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She Means Boss

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The Queen of Hearts

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Editor's Note

Nobody warns you about the sentences.

Be realistic. Wait your turn. Now is not the right time. You are lucky to even be in the room. You are too ambitious, too direct, too much. Most women have a collection of them, gathered over periods of time, each one built to do the same subtle work. To make her feel smaller than she really is.

Olori Atuwatse III was handed one of the sharpest of all. At her father's burial, a relative told her that being a firstborn is not the same as being a first son. The grief was still raw, and someone had chosen that exact moment, the rawest one available, to remind her of the place reserved for daughters. That moment sharpened a conviction she carried, that empowering women could not stop at the workplace. It had to reach the grassroots, and it had to reach the culture that produces sentences like that one.

Her belief system runs through everything she has built. Royal Iwere Foundation, structured for continuity beyond any single leadership cycle. EstablishHER, whose first cohort of 108 graduates is already mentoring the women behind them. Elevate Africa, the pan-African fellowship she and her husband, Ogiame Atuwatse III, the Olu of Warri, launched with a \$1 million commitment. She has addressed the London Stock Exchange and the United Nations General Assembly, and she still finds time to read stories to children in the Warri Kingdom, where she is fondly known as Mama Iwere. She is the same woman in every room.

One thing she said has stayed with me since. For a long time, the world has framed African women as people to be helped rather than people who create value. She has watched that framing begin to change, and she is precise about what now has to follow it. The recognition has arrived. The capital has not caught up to it. That gap, between how visible women have become and how little still flows to them, is the whole story of women's enterprise on this continent right now.

There is a woman reading this who has been handed one of those sentences. She has carried it for years, as though it were a life sentence. I want to remind her that she is allowed to put it down. This edition is for her.

Datari Ladejo
Editor, She Means Business



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Before Circularity in Fashion Can Work in Nigeria, Someone Has to Build the Infrastructure

By Ifunanya Dozie, Development Finance Specialist & Sustainable Fashion Entrepreneur

The opportunity inside Nigerian fashion's textile waste is real. So is the gap between that opportunity and a functioning market. The difference is infrastructure.

I came to circular fashion as a believer. I evolved into a pragmatist. And I think that journey is more useful to this conversation than the belief ever was.

A few years ago, I rented a space close to a traditional market in Lagos. The plan was straightforward: collect textile waste from garment producers, aggregate a consistent stream, and connect it to global recyclers. Natural fibres to mechanical recycling. Synthetics to chemical. The circular loop would close.

It did not work. Not because the waste was not there, it was everywhere. But the moment I started pulling it apart, the real problem emerged. Denim mixed with polyester. Cotton blended with acrylic. Natural and synthetic fibres tangled together, unsorted, impossible to process at scale. Global recyclers need to know exactly what they are receiving before they commit to processing it. What I had was volume without predictability. And without predictability, there is no market.

I eventually concluded that a purely circular fashion business model was not yet commercially viable in Nigeria. The infrastructure it requires simply does not exist at the necessary scale. What I did not do is stop believing that circularity in fashion is the direction the entire industry needs to move. Understanding why something does not work yet is a different thing from believing it never will.

CIRCULARITY IN FASHION IS NOT THE SAME AS CIRCULAR FASHION

Circular fashion refers to specific business models: upcycling, deadstock production, resale, repair. Circularity in fashion is the broader systems principle

beneath all of them: materials stay in motion, value is recovered at every stage, nothing exits unnecessarily to landfill. One is a commercial model. The other is a design and production philosophy that can sit inside many different business structures. The argument here is not that Nigeria needs more circular fashion brands. It is that the entire Nigerian fashion industry needs the infrastructure conditions that would make circularity in fashion possible at a systems level.

THE DATA GAP THAT IS ONLY JUST CLOSING

Lagos alone generates approximately 260,000 tonnes of textile waste every year. That figure, the first reliable estimate of its kind, comes from Project Irapada, launched by Style House Files in April 2026. Before Irapada, that number did not exist. Not because the waste was not there. Because nobody had measured it.

For a long time, those working on circularity in Nigerian fashion have done so without the data foundation that serious market development requires. This is not a criticism of the work. Reliable textile waste data has been scarce across the African continent. Without a baseline, even well-intentioned efforts were working with limited visibility into the actual scale of the problem. Project Irapada is beginning to change that. As Omoyemi Akerele put it at the initiative's launch: "We must address waste not just as an environmental issue, but as a justice issue. When we didn't have the answers, we went ahead and began the research ourselves."

THE INFRASTRUCTURE GAP THAT REMAINS

I spent years before entering fashion developing markets for off-grid energy solutions. That work taught me something that applies directly here: the existence of an opportunity and the existence of a functioning market are entirely different things. A market requires equilibrium. Supply means everything that enables a product to reach the customer reliably: sorting infrastructure, consistent material streams, processing capacity, investment, policy. Demand means awareness, affordability, and

trust. Both sides are currently underdeveloped for circularity in Nigerian fashion.

The most foundational gap is textile sorting infrastructure. Consider how European cities manage household waste. Glass goes to glass collection points. Paper to paper bins. Organic waste separated from general refuse. This source separation is not incidental to recycling working at scale. It is the precondition for it. Textile waste requires exactly the same logic. Pre-consumer offcuts from cutting tables need to be separated by fibre type at the point of generation. Post-consumer garments need collection systems that distinguish natural from synthetic fibres. Without that separation happening early, everything downstream becomes unworkable.

Nigeria's garment production is predominantly informal: thousands of tailors across markets producing on demand, from aso ebi commissions to small fashion house orders. These tailors typically have very limited knowledge of the fibre composition of the fabrics they cut. They buy by sight and feel, not by composition label. The result is pre-consumer offcuts of unknown and mixed fibre content, making them nearly impossible to route into formal recycling streams. The infrastructure that would allow a tailor to separate cotton offcuts from polyester scraps at source does not yet exist. Neither does the post-consumer collection infrastructure that would allow households and markets to deposit worn garments into designated streams. This is the sorting problem. And without solving it, nothing downstream functions.

The African Development Bank estimates that a circular textile economy across the continent could unlock USD 8 billion in annual value by 2035. Conscious fashion platforms curating brands built around longevity and intentional production are doing real demand-side work. But demand alone cannot create a market. Someone has to build the supply-side conditions that make the model viable.

THE ROOM IS OPEN

The conversation about circularity in Nigerian fashion is finally becoming legible. Project Irapada has given Lagos its first real numbers. The room is opening. But entering a room and being ready for what is inside it are different things. The question is not whether Nigeria will participate in the global shift toward circularity in fashion. It is whether we will participate as builders or as bystanders. That work is already underway. It needs more people who understand what it actually requires.

Ifunanya is the founder of Gelalli, a conscious fashion platform curating artisanal and contemporary African brands built around longevity, craft, and community impact.

MARINE SERRE BUILT A BRAND ON UPCYCLED MATERIALS THAT GREW TO OVER €15 MILLION IN REVENUE BY 2022. HER MODEL DEPENDS ON CONSISTENT, SORTED, IDENTIFIABLE INPUT STREAMS. THAT INFRASTRUCTURE EXISTS IN PARIS. IT DOES NOT YET EXIST IN LAGOS.

DIGITAL AJO

Africa's Oldest Financial System Is Learning How to Recognise Itself

The digitisation of women-led savings networks may become one of the continent's most consequential capital transformations

What if Africa's most sophisticated financial innovation did not emerge from a fintech accelerator, a banking reform committee, or a billion-dollar startup valuation, but from women sitting in market clusters, contribution circles, and tightly woven trust networks long before formal institutions considered them financially visible?

That question matters more than it first appears.

Because somewhere beneath the language of "financial inclusion," "embedded finance," and "digital banking," lies an uncomfortable truth: millions of African women built functioning financial systems decades before the institutions now attempting to digitise them fully understood their value.

They called it ajo.

For years, systems like ajo, esusu, and rotational contribution circles were treated as economically peripheral. Familiar, yes. Culturally important, certainly. But rarely discussed as serious financial architecture. They existed outside the prestige of institutional banking and beyond the language investors typically reserve for innovation.

Yet these systems financed inventory before microloans became fashionable. They enabled women to scale trade before venture capital discovered female-led entrepreneurship. They created liquidity where banks created barriers. And perhaps most importantly, they solved one of finance's oldest problems long before technology attempted to: trust.

Now fintech is catching up.

Across Nigeria and other African economies, informal savings behaviour is being translated into structured digital ecosystems. Contribution histories are becoming transaction data. Community accountability is becoming behavioural intelligence. Rotational savings patterns are becoming alternative credit signals.

In other words, what was once dismissed as informal finance is increasingly becoming financial infrastructure.

And the implications extend far beyond savings applications.

The most intelligent investors are beginning to recognise that digital ajo is not merely a fintech trend. It is potentially the institutionalisation of one of Africa's oldest distributed financial systems. That distinction matters because it reframes the opportunity entirely.

The real innovation was never the app.

The innovation was the social architecture underneath it.

For decades, women sustained financial ecosystems where participation rates remained consistent not because software enforced compliance, but because reputation did. Community visibility did. Relational accountability did. These systems succeeded because they understood something many formal financial institutions struggled to engineer efficiently: people are more likely to honour obligations within trusted social structures than within abstract institutions.

That insight is now commercially valuable.

As digital platforms formalise contribution systems, they are also generating something historically inaccessible within informal economies: usable financial data. Contribution consistency, repayment patterns, cooperative participation, and transactional reliability are all becoming measurable.

This changes the economic visibility of millions of women.

A trader who operated successfully for fifteen years without a formal credit history may now possess a digitally traceable financial footprint strong enough to support lending, investment access, insurance products, or SME financing opportunities. Behaviour that once existed privately within community systems can suddenly become institutionally recognised.

That transformation is enormous.

Because global finance has long struggled with the question of how to assess populations excluded from conventional banking structures. In many African economies, the issue was never an absence of financial behaviour. The issue was that the behaviour existed in systems formal institutions failed to document.

Digital ajo changes that equation.

And capital is paying attention.

Increasingly, fintech companies, investors, and financial operators are exploring models rooted in collective savings behaviour, embedded community finance, cooperative lending, and alternative credit ecosystems. Not simply because these models are socially impactful, but because they are commercially efficient.

Traditional banking expansion remains expensive. Trust acquisition is difficult. Customer retention is fragile.

Community-based savings systems, however, already solved these problems years ago.

Women-led contribution ecosystems created recurring participation before subscription economics became a technology strategy. They created embedded accountability before behavioural finance became an industry discussion. They built decentralised financial trust networks before decentralisation became a fashionable investment thesis.

This is precisely why the digitisation of ajo deserves deeper intellectual attention than it currently receives.

But there is also another side to this evolution, one elite readers should interrogate carefully.

Who ultimately captures the value being created?

Once informal savings systems become digital ecosystems, they also become monetisable. Behaviour becomes data. Data becomes valuation. Valuation attracts investment capital. The question is whether the women whose habits, discipline, and communal systems created this infrastructure will participate merely as users, or as owners and investors within the platforms now scaling their behavioural models.

This may become one of the defining economic questions of Africa's next fintech chapter.

Because the future of digital ajo is unlikely to stop at rotational savings. The possibilities are already expanding toward cooperative-led credit systems, inventory financing, embedded insurance, women-led investment communities, diaspora-backed savings structures, and decentralised SME capital ecosystems.

What appears today as a familiar cultural system may eventually evolve into a major alternative financial rail for underserved African markets.

And perhaps that is the deeper irony underneath the rise of digital ajo.

Africa's next meaningful financial infrastructure opportunity may not emerge from importing entirely new systems. It may emerge from finally recognising the sophistication of systems women quietly built long before the world considered them investable.





THE BRAG SHEET

Women rate their own work below men who do exactly as well, a habit the evidence traces back to childhood and the modern workplace taxes in full. Why the gap persists, and why the fix is a written record.

Ask a woman and a man who have performed identically to rate how well they did, and the woman will mark herself lower. The result holds across more than 4,000 adults and over 10,000 schoolchildren studied by Christine Exley of Harvard and Judd Kessler of Wharton, whose paper in the Quarterly Journal of Economics gave the pattern its name, the gender gap in self-promotion. Women describe their own ability less favourably than equally capable men, and they do it in the places where it is most expensive, the job application, the interview and the annual review.

THE WORK DOES NOT SPEAK FOR ITSELF, AND IT NEVER DID.

finding women roughly 28 percent less likely than men to promote their own published work online. The reluctance shows up early, survives scrutiny and costs money.

It is expensive because almost every gate in a modern career runs on self-report. The performance review opens with a self-assessment. The promotion case asks you to build it. The raise conversation rewards

whoever can recite, in numbers, what she delivered. A high performer who assumes her work speaks for itself is competing against colleagues who worked out long ago that work does not speak for itself. Someone speaks for it, and memory is generous to whoever is loudest, which is seldom the woman who decided her results would carry her.

The cost also compounds. A self-assessment marked half a grade low feeds a smaller raise, and that raise sets the base the next one is calculated from, so a modest account of a single good year quietly suppresses the earnings of every year that follows it. The gap is not paid once. It is paid with interest.

The remedy is unglamorous, which is most of its appeal. Keep a written record of what you have done, the figure attached to it and what it changed, built up as the year runs rather than reconstructed from memory once the review lands. Call it a brag sheet, though the name undersells it. What it does is turn advocacy into recitation. You stop reaching for the confidence to praise yourself and read out what is already on the page.

Done well, the record dissolves the part most women find hardest, the suspicion that they are showing off. Set “I think I had a good year” beside “I brought in \$40 million in new business, kept three accounts worth \$25 million, and trained the two analysts who now run the desk.” What separates the two is documentation. The first is a feeling, and feeling is precisely where the self-promotion gap does its damage. The second is a number on a page, and a number is hard to mark down.

Exley and Kessler were careful to present the gap as something the workplace rewards and punishes unevenly, rather than a defect in women to be fixed. Until the workplace changes, the rational move is to stop relying on a system that quietly discounts a woman’s account of her own work. Keep the receipts. Then let them do the talking you would rather not.

KEEP THE RECEIPTS

A working method, built around the specific ways women are undercounted at work, and what to do about each.

Men keep score. Often they do it without thinking about it, a running tally of what they have delivered, ready to be produced the moment a pay review or a promotion conversation calls for it. Women, the research consistently finds, are likelier to keep quiet and trust that good work will be seen and counted by someone else. It tends not to be. A brag sheet is the correction. It is a private, running record of what you have achieved at work, logged as it happens and kept with its numbers intact, so that when the moment comes you are reading from evidence rather than scrambling through memory.

The reason to keep one is structural. Women rate their own performance below men who perform identically, are given less credit for what teams produce, and pay a social price for the same direct self-advocacy men perform without one. Each of those is a documented finding, and each quietly subtracts from a career over time. The sheet counters all three at once, because memory fades and modesty compounds, and a written record does neither.

Building one is almost insultingly simple. Open a file today, and each time you finish something that counted, write a single line naming what you did, the figure attached to it, what it changed for the business and whom it served. Give it fifteen minutes at the end of each month so it never goes stale. Keep it to yourself, because it is a working instrument rather than a performance. When the review, the raise, the promotion case or the job application arrives, and when someone senior needs the facts to argue for you in a room you are not in, this is the file you open. What follows is how to keep it so that it works the way it should for a woman.

1 Start it today, not in December

The most common mistake is keeping the record in your head and assembling it the night before a review, by which point most of the year has evaporated. Open a document now, date it, and treat it as part of the work rather than an afterthought to it. Everything that follows depends on the file already existing when you reach for it.

2 Write "I," even where you were trained to write "we"

Women are praised early and often for being team players, and the credit for shared work then drifts toward whoever is most visible in the room, who is frequently not the woman who did the heavy lifting. Madeline Heilman's research on group work found that women receive less credit than men for identical contributions unless their individual role is spelled out. So spell it out on the page. Record what you decided, what you built, what you led. You can be generous about the team in the meeting and exact about yourself in the file.

3 Put a number on everything

Revenue won, costs cut, days saved, people trained, accounts kept, risk removed. When a contribution resists direct measurement, measure its proxy. Vague language is discounted for everyone, and the evidence suggests it is discounted harder for women, who are more often made to prove the same competence twice. "Improved the reporting process" carries no weight. "Cut the monthly close from ten days to four" is a fact a manager cannot wave away.

4 Log the invisible work, then count what it costs you

The economists Linda Babcock, Lise Vesterlund, Laurie Weingart and Brenda Peyser spent more than a decade documenting what they call non-promotable tasks, the work that keeps an organisation running but earns the person who does it no raise and no promotion. Organising the offsite, onboarding the new hire, sitting on the committee, absorbing the difficult client. Women are asked to do this work more often and agree to it more often, and it quietly drags their advancement. Keep a second column for it, separate from your wins. The point of logging it there is visibility, so you can



see how much of your week disappears into work that will never appear in a promotion case. When that column fills up, treat it as your signal to start declining.

5 Translate feeling into evidence

The self-promotion gap that Christine Exley and Judd Kessler measured lives in soft language. "I had a strong year" invites a markdown. "I brought in £40m and kept £25m from walking" does not. Before any sentence about your work reaches another person, on a form, in an email, across a desk, translate it from how it feels into what it can be shown to be. The sheet is where you do that translation in advance and calmly, rather than in the moment and under pressure.

6 Plan for the backlash before you walk in

Here is the part the standard advice leaves out. The same research that tells women to advocate for themselves also shows they are penalised for doing it, because assertion reads as a breach of the warmth women are expected to perform. Hannah Riley Bowles and Linda Babcock found that women who push their own case face a social cost that men making the identical case do not. Hold your ground and change how you frame the ask. Pair your evidence with a legitimate shared rationale, what the work makes possible for the team and the business, and approach the conversation as joint problem-solving. Bowles found that this cooperative framing is both more effective at winning the yes and far less likely to trigger the penalty. Walk in with the numbers and the framing already written down.

7 Put the sheet in your sponsor's hands

A mentor gives you advice. A sponsor spends their own credibility arguing for you in the rooms you are not in, where pay and promotions are actually decided. Sylvia Ann Hewlett's research is blunt about the pattern, that women are heavily mentored and badly under-sponsored, rich in advice and poor in advocacy. Your brag sheet is the most useful thing you can hand a sponsor, because it lets them make your case in specifics instead of generalities. Do not wait to be asked. Identify the person with real influence over your trajectory and make sure they have your record, current and quantified, before the decision meeting they will sit in and you will not.

8 Stop calling it bragging

The name does the tool a disservice. The sheet inflates nothing. It corrects a measured tendency to undercount yourself, one the researchers traced as far back as the sixth grade, long before any boardroom. The men you are measured against are keeping a version of this record, on paper or in their heads, and feeling no apology about it. Read back honestly, your sheet is simply the truth, written down before you needed it and ready the day you do.



OLORI ATUWATSE III

Queen Consort of Warri Kingdom

INHERITANCE

You have spoken publicly about being told, after your father's death, that there is a difference between a firstborn and a first son. What did that moment teach you about how power is gendered in Nigerian families, and how has it shaped the way you lead now?

As a Nigerian woman, you learn from a young age that power is gendered. It shows in things as simple as people seeing the primary school Head Boy as being senior to the Head Girl or even in how some relatives speak to and about your mother.

So, when my father died, what really shocked me was the timing and the casualness of being told by a relative that I, his firstborn, was not equal to his first son. We had just lost someone we loved, and it was a heavy moment for everybody. I suppose I expected grief to make us more human, not more bound to social constructs, but sometimes, people are just waiting to reveal what they have been thinking for years.

Thankfully, God had done a work of renewed identity in me by then, so that snobbery only strengthened my conviction that women's empowerment must not be limited to work contexts. It must happen at the grassroots. It must happen culturally.

If people justify inequality by saying, "This is our culture," then those of us who are custodians of culture must use everything we have to reshape what culture protects and permits. That is why my husband's declaration from the day he was crowned king — that our women will no longer be invisible — continues to resonate with me.

In Warri, we are not trying to erase culture. We are restoring it to a truth older than bias: men and women are created with equal value. Every day, I lead with the awareness that many girls and women are still diminished in places where they should be deeply affirmed. So, I want my work to say to them, "Your value is not up for debate. Your light is not secondary."

Your father, Captain Hosa Wells Okunbo, built one of Nigeria's most distinctive commercial careers. What is the thing he taught you about how to think that you find yourself using almost every day?

I don't think it was one direct lesson so much as the way he lived. My father came from a very humble background and built something extraordinary. Even now, when I think about the scale, it still feels mind-blowing to me. That kind of impact is only made by a mind that refuses to bow to limitations, and I think that's the greatest thing he taught me to think.

That lesson means even more to me because I spent much of the first three

decades of my life feeling like I had no value to offer. There were voices, internally and externally, that made me question whether I was enough. But when God healed me from those mindsets and silenced those lies, I also began to look at my father's life as a pointer to what is possible when a person refuses to let their beginning define their ending.

Today, whether I am working with women in Warri, building institutions, or raising my own children, that is one of the convictions I try to impart. You are more powerful than your circumstances may have allowed you to believe. You are more capable than your past hints at, so refuse to bow to internal and external limitations.

Before any of this, you co-founded the fashion brand Colour Couture at LSE and built the breakfast brand Breakfast in Bed in Lagos. Which of those two ventures taught you the most about Nigerian business, and what would the woman who ran them think of the woman you are now?

It is difficult for me to choose one, because both brands taught me in different ways.

Colour Couture was born out of my love for fashion, while Breakfast in Bed came from my love for good experiences. I enjoyed building both brands. I really did, but I also think, in some ways, they were ahead of their time. Perhaps if they existed in today's social media age, where people are even more visually connected and more appreciative of curated experiences, the journey may have been different. So, one big lesson from both is that timing matters in business. A good idea has to meet the right market, infrastructure, and season.

I think the woman who ran those businesses would look at me now and say, "Wow, you are much bolder, stronger, and wiser than I imagined." She would recognise my continued creativity and passion, but she would also see that life, faith, motherhood, grief, leadership, and even those early business lessons have stretched me in incredible ways.

You hold a law degree from LSE and were called to the Nigerian Bar in 2010. African development policy has been written by economists, donors, and consultants for decades. Few of those frameworks were drafted by lawyers. What does the lawyer in you read in them that the sector has been short on?

Although I studied law and was called to the Nigerian Bar, I have never practised law in the traditional sense. Still, you never really escape the way legal training trains you to think. It makes you attentive to structure, responsibility, rights, and consequences.

That said, I do not think it is only the lawyer in me that reads development frameworks differently. I think it is the Queen in me, the mother in me. It is Mama Iwere, the woman close enough to the grassroots to know that





development cannot happen in a vacuum.

Economists, donors, consultants, and experts all have their place, but the people most affected by these policies must also have a stronger voice in shaping them. We cannot keep building frameworks around what we assume people need.

That proximity is what I think the sector has sometimes been short on. When you are close to people, you not only see the obvious development gaps, but you also see the cultural and systemic barriers that prevent progress from taking root. You see why a woman may receive funding and still struggle to grow her business. You see why a girl may be talented and still not imagine a future beyond what her environment has permitted. You see why access alone is not always enough if dignity, confidence, safety, and community support are missing.

So yes, the lawyer in me values good frameworks, but the mother in me keeps asking: Does it make room for their lived reality?

THE CROWN

Most little girls grow up with the fantasy of one day becoming a Queen. In August 2021, that fantasy became your day-to-day reality. What part of the role has taught you a truth no fairytale could have prepared you for?

Fairytales usually end with, “and they lived happily ever after,” don’t they? They never quite show us the difficult decisions, expectations, or the weight of responsibility that comes with being entrusted with a role.

Thankfully, I did not come into queenship with a fairytale mindset. I married a prince, so we always knew there was a possibility that he would one day become king. Even then, our view of it was never a fantasy with beautiful clothes, ceremony, and being catered to. It was always about responsibility. Thankfully, we both have parents who modelled

that to us early on.

If you come into any role thinking only about what it adds to your life, you will miss the assignment. So, really, no fairytale can prepare you for queenship because true queenship is about serving people up close and being impactful, not just being regal and beautiful.

You did not grow up Itsekiri. You married into a centuries-old kingdom and were asked to become its most visible woman. What advice would you give to any woman walking into uncharted territory of her own, and what did you have to earn that no title could have given you?

I would first say that I am deeply grateful for the generosity of our people, who call me Mama Iwere. Every day, I still strive to live up to that name and the trust reposed in me.

My advice to any woman walking into uncharted territory is to be humble enough to learn. Whether you are entering a literal culture, as I did, or stepping into a new workplace, industry, or season of leadership, you must learn the culture. There is so much wisdom available when we do not enter new spaces trying to prove ourselves too quickly, but instead choose to observe, listen, learn, and honour what is good in them. I am also blessed with a wonderful mother-in-law, whose example continues to teach me.

Now, as to what I have earned that no title could give me, the easy answer is love. A title may give you recognition, but it cannot give you the love of the people or their trust. Only genuineness and service can do that. I am grateful that the Itsekiri people see my heart for them and they reciprocate it.

You inherited a title older than Nigeria itself. It has outlived three constitutions, twelve currencies, and most of the country’s modern institutions. What does that kind of longevity teach you about how institutions actually survive, and what are you doing to make sure Olori survives the next century?

Our Kingdom’s longevity teaches me that what we preserve with intention survives. Now, this doesn’t mean failing to evolve; it means continuing to build on what is good and using your institution as a platform for service. So, when I think about the next century, I am not thinking only about how the title survives in name. I am thinking about whether its relevance survives. Will women and children still feel strengthened by it? Will the office continue to be associated with compassion, dignity, cultural stewardship, and real transformation?

I may not control the next hundred years, but I can tend to this season with the seriousness it deserves. I can help show that the office of the Olori is not ceremonial. The Olori is a mother, a builder, a force for generational impact, just like our ancestors intended. The rest will follow naturally because when people see that an institution serves them, they protect it and guarantee its survival.

THE FOUNDATION

You now sit across multiple institutional responsibilities, including the Royal Iwere Foundation. Most Nigerian non-profits fail within five years on governance and funding gaps. What is the institutional architecture you have built to ensure continuity beyond individual leadership cycles?

The Royal Iwere Foundation has the blessing of being connected to the throne, which provides a long-term foundation. It is also rooted in the vision of the Olu and Olori’s offices, and that matters because we are thinking generationally. Yet, we are very conscious that impact cannot be built around personality or office alone.

Our operating structure prioritises governance and advisory oversight, as well as a solid executive and operational team. Because of the nature of our work, there is also a growing volunteer base, many of whom come from the communities and programmes themselves. That is very important to me because sustainability is strongest when beneficiaries become builders too.

We also build through partnerships because RIF was never designed to be a “us, us, us” platform. It is a collaborative vehicle for human capital development in the Warri Kingdom. So, when we think of continuity, we think of three institutional anchoring, operational structure, and community ownership as the way to ensure our impact survives beyond individual leadership cycles.

Cohort 1 of EstablishHER graduated 108 women in March 2026. What changed in those women between the day they walked in and the day they walked out that the numbers will never fully capture?

Where do I even start? There are some transformations that numbers will never fully capture. Yes, at EstablishHer, we talk about enterprise, financial literacy, leadership, and growth, but before a woman can build boldly, she has to believe differently first. Many of the women walked in burdened because life, society, and circumstances had taught them to think too small about themselves. By the time they walked out, they had a renewed identity. Our mindset-shifting modules had given many of them self-belief and permission to dream again. So, they had begun to see themselves not just as women trying to survive, but as economic actors, decision-makers, businesswomen, and contributors to their communities.

For me, that inner shift is the key because I know what inner work did in my own life. I know that when your mindset changes, your choices change. When your identity changes, your capacity expands. It’s the kind of transformation that may not fit neatly into highlight stats, but it is, to me, one of the most important metrics for success.

Most Nigerian foundations report on outputs. Women trained. Sessions held. Dollars granted. What is the single outcome metric RIF tracks that gives you the most honest read on whether the work is actually moving the needle?

RIF works across education, children's development, skills, enterprise, teacher training, agriculture, literacy, healthcare awareness, and more. So, the question we keep asking is what continues to grow after our programmes?

The journey is long, and the signs of progress vary across programmes, but one of my favourite markers is the ripple effect. I love seeing teachers become more equipped and carry that improvement into their classrooms year after year, multiplying the value of one intervention across many children. Through programmes like Love Gardens and Storytime, I love watching young people develop responsibility, imagination, teamwork, curiosity, and self-belief in ways that impact both them and their families. Among women, I am deeply thankful when EstablishHer mentees become mentors themselves, hiring and training other women and becoming sources of stability in their communities. It is also meaningful when beneficiaries return as volunteers, and people who once waited for help begin participating in building solutions.

That ripple effect tells me the work is moving beyond output into real transformation. For us at RIF, that is the real goal.

The Gaborone Communiqué emerged as one of the key outcomes of your convening work. What governance mechanism ensures implementation between convenings rather than symbolic declaration?

For me, a communiqué is only as powerful as the work that follows it. It cannot become one of those well-written documents applauded in the room and then forgotten after everyone disperses. The real test is what happens after the convening.

Our mechanism is sustained engagement. We work to ensure that the ideas in the communiqué translate into institutional conversations, government engagement, partner alignment, and practical next steps. That means working directly with relevant institutions, including government and policy-facing bodies to define needs and amplify both solutions and successes.

You have addressed platforms including the United Nations General Assembly and the London Stock Exchange. How has that exposure shaped your understanding of how African women's enterprise is being positioned within global capital markets?

It has confirmed what I already knew – African women have always been building, even when we weren't being announced or celebrated.

Unfortunately, a lot of past framing positioned African women as beneficiaries of help rather than creators of value. What these global platforms have shown me is that the language is beginning to change. There is growing recognition that women's enterprise is not charity. It is an economic strategy, a serious pathway to inclusive growth.

Now, I'd like to see investments in our women match and exceed the growing visibility. Yes, give us the applause, but we need the funding even more.

THE CONTINENT

Elevate Africa launched with a \$1 million commitment, and the inaugural fellowship selected 18 fellows from 3,447 applicants across 37 countries. What was the selection screen that mattered most, and what is the fellowship's measurable thesis of return?

The criterion that mattered most was the potential for present and future impact. We were not simply looking for impressive CVs or people who could speak beautifully about Africa's future. We sought people already doing the work, yet whose solutions had even greater potential to accelerate development in their sectors, communities, and countries.

Our thesis of return is that when you invest deeply in mid-career African professionals, the returns do not stay in the room. They ripple across the continent through narrative change, policy influence, innovation, enterprise, and ecosystem leadership.

Our inaugural cohort is already proving that. 100% of fellows reported greater leadership clarity and conviction. We had 92% convening attendance and 87% deliverable completion. The cohort produced 34 thought-leadership articles and 15 capstone projects. One fellow completed and presented an AI-powered cervical cancer early-detection tool for women, which for me was such a striking example of what happens when leadership development meets practical innovation.

Together, these outcomes demonstrate strong engagement, high program completion, intellectual output, and tangible leadership development, establishing a credible foundation for long-term continental impact at scale. For those looking to back African leadership in a meaningful, measurable way, Elevate Africa represents exactly the kind of bet the continent needs.

You built a Media pillar inside Elevate Africa with a deliberate editorial position. What is that position, and what story about African women is the global press still getting wrong?

The Media pillar exists because narrative shapes what people believe is possible, where capital is funnelled, whose ideas are taken seriously, and

whose leadership is seen as legitimate.

For too long, Africa has been narrated by people looking at us from the outside, often through the same tired lenses of crisis, charity, conflict, and potential, but rarely power. There is a proverb that says, until the lion learns to speak, the story of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. Thus, our editorial position is that Africans must take responsibility for telling African stories with truth, dignity, and imagination.

Still, our media work is not about romanticising African. It is about presenting the complexity, agency, and excellence of our continent.

At the FLAIR Summit in London you laid out a three-part framework. Mentor, Reform, Empower. Walk us through how it operates at the level of execution, and what part of it anybody reading this can take home and apply tomorrow?

The framework is very practical.

To mentor is to help women name and scale what they already carry. Many women are already leading, but they have not been taught to call it leadership. At FLAIR, I said we must turn





unconscious competence into conscious power, because Africa cannot thrive only on a handful of prominent female leaders. We need women stepping into their full power at every level.

At execution level, mentorship means coaching, sponsorship, peer networks, exposure, and helping women see the value of their own experience. It is not always about adding something new. Sometimes it is about helping a woman recognise that what she has been doing all along is powerful.

To reform is to remove the barriers that keep women from advancing. Some barriers are legal while others are financial, cultural or even hidden in family structures and workplace norms. Reform means we cannot keep asking women to rise while leaving the ceilings above them intact.

Finally, to empower is to put real resources behind the belief. Access to capital, markets, and platforms, and access to education, technology, policy rooms, and decision-making spaces.

What can anybody reading this apply tomorrow? Find one woman whose leadership you already see, and do three things: name it, remove one barrier around her, and open one door. That door may be a recommendation, a contract, a conversation, a training opportunity, a childcare solution, a seat at a table, or simply the courage to say in a room, “She should be considered.”

Royal stewardship of Elevate Africa is a deliberate choice. Most pan-African platforms are state-led or donor-driven. What does royal stewardship give the work that state or donor stewardship cannot, and where does it reach its own limitations?

The Warri throne bears centuries of memory, continuity, culture, and responsibility. Unlike state- or donor-driven platforms, it is not confined to an election or funding cycle. Thus, our royal

stewardship of Elevate Africa allows us to think more long-term than most can.

It also gives a different kind of convening power. Royal institutions sit in a unique space because we are close to culture and people, yet still able to engage government, business, philanthropy, academia, and the diaspora. That matters because Africa’s challenges are not neatly divided into segments. Culture affects economics; narrative affects capital; leadership affects policy; policy affects families; and so on.

Still, I am very clear about our limitations. Royal stewardship cannot and should not replace the work of states, private institutions, development partners, entrepreneurs, investors, or communities. This is not “royalty versus government” or “royalty versus donors.” It is everybody’s bringing their unique contributions to the table. That is why Elevate Africa is built around partnerships across countries, sectors, institutions, and communities.

The royal office can help hold the long vision, protect the dignity of the narrative, and convene people around a shared future, but implementation requires many hands.

THE PERSONAL

You are a mother to three young children. What is the parenting move you have borrowed from your own childhood, and what is the most millennial thing you do that would absolutely horrify your parents?

My parents were very intentional about passing on good values like humility, hard work, and honesty, and I am also very intentional about passing them on to my children. I want them to know that

privilege is not an excuse for entitlement; it is a platform for serving others.

The most millennial thing I do? I apologise to my children when I am wrong, and we have repair conversations. I want them to see authority and humility as two sides of the same coin. I also teach them techniques for emotional regulation, which I imagine would have been considered needless in some of our childhood homes. In those days, emotional regulation was often, “Keep quiet” or “go and sit down somewhere.” I want my children to have language for their emotions and values strong enough to guide them through those emotions.

The country calls you Olori. The kingdom calls you Mama Iwere. What do your children call you, and how do you have fun with them when no one else is watching?

My children call me Mummy, but when they want something, I am Mama. We are quite close-knit, and like any family, we have fun in regular ways. We play board games, read, pray, and just generally enjoy one another’s company.

You are one of many siblings. Tell us about the family group chat. Who runs it, who sends the most interesting messages, and what is everyone always laughing about?

The leader of the family group chat depends on the subject matter; whoever has the strongest opinion on the day’s topic temporarily becomes chairperson. Most of the time, we are laughing or pulling jokes on my mum. Honestly, her messages are hilarious, and our group chat often feels like being in our childhood home together again. You know how it is with your siblings. You don’t care about one another’s positions or success. You are just loved ones bantering all day long.

You turned forty this month. On the day, what did you cry about, what did you laugh about, and what did you eat?

Honestly, I did not cry, and that itself felt like a miracle. So many years of my life were marked by tears, anxiety, fear, and trying to find myself, and I dreaded birthdays for a long time. However, turning 40, I have been in a state of gratitude for the last five years of God’s redemptive work in my life. 40 has been filled with laughter because God has restored so much that I once thought was lost.

It reminds me of the scripture that says, “When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.”

You are known as a woman of deep Christian faith. What is your go-to Bible verse, and which woman in scripture do you find yourself most drawn to?

My go-to Bible verse is Ephesians 2:10. It reminds me that we are God’s workmanship, created with purpose. When you begin to understand that God designed you intentionally and all your life’s circumstances can be used positively by him, it changes how you see your life.

The woman in scripture I am most drawn to is Esther, for obvious reasons. However, beyond the royal connection, Esther’s story speaks to courage, timing, identity, and assignment. She came to understand that her position was for a purpose and used her influence with wisdom, humility, and bravery. That resonates deeply with me.

You are married to Ogiame Atuwatse III, the Olu of Warri Kingdom. What is the most ordinary thing the two of you do together that nobody would believe, and what is the conversation you keep having that has nothing at all to do with the kingdom?

Baba and I enjoy very ordinary things. We love taking walks together and chatting along the way. We enjoy dining out, especially when we are not in the country. I must say that I really do love our ordinary moments away from the public eye because, before we are king and queen, we are first husband and wife, and best friends.

What is the song you cannot skip when it comes on, and if your life were a soundtrack, what would the current track be called?

Right now, the song I cannot skip is Greatman Takit’s “All the Praise.” It captures my gratitude to God, amazement at His power, and just the pure joy of my life in God.



LEGACY

The women reading this will not all become queens, builders, or matriarchs of foundations. What is the one principle from your work that applies regardless of the scale at which they are operating?

Do the inner work.

Whether you are leading a nation, raising children, building a business, managing a home, starting again after disappointment, or simply trying to understand who you are, sis, please do the inner work. So much of what we call limitation begins internally. However, when internal healing happens, our true God-given identity becomes clearer, and it births the courage to fulfil our purpose.

Everything I am building today flows from what God first healed in me privately. Oh, and while you asked for one principle, allow me to add a second, connected one. Once you have done the inner work of building confidence and courage, know that your redemption is not only for you. Your identity, vision, and growth are meant to overflow into the lives of others, so use your light to illuminate someone else's path.

What is the single sentence your mother lives by that you would write on a wall for every woman in this country to read, and what is the sentence she only says to you in private that you would write for the ones who have already started building?

What my mother lives by and what she says to me are one and the same, "Ivie, pray, pray, pray." It might sound cliché, but prayer is the foundation of everything good and sustainable in my life. I pray before I start and as I build, and I pray when doors close and when they open. Prayer and dependence on God are the keys to my mother's success, and they are mine too.

If my life were a soundtrack, it would be "Make Me a Bethany" by Jesus Image, because my greatest desire is to live a life of consecrated surrender to God.

What is the thing about you that the people who knew Ivie before any of this would say has never changed, no matter how many rooms you have walked into?

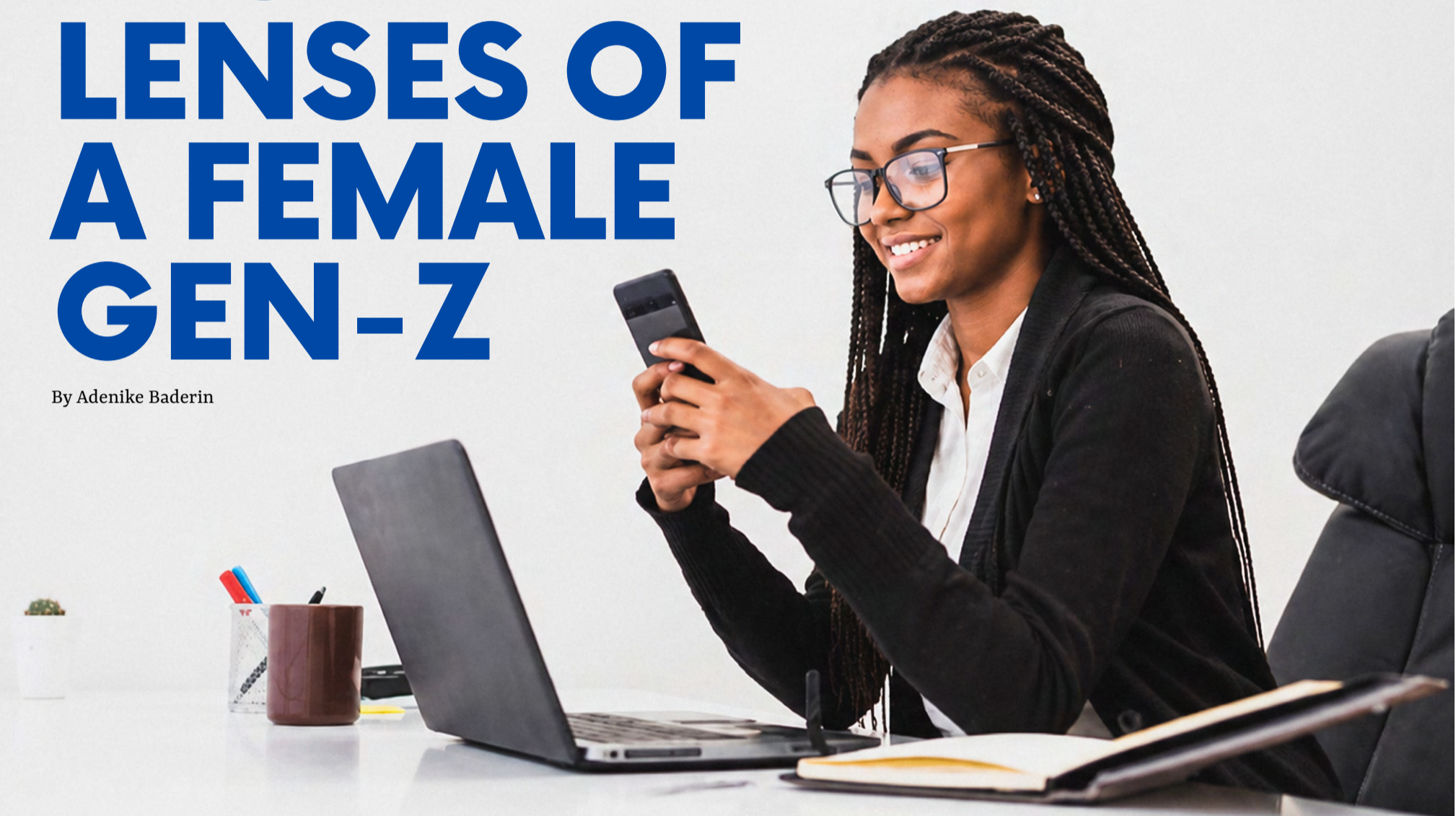
I think they would say I have always cared deeply about family, authenticity, and people, and none of that has changed. If anything, this role has given me more room and opportunities to fully be that person.



THE WORLD FROM THE LENSES OF A FEMALE GEN-Z

Why Gen-Z Women Are Redrawing Workplace Boundaries

By Adenike Baderin



In the Nigerian corporate world, older generations often mistake the Generation Z outspokenness and non-conformity for rebellion. They see young women, specifically Gen-Z, pushing back against established norms and conclude they are “difficult” or “entitled.” But this is not so in some instances. What looks like defiance is actually this young generation of women’s refusal to inherit a broken system.

Born into an era of radical accountability made possible through technology and the online social space. Social media has shrunk the world, turning a private office into a global stage. When a young woman shares her experience of bullying on X (formerly Twitter), she isn’t “bypassing” HR out of spite. She is seeking the accountability that internal structures historically fail to provide.

This need for accountability is a survival tactic. For decades, older women worked twice as hard for half the credit, enduring “silent” abuses to protect their careers. The Gen-Z’s watched this trade-off and rejected the bargain. They are not rebelling against work; they are rebelling against the double standards that make work unsafe.

The numbers justify this lack of trust. According to the Nigeria Annual Human Rights Report 2024, gender-based violence and sexual harassment remain entrenched in some professional structures. A 2025 Sector Analysis by the Safeguarding Support Hub Nigeria revealed that management-level staff are involved in nearly 50% of workplace sexual exploitation and abuse cases.

Even more staggering is the justice gap. The same report found that only 30% of reported incidents achieved substantiation. This means that 70% of cases either vanish into bureaucracy or end without consequences for the perpetrator. When the system fails to protect, the “rebellion” of public call-outs becomes a necessary tool for safety.

In 2024, a viral thread on X detailed the experience of a young female

intern in a Lagos-based firm. She was repeatedly pressured for dates by a senior executive. When she refused, her “attitude” was questioned in performance reviews. Her quote resonated with thousands: “I didn’t come here to be ‘nice’; I came here to work. If my boundaries make you uncomfortable, that is your work to do, not mine.”

This is the Gen-Z ethos. They define roles by output, not by how well they “manage” the egos of their seniors. When they ask about growth prospects or mental health policies before signing a contract, they are performing a risk assessment. They are aware of their worth and the historical cost of silence.

What traditionalists call “disrespect” is often just plain speaking. Gen-Z women are naming things clearly. When they set boundaries, it looks like defiance because the previous standard was total compliance. But as the data shows, that compliance did not lead to safety; it led to a culture where only 30% of abusers face any investigation.

For Nigerian corporate organisations to thrive, they must stop viewing Gen-Z as a problem to be “managed” and start seeing them as a benchmark for healthy workplace without pretence.

To bridge this gap, companies must: Implement zero-tolerance policies and move beyond paperwork to active enforcement, as seen in the 2024 MAUTH Yola Sexual Harassment Policy. Transparent reporting to Create safe, third-party channels that do not involve immediate supervisors. Outcome-based leadership to evaluate leaders not just on revenue, but on the safety and retention of their female subordinates.

Gen-Z women are not pushing back because they hate structures. They are pushing back so they can finally exist in it on their own terms.



WOMEN MUST OWN THINGS

At the second edition of the Mum Fund, more than 200 women gathered in Lagos and set the language of empowerment aside for a harder conversation, about ownership, capital and who controls the institutions that decide who gets access.

More than 200 women gathered at The Chair Centre in Lekki on 15 May for the second edition of the Mum Fund, and the morning's sharpest argument arrived early. Mojisola Hunponu-Wusu, founder of Woodhall Capital, used her keynote to move past the familiar vocabulary of women's empowerment and name what she takes to be the real issue. Ownership. Women, she argued, must own firms, fund financial platforms and hold intellectual property, rather than join, support or service the institutions other people own.

"Women must own firms, fund financial platforms, and intellectual properties," she said, and the line landed because it refused the softness usually expected of women speaking publicly about ambition. The questions underneath it were the ones the rest of the day kept returning to. Who controls capital. Who controls access. Who owns the institutions that decide both.

The Mum Fund was built by Feyi Bello, chief executive of the Swaddle app and the Motherwell podcast, and Ibiyinka Ibru, founder and chief executive of MoneyStart, around a group that structured wealth conversations routinely overlook, mothers earning and building while carrying the bulk of the caregiving. Its first edition, in 2025, drew more than 300 registrations and, by the organisers' account, moved over ₦51 million into new investments among the women who attended. This year's theme, My Sister's Keeper, pushed the premise from individual financial literacy toward shared accountability, the argument that women's wealth-building should be collective rather than solitary.

The sisters that keep

The day's most anticipated session put Ibukun Awosika, the former chairman of First Bank of Nigeria, alongside Dr Omobola Johnson, the former communications technology minister and now a senior partner at TLcom Capital, and Yewande Zaccheaus, founder of the events company Eventful. Titled The Sisters That Keep, it turned on what women owe one another inside the rooms where decisions are made.

Johnson put it most usefully. "When a woman is not in the room, your job is to support her, protect her," she said. "And when a woman is in the room with you, make sure you amplify her voice." It is a working definition of sponsorship, the active spending of one's own standing on another woman's behalf, and the room recognised the alternative it described, the silence that lets a capable woman be diminished while other women watch.

When a woman is in the room with you, make sure you amplify her voice.

Awosika's contribution was less tactical and more a question of nerve. "Never apologise for who you are and what you have become," she said, and "you need to have the courage to make a choice and fight for the choice." Zaccheaus named the hardest part of the theme out loud, that celebrating another woman's success sincerely, without comparison quietly souring it, is simple to say and difficult to practise.

The cost of building

The afternoon panel, titled Becoming the Dream, paired Rolake Akinkugbe-Filani, an energy, infrastructure and finance executive, with Bidemi Zakariyau-Akande, founder of the PR agency LSF, and moved from achievement to its price. Akinkugbe-Filani made the case for pausing long enough to check whether the life being built still matches the woman building it. Zakariyau-Akande was blunter about the cost. "From the day I started building LSF, I put in hours of work," she said. "You need to be hungry and work really hard to become the dream." It was a useful correction to a culture that romanticises ambition mostly through people who have never had to sustain it.

What the Mum Fund demonstrated is that the appetite among accomplished Nigerian women has moved. The reassuring vocabulary of empowerment is wearing thin, and what these women want in its place is the harder and more durable thing Hunponu-Wusu named at the start, ownership, capital and the institutions to hold them. They have stopped looking for inspiration and started looking for architecture.

THE **₦294** BILLION GAP

Nigeria has put a precise figure on the cost of not lending to women. The number worth watching is the share of it that has actually moved.

₦294 billion is the price Nigeria's banking system has put on its own reluctance to lend to women. That is the size of the financing gap the Central Bank, the Development Bank of Nigeria and the Bank of Industry committed to closing when they signed the Women Entrepreneurs Finance Code in 2024. Naming a gap is the easy part. Two years on, the figure that matters is not the one in the pledge. It is the share of it that has moved from announcement to balance sheet.

On paper, some of it has. The Development Bank of Nigeria says it has pushed more than ₦187 billion through its participating banks to roughly 357,000 women-owned businesses. Tony Okpanachi, who runs the bank, puts women at 72 percent of its borrowers, a ratio almost no development financier elsewhere on the continent can match. And the CBN governor, Olayemi Cardoso, has stopped making the moral case and started making the commercial one, calling underfunded women entrepreneurs a \$1.7 trillion opportunity for the institutions still ignoring them. When a central banker reaches for the language of return on equity, the conversation has changed.

The trouble is that a pledge does not touch the machine that made the gap. Nigerian banks lend against collateral, and collateral here means land or buildings, which women hold at a fraction of the rate men do. A woman can run a profitable company for a decade and still be told the security on her loan needs a title deed in her name, which the family house rarely carries. The CBN's own financial inclusion strategy lists women among the most excluded borrowers in the country, alongside the rural north. None of the codes signed in Abuja rewrites the credit memo a loan officer fills out in Kano.

So the working question for a woman who needs money this quarter is narrower than the policy debate. Which doors are actually open. A handful are. The Bank of Industry runs a women-only facility, GLOW, lending up to ₦50 million on lighter collateral terms than a commercial bank would set. FCMB reopened its SheVentures window this year with interest-free loans up to ₦5 million, occasionally ₦10 million. The Mastercard Foundation's Pathways to Scale stretches from ₦3 million to ₦300 million for businesses with somewhere to grow. Older and slower, the CBN's MSME Development Fund and its AGS-MEIS scheme ask for less security than the banks but test your patience instead. Every one of them wants the same things before it releases a naira. Registered accounts, a tax number, twelve months of statements, and at least a season of waiting. Which is why the women who get funded tend to be the ones who set the relationship up before the need was urgent. Run two years of revenue through a real business account, take a small loan you could have done without, pay it back early, and you arrive at the next meeting with a record instead of a pitch. Banks lend to the record. They have heard the pitch.

The use of the ₦294 billion figure is that it can be counted. A grievance you can quantify is a grievance you can hold someone to. The institutions that signed the code know the number. The women they named it for should make a habit of asking, every quarter, how much of it has left the press release.

NONE OF THE CODES SIGNED IN ABUJA REWRITES THE CREDIT MEMO A LOAN OFFICER FILLS OUT IN KANO.



SHE RUNS THE ROOM NOBODY SEES

Bukola Akinsanya is Managing Director and CEO of SaySwitch, a CBN-licensed payment switching and processing company. Her career spans Interswitch, Flutterwave, Arca Payments, Duplo, and Qrios. She got there by spending over a decade inside the infrastructure most people never think about.

There is a layer of the global financial system that most people will never see. It sits beneath the apps, beneath the cards, beneath every interface consumers touch. It is where transactions are routed, authenticated, and settled in milliseconds. In Nigeria, Africa's largest economy, Bukola Akinsanya runs one of the small number of companies licensed to operate it.

The Central Bank of Nigeria licenses fewer than twenty companies as payment switches and processors, the highest licence category it awards. They process trillions of naira annually and underpin virtually every electronic transaction in a nation of over 200 million people. Scan the leadership and the pattern is immediate: the CEOs and founders are, with very few exceptions, men. Akinsanya is among the rare women at the helm. Her presence is not symbolic. It is structural.

SaySwitch processes transactions across some of Nigeria's most critical sectors, from banking and government to healthcare, education, oil and gas, and hospitality. But what distinguishes the company is not just who it serves. It is what it builds. SaySwitch developed one of the first self-service kiosk platforms in Nigeria, moving the point of transaction from behind the counter into the hands of the consumer. In a market where innovation is measured by what happens on a screen, Bukola is building it in the physical world. The reach is wide. The vision is deliberate.

Her career before SaySwitch reads like a masterclass in the payments ecosystem. She has built products inside switching architecture, navigated hypergrowth at one of Africa's most recognised fintechs, transformed a payments business and repositioned it for growth, secured critical payment licences for both local and international operations, and built commercial infrastructure for enterprise clients in B2B payments. Each role was a different layer of the same system. By the time she took the seat at SaySwitch, she had touched more of the ecosystem than most executives encounter in an entire career.

During one of the most significant bank mergers in Nigerian history, Bukola led the integration of USSD banking services across ten major institutions, the channel through which millions of Nigerians who do not use smartphones access their money. Getting it wrong would have locked real people out of real accounts. She got it right. Her financial inclusion work also drew support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Bukola does not frame her career as a story about gender. She frames it as a story about competence. Knowing the regulation before the consultation. Knowing the numbers before the meeting. Knowing the system well enough that her presence becomes a function of what she brings, not what she represents. But in a sector where the leadership is almost exclusively male, a woman running one of the licensed switches is not a diversity statistic. It is a shift in what the industry considers normal.

The invitation to the table was never coming. What works is knowing the subject so thoroughly that the table has no reasonable basis to exclude you. And then staying long enough to change what it looks like for the next woman who walks in.



THE SHADOW COO

Every scaling company has someone who turns one founder's vision into an institution that runs. She rarely gets the title, the credit or the path to the top seat. That gap costs her, and it costs the company more than it knows.

When Sheryl Sandberg joined Facebook as chief operating officer in 2008, the company had already won the part everyone could see. It had explosive growth, cultural reach and a founder the press had decided was a genius. What it did not have was a business. Sandberg was brought in to build the machinery beneath the momentum, the advertising engine, the operational structure, the systems that would

let a viral product become a company able to survive its own scale. She built it. For the decade that followed the story stayed fixed. Zuckerberg was the visionary and Sandberg was the operator who made the place run. One of those roles is remembered as the reason the company exists, and it is not the one that did most of the building. The layer that holds the place together

What Sandberg embodied at the top exists, far less visibly, in almost every company that grows faster than its structure. A second operational layer forms beneath the official hierarchy, built out of necessity rather than design. It absorbs the complexity the formal system cannot yet handle. It turns strategy into execution across teams still inventing their own processes. It keeps continuity intact while the org chart catches up. It is presence without title, authority without mandate, responsibility without the standing that should come with it.

That layer is disproportionately staffed by women, and the funnel begins early. Women enter the workforce in near-equal numbers and then lose ground at the first promotion, where McKinsey and LeanIn's 2025 Women in the Workplace study found only 93 women moved up to manager for every 100 men, and 74 for every 100 where the women were women of colour. Those who keep climbing are steered more often than men toward the functions that keep a company running, and away from the revenue-owning roles that confer visibility and lead to the top. They end up holding the institution together from the part of it least likely to be credited for the holding. The credit follows the title

This compounds. The work that stabilises an organisation is the least visible work it contains, and the least visible work is the work women are most often handed. Recognition follows title, and title follows the

roles women are least likely to hold. Women now occupy around 29 percent of C-suite positions, up from 17 percent a decade ago, yet the climb stays steepest exactly where the operational layer sits, in the functions whose entire purpose is to make everything else look effortless. Done well, that work disappears. When it disappears, so does the case for promoting the person who did it.

What capital is actually buying

There is a reading of all this that has nothing to do with fairness and everything to do with price. Sophisticated capital looks past momentum to a harder question, whether a company's execution can survive the departure of any single person. It asks whether operational intelligence is system-dependent or person-dependent, whether it is encoded into process or stored in someone's head. A business held together by an uncredited operator carries a particular exposure. It runs well under normal conditions and turns fragile the moment that person leaves, and because the knowledge was never institutionalised it cannot be priced into the valuation. It supports the company without ever appearing on its balance sheet.

The irony sits in plain sight. The same invisibility that denies the operator her title also hides a real risk from the people writing the cheques. The woman is underpriced. So is the company that leans on her.

Stop being a shadow

The fix has two halves, and they belong to different people. For the company, the task is to make the operational layer legible, to turn tacit knowledge into documented systems, give the function a title and a mandate, and stop running institutional survival on one person's memory. That is risk management rather

er than generosity, and it is the difference between a company that can be sold or scaled and one that can only be held together by hand. For the woman doing the work, the task is narrower and harder. The work that holds a company together is precisely the work that leaves no trace unless she insists on leaving one. Functional authority has to be converted into formal authority, the title named, the scope written down, the value created set on the record rather than absorbed quietly into someone else's story. The shadow COO's real project, in the end, is to stop being a shadow.

**DONE WELL, THE WORK
DISAPPEARS. SO DOES THE
CASE FOR PROMOTING
THE PERSON WHO DID IT.**

GLAM & GENUINE

FASHION PIECES



ACCESSORIES | BAGS | DRESSES | JACKETS | SHOES | SKIRTS | SUITS | TROUSERS

NITAS

SHOP QUALITY & AFFORDABLE FASHION PIECES AT
LEKKI CENTRO MALL, PLOT 69A, OFF ADMIRALTY WAY, LEKKI PHASE 1
SHOP D7, ADENIRAN OGUNSANYA SHOPPING COMPLEX, (SHOPRITE), SURULERE, LAGOS
44, OPEBI ROAD, IKEJA, LAGOS
☎ +234 (0) 708 282 7976 ✉ INFO@NITASONLINE.COM 🌐 WWW.NITASONLINE.COM