Representative Sheila Jackson Lee and our sister from Florida --

MS. SESAY: Frederica Wilson.

MR. ADKINS: -- Frederica Wilson, who got behind this and even led into the development of the Congressional Black Caucus for Women and Girls where this issue was a part of it alongside national issues that relate to black women and girls. So I thought even from that perspective it was very helpful as a driver of action.

MS. SESAY: It was helpful. Yeah.

MR. ADKINS: Right here in the front.

MR. SESAY: Thank you. My name is (inaudible) Sesay.

MS. SESAY: Sesay?

MR. SESAY: Yes, another Sesay. (Laughter)

MS. SESAY: Are we related?

MR. SESAY: And I'm from Sierra Leone.

MS. SESAY: Okay. In that case, yes.

MR. SESAY: Yes. (Laughter) I'd just like to get your thoughts on in sense of the broader advocacy for the rights of girls to education or among the broader challenges that girls in Africa face. You know, what lessons do you think there are to learn from what happened with this campaign, to the other challenges that girls face across the continent. You know, things that have happened in the news and then we forget. In Sierra Leone, you know that we were very quick to forget about victims of the world. Same with Ebola survivors. You know, I'm part of a team, a number of lawyers representing Ebola survivors

in litigation right now and they are just becoming an abandoned constituency. Or the fact that like for several African countries there are policies or laws being developed banning young girls from attending school if they become pregnant, you know (inaudible) as well.

So it would be good to get your thoughts on what lessons there are to learn in terms of our broader advocacy on these issues.

MS. SESAY: Yeah, you know, so the thing about -- thank you for that question, brother. (Laughter) The thing about the importance of educating girls, I don't think it's a secret. We all know the value and the benefit of it. I mean the SDGs are -- a whole host of the SDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals, that are centered around women and girls. People understand that we need to educate and empower women and girls and that it has a ripple effect across a number of other metrics and areas of life. So it's not like governments don't know, they know. I don't need to sell that to them. They know the benefits. They know the benefits not just socially, they know the benefits economically if these women are empowered and get jobs and can have businesses and can look after themselves. They know in terms of life expectancy and general wellness and health in the communities. They know all of this.

So I think the issue is it's just priorities, it's just priorities. And in a country like Sierra Leone, which as you know ha a host of issues right now, the economy seems to be tanking, there's a commission of inquiry into the previous government. What I still don't understand is why knowing that, governments won't make it a priority. And is it case that they need more funding from international communities. I don't know if there are enough organizations out there working to support to get girls back into school. I just don't know why there's such resistance in Sub-Saharan Africa, why we haven't made more progress to increase the number of girls who are being educated. It is very slow. It's the slowest pick up rate in the world, Sub-Saharan Africa.

In terms of lessons to be learned, I would hope that governments would see that if you ignore and abandon your girls and something awful like this happens, it can have

real world implications that you will not get reelected. That's what Jonathan found out. Jonathan saw that his ignoring this issue cost him to a large degree an election. So I would hope that governments would see that people care about these issues, it's important.

To your broader issue of people forgetting in the news when awful things happen, rather, well, I mean right now when it comes to this country in particular, they'll barely do anything other than Trump, you know, which I take huge issue with. So it's not even a case of forgetting, they don't even register.

MR. ADKINS: It's a choice.

MS. SESAY: You know, Africa is getting so little coverage right now when it comes to western news organizations, in particular U.S. based. And even if you're looking at the UK, it's Brexit and now Boris Johnson is Prime Minister. Good luck with that. (Laughter) The world is just becoming even more myopic if you ask me. And so the attention span is dwindling and it comes back to Africans selling African stories, it comes back to people who are committed to the continent telling the stories, but we can't be looking to big organizations to tell them. And then we'll keep the stories alive.

MR. ADKINS: So we'll go to our far right, the gentleman there, and then to the back row.

QUESTIONER: Yeah, my name is Karl Polzer and I do work on economic inclusion, but I'm an outsider to this, so this is an outsider's question.

I just wonder, what specific -- after all this happened, in what ways did the federal government react to protect schools more, number one. How did the regional government react? Can it react? Do it have the political power to react? And something I don't understand, what is the motive of Boko Haram? Is it just to cuss over the government or is actually to suppress women in a cultural way? And if that's true, do they have some sympathy among the regional government to keep women down? And does that play into this?

Does that make sense?

MS. SESAY: It's a good question. I mean in the aftermath of what happened, the federal government and the regional government just fought and the girls just became, again, just tokens. They just became pawns.

So the federal government said the regional government shouldn't have had the school open in the first place. The regional government said you should have provided more security. And on and on and on it went. Meanwhile the girls had disappeared. So it just became a political battle if you will.

In terms of the immediate reaction, they barely reacted. That was the whole thing, they barely reacted, allowing these girls to disappear further and further into Sambisa Forest. So the reaction was really, really poor. The regional government would say, and I think this much is true, that when it came to finding the girls they really needed federal government help to do that. That's something they couldn't have done, they didn't have the assets to do that. And the federal government would say we took it seriously, but we just don't see the evidence of that when you speak to people on the ground. So the failed them. They failed them by allowing them to be taken, by not having sufficient security on the ground, and they failed them in terms of the response.

Because one of the things I learned from my interviews with the girls is they started pressuring them to marry about six months in. They said to them, as we can't do a deal for you -- as you haven't been rescued, you should marry. So I feel like there was a window there where they could have gotten them all back that was lost, which pains me greatly. While they're busy doing this political jockeying back and forth, the created the space and the opportunity eventually for some of these girls to be forced to marry.

In terms of Boko Haram, Boko Haram, in Hausa, the predominant language of the north means education -- western education is forbidden. So Boko Haram's principle motivation, and it's hard to talk about Boko Haram as a monolith now that it's split up between a Boko Haram that we all know from 2014 and this new group that broke off in 2016 that has aligned itself with Islamic State, which is also another issue, which is also

something that I speak of in the book, why we should pay attention this. There is now a faction aligned with Islamic State whose principal mission is to go after American interests.

But Boko Haram has a problem and has long made it its mission to crush western education and secular education. So they want to see a Sharia based law in place, they don't want to see girls in school. When generally attack in the past they would say go off and get married, leave school. So that's kind of their motivation. They want to start a caliphate, an Islamic State, they want Sharia law, they want women and girls in the home.

MR. ADKINS: Go right to the back here, that last row.

QUESTIONER: Hi.

MS. SESAY: Hi.

QUESTIONER: My name is (inaudible). I work with Discovery Learning Alliance.

My question is focused on education. Based on your experience across Sub-Saharan Africa, are there initiatives, both local and ones that are internationally funded, that you see to keep girls in school or help them get into school that are actually successful? So just on a more positive note, are there success stories that you see that, you know, those of us who work in international development could emulate?

MS. SESAY: I mean, listen, there are lots of programs that are working, that are doing well. I did the film in -- and I'm aging myself because I can't remember anything -- I think it was in 2015 or 2016, I did the Michelle Obama film about girls education around the world where I went to Morocco and Liberia with the former First Lady and Meryl Streep and Freida Pinto. And so, you know, in a country like Liberia that's quite similar to Sierra Leone, is post conflict, not too different from Nigeria -- doesn't have the economy or the money, but you know what I mean -- we saw firsthand that girls are getting into school. It's the numbers. So, you know, Peace Corps, a World at School, there are lots of programs that are on the ground that are helping girls get into school. There are lots and lots of NGOs that are -- She's the First. I mean there are lots of different programs that are sponsoring

girls, that are providing after school programs to empower them and keep them interested in school, make them stay in school. My program, one of our principle missions with We Can Lead, is to encourage them to stay in school, avoid early pregnancy. We run as an after school program and a weekend program. There are lots and lots and lots and lots of initiatives.

It's about scaling up, and that's money. It's about governments bringing the money and also have the programmatic structures in place to get more girls in school through the NGO nonprofit side. Governments can't do it on their own. I mean it has to be this public-private partnership, it's got to be also these nonprofits that are working. They have a role to play. It's just not happening fast enough. But I have seen like in Liberia, you know, in Sierra Leone, in Ghana, you know, there are more children going to school, there are more girls going to school, it's just competing interests. If you're a poor family and you don't have the money and you have to choose between a girl and a boy, invariably they still choose the boys. And that's about financial decisions. We need to financially strengthen these families with programs that give them access to capital, allows them to start businesses, allows them to get jobs, and then they can educate their children.

It's a big issue. It's not just people not wanting to send their kids to school.

MR. ADKINS: All right, we'll take a few more. We'll take the gentleman there in the rear and then the gentlewoman over here to my left.

QUESTIONER: Hi, my name is Lambert, I'm a freelance journalist.

I'm just concerned about the title of your book, why you chose that title

MS. SESAY: You're concerned?

QUESTIONER: Yes, I'm concerned about it.

MS. SESAY: Why are you concerned?

QUESTIONER: I'm concerned because I would have expected a different title.

MS. SESAY: Well, what title would you have expected?

QUESTIONER: So what were the series of titles you had before choosing this?

MS. SESAY: No, no, no, you started this. (Laughter) So what was the title you expected?

QUESTIONER: So I would have chosen something about the plight of African girls.

MS. SESAY: Have you read the book?

QUESTIONER: Say that again?

MS. SESAY: Have you read the book?

QUESTIONER: How do I write it?

MS. SESAY: Have you read it?

QUESTIONER: Yeah. Well, I've read three-quarters of it.

MS. SESAY: Have you really read three-quarters of it?

QUESTIONER: Yes.

MS. SESAY: Because if you've read three-quarters of it you should know why it's name what it's named.

QUESTIONER: Precisely, that's why I'm saying that. Because I'm getting to a different thing, why that particular aspect of this and not some of the other more -- I will say more intriguing aspects that would have -- I mean I'm looking at it from also a business point. Why would I be concerned about some things under trees when I would have chosen something about -- directly related to the girls?

MS. SESAY: Oh, you mean why didn't I go for something more salacious, like the rape and slaughter --

QUESTIONER: Correct.

MS. SESAY: -- of girls? Because that is the exact point that I'm trying to make. I'm not trying to go down the road where I'm fixated on the agony and the trauma. I'm trying to humanize them and bring out their beauty and their humanity. And, quite

frankly, "Beneath the Tamarind Tree" is far more lyrical a title than the rape and slaughter of the Chibok girls. So I chose it for that reason. Plus, you know, it's like naming your children -- it's intensely personal. So I understand that it might have been your choice, and I respect the question. I think it's a valid question why I chose it. I chose it because it speaks to something in the book, it speaks to a specific experience in the book and I wanted something evocative, I wanted something that harkens back to the cannons of African literature. That's something that is beautiful and not just something that seems like click bait. (Applause)

MR. ADKINS: We'll go to --

QUESTIONER: Hi, my name is Natalie and I'm on the Girls Education Team here at Brookings.

MS. SESAY: Hi.

QUESTIONER: Thank you so much for talking to us today and I look forward to reading your book.

MS. SESAY: Thank you for being here.

QUESTIONER: So this conversation has focused a lot on kind of the power of leveraging storytelling for impact. And a lot of us in DC and in the policy space, we kind of -- while storytelling can run the risk of, like you said, luxuriating an agony, our work can sometimes run the risk of reducing lived experiences to data and to numbers and to analysis.

MS. SESAY: Yeah, yeah.

QUESTIONER: And that's something I've personally been thinking about a lot.

So I'm just really wondering, in terms of getting -- you know, if everyone's goal is to get governments to make this a priority, to get people to leverage resources and allocate money and scale up initiatives, where do you see the correct balance and intersection of --

MS. SESAY: Storytelling.

QUESTIONER: -- policy analysis and storytelling?

MS. SESAY: I think it's a good question. I don't think we should separate the two. I mean that's part of the reason -- I mean I could -- people ask me -- if you read the book, there's a memoir piece and I tell my mother's story in it and people say why did I choose to do that. Because I think I could give you 1,000 data points about what education can do and barely any of them would resonate or make the same impression as you actually reading this book and reading my story or somebody else's story and seeing what education can do.

So I think that they go hand in hand. I don't think it's -- I mean don't do what candidates seem to do now on debate stages, which is kind of lead with the anecdote to drive it, because that's -- just don't. But I do think that to successfully capture people's attention, to help them understand -- people learn -- you know Trevor Noah made this point when we sat down that people really engage through stories. You know, people have done the research. Even with fundraising, don't give people data points, give them a story. That's what people connect to and that's what will make people give.

So I just think you do it sensibly, you do it intelligently, you plug the data in where it makes sense, but I think it should be presented in a story form with a character, with a person at the heart of it. I think that's the most successful way of being able to do the work you do.

But, yeah, for sure, even governments, if you just give them a host of data points, I don't know that that's going to move the needle. They know all the data points by now. I think it's being able to give them real life examples and being able to give them case studies, that helps move the needle, that helps people truly understand it and see what you're trying to achieve.

MR. ADKINS: Excellent. And with that, we will close the program.

MS. SESAY: No, no, no, no. she had her hand up forever.

MR. ADKINS: We got one more? Okay, let's go.

QUESTIONER: Hi, Isha, good morning.

MS. SESAY: Good morning.

QUESTIONER: I'm so inspired by your story. I'm a fellow Sierra Leonean.

MS. SESAY: Are you a Sesay too? (Laughter)

QUESTIONER: And your story is so similar to me -- and I grew up in Sierra Leone, I remember growing up and being told little girls should be seen but not heard.

MS. SESAY: That's right.

QUESTIONER: And I know that Sierra Leoneans we all have -- in Sierra Leone we also have our own issues. And I'm a mother of two girls now and I'm so inspired by your story. I wish my daughter would have been here today.

MS. SESAY: Thank you.

QUESTIONER: What was your perception, how did Sierra Leonean government or say all the other neighboring countries, how were you perceived with this group that you rolled? Did they think, oh, here she comes again, she's a trouble maker, especially since we're from Sierra Leone? How did they perceive you with this book that you wrote?

MS. SESAY: I mean for sure they're like here she comes, this one, doesn't she have other things to do? I think that's really how they feel. (Laughter) Someone actually tweeted at me, they said something like you're from Sierra Leone where you have enough of your own problems. You're not busy causing trouble there, you're causing trouble in Nigeria. And that's the reaction of some people. I think most African countries are just grateful I'm not causing trouble in their country, to be honest. (Laughter) I think they're more than happy for me to stay focused on Nigeria.

So I think from that perspective they welcome the book, but like I always say to them, I'm coming for you, give me time, I'm coming.

Thank you everyone. (Applause)

MR. ADKINS: Just wanted to close by thanking Isha for writing this wonderful book --

MS. SESAY: Thank you.

MR. ADKINS: -- for choosing the title that you chose for your amazing book. And we missed you behind the desk, but we welcome you out into the broader world to do this amazing work. And we thank you again.

MS. SESAY: Thank you. You'll see me on the screen soon, worry not. Thank you. Thank you, everyone. (Applause)

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I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

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