

Finding Her Voice

**LEAD scholar
Azhin
Abdulkarim '18
speaks on
women's role in
diplomacy,
volunteers at
Syrian camp**

Growing up in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq where she often had to be very careful of what she said, Azhin Abdulkarim, Johns Hopkins SAIS class of 2018, never imagined that one day she would be speaking publicly about the important role women can play in diplomacy.

A recipient of the Leadership in Emerging and Advancing Democracies Fellowship, Abdulkarim is participating in the Johns Hopkins SAIS Women Lead Practicum, a pilot program to empower

more women in the political sphere.

“It’s an amazing opportunity as a girl and as a woman from that area to have my voice heard,” says Abdulkarim who speaks Kurdish, Arabic, English, and French. Through the practicum, Abdulkarim and other SAIS students have been collaborating with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates and the UAE Diplomatic Academy on a project to build programming that draws more women into diplomatic fields.

On April 22, members of Abdulkarim’s research team shared their results at the academy’s conference on the role of gender in foreign and security policy.

At Johns Hopkins SAIS, Abdulkarim has also been studying the United Nation’s Resolution 1325, which was established in 2000 to provide greater protection for women and to acknowledge their role in the prevention and resolution of conflicts. And as a volunteer at the Syrian camp near her hometown of Sulaymaniyah, helping refugees communicate more effectively with the UN’s refugee agency, Abdulkarim was also struck by the number of women

and children present and how much they are affected by war in the region.

“I think that’s one of the main reasons that it’s important to bring more women’s voices into the political sphere,” she said, acknowledging past barriers to their involvement and recent studies that show more peaceful outcomes occur when women are included in the diplomatic conversation.

For herself, Abdulkarim credits her fellowship—created by the Bologna class of 1983 to mark its 20th

reunion and augmented for its 30th—as an important factor in her enrollment at the school, first in Bologna and now in DC.

“It was crucial to being able to attend graduate school because of the economic situation that is currently still happening in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq,” according to Abdulkarim, whose concentration is in conflict management and international development. She added that the two are entwined, that having basic human needs met is a key factor to avoiding future conflict.

“Looking at the Middle East, we’ve seen a lot of turbulence and violent decisions. So, I feel a kind of sense of responsibility to study more about conflict management,” said Abdulkarim. “I hope my work can lead to better reconciliation efforts and contribute to a more peaceful, resilient society.”

Abdulkarim also recently spoke at the annual Johns Hopkins SAIS Global Women in Leadership Conference and the International Women’s Day on the Homewood Campus.



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BY GEORGIA JEWETT '18, EMILY WEISS '18, AND SHUTING YOW '18

Empowering Female Teachers In Nigeria



Nigeria has the world's largest out-of-school population, a statistic compounded by flows of internally displaced people fleeing Boko Haram violence. As members of a team in the inaugural Johns Hopkins SAIS Women Lead Practicum, we had the opportunity to partner with Creative Associates International—an international development organization with several initiatives focused on Nigeria's out-of-school population—and the American University of Nigeria to research the challenges facing female teachers in northeast Nigeria.

Research has confirmed that the presence of female teachers positively affects female students' enrollment, especially in rural areas where religious and cultural norms drive gender disparity in education. However, the research does not propose ways to increase the recruitment of female teachers. To address this gap, we went directly to female teachers—called “learning facilitators”—in Creative's non-formal schools in the Nigerian states of Bauchi and Adamawa. We sought to learn about both the barriers and incentives they face day-to-day.

During a January research trip supervised by Professor Chiedo Nwankwor, we surveyed 114 teachers, led focus group discussions with over 147 participants, and conducted 24 key-informant interviews with traditional and religious leaders, government officials, and education specialists.

In both locations, we were warmly welcomed by community members eager to share their experiences working with Creative. Our partnership with Dean Patrick Fay and Provost Muhammadou M.O. Kah of American University of Nigeria enhanced the investiga-



This work has sparked a broader conversation about women's empowerment through access to education and workforce participation.

tion. Five AUN students also assisted by implementing our survey, contextualizing our findings, and translating key documents.

Our findings, which will provide tools to boost recruitment of female teachers in non-formal schools, promise to have a positive, long-term impact on internally displaced children, especially girls, in this region. In developing one of our recommendations, for example, we found that while Creative's projects effectively rely on bottom-up

community initiatives to recruit teachers, rural women often lack access to professional and social networks. As a result, they miss opportunities to connect with recruiters. By decentralizing the recruitment process and employing more women in recruitment drives, Creative can better identify qualified female candidates with a personal stake in improving access to education for girls in their community.

Creative's commendable work has sparked a broader conversation about wom-

en's empowerment through access to education and workforce participation.

We are grateful to the Johns Hopkins SAIS Women Lead Practicum for enabling us to pursue this research in partnership with Creative and AUN. The experience gave us a deeper understanding of gender issues in northeast Nigeria, and we were able to showcase our findings at the SAIS Global Women in Leadership Conference in March and present our published report to Creative's senior staff in April.