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From DC with love: A diaspora's fight to bring back the girls

By *Jenny Lei Ravelo* (/news/authors/695089)  @JennyLeiRavelo (<https://twitter.com/JennyLeiRavelo>) 26 April 2016



Omolola Adele-Oso, founder of Act4Accountability. Photo by: Act4Accountability

Frustrated with the silence she was getting from the Nigerian government and its embassy, Omolola Adele-Oso posted on Facebook at the end of April 2014 that she'd be visiting the embassy the following week — and anyone who wished to demand accountability for the kidnapped schoolgirls in Nigeria was welcome to join.

A week later, she was surrounded by about 300 people outside the Nigerian embassy in Washington, D.C., and members of the international press were asking her: What's the name of your organization?

"I just had not thought about it, and on the spot I said 'well we're acting for accountability so we are Act4Accountability,'" she recalled, laughing.

That was more than two years ago, right after Islamist group Boko Haram kidnapped 276 female students from the Government Secondary School in the town of Chibok (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chibok>) in northeastern Nigeria. Some 57 of the girls have been reported to have escaped since, but the rest are thought to remain in captivity.

The campaign to bring back Nigeria's schoolgirls to their families quickly erupted on social media, with the popular hashtag #BringBackOurGirls trending on Twitter. And the birth of Act4Accountability was a win for the professional architect turned social activist, whose career jump was prompted by the economic crisis in 2008.

"I've always kind of been an advocate activist. I grew up in a family where my grandfather was a king of Lagos. And so we've always been sort of public servants in my family, and my mother [always says] if you've been given a lot, you have to support your fellow brothers, sisters," she said.

So Adele-Oso, who moved from Nigeria to the U.S. after finishing secondary school, made a gamble. She left the architecture field and became active in advocating for the rights of people of color, from issues of homelessness to HIV and AIDS. It's here that she claims to have developed her "community organization chops," and soon after, she was reaching out to African diaspora in the United States.

Setting the stage

Because Act4Accountability was founded at the height of the demand for the return of the Nigerian schoolgirls, the organization has been labeled as the "Bring Back Our Girls Organization." And because their early days were characterized by protests at the Nigerian embassy, a number of people have branded them as "protesters" and "anti-government" — a reputation Adele-Oso is trying to straighten out.

"I always tell people we're not anti-government," she said. "We're pro-Africans, and that takes a while for people to understand because a lot of diaspora groups here shy away from the hard call for accountability."

Their work goes beyond calls of rescue for the kidnapped girls. Adele-Oso also passionately talked about the thousands of other women and girls abducted by Boko Haram since the incident a little more than two years ago; the internally displaced people in northern Nigeria suffering from the still unresolved insurgency; and the millions of children and youth out of school in Nigeria because of the conflict.

7 ways to support women and girls who escape abductions (<https://www.devex.com/news/7-to-support-women-and-girls-who-escape-abductions-88043>)



What are the ongoing challenges facing the girls who escaped abduction and what are aid organizations doing to support them? Devex gets the inside track from organizations about the best way to support the women and girls who survive such ordeals.

Every morning, one of her first tasks is to check Twitter to keep up with issues affecting her home country. It's here that she learns of Nigerians' daily plight, from corruption to the high cost of petrol resulting from the current oil shortage.

Staying abreast of what's going on in Nigeria helps inform the organization in its advocacy work, Adele-Oso said. For example, when she hears of policies being drafted between Nigeria and the United States, she can focus advocacy efforts on calling for certain measures to be put in place to ensure accountability.

"If you're giving Nigeria money, how are you going to make sure that the funds that are supposed to go towards development or humanitarian needs or security needs are actually going to where they're supposed to?"

And it's her hope to replicate what Act4Accountability does in every African country in the future.

Early lessons

For their advocacy to gain more traction, Adele-Oso knew she needed a lot of patience and a different approach for different types of people or organizations. If there's anything she learned in her years of community organizing, it's that people will not organically come and throw their support behind a cause — at least not as often as one wishes.

"It's how can you find that common element that people can all get behind and support in their own way? Don't assume that everybody is going to be there protesting or shouting from the sidelines with you if that's what you need," she said.

Her architecture background helped in working and understanding diverse groups of people: "As an architect, you work with the clients, you work with the engineers, you work with the contractors, and you have to be sort of the glue holding everybody," she said.



Act4Accountability founder, Omolola Adele-Oso, at the BBOG vigil to cap the second anniversary of the kidnapped Nigerian

schoolgirls. Photo by: Act4Accountability

She recalled how patience and a clear understanding of what she wanted to do played a key role in her transition from architecture to advocacy. But the second most important thing to remember, she shared, is having a plan and remaining patient. While she founded Act4Accountability in 2014, it was only last year — after a full year of planning and prepping — that Adele-Oso quit her day job to focus in managing her organization.

She continues to consult for community organizations to be sure she can pay the bills.

“It's finding that balance between pushing and advocating and building an organization,” she said. “I think that a lot of people don't think about that part. They think, ‘Oh yes I'm just going to quit my job and just do this’.”

Fighting back

This year, in a surprise move, the Act4Accountability team and supporters did not protest to mark the two-year anniversary of the kidnapping of the Nigerian schoolgirls. Instead, they launched the BBOG Education Week, which aims to educate people that the fight to get the girls back is not yet over, and there are many other issues that need to be addressed as well. This included a letter writing event, a fundraiser and a vigil that capped off the second anniversary of the tragedy.

“The tactic of protesting is one thing, but how do we transform the anger and frustration into advocacy and coordination?” Adele-Oso said.



That's not to say they are abandoning protesting entirely, but in order to engage more organizations and individuals, she felt the need to educate them first on what's really happening, and what hasn't happened yet.

Various people come up to her and are surprised to learn the girls are still missing. But what upsets her more is people advising her to let it go.

“The theme of this year's Bring Back Our Girls anniversary is hope endures, and if we give up on these girls then we give up on the millions of women and girls around the world who could possibly be in the same situation. And I have to believe that the world shouldn't move on when such an atrocity happens. So if it is just a small group of us that stay vigilant, then so be it,” she said.

But Adele-Oso also understands she cannot impose her beliefs or her values on others. However, she would like to believe that there are other people in other parts of the world that, like her, have not yet lost hope in bringing back the girls.

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Jenny Lei Ravelo is a Devex senior reporter based in Manila. Since 2011, she has covered a wide range of development and humanitarian aid issues, from leadership and policy changes at DfID to the logistical and security impediments faced by international and local aid responders in disaster-prone and conflict-affected countries in Africa and Asia. Her interests include global health and the analysis of aid challenges and trends in sub-Saharan Africa.

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