When Rooms Go Quiet (Oghenefejiro Adjerhore)

Public life has its own weather. On bright days, the air stretches wide and people move through it with an ease that feels almost like trust. Markets hum. Radio hosts hold conversations that skip across cities. Group chats swell with opinions and laughter. Under mango trees, plastic chairs gather around someone telling a story that makes every listener feel a little more visible.

Then the atmosphere tightens. The sky feels closer. Platforms that once held space for courage begin to fold inward, as though bracing against an unseen storm. A newsroom drops its political desk. A community hub loses its funding. An activist lowers their voice in public. Silence does not arrive loudly. It slips in, then settles like dust that refuses to rise again. Soon, the map people use to understand the world grows faint at the edges.

This is how shrinking civic space announces itself.

For Jumoke, it started with a locked room. She volunteered at a small center in Ibadan where young queer women learned digital storytelling, poetry, and self-defense. The space was held together by three plastic tables, a flickering fan, and a hand-painted sign that greeted everyone with “You Belong Here.” It was modest, but it offered her the first breath of freedom that felt like her own. In that room, she wrote her truth without apology.

One morning, the coordinator pulled her aside and whispered, “We cannot renew the lease. Someone reported us.” The landlord had been questioned about “those kinds of people.” Within a week, the doors closed. Jumoke took the posters down herself. “Visibility is Power.” “Tell Your Story Before They Tell It for You.” She folded each one slowly, the way someone might fold something living.

The silence did not claim only a building. It claimed a rhythm. The routine of arriving somewhere you are welcomed. The ease of being seen. The comfort of laughing without checking who is nearby. She found herself contracting in small ways. Editing old posts. Measuring her voice at work. Carrying her thoughts with the carefulness of someone holding glass.

Across Nigeria, the pattern moves in similar lines. Laws that limit assembly. The watchful gaze that follows activists. Pressure placed on journalists. Administrative hurdles that drain nonprofits of strength. The ordinary act of gathering becomes something weighed against risk. Even simple expression begins to feel like stepping onto a ledge.

Women and girls feel these shifts first. Centers that help survivors of violence struggle to keep their doors open. Workshops where women once trained as community advocates now fade from calendars. Rooms that once pulsed with energy become stretches of quiet where isolation settles in and harm hides in the dark. Public life loses its presence not because they choose absence, but because the places that held them have been pushed out of reach.

For LGBTQI communities, the stakes rise sharply. Many already move through a world shaped by stigma and surveillance. Community centers, peer groups, safe gatherings, these are more than meeting points. They are lifelines. When civic space contracts, those lines thin. Storytellers with the gift of making queer life legible lose their platforms. Healers who hold community grief carry heavier burdens. The result is a quiet form of erasure. The world does not become less queer. It becomes less safe for queerness to be seen.

Jumoke kept trying to write. She built a blog under a pen name and filled it with short essays about belonging and the small intimacies that held her together. Then the flood arrived. A storm of hateful

comments, a threat that read, “We know who you are.” That night she switched off her phone and sat in the dark, unsure whether silence offered safety or something closer to surrender.

Yet something in her refused to bend. Two friends invited her to meet in the backroom of a tailor’s shop, where their laughter blended with the hum of sewing machines. They turned scraps of Ankara into protest art. Words like “Freedom” and “Home” stitched into discarded cloth. They started reading circles, passing poems by queer African writers from hand to hand. “We are only a book club,” they would say when questioned. In truth, they were rebuilding a room, one story and one shared evening at a time.

When fear swept in again, they shifted their gatherings into something even braver. Community care wearing the disguise of art. They launched Threads of Light, an anonymous exhibit that appeared overnight in laundromats, hair salons, and roadside kiosks. Patchwork squares embroidered with fragments of poetry. “I am here. I have always been here.” People did not always know who made them. They only felt a tug, a reminder that courage was still moving quietly in their city.

Through Threads of Light, Jumoke discovered that resistance can bloom through beauty. Art can carry what politics tries to erase. Each stitched line felt like a crack in the silence, letting in air, letting in hope.

At the heart of this crisis lies something often unnamed. The power of expression. The freedom to speak, question, and name injustice. Expression lives beyond language. It is recognition, the right to take up space as a person whose experiences hold meaning.

When expression shrinks, identity becomes contested ground.

Even so, humans respond to silence with invention. When the public square narrows, people carve out new ones. Conversations move into living rooms. Teach-ins happen on encrypted channels. Murals bloom on walls in the middle of the night. Poetry speaks in coded lines. People gather around candlelight because the light continues to matter.

Creative and peaceful resistance is not abstract here. It is part of Nigeria’s muscle memory. Fela Kuti turned music into a political archive in the 1970s and 80s, teaching crowds through rhythm and defiance. Ken Saro-Wiwa used writing and organising to defend Ogoni land, insisting that environmental destruction was a direct assault on human life. The women of the Bring Back Our Girls movement stood each day in Abuja’s Unity Fountain, their presence an unbroken demand for accountability. During #EndSARS, young people painted walls, wrote chants, live-streamed truth, and transformed pain into collective power.

In the quiet corners of Ibadan, Threads of Light joined this lineage. Proof that art can breathe through the smallest cracks.

Free expression keeps the soul of a community intact.

To defend civic space, we need more than legal reforms. We need to support the people who carry stories. Strengthen neighbourhood radio. Protect community journalists. Fund shelters. Equip organisers with digital safety. Give artists, writers, and cultural workers room to rest so their voices do not break under the weight of their own calling.

We need to keep building rooms. They might begin as fragile things. A WhatsApp group. A reading circle. A health outreach behind a clinic. A poetry night with another name. These small spaces matter. They hold courage until courage can stand again in the open air.

There is an ethical test at this moment. A society reveals its health by how it treats the people who live at its margins. Women, girls, and LGBTQI communities have learned to navigate storms. Yet survival cannot be the only story. They deserve room to dream, create, lead, and speak without fear.

The work now is to widen the space again. Through steady, human acts of presence. Speaking in small rooms. Listening through heavy silences. Standing beside those who are targeted, so no one faces the state and shrinking civic spaces alone. Creating art that keeps memory alive.

When rooms go quiet, we build new ones.

And sometimes, like Jumoke, we stitch light into them.