

## **The Cost of Silence and Its Impact on Women and Girls**

The cost of silence and its impact on women and girls in Nigeria has been significantly noted in the shrinking civic spaces. According to the World Economic Forum's 2024 Global Gender Gap Report, Nigeria improved its ranking from 130th to 125th out of 16 countries, a notable advancement, but still a disappointing position for a country often referred to as the "giant of Africa". As a male child, the gender disparity was evident in the way I was culturally raised in comparison to my female peers, despite the fact that I saw girls as equally book-smart as boys and, in many cases, smarter. This raises questions about what happens to girls and why social conditioning has largely taken over in grooming them into women.

From observation, girls also try to take up as much space as boys, but as they grow from teenagers into adulthood, their aspirations become repressed. The woman whose dreams had always been to become a doctor, engineer, lawyer, or managing director often gives up on that ambition. In various sectors of the Nigerian economy, women are underrepresented. The gender wage gap keeps increasing, and these women who studied just as much as men with equal dreams and aspirations are now poorly represented in labour participation, while relegated to the home front. The aftereffect of not taking up space has become silence.

Despite women making up the majority of those who cook at home, statistics show that men still dominate the position of "chef." According to a 2022 study, only about 6% of Michelin-starred and top-ranked restaurants are led by women, raising questions about why female aspirations rarely extend beyond girlhood. In Nigeria, the environment plays a significant role in the transition of women from childhood to adulthood. These disparities later in life impact how women are represented in political spaces, which in turn influences policies made for women and how a few women in those spaces are treated (e.g., Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan).

In 2023, Nigerian women held only 4.4% of positions in the National Parliament. When there are no women in the top political and leadership positions, young girls have little or no aspirations to go beyond academic certifications. Globally, data shows persistent wage gaps, with women earning significantly less than men in similar roles due to gender disparities. The cost of silence means there is no progression for women. Women are relegated to being dormant housewives without autonomy, often compelled to rely on hypergamy in their journey of economic survival.

While women strive to be on par with men, in many cultures and states in Nigeria, there remains a significant literacy gap, even as women continue to prioritise education. In Northern Nigeria, girls are often forced into marriage as early as the age of thirteen. When a young girl is stripped of her autonomy at that age, she loses the sense of urgency that comes with learning and growing alongside her peers. Instead, she becomes subordinate to a man who claims ownership over her. She is restricted to primarily interacting with other married women as a group united by their shared expectation of pleasing their husbands.

A 2021 report stated that 48% of girls in Northern Nigeria were married by age 15 and 78% were married by age 18. The cost of silence for women and girls translates into shrinking civic spaces. If women do not occupy these spaces as individuals with lived experiences, advancing the rights of women and girls becomes a significant challenge. The work of Western feminists has been instrumental in advancing the rights of women in the Western world. A growing girl has a role model in radical feminist thought-leaders who are taking up space unapologetically. When a girl sees an adult woman who is unapologetic in fighting for her rights with similar lived experiences and survival journeys, she is more likely to report sexual and domestic violence.

While the cost of silence contributes to shrinking civic spaces for women and girls in Nigeria, education and fulfilling aspirations can empower women to become part of the decision-making process. In such spaces, they can play key roles in implementing laws and policies that help women and girls thrive, enabling them to exist freely in a world where their priorities are at the forefront.