

10

Young Nigerian Women to Watch

Who runs the world?

To be a young woman in Nigeria today is at times exciting, exhilarating, frustrating, but always promising. For the group of 10 young women featured here, aged between 20 and 30, the word “trailblazer” aptly embodies who they are.

Belinda Otas, a Nigerian herself, profiles the young and gifted Nigerian female talent who are breaking barriers and paving an empowering future for the next generation. Girls, we salute you!

Nmachi Jidenma

The global shaper



“Young Africans are quickly becoming voracious adopters of new technologies particularly across mobile and social media,” says Nmachi Jidenma. “Google, Apple and Microsoft have come to shape people’s lives across continents and create billion-dollar companies. The hope is that Africa will witness the rise of its homegrown global technology success stories in the next decade. These will help create jobs and provide opportunities for expression and empowerment for the continent’s young populace.” Nmachi can confidently say this, as she is part of a generation making it happen. At 24, she is a program coordinator at Google and works on the company’s initiative aimed at increasing technology and internet usage in universities across Africa. She is also the founder of Celebrating Progress Africa (CPA), a blog dedicated to celebrating Africa’s business and technology success stories. Nmachi was previously Africa Editor of The Next Web, an international technology news website based in the Netherlands. Recently named as a Global Shaper by the World Economic Forum, Nmachi holds a Master’s Degree in Applied Economics and Management from Cornell University, New York. She is passionate about using technology to solve societal problems.

Tola Sunmonu

The agricultural revolutionist

Tola Sunmonu, 24, wants to put food security on Nigeria’s national agenda and her main objective is to start an agricultural revolution that will result in the country being able to feed its citizens and have surplus to export. She is founder of Harambe Nigeria, a not-for-profit organisation whose vision is to change the way Nigerian youths engage with agriculture. Tola says: “This narrow image of the sector as just farmers is part of the problem that discourages young people from applying their other much needed skills.” It is Tola’s hope to rebuild Nigeria’s agricultural sector as one of the smartest strategies towards rebuilding the economy. “Our role is to provide the necessary information to get young people thinking about agriculture as a lucrative career,” she adds. “A point, one could argue, some of our African leaders have failed to make. Hence we have a generation seeking the 9-to-5 route, when the chance of entrepreneurship stares them in the face but is wrapped in a different package. One of

Harambe’s core programmes to achieve this goal is the Harambe Incubator for Sustainable Agricultural and Rural Development. It provides selected students with the opportunity to start local agribusinesses and currently operates at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

Born in Nigeria, Sunmonu is a graduate of Stanford University, California, with a degree in Economics. She was a Goldman Sachs Global Leader nominee in 2009 and an Ashoka Fellow nominee in 2010. But do not be fooled by her years, she is aware of the challenges that come with being young and a woman working in a sector that is predominantly male dominated as far as decision-making is concerned. “Some men try to take advantage of me because they assume I’m naive. As a woman you must have your principles and not let them go for anyone. Once you do this you start developing a good reputation and men take you seriously.”



“As a woman you must have your principles and not let them go for anyone.”

“Gender equity is one of the solutions to a sustainable economy and the sustainability of our future communities.”

Wana Udobong

The caring journalist

Her Twitter handle reads, ‘Miss Wanana’ but don’t get carried away. This is one serious lady, albeit with a playful side. A journalist, radio presenter and producer, writer and poet, and a gender and healthcare advocate, Wana Udobong has the ability to take on a wide range of subjects and breathe life into them. Born in Nigeria, Wana studied Journalism at University for the Creative Arts, Surrey, England, where she bagged herself a First Class degree. She went on to work as a freelance producer for BBC World Service. After 10 years of living in England, the home bug caught up with Wana and she relocated to Nigeria in 2009. She currently works at 92.3 Inspiration FM, Lagos, as a presenter and producer and anchors a number of programmes, including a human interest/listener participatory programme called ‘Sharing Life’s Issues’.

Wana is a member of Alliances for Africa (a women and human rights organisation), the Nigerian Feminist Forum and has worked extensively on the issue of violence against women. It is her hope that Nigeria and Africa will get to a point where gender equality is based on vision and leadership as opposed to merely educating young girls. “I believe gender equity is one of the solutions to a sustainable economy, and the sustainability of our future communities,” she says.

Wana is also the creator of the 1k4Cancer initiative, a fundraising platform with the aim of raising funds to assist impoverished cancer patients with their treatment. She is additionally a campaigner for the equal rights of disabled people who still suffer from being stigmatised. Earlier this year, Wana was chosen as a Global Shaper by the World Economic Forum in Davos. She runs the literary arts and culture site, Guerrilla Basement and a content provision company called Guerrilla Basement Productions. Wana is a busy bee to say the least!

Toyosi Akerele

The educator



Toyosi Akerele, 28, is a youth advocate and education expert, who has spent her growing up years helping to shape Nigerian communities in the areas of youth education and capacity building. She is a respected advisor, content expert and commentator on issues of entrepreneurship, education and governance and is the founder and executive director of RISE Networks, a leading social enterprise in Nigeria. She has conceptualised and developed effective programmes to deepen the links and learning opportunities for young people in knowledge acquisition, enterprise and nation building. The RISE National Youth Forum, a flagship project of RISE Networks, has attracted hundreds of thousands of young people from across Nigeria. An inspirational youth leader, Toyosi is celebrated nationally and is an alumni of the United States Government’s Prestigious International Visitor Leadership Programme for emerging Leaders. In 2011, Toyosi was described by Michelle Obama as one of her personal inspirations before she embarked on a tour of South Africa, where

she attended the Young African Women Leaders Forum and Toyosi was the only Nigerian present. Toyosi has been actively involved in national and international projects on the need to provide a platform for youth inclusion in policy formulation and implementation. She is the recipient of numerous awards including Europe’s 2012 Crans Montana Forum New Leader of Tomorrow, 2012 This Day Awards for Nigeria’s Women of Distinction and 2011 Young Entrepreneur of Success Digest Entrepreneurial Awards. A law graduate from the University of Jos, Nigeria, and University of New Hampshire in the US. “Because I’m a woman, I must make unusual efforts to succeed,” Toyosi told NAW. “If I fail, no one will say ‘she doesn’t have what it takes’. They will say women don’t have what it takes. My name is Toyosi Akerele, a proud woman from Africa, and I represent the undying, refreshing vigour and excellence of the Real Nigerian Woman, authentic and unstoppable in every way!”

Uche Eze

The pioneer & entrepreneur
(the face behind BellaNaija.com)



She is the driving force behind BainStone Limited, a New Media company aimed at conceptualising, developing and managing innovative and exciting online media content aimed at pan-African and Nigerian audiences. However, that is not what many know Uche Eze for. BellaNaija.com, described as the premier lifestyle, entertainment and fashion website in Africa is what Uche, at 27, is renowned for. Founded in 2006, BellaNaija.com is an award-winning online magazine platform with a relevance that is evident in its readership. A loyal readership base means a following that generates over one million hits per month. The website, often referred to as a pioneer in the field of entertainment content in Nigeria, has won numerous awards including the Outstanding Contribution to Fashion Communication Award at the 2010 Africa Fashion Week held by Africa Fashion International (AFI) in Johannesburg, South Africa. A business savvy mind, Uche is the managing director of BainStone Limited, which she established in 2009 and through its flagship online media

product – BellaNaija.com – is a pioneer in the online media industry in Nigeria. A TEDAfrica Fellow and a 2010 Future Awards nominee for Best Use of Technology, Uche has been featured on the ‘Oprah Winfrey Show’ and ‘Inside Africa’, one of CNN International’s flagship programmes about the continent. Uche was recently selected as a Nigeria Leadership Initiative – NLI Associate, a prestigious distinction for young outstanding Nigerians. In January 2011, she was honoured as one of the Young Persons of the Year at the esteemed The Future Awards. In February of the same year, BainStone was chosen as one of 50 high-potential Nigerian SMEs and awarded a British Airways Opportunity Grant. Most recently, Uche was awarded the TW Magazine Protégé Award for Business Entrepreneurship. She holds a Bachelor’s degree in Business Administration from the Richard Ivey School of Business, University of Western Ontario, Canada, where she graduated with distinction in 2006.

TY BELLO

PHOTONIMI

Ify Aniebo

The cool scientist

At 27, Ify Aniebo is a scientist whose goal is to make science cool for young African women. Her professional dream is to find a cure for malaria and her interest in the disease began when she suffered bouts of malaria as a child and in her early teens. To this end, she has undertaken field research on malaria in Thailand. Later this year she will also embark on an HIV/Aids research project in Swaziland.

In 2010, Ify was crowned Scientist of the Year and Young Person of the Year at The Future Awards, one of Nigeria's premier awards, which recognises the contributions of young people who are making a difference in the country. An Exxon Mobil and Wellcome Trust Scholar, Ify is currently studying for an Msc in Global Health Science at Oxford University. She is the founder and editor of *African Health* magazine, an all-important online resource that aims to redefine the health of the average African. A firm believer in the power of education, she says it has given her independence and a freedom that cannot be attained elsewhere. "I find that knowledge is powerful. The right information is a determinant of success," she says. "It is Ify's view that young African women will add tremendously to the growth of the continent. Her message to her contemporaries is to "work hard, because persistence pays off. Never give up on your dream no matter the circumstance you find yourself in."



ATUNBI

Yetunde Odugbesan

The humanitarian

Yetunde Odugbesan describes herself as a "humanitarian, who wants to promote human welfare and social reform that will empower the youth". She was recently chosen as one of the 30 Most Intriguing Africans in New York by *Applause Africa Magazine*. Yetunde, 24, is a graduate of Rutgers University, New Jersey, with a

Master's Degree in Global Affairs. She is currently pursuing her Phd in Global Affairs. Her doctoral research focuses on political corruption and its effects on governmental trust and performance in local and state government. She is the founder of Yetunde Global Consulting LLC, a management consulting firm which specialises in leadership development and training, organisational management and global business strategies. Yetunde is the creator of Putting Your Best Self Forward, an

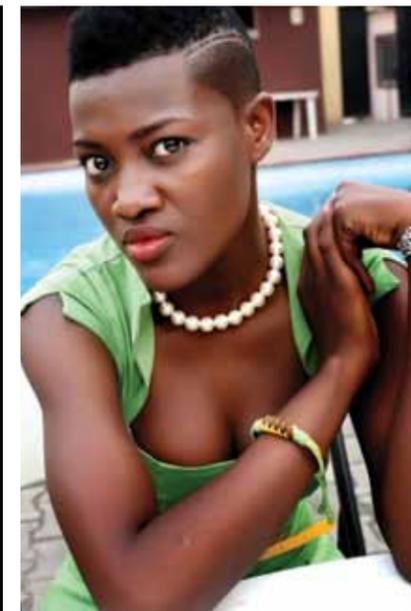


ROOIME PHOTOGRAPHY

online forum that provides personal and professional advice. Armed with the goal of maximising the potential of her generation, she recently founded and is the executive director of Young Woman's Guide, an organisation that provides women with empowerment and mentorship opportunities. Young Woman's Guide aims to support women and girls through educational and personal development. "Young women all over the world need to know that there are people, both men and women, who are rooting for their advancement, development and success," she says. "My goal is to ensure that at least one woman is sponsored each year, especially young women from Nigeria."

"Nigeria is where I come from and I know we have the best, brightest and most innovative minds. I want to make sure that young women are exposed to the right opportunities and have the right support to live out their dream and contribute positively to the development of Nigeria and the progression of the global community."

"I want to make sure that young women are exposed to the right opportunities and have the right support to live out their dream."



EFE LOPEZ

Aduke

The voice of a generation

During the recent fuel subsidy crisis in Nigeria, which led to nationwide protests, a 24-year-old neo-soul and afro jazz music artist caught the attention of the young and old as a result of her ability to capture the pain and cry for change from ordinary Nigerians. Given the immediacy and poignancy of her song, 'Hear the Voice', Ayobamidele Aladekomo better known as Aduke, was catapulted to national prominence for capturing the frustration with her visceral lyrics...

*Hear the Voice of the wailing masses
They are wailing for food
They are wailing for water
Hear the voice of the wailing masses
They are wailing for light
They are wailing for shelter...
Since I was a child, I have been shouting Up NEPA...*

And so came the responses – "hauntingly disconcerting" and "another exposition from a beautiful mind..." In one song, Aduke expressed the anger of her generation, who have grown up without the proper infrastructural system, and live with the damaging effects of corruption and mismanagement. Aduke told *NAW* that music is her personal language. "For me it was a moment to express long-felt pain, I come from a neighbourhood where people can't sleep at night when it rains because of flood.

"People fill bad roads with dirt to level it up and make it pliable! My environment writes my story. 'Hear the Voice' is the voice of millions of Nigerians in unity. I sang the song to express the feelings of those who have no means to express themselves and struggle to get by every day."

An artist of many talents, Aduke is also a poet and has worked as part of a dance-theatre company. "My music encompasses every facet of life from love, trust, friendship, faith, hope and happiness, factors that make up the human existence. I want my music to serve as a source of inspiration and motivation and my dream is to be internationally relevant not only as a musician but also as an ambassador of Nigeria."

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Mercy Abang

The politically conscious journalist and blogger



PERKINS ABAJE

At 27, Mercy Abang is a journalist with a keen interest in the political landscape of her country. Mercy holds a postgraduate qualification in advertising and public relations and a professional qualification from the Kofi Annan International Peace Keeping Centre Accra. She serves as an elections observer with ECOWAS and is a member of the youth-led group EnoughisEnough, which champions good governance within the country. In the past she has worked with her fellow African youths, mobilising against the Economic Partnership Agreement with Africa, Pacific and Caribbean (ACP). Mercy is an example of what women's political participation can do for a nation as she works with the aim of achieving a better tomorrow for Nigeria. She says it best in her own words: "I work for democracy. My dream is to see a Nigeria where the rule of law is practised and the Nigerian people make decisions at the ballots during elections. For me the only way the Nigerian people can truly and honestly embark on a successful revolution is at the ballots and not on the streets with machetes and burning fire."

"My dream is to see a Nigeria where the rule of law is practised"



Blessing Okagbare

The hope

Blessing Okagbare is Nigeria's best hope of a medal at the forthcoming 2012 Olympics Games in London. The 24-year-old, who in 2010 was described as one of the most important athletes on the African continent, is a long and triple jumper and short (60-metre and 100-metre) sprinter. In 2008, she won a Bronze Medal at the Beijing Olympics. Blessing was born and raised in the Niger-Delta region before he left to study at the University of Texas, El Paso (UTEP), where she found the right environment to train and develop her athletic skills. She has since become a world-class athlete and has competed against the likes of Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce, the reigning Olympic 100-metre champion. Her rise in the sprint world of athletics has been nothing but meteoric. Her first foray into sport was playing soccer for her high school, but she later fell in love with track and field events and started jumping in 2004. After winning state championships in Nigeria, Blessing represented the country at the 2006 World Junior Athletics Championship in China. She came to national attention in 2007 at the All-Africa Games trials, Lagos. There, she won the long and triple jump events, setting a new national triple jump record of 14.13 metres. However, settling into the life of an athlete was not all she wanted. Blessing was

equally hungry for an education and more than anything wanted to gain a Business Degree. So, when UTEP came calling with a scholarship, Blessing was ready.

Blessing has been described "an unbelievable talent" by US athletics commentators. In 2010 she entered the elite hall of fame of athletics, along with the likes of Carl Lewis and Jesse Owens as the only athletes to win the 100-metre and long jump events at the same US National Collegiate Athletic Association Division One championships. In 2010, Blessing was named Conference USA Female Athlete of the Year and was awarded the US Track and Field and Cross Country Coaches Association Mountain Region Track Athlete and Mountain Region Field Athlete of the Year during the indoor season. She was named as the Mountain Region Track Athlete of the Year for the outdoor season and was a Bowerman Finalist, one of the highest honours awarded to student athletes in the US – no ordinary feat for someone who is not an American citizen.

Known for staying incredibly focused, her strategy is to "always stay patient and execute my race until I get to the finish line". It is her dream to be remembered as one of the world's best athletes. ■

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