

Tribute: Hajiya Bilkisu Yusuf and Her 'Jihad' of the Heart (December 1952–September 2015)

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Born December 2, 1952 in Kano, Hajiya Bilkisu Yusuf passed away on the 24th of September 2015, in the process of performing the Holy Pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia. In the years between, she accomplished so much that it would be foolhardy to attempt to capture even the essence of her many achievements in one short tribute. Hajiya Bilkisu graduated in 1975 with a BSc degree in Political Science from the Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria, and, after an MA in political science from the University of Wisconsin in the United States, went on to become a journalist *par excellence*. She obtained an advanced diploma in journalism and international relations at the Moscow Institute for Journalism and International Relations, and became the first female editor of a daily newspaper and weekly magazine in Northern Nigeria.

A devout Muslim, a loving mother of two children, an accomplished woman and role model, Hajiya Bilkisu was known for so much more than journalism. Her abiding passion for social justice and public service was manifest in the very many vocations that she successfully facilitated and engaged in over the years. She founded the Girl Child Concern (GCC), advocating for girl-child education to curb the many deprivations that diminish girls' opportunities and potential, particularly in Northern Nigeria. GCC was a pioneer and shining example of what could be done for adolescent girls: from offering scholarships to indigent girls to organising summer camps, mentoring, skill acquisition and networking activities.

Hajiya Bilkisu also wrote ardently in favour of the less privileged and against press censorship. She would foster debate, strategise, plan, advise and implement those decisions which she found contextual and feasible. And she was everywhere: supporting the internally displaced; learning, sharing and speaking at events at home and abroad; organising and executing her plans

in a quiet but determined manner. Even as she traversed the world for the causes in which she believed, Hajjiya Bilkisu remained true to herself. She was especially passionate about peace-building, interfaith dialogue and gender justice. She was a committed leader of the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN), encouraged and promoted women's involvement in interfaith dialogue, monitored elections, engaged in improving health outcomes in respect of reproductive health and, specifically, maternal mortality and HIV/AIDS, laboured to end violence against women, worked for child survival and against child marriage, supported youth empowerment as a panacea against terrorism, promoted the participation of women in politics, at every opportunity reiterated the critical need for good governance, and consistently called for strategic leadership and for peace and development in our country. She truly lived a life of service to Nigeria and to humanity.

As a civil society activist, she led, consulted for and belonged to many non-governmental organisations, including Women in Nigeria, the Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Nigeria, ABANTU for Development, Health Reform Foundation of Nigeria, GCC, MUSAWAH, Advocacy Nigeria, Women's Interfaith Council, Bring Back Our Girls Movement, Vision Trust Foundation and the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council. She also keenly served on ad-hoc, fact-finding committees set up by the Nigerian government to address and redress the sundry challenges that have afflicted the nation at various periods in its history.

Hajjiya Bilkisu was also a mentor and mother to so many. Kind, generous and compassionate, a sincere and faithful woman, her close friends spanned faiths, class structures, cultures and nationalities. Her simplicity, resolve and calm amidst any storm were legendary. She went about her life's calling diligently and purposefully, always with a smile on her face, impacting positively on others. She was patient and humble, but also principled and disciplined. Her faith was unshakeable, and those who witnessed her final moments when she was about to lose her own life recall that she departed with prayer on her lips, encouraging others around her even as she realised that her time was nigh.

Those fortunate to have met her along life's journey will sorely miss Hajjiya Bilkisu. As family, friends and associates who mourn her abrupt passing, we are somewhat consoled by her preserved eloquence on sundry matters of public interest. Immortalised by the written word, Hajjiya Bilkisu will continue to be read and appreciated through her numerous publications in newspapers, magazines, journals and books. She remains with us still, even though physically departed from this earthly realm. She will never be forgotten.