

Your Excellency Dr Fatou Bensouda,

Distinguished guest

Students

Good afternoon to you all.

It is an absolute honor and privilege for me to stand before you this afternoon to share some words of encouragement. However, I would like to seize this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences and their enthusiastic and dedicated lecturing staff, who worked tirelessly to contribute to the successful completion of my Master's degree.

Special thanks go to Chipo Mwale, Professor Jon Yorke, Dr Lamin Daffeh, and Dr Friso Jansen. I would also like to recognise the University's Health and Well-being Team and Stephen Dean at the Academic Success Team for all the support and encouragement they gave me during my degree programme.

Studying at Birmingham City University (BCU) is one of the best decisions I have ever made. I met many outstanding individuals who supported me in achieving my aspiration despite numerous challenges.

I am deeply grateful to BCU because they made my dream of attaining higher education come true despite all my challenges and allowed me to stand before you today to share my story. My childhood dream has always been to share my story with a large audience.

Regarding saying words of encouragement, I think being in this room and such an audience today is clear evidence that you are all highly motivated to achieve your life's aspirations. I hope my story will inspire you to do more and encourage others who are not here and/or contemplating enrolment. I hope my

story will also make you realise how privileged you are to release your right to education and have so many opportunities at your doorstep.

I firmly believe that the biggest secret to achieving your life aspirations is education. Life is not without its challenges however, you will always emerge successful when you apply these three things: optimism, perseverance and determination. With these, no matter what your challenges are, success will always be the outcome. You will also need to be highly disciplined, consistent and committed. Because without commitment, you never start, and without consistency, you will never finish.

Coming from a patriarchal society where a woman's success is measured by marriage and the number of children you have. You can only imagine my journey to achieving higher education was not easy. My challenge started at just age 14 when the first suitor came and then at 16. I often went without food, uniforms and books were burnt all in a bit to discourage me from going to school. But I was determined to be educated. I would borrow my friend's uniform and copy notes from them which also at times got burnt. The corner shop keeper will call me aside to offer me bread. I was always the last person to go school and will get detained for been late and get punished for going home late almost on a daily basis.

My experience has taught me that no matter how painful your journey has been or is, trust me, you will learn more from pain than you could ever learn from pleasure. When resilience is built from painful experiences, no amount of adversity can stop you from achieving your goals. Challenges and failures are necessary components of success and, often, your hard times shape you into the person you are meant to be.

For example, I was grieving my sister's death at the time of enrolling for my LLM degree, but her death was my biggest inspiration to achieving my degree in International Human Rights Law to develop skills to fight against some of the injustice and human rights abuse women and girls go through including forced marriage.

**I would like to conclude with a quote from Maya Angelou's inspiring poem**

**"And Still I rise"**

Out of the huts of history's shame

I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain

I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.

## Interview questions and answers

- **What was your experience of studying your course at BCU?**

My experience was extremely positive. I had challenges at the start of my degree, but studying at BCU was so therapeutic that all my worries and self-doubt diminished by the time I left. I was supported by the wonderful team at the Health and Wellbeing Team and Academic Success every step of the way.

- **Tell us about your journey since graduating from BCU. What has been your experience in your career so far?**

I graduated in August 2022, and by September 2022, I had been appointed as a Counsellor at the Gambia High Commission in London, a position I hold to this day. I feel so confident in my job because the knowledge gained from my LLM in International Human Rights at BCU has prepared me very well. To be honest, I feel like I can do anything and excel in it because the knowledge and skills I have gained are also transferable.

- **How does your course at BCU now relate to your current job and how has it prepared you for your future career aspirations?**

The knowledge and skills gained from the LLM International Human Rights degree are very useful and relevant to my current role as a Counsellor at an Embassy or diplomatic post. Honestly, it feels like the degree was tailor-made for my current career in International Relations and as a diplomat.

The Human Rights in the Wider World module helped me develop the skills needed for diplomacy. The International Women's and Children's Rights module helped me understand so many common issues women and children worldwide

face and international instruments protecting the rights of Women and Children, such as the CRC and CEDAW. Global Health Law, International Criminal Law and Public International Law helped widen my knowledge and skills to challenge authorities whenever I feel an individual's human right has been violated. Advanced Legal Research Methods helped with my Dissertation on FGM/C.

During my LLM master's degree programme, I also had the opportunity to spearhead two research seminars to commemorate International Women's Day and Human Rights Day, which helped develop my confidence in public speaking.

I have always been passionate about fighting against oppression and injustice. Although I am aware that inequalities are inevitable but, putting them right is a matter of social justice. When I was lost and didn't know what to do with my passion, BCU helped me turn it into a profession and build a career path supporting people facing injustice, particularly women and children. Including Female Genital Mutilation/Circumcision (FGM/C) and forced marriage.

Coming from a background where these human rights abuses still persist, I endeavour to use my life experiences positively. Together with the knowledge I have gained in LLM Human Rights Law, I ensure that inhumane cultural practices are diminished from my society and the world at large.