When Culture Becomes a Cage: The Fight for Nigeria's Future

By Dr Onyeche Elisabeth Agbiti-Douglas, Director, Nigeria Youth Futures Fund

March is International Women's Month. Thirty-one days the world sets aside to celebrate women — their strength, their contributions, their dignity. In Nigeria, this March, we watched a video from Ozoro.

On March 19, 2026, in Ozoro, Delta State, a cultural festival became something else entirely. Women were chased. Stripped. Assaulted in the open. And the young men around them did not intervene — they filmed it. They cheered. They uploaded it. Some of those videos are still circulating.

This happened in International Women's Month. Days before Mother's Day. In 2026.

But let us linger for a moment on those young men, because Ozoro was not only a crisis for Nigerian women. It was a crisis of Nigerian youth. The boys holding those phones were not nameless villains imported from elsewhere. They are our youth. Products of our schools, our communities, our religious institutions, our social media ecosystems. The rise of misogynistic online communities — spaces that frame female autonomy as a threat to male dominance and frame violence as a legitimate reassertion of control — has created digital echo chambers that are radicalising a generation of young Nigerian men. Social media platforms have seen surges in users celebrating acts of violence against women, with some trivialising or openly justifying it. At the Nigeria Youth Futures Fund, we work daily with young people who are visionary, empathetic, and hungry to lead differently. The young men in Ozoro represent what happens when that hunger is never redirected — when no institution, no elder, no curriculum steps in to teach boys that manhood is not dominion. The question Ozoro forces us to answer is not only "who failed those women?" It is equally: "Who failed those boys?" And what are we going to do about it?

Let us be honest about what we are dealing with before we reach for statistics and policy language. Because the temptation, when we talk about the condition of women in Nigeria, is to make it abstract — to turn it into a governance problem, a development indicator, a line in a report. Ozoro resists that temptation. It was not abstract.

But first — and this matters — let us be precise about the word "culture," because it will come up and be misused. Culture, real culture, is the living memory of a people. It is the way a community marks birth and mourning, the songs that carry history, the rituals that bind generations together. It is worth protecting. What happened in Ozoro was not that. Patriarchal cruelty is not culture — it is control wearing culture's clothing. The moment we genuinely accept that distinction, we stop defending the indefensible and start protecting what is actually worth preserving.

Nigeria has over 241 million people — Africa's most populous nation and, by almost any measure, one of the most talented on earth. It is also, according to the 2025 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index, ranked 124th out of 148 countries on gender equality — 30th in Sub-Saharan Africa. Africa's giant, outranked by 29 of its smaller neighbours on the basic question of whether women are treated as fully human.

And here is the connection that does not get made often enough: the assault in Ozoro and the empty chairs in our legislature are not separate problems. They are the same problem. When a society systematically strips women of political power — when it signals, through its laws, its parties, its traditions and its silences, that women's voices are optional — it also signals that their bodies are negotiable. Women's representation in ministerial positions fell from 17.6% in 2024 to just 8.8% in 2025. Women hold just 64 of approximately 1,460 legislative seats — the lowest female representation of any national legislature in Africa. Not West Africa. Africa. And in the streets of Ozoro, that same hierarchy played out in real time, with camera phones as witnesses.

The machinery producing these outcomes is not mysterious. It is patriarchal tradition dressed as a religious obligation. It is the widowhood rites that punish grief. Child marriages that end girlhoods before they begin. Witchcraft accusations that target women with uncanny consistency. Political parties that price women out of candidacy with fees no woman from an average household can afford, then call the resulting all-male shortlist a "merit-based" outcome. These systems did not emerge by accident. They were built, they are maintained, and they serve specific interests — none of which are the interests of women and girls.

And still. Despite all of it.

Amina J. Mohammed is the UN Deputy Secretary-General — the second-highest-ranking person in the United Nations — and she is Nigerian. Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala leads the World Trade Organisation, the first woman and first African to do so. Coach Rena Wakama led D'Tigress to a fifth consecutive AfroBasket championship, becoming the first woman in history to do it — ending 57 years of male dominance with what looked, from the outside, like quiet competence, and was, from the inside, something much harder earned. Rasheedat Ajibade — from Mushin, Lagos — now plays for Paris Saint-Germain. In hospitals, courtrooms, tech startups, markets and schools across this country, women are showing up, producing, leading, holding things together, largely without the structural support that should be their right.

This is not a tribute. It is a provocation. And it comes with a price tag.

According to the World Bank, gender gaps in earnings alone are costing the Nigerian economy at least 2.3% of its GDP annually — and that is a conservative estimate. The IFC calculates that if Nigeria reduced gender inequality in its labour market, economic participation, and political representation, GDP could grow by as much as $229 billion. This is not sentiment. It is economics. Every girl denied an education, every woman priced out of a political race, every female entrepreneur refused a loan she qualified for — these are not personal misfortunes. They are national self-sabotage, measurable and preventable. Research spanning four decades

of Nigerian data confirms that gender inequality directly and causally suppresses economic growth in the short, medium, and long term. We are not just failing our women. We are failing ourselves.

Three things that must actually change

Communities must stop outsourcing this to the government. Every elder, every religious leader, every parent who has ever watched a woman be diminished in a family meeting and said nothing — that silence is a vote for the status quo. And every community that watches its young men grow into the kind of people who film assaults instead of stopping them has a reckoning to do. Naming and rejecting gender-based exclusion in the rooms where you have influence is not activism. It is the basic responsibility of anyone who claims to love this country. Mentorship programmes that specifically reach adolescent boys — teaching them what healthy masculinity looks like, what consent means, what leadership actually requires — are not optional extras. They are urgent infrastructure.

Political parties and INEC must act before 2027. The Reserved Seats for Women Bill needs to pass — not be studied, not be referred to committee, but passed. Parties must field women in at least 35% of constituencies or face financial penalties. INEC must build gender-responsive support into the electoral process itself: subsidised fees, security provisions, civic education. The 2027 elections cannot look like 2023.

The Federal Government must enforce what already exists. A Federal High Court ruled in 2022 that the government must implement 35% affirmative action in public appointments. That ruling is being ignored. Enforce it, with transparent reporting and consequences for non-compliance. And every cultural gathering that receives a government permit must demonstrate it meets baseline safety standards: trained security personnel with gender-sensitive protocols, designated female marshals, a named accountability officer, and a publicised emergency reporting line accessible on the day of the event. Not as bureaucracy — as a baseline of civilised responsibility. What happened in Ozoro was a crime committed at a permitted public event. Someone must answer for it.

The WEF estimates it will take 123 years to close the global gender gap at the current rate of progress. Nigeria is not just behind that pace. Nigeria is moving in the wrong direction.

We have the laws. We have the talent. We have, in the women of this country, some of the most extraordinary human beings alive. And we now have the economic data to prove, beyond sentiment, exactly what their exclusion is costing us. What we have consistently failed to provide is the political will to match their courage — and the courage to raise boys who understand that a woman's dignity is not a threat to their own.

The Nigeria we keep promising is not possible without them. It never was.

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