

4 CHALLENGING NORMS

'Feminism in Nigeria is not a subject. There is this idea that it is Western ideology, that it goes against everything Nigerian culture stands for and if you support feminism you are trying to destabilise our whole culture. They use the word "feminist" as an insult. They throw the term at women, "oh, you're a feminist" and that means you never get married, never raise a family, you are here to destroy the society. Which of course we aren't. Feminism is about a better future for women, which equals a better society for everyone.' Priscilla, 30

'I don't think I'm anybody's role model but, whether you like it or not, as a woman who has managed to break the glass ceiling you have a responsibility to let more women in. To be honest I don't think diversity and inclusion is charity. It's really not. It's very profitable. It's economically sound to have women working. There is a balance that needs to be achieved and it's very glaring when women are not there. I'm not asking you to hire women for women's sake – I'm asking you to better your organisation because balance is both progressive and profitable.' Odunayo, 28

'I got married almost a year ago; I met my husband in tech. We are in the house, both constantly on our laptops, both always working. He works in fintech, so he understands how it feels. We are not trying to make our lives difficult by saying "oh there are gender roles, you have to do this". We both understand that we have aspirations. We work together to make it work. This is not the same for many young women. You hear women say, "I don't think my husband would let

me work in tech, it's too time consuming. I think I'll just have children and stay at home." They do that because they don't get the kind of support that they need. I believe you can do both: you can have children, bring them up and still live a life you consider meaningful. You don't have to lose yourself because you are trying to raise a family. I believe it's possible.' Bolanle, 28

'Religion is very important to most Nigerians. It offers a form of escape. The downside is that people are complacent, they give up on this life because of hope for the next. But the upside is that it is a hopeful ideology to build their lives around. For me religion has helped me form ideals. I read a lot around other religions too, to help me form an overall world view. And it's a way to understand, relate and connect with people, too.' John, 34

'Nigerians are very religious, especially my parents' generation. The colonialists came with religion for us, and we dove in, as if we are the number one when it comes to religion. There is this high sense of morality, sanctimony, but at the end of the day they are still contributing to the problems that we have, and they won't let members of the LGBTQ+ community live their lives.' Osinachi, 30

'At times it feels that you are all alone. You're the only person who's queer, the only person who has all of these questions inside of you. There's not a lot you can say to people. You either have people of traditional African religions or Christianity or Islam, and that doesn't provide a lot of wriggle room.' S. I., 25

Waiting for an Uber on a busy street in Ikeja, the sound of praying and singing rises above the noise of the traffic. Behind a market stall and between two buildings – one of which houses a strip joint, the other a two-storey apartment – an open-sided marquee has been erected. Folding

chairs are set out in rows, socially distanced, facing a huge TV screen on which a Pentecostal pastor is giving a rousing sermon. A dozen or more people of all ages – some men, most women – are spread throughout the tent. Some are standing, swaying, clapping their hands. Others are sitting, saying loud amens in time with the pastor. They are enraptured and engaged, oblivious to the sounds of traffic and the street life surrounding them.

Religion plays a significant role in Nigerian culture. With a population of 90 million Muslims, it is the fifth largest Muslim country in the world. Its more than 86 million Christians make it the sixth largest Christian country globally.¹ In Lagos, a primarily Christian city, churches proliferate. They range from historic buildings cast in the European mould or vast modern edifices resembling conference centres and designed to hold a congregation of thousands to smaller makeshift churches, like the street-side marquee. (Even the small Danfo buses that rule the streets of Lagos are stencilled with bible sayings – ‘God is my shepherd’, ‘In God I trust’ – and the more prosaic endorsement of the work ethic: ‘Money no dey fall from heaven’.)

Religion is an area where some of the Soro Soke generation are beginning to find themselves conflicted. Most young Nigerians remain deeply religious. They often mention God in conversation. They speak of their relationship with God, their church, their pastor and the community of their congregation. They talk of how religion informs their family lives and their decisions and of the importance of prayer. They wake early on Sunday to attend a service; they tithe a portion of their income to the church. They bless each other and their families when they say goodbye.

‘Nigeria is a very religious society; you are either Christian or Muslim and it’s embedded in the foundation of everything. Family structure is very religious, we all go to church’, says 30-year-old academic Priscilla Eke. ‘I was

born and raised Catholic and my parents are still practising Catholics but I choose to go to a Pentecostal church now. My parents understand – so long as I have a relationship with God, that’s the most important thing. I go to a Pentecostal church because I love the way they worship, the vibe, the way they follow the scripture. I love to worship and the atmosphere there just suits my spirit. It doesn’t mean I discard the process of Catholic Church in any way. I just feel that this is where I grow more in terms of my relationship with God.’

Osinachi, 30, is an artist who grew up in Aba, not far from Port Harcourt, in the south-east of Nigeria. He was exposed to two religions in childhood. ‘My mum grew up in a very strict Catholic home, her elder sister is a reverend sister in the Catholic Church. I spent most of my time as a child with my aunt and at one point I aspired to being a reverend father. My dad came from a strong Jehovah Witness home. And it was by going to Kingdom Hall as a child that I learned to read Igbo fluently. They had these leaflets, Watchtower and Awake, that they translated, and they had really good translators, so it was well written in the Igbo language and you could read it and understand and enjoy.’

Nigeria is not alone in its religiosity. In their paper ‘Religion and Social Transformation in Africa’,² Obaji Agbiji and Ignatius Swart note that in many African countries, people who do not subscribe to any form of religion make up less than 0.1 per cent of the population. The pair find that religion ‘constitutes an inextricable part of African society’. ‘In the African worldview religion permeates the political and socio-economic life of Africans, just as politics, economic activities and other vital components of life permeate religion’, they write.

According to Agbiji and Swart, political and economic elites across Africa often use religion to legitimise their power, and religious leaders have done little to confront

that power in a bid to stem poverty and corruption.³ Instead, in Nigeria, and elsewhere, religion has been used by politicians, political institutions, religious leaders and religious communities to foster and sustain the structural entrenchment of existing systems.⁴

This entrenchment is causing an internal struggle among some of the younger generation. They remain religious but find their aspirations and identity suppressed or denied by religious dictate. Young women can find the church policing their lives. Journalist Edwin Okolo, writing in *African Arguments* magazine, says religion in Nigeria 'is often elevated as fact and used to govern everything from reproductive rights to interpersonal relationships'.⁵ Women, in particular, are held to high social mores. In some congregations, says Okolo, deacons scold female churchgoers for perceived slights to tradition, such as wearing their hair short.⁶

The younger cohort finds these conventions stifling and is beginning to challenge them. 'I grew up in a traditional Nigerian home, but I went to American and British schools and studied my Bachelor and Master's in the UK', says Eke. 'When I moved back to Lagos the culture just hit me and I couldn't get used to the way women are treated. Right from when I got there everyone was telling me how to behave and it made me very uncomfortable. Parents will tell you this part of the Bible says the way men or women should behave. But they pick or choose scriptures that support them and forget the rest. Religion is part of the weight that adds to the strong grip that men have on society, and they use religion and the Bible to hold on to this culture.'

In her paper 'Feminism Is the New Culture for Nigeria' Eke notes that Nigeria ranks 139 out of 156 countries in the world, and 32 out of 35 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, in terms of gender equality.⁷ 'Within the Nigerian context, patriarchy is at the foundation of our culture and has

established a belief system that supports and promotes the superiority of men over women', writes Eke.

A UN study in 2020 found that 28 per cent of 25- to 29-year-old Nigerian women have experienced some kind of violence since the age of 15, ranging from forced and early marriages to physical, mental or sexual assault.⁸ And on an everyday level, the reach of patriarchal thought extends through society. Afrobarometer is a non-profit corporation that undertakes pan-African, non-partisan research on African experiences. In a survey of 1,599 Nigerian adults in January and February 2020, when asked the question 'who is the person who has primary responsibility for making decisions on behalf of your household?' only 14 per cent of female respondents, against 71 per cent of males, said they identified as the head of their household.⁹ This imbalance is also reflected in the workplace.

'It's not equal in the work environment, certainly not', says Eke. 'Certain roles are pencilled in for only men to occupy – managing director, head of department, chairman, other leadership roles. You even hear women in the workplace tell you that you shouldn't aspire for those positions because it's not meant for you. In the mind of men and women there is a perception of the roles women should do. It doesn't matter your qualifications, your experience, you just cannot go further than a certain role.'

Young Nigerian women are increasingly pushing against these typical gender archetypes, says Ndeye Diagne, who oversaw the Africa Life survey at consultancy group Kantar. 'Equality is close to their heart', she says. 'There is a belief that gender stereotypes need to be addressed, that women should have the same opportunities. Stereotypes still exist of course but there is movement towards greater equality.'

Eke agrees. 'Younger women see things differently. Why are we working hard only to be stopped at a certain level?

How can we start cancelling out those ideas of this is a woman's job and this is not a woman's job? Some young women no longer have that mindset, that narrative that puts them on a certain level. They were brought up to dream and think big and go out and achieve. They had parents who did not think in terms of gender, instead raising their children based on interests. Their fathers pushed them and gave them the best education and encourage them to achieve. They are pushing at the glass ceiling and it's that positivity that gives me hope.'



Figure 18 Odunayo Eweniyi, 28, the co-founder and CEO of online savings and investment brand PiggyVest
Credit: Odunayo Eweniyi

Odunayo Eweniyi, 28, the co-founder and CEO of online savings and investment brand PiggyVest, is an example of the growing power of younger women in the workforce. As a keen defender of equal rights, Eweniyi's company has a diverse workforce. 'We went on a company retreat, and we released a team photo on social media. My team has slightly over 50 per cent representation of women. It was so strange for people to see more women than men that everyone started asking "is this an all women team?" It was a very interesting reaction to see', she says.

Working in the heavily male-dominated tech sector, Eweniyi has become used to fighting for her right to be heard as a woman – her Twitter account is ironically named 10X Tech Bro. She has found that success has given her a measure of equality that can elude other women. 'As I've gotten more successful, the way people treat me gets better. All of a sudden no one is asking questions as to why I am in the room. A decent amount of people know my name and the accompanying respect is not something they would accord a woman who has just started', she says.

In July 2020 she and a friend co-founded the Feminist Coalition with a mission to champion equality for women across society. 'We crystallised our needs into three pillars: women's health and safety, financial literacy, and legislative power for women', says Eweniyi. 'Everything I've read and a lot of my own views that I've imbibed from working is this: the difference between men and women, and the difference in their treatment, is a game of money and power. A very key part of the Feminist Coalition mission is helping women understand that money means power and that power is important.'

Along with gender inequality, homophobia is an issue that blights many young lives in Nigeria and across the continent. Many churches reinforce the idea that sexual minorities are an aberration caused by trauma or supernat-

ural interference.¹⁰ The Nigerian government's criminalisation of same-sex relations in the 2014 Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act was largely seen as an attempt by the then president, Goodluck Jonathan, to woo religious voters. The act not only penalises a same-sex marriage or civil union with 14 years imprisonment but also criminalises direct and indirect public display of, or support for, 'same sex relationships, gay clubs, societies, and organizations, processions, or meetings' with 10 years' imprisonment.¹¹

This draconian legislation largely reflects wider public opinion. In the 2020 Afrobarometer research, Nigerians were very open to having neighbours of other ethnicities or religions but 89 per cent said they would strongly or somewhat dislike living next door to homosexuals.¹² And according to a report in the *Greenwich Social Work Review*, since the act was passed, violence against LGBTQ+ Nigerians has risen by 214 per cent.¹³ 'Survivors frequently report arbitrary arrest and unlawful detention, invasion of privacy, physical assault and battery, and blackmail/extortion', says the report.¹⁴

Diagne agrees that LGBTQ+ rights are still largely a taboo subject. 'Religion makes it difficult. LGBTQ+ agendas are driven more from a diaspora perspective though some younger people, particularly those under 25, are more receptive to the idea, so it's not black and white', she says.

Journalist S. I. Ohumu, 25, identifies as queer. 'Acceptance is about a number of things. Age plays a part yes, but also the environment you grew up in, something as simple as the number of books you have read in your life', she says. 'I find people as young as myself or even younger still being very conservative, very close-minded. And you can't always fault them for that. The LGBTQ+ struggle for the most part is a question of privilege. If you grow up in a street where getting one meal a day is a struggle, I don't know that the foremost thing on your mind is being accepted for being gay.'

Artist Osinachi also identifies as queer and agrees that wealth is important. 'In Nigeria, what might protect you is your money', he says. 'In the sense that you get to live in an exclusive neighbourhood and on the road you are in your vehicle and nobody sees you. If you are effeminate, you just go from your vehicle into your house and go to special events and can afford to travel out of the country for a vacation and not really engage. But for the ones who don't have this luxury it is quite difficult. We hear stories about people being mobbed, families rejecting their own. We have lost a lot of human resources – I know a number of gay people who aspire to leave the country because they want to live freely. I can't hold a guy's hand, eyes would be on us; there are so many things that you can't do.'

Along with rising wealth, the diversity, anonymity and increasingly cosmopolitan nature of megacities like Lagos play a part in breaking down prejudices. In Lagos, the fashion industry's role in subverting gender norms has made it an ally to the queer community, leading some to call Lagos Fashion Week the unofficial Pride of Nigeria.¹⁵ Brands such as unisex fashion label Bloke and androgynous menswear brand Orange Culture push the boundaries of traditional gender norms. The Orange Culture menswear collections feature bright colours and traditionally feminine elements such as crop tops, pussy bows and sequins. In interviews, founder Adebayo Oke-Lawal has said: 'For me, fashion continues to be an important way to investigate social dynamics.'¹⁶

Despite the criminalisation of homosexuality, speaking out is still a given for this generation. Osinachi is challenging sexual norms in his work. 'I think the first work I made confronting that subject was *Nduka's Wedding Day*', he says. The piece features a male figure in a wedding dress holding a bouquet. Another piece, *Becoming Sochukwuma*, depicts a male dancer pirouetting in a tutu and was inspired

by 'I Will Call Him Sochukwuma: Nigeria's Anti-Gay Problem', an essay written by Chimamanda Adichie in reaction to the 2014 bill. Osinachi says his interpretation 'imagines Sochukwuma as a Nigerian queer man who grows up to love himself to the point of showing off his potential through dance'.

Writers and independent film-makers are also starting to give voice to LGBTQ+ stories. 'Nigeria is deeply homophobic and so is the film industry here', says screenwriter and director Uyaiedu Ikpe-Etim, 32. 'Nollywood is safe, commercial, conservative and homophobic. LGBTQ+ characters are seen as needing deliverance and even



Figure 19 *Becoming Sochukwuma* by Osinachi
Credit: Osinachi

subjects such as African traditional religions, voodoo for example, are demonised. When I started writing screenplays, I found I couldn't write the stories I wanted to write. I might write in a gay character here or there but often they didn't take it.'

When Ikpe-Etim released *Ifé*, her directorial debut, in 2020, she faced the issue head on. *Ifé* means love in the Yoruba language and the film is a lesbian love story. 'It's corny and soft and lovey-dovey and set over a three-day first date, which is kind of a thing in the lesbian community. People joke that when a lesbian says she's going on a date you can expect to see her in a week's time. We fall in love easily. I'm big on lesbian stereotypes, because why not?', says Ikpe-Etim.

The film was released online, to circumvent Nigeria's censorship laws, which currently only apply to films shown in cinemas. Even so, Alhaji Adebayo Thomas, the head of the country's censorship board NFVCB, put out a statement saying that Ipke-Etim could face 14 years in prison for 'promoting homosexuality on a screen'. 'There's a standing law that prohibits homosexuality, either in practice or in a movie or even in a theatre or on stage', he said.¹⁷

'Technically we didn't break any laws with the film, but the authorities are angry that we didn't give them a chance to censor it', says Ikpe-Etim. 'Politics is not yet dominated by young people and the people in authority now, all they know is how to bully and shut you down. They even sent letters to radio stations saying that broadcasters couldn't talk about the film on air.'

She believes the censorship board is out of touch with the way younger viewers feel. 'I think it's a great time for *Ifé*. Everyone in the queer community is so excited about it and ready for it. We want to see queer people on TV, living normal lives. This film is not about struggle or homophobia – it's a story about two women in love.'

And, she says, *Ifé* is at the forefront of a wave of queer-friendly work emerging from the Sore Soke generation. ‘Gen Z have been born in a different time; they are not depending on one source for information – they have the Internet, not just church, school or family. And a lot of queer creatives are springing up, it’s such an artistic community. In a few years from now there will be a lot of queer stories being told whether people are ready or not.’

In the Canvas8 2020 report ‘Why Young Nigerians Are Rebelling against Tradition’,¹⁸ Caleb Somtochukwu Okereke, the managing editor of the digital publication *Minority Africa*, agrees there are clear generational differences. He suggests the online space is key to opening minds. ‘There’s a difference in how Gen Z Nigerians deal with LGBTQ+ issues and how Gen Y handles it’, he writes. ‘Gen Z Nigerians, in general, are more open to having dialogues about these issues than their Gen Y and Boomer counterparts, and while they are still homophobic, there’s a noticeable difference in how they react and view these issues. Gen Z have access to the internet and information goes a [long] way in defining how they react to things like gender and sexuality.’¹⁹

Social media is altering this generation’s social connections, which historically have been based on kinship and shared ethnic origins, but not everyone is happy with its progressive direction. Traditional values still carry weight with many young people. Davies Okeowo, 30, typifies the concerns about the impact social media is having in driving wider social change: ‘I work a lot with young people between 17 and 24 years old and I think their priorities are misplaced. Hard work, respect, tolerance, the basic principles that make up our society, are being lost. There’s a sense that you can become famous if you do something stupid on social media, and if you do it consistently you can make money doing it. Or they’ll trade crypto, make a fast trade then cash out. There’s a perception that “we can

get it quick". I'm conservative and I believe advancement is made up of pillars and some are more important than others. Social media and technology will leave us better off economically but it's going to leave us worse off values wise.'

But there is no putting this genie back in the bottle: social media has created a space for more open dialogue, and minority groups are making their voices heard. Ipke-Etim is open about her sexuality on social media: she recently documented the experience of coming out to her mum on Twitter. 'Right now, queer people in Nigeria have become more visible and louder', she says. 'We use social media a lot. I'm on social media, I post about how I feel. I manage to be a very visible lesbian, to live my life loudly. It is somehow revolutionary. It shouldn't be but it is – I'm taking up space in a place where people don't want me to.'

As a public figure with a large social media following, Ohumu also uses her voice to raise LGBTQ+ issues online. 'Because being queer is criminalised in Nigeria, people are harassed by the police. It's serious. It's heavy. But it's also knowing that if you don't say anything, it won't change. If you are privileged enough, by virtue of your voice or your following or whatever that makes you not as vulnerable, then I think you have a responsibility to be open about it', she says. 'It's tricky to be open in the sense that you want to show that what you are doing is not wrong, but you are also concerned about what the law says. Twitter is one space where LGBTQ+ Nigerians are really voicing out and living their lives openly and having conversations. It's a safe place to have that conversation. From time to time you see LGBTQ+ trending on Nigerian Twitter, which is a very good thing. Although most of the comments you get are negative, the fact that the conversation keeps happening means people's minds are being changed.'