

Nike Oshinowo

“Successful women should help raise future successful women”



Nike Oshinowo is more than an ex-beauty queen. She is a high-profile entrepreneur with interests in diverse businesses, and recently organised the highly acclaimed United Nations World Tourism (UNWTO) Conference for Africa held in Calabar, Cross Rivers State, Nigeria. She tells *New African Woman's* Belinda Otas why successful women of today must also help raise the successful women of tomorrow.

New African Woman: Let's talk about Nike Oshinowo, the businesswoman. You are well known as a former beauty queen, as Miss Nigeria 1991. How challenging has the transition been from that to being taken seriously as a businesswoman with several businesses? You are CEO of Nike Oshinowo Incorporated, a lifestyle brand for Nigerian women, and until recently were creative director of the Miss Nigeria pageant.

Nike Oshinowo: The interesting thing is that I keep telling people that it's how you conduct yourself during your reign. I was a beauty queen but I wasn't a teenager, I was 24 years old, had finished school and was working. So I was an adult queen as it were, and I knew exactly what I was going to use it for. I'm very aware of the term beauty with a purpose and if you are able to command attention, that attention must be used for a purpose. The purpose then was charity work but then I'm Nike Oshinowo and I'm my father's child. My father passed on this phenomenal business mind to me and as much as I wanted to be a beauty queen, go into fashion and more, your business mind eventually takes over. The year after my reign, I opened my own business, Nigeria's first takeaway place, and it was all about Nigerian food. I knew I would always end up in business, that is what my father did and I knew I would follow in his footsteps. However, what I did was to use my education and business

mind and direct it in one area and that was all about health and beauty. Not fashion, just health and beauty. I'm not a fashion expert. Now say to me, what does that have to do with this project? I am 46 years old. The more time I have spent in Nigeria, the more I love my country. I truly do find it beautiful but you see this word 'beauty' that we throw around so much with Africa; we are so focused on the physical. I love my country, it's the beauty from within, the beauty that I get when I look at that [points to Calabar creek behind the hotel], I love that and I want to share that with people. I don't want when I land in Heathrow airport, they smile at me differently. I want them to love my country too. I want them to love my country the same way that when a New Yorker lands at Heathrow airport and as an American, they treat you differently because they know your country is beautiful and that's just from them having been educated and exposed to it. I want to educate people about my country and expose them to it.

In a country like Nigeria, where a woman's role is gradually evolving and being redefined, there's still a glass ceiling that's yet to be broken in different sectors of society. What are some of the challenges that you have encountered along the way and how did you overcome them?

You know something; I find it astounding that they allow me to do

everything I want to do. I say to myself and other young ladies, 'look at me, they are letting me do it. Don't even give them the chance to tell you No! You are fine'. The sky is the limit. No one has ever told me that I couldn't do anything. I actually don't see why I cannot be president. I don't think anyone would try to stop me. I don't see why I cannot run for governor or for the senate. That's what I'm saying to anyone coming behind me, 'you just go for it, don't even look and see who is there or who is looking. If it's there and you want it and that is the goal, just keep going for it'. That's what I have done. No one has ever said, 'ha! Nike, you're a woman' or 'Nike you're a girl', not one human being, no one.

What is it about the Nigerian woman's narrative within Nigerian society today that needs to change so that more young women can aspire to greater things?

Our women; we need to make and create opportunities for people to follow on our behalf. You know what? If you are a female minister, you need to be conscious of the fact that you are a role model to women coming after you and you need to create the avenues for young ladies coming after you to become ministers. You don't get there and then just want to close the gate that you are the only female minister ever. It's our responsibility as successful Nigerian women, every single one of us, to make sure that there are more successful Nigerian women coming after us. Half a dozen need to replace me and other successful women. We need that, it is important and that is what we are not doing right.

And what specific actions do you want to see in order to make this change happen?

You know, it does not need to be political. It's social. We just need to be more accommodating of each other. If I am sitting having lunch and speaking to a waitress, because most waitresses are doing it while studying, and if I say to her, how long have you been doing this? And she says she is in University of Calabar and if I ask her what she is studying and she happens to tell me Law, I encourage her. You have to encourage and help at every single junction and given opportunity.

You just have to keep helping and opening doors. South Africans and Americans did it; they called it 'positive discrimination'. Positively discriminate. Yes, we need to. I feel it's necessary.

Is the use of quotas for women within government offices and in the private sector something you agree with?

No, no, not in the form of quotas. In an unregulated manner, I believe it can be done. I believe it can be done in a less formal manner just with encouragement. I truly believe that. I don't believe anything needs to be cast in stone. By the time you make it political and start putting quotas, you spoil everything and you are leaving out the capable men just to put in some undeserving women. I'm not saying every single woman needs to be encouraged or become president or be put in school. I'm saying when you come in contact with one that wants to get there, help her, encourage her, that's all.

Do you think that as women we make a lot of noise about our achievements? Or is it that we simply don't know how to or have been trained on how not to tell our success stories in favour of being humble?

I have a lady that works for me called Wunika Mukan and she is a Nigerian-American with dual nationality, and I watch how she is. I have noticed that when you are trained in America, you are different. When you are trained in England, as I was, you are different. For those of us trained in England, we are not so in your face, we won't come to you and say my name is this and I have done this and that... while the American trained would meet you and say, "my name is Nike Oshinowo, I'm the media president of this and about to become the president of that...my mum was and my dad was...". You are like okay, okay. We need to be able to find a balance between that. Maybe not so much of the American, just find a balance. Even I am trying to learn to do that right now because we have been trained that way and maybe it's now ingrained in our DNA through evolution and survival maybe, and we have learnt not to so much blow our own trumpets and tell our success

"It's our responsibility as successful Nigerian women, every single one of us, to make sure there are more successful Nigerian women after us."

stories. But if we don't, people won't know we are capable or that we can do the job. How will they know we can do the job if we don't write how capable we are in our resumé? And sometimes, we cannot carry our resumé around when we meet people for the first time; you simply need to let them know you are capable.

When it comes to women repositioning themselves in life, career and business like you have done, what message would you like to share with our readers?

I'm going to use Nigeria as an example – we have a finance minister who is a woman, for the first time in our nation's history. I want her to embrace our young girls more. I want her, when an institution or someone like me writes to her, to say I have this programme I'm doing and I think it would be nice for her to attend or be a part of it, I want her not to think about it twice. I want her to be like, wow! girls, who eventually wants to be in my position? Say yes! That's what I want. I want our minister of petroleum, again, the first time a woman has been the minister of petroleum in this country. Do you know what that means for our schoolgirls, who are growing up in homes dominated by their fathers, brothers and uncles, to be able to hear her say you can get here too. I'm not special. You can be me. That is all I want. I don't want to be the only one singing the song.

How was the experience of organising and being the chief host of the United Nations World Tourism (UNWTO) conference? What inspired you to take on the project?

I wish I could take credit for it but I cannot. I was approached to organise the event and I remember thinking, why



me? A conference, how boring? But I got home and snapped out of it and literally thought I can use this as an avenue to promote my country and basically show off every single aspect of Nigeria that I love. I remember the next morning, frantically calling the honourable minister and saying yes, I will meet with you and yes I will do it. Yes! Yes! Yes! The poor man when we finally met in Abuja must have been thinking that was a rapid U-turn because when he initially offered it to me, the first thing I said was no, my year is busy. I just didn't think it would be interesting. Having sat down and thought it through, I'm so glad I accepted because even though the mundane sessions are conference issues, during the evening sessions I was able to inject a bit of Nigeria into it – showing off our culture, cuisine, fashion, art, theatre, musicians and that is what I really wanted to do.

This year's theme was 'Responsible Tourism: Opportunities for Women and Youth'. How do you empower women and youth through tourism and what benefits do you believe they stand to gain if the right infrastructure is put in place?

In Nigeria, women make up just about 50% of the population, while our youths make up almost 75%. So, if you don't consider those two, you have literally taken the wrong direction. Now, if 50% of your workforce is female, you had better focus on them. I'm constantly being accused of being sexually biased but women do make better workers. I have all an all-female team. If I want my stuff done, I want it done right and I get a woman on it. They know how to juggle, whether they have women issues, fighting their husbands at home or they are nine months pregnant and are about to give birth. It doesn't come into it or matter. They get the job done and I'm so glad that we now have a platform for them to jump on this tourism wagon, either through the arts and craft, fashion or as tour guides or in the hospitality sector and through food tourism. I'm glad that we are able to open up this industry to our women because a lot of things in Nigeria are still dominated by men and I wonder why we moan about how it (Nigeria) is. Maybe once they hand the reign over to us, maybe we will do a better job... ■