

## SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

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### INTRODUCTION

*“Political freedoms are not a luxury in a democratic state; they are a necessity. A democratic society cannot be built or preserved if freedom of assembly and freedom of association are not guaranteed, encouraged and respected. These political freedoms are an indispensable check on any democratic power. Freedom of assembly and freedom of association are key building blocks of democratic security.”*

Civic space is the oxygen of democracy. When it shrinks, society struggles to breathe. It is the actual voice of the unheard, power of the marginalised and the very last hope of the hopeless. Civic space refers to the arena where individuals and groups exercise their right to express their views, assemble, and associate freely without interference.

In a stable and open democratic system, civic space is expansive, gives room for diverse opinions, accommodates the voices of the oppressed and encourage the thought to stand out creatively. Unfortunately, this space has been under threat in many countries especially Nigeria, manifested through restrictive legislation, censorship, and harassment.

The case appears otherwise in a state that claims to practise Democracy, where women are subjected to cruel traditional beliefs and mediocre, where the minorities are further oppressed, where the girl child struggles in the limelight without being a toy of emotional or physical abuse.

### HOW SHRINKING PUBLIC SPACE AFFECTS WOMEN, GIRLS AND MINORITY GROUPS

Homes are set to be the bedrock of every society. It is not just a house, an apartment or residential place, it is the place of trust, where confidence is built, where voice is found and where solace keeps pulling. However, the case was otherwise for Chiwe, a fifteen-year-old girl. She was forced to get married to Izuchukwu Igwilo, a 56 years old Anambra man who suffered from mental illness and alcohol addiction. She was not coerced into marriage by a stranger but her very own family, where is meant to be her place of solace. Chiwe is never the only girl subjected to such a harmful norm. A report from Save the Children International shows that in the northern region of Nigeria, **78% of girls are married before age 18**, and in many areas, as many as **48% of girls are married by age 15**. According to UNICEF 2024, **“four out of every ten girls in Nigeria are married before the age of eighteen**. This shows how a female child is subject to humane traditional beliefs and displayed as an object of ridicule in some societies.

The scale of child marriage in Nigeria is massive. This is not a few isolated incidents, early marriage is entrenched in many communities, especially in poorer, rural, or northern areas. As such, many girls never get the chance to complete their education, develop life skills, or make autonomous life choices. This roots back to the mediocre thinking on how girl child has no impact in the environment better than in her husband kitchen.

Or shall we explore the case Ochanya was reportedly subjected to prolonged sexual abuse (rape) by an adult relative over several years? The abuse caused severe health complications (vesicovaginal fistula, VVF). She died on 17 October, 2018 after failed treatment. She was 13 and was raped continuously by her uncle till death. She could not voice against her oppression and her only crime was being a girl child.

A girl child is subjected to much ridicule stemming from barbaric traditional beliefs, she couldn't find herself a voice, nor is she given a platform to be heard. Her fear of further abuse, stigmatisation, and fear of being tagged a witch with the unspoken lie shrunk her voice. **She did not only lose her voice, she is also her confidence, her identity and her life.**

Women are not free from the effects of this too. The society, they say, thrives upon the impacts of women. So when a community is prospering, then it is as a result of the how progressive the women in it her, and when it is in ruin, the women should be checked.

After a girl child struggles among all odds and tribulations, rising against all tides towards academic success, and finally scale through, she prepares against other hurdles of societal mediocre. On how she is meant to sweep in the corridor of success and not thrive, on how she is not to dream too big to get married or how being successful can be egoistic.

The digital space, once a safe platform for feminist activism, is now threatened by surveillance, cyberbullying, and targeted threats against women journalists, lawyers, and advocates. Female human-rights defenders face gendered insults, doxxing, and intimidation, discouraging their participation in public discourse. For many women, digital insecurity translates to political invisibility.

Communities in Southern Kaduna, Plateau, Taraba, and the Niger Delta face violence that restricts their ability to assemble, protest, or demand justice. Attacks on minority villages often go uninvestigated, and community leaders who speak up face threats. Restrictions on protests in these regions undermine minority voices in national conversations. The Atyap minority, as a case study, communities in Southern Kaduna were repeatedly attacked in 2020. Dozens of villages were burned, hundreds were killed, yet no meaningful state investigation occurred. When the community attempted peaceful protests to demand safety and justice, the Kaduna State Government banned protests, arrested organisers, and threatened leaders. This demonstrates how violence and state restriction of civic freedoms can silence minority groups.

Another affected minority group is People With Disabilities. In one documented instance, a blind Nigerian musician and rights activist, saying he wore a protest T-shirt, was arrested along with others by a security agency despite his disability. His detention was challenged in court; the case drew attention within civil-society circles as illustrative of how even PWDs exercising civic

rights are not safe.

Many public buildings, polling units, or civic-space venues remain physically inaccessible to PWDs; public information, mobilisation efforts or aid delivery rarely cater to their needs, shrinking their effective participation.

Women, girls, and minority groups are connected because they all face unequal power, discrimination, and barriers that limit their voice, safety, and participation in society. They share a common struggle; **the fight to be seen, heard, and respected.**

## THE POWER OF FREE EXPRESSION

The concept of freedom of speech is beyond the write to speak, it is the heartbeat of human dignity. It is the power that allows a woman to define her truth, a girl to dream beyond silence, and a minority group to claim and create the space history tried to erase. When people can express their opinions and voice their thoughts, they do not just use words, **they use wings.**

**Malala Yousafzai** once said that, *“We realize the importance of our voices only when we are silenced.”* In a society where every has done wrong due to shrinking civic space, the power of free will not only bring colours to dark shades, it prevents every Chinwe from taking the same bitter lemon, it gives hope to every child to set the bar and go so high and beyond, every woman a chance to have a say in the system and thrive beyond societal mediocre, and the plights of the oppressed heard, the voice of the marginalised.

Free expression is where courage begins. It transforms a whisper into a movement and a single story into a force that shakes walls built on fear. It turns pain into poetry, experiences into lessons, and struggles into calls for justice. Every time a woman speaks out against violence, every time a girl questions an unfair rule, every time a minority community tells its story, the world becomes a little freer.

It allows people to challenge broken systems without lifting a stone. It allows oppressed groups to rewrite narratives that once trapped them. It allows creativity, activism, leadership, and truth to breathe openly. A society where people can speak without fear becomes a society where solutions grow, ideas thrive, and justice walks confidently.

Borrowing the mantra of Jaw war, a University of Ibadan public speaking contest, it **stands** the weak **up**, it **speaks up** for the oppressed and **shuts up** the oppressors for a society grows weaker, not stronger, when people are afraid to speak.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF STANDING UP POSITIVELY AND CREATIVELY

Standing up is not always about raising your fist; sometimes it is about **raising your voice, your ideas, and your courage.** In a world where silence can strengthen injustice, standing up positively and creatively becomes an act of hope, a way of reminding society that change does not always have to come with chaos.

A society grows weaker, not stronger, when people are afraid to speak. To stand up positively means to challenge wrongs without becoming destructive, to confront problems with solutions rather than fear. It is choosing dialogue over violence, strategy over anger, and innovation over destruction. Positive action builds bridges where conflict tries to build walls. To see something and not keep quiet, to speak against injustice with firmness, to debate barbaric beliefs constructively, and to continue to be the light at the tunnel for the voiceless.

Standing up creatively means using imagination, ideas, thoughts creatively as a weapon of change. Art, writing, music, technology, storytelling, protest chants, fashion, drama, poetry, and community projects all become tools that transform pain into power. A society that embraces creative resistance finds ways to speak even when it is told to be quiet. It finds a voice even when it is suppressed.

Creativity allows people to protest without shouting, to inspire without attacking, and to change minds without confrontation. It turns ordinary people into symbols of resilience. **A peaceful march painted with colours, a poem shared online, a short film exposing injustice, a painting on old walls, a photograph of the oppressed, all these coming together to form one voice in a shrinking public space.**

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