

IvoryNG

A Lifestyle...Expanding Possibilities

JANUARY - FEBRUARY, 2019



Aisha Waziri Umar
...The social reformer

From the Desk of Editorial/Lifestyle Director



***H**ardly does one come across someone who is so passionate about Nigeria so much so as to take up the role of a reformer, in a bid to bring about the necessary change and order that Nigeria badly needs at this point in time and at a great personal cost too.*

And what is more, being a female social reformer in a society that is still largely patriarchy and plagued by gender inequality because of influences of religious beliefs and culture can be, to say the least, not quite encouraging. But Hajia Waziri Umar has over the years, successfully broken out of that mould and stereotype to command the respect of many with her work in nation building via the Revive Nigeria Group, a pressure group that advocates for social justice, peace, unity and good governance.

Coupled with being a key part of the ongoing reconstruction and rehabilitation in her home state, Borno, it only became natural for her to want to go beyond her work as a member of the civil society

and be able to influence decisions in the House of Representative to get things done without encumbrances.

The saying that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, aptly applies to Hajia Umar's decision to seek representation for the people of Jere constituency in the National Assembly as her father, Alhaji Ibrahim Waziri was himself a maverick politician who founded the Great Nigeria Peoples Party (GNPP). With a first and master's degrees in law, a number of training programmes including one at INSEAD, one of the top business schools in France and another in Oxford University on Global Business, the author and philanthropist is obviously more than qualified for the arduous task of politics and social reformation.

For this reason and several more, the law trained former banker got the green light to feature on our January/February cover. Please sit back and enjoy this packed interview.

Nkarenji Ukonu

Aisha Waziri Umar: The social reformer

She is a legal practitioner, activist, author and social entrepreneur who has amassed about 29 years of experience across multiple sectors including the public and private, the academia and civil society. A strong advocate of nation building through the Revive Nigeria Group, Aisha Umar who is was also the former Senior Special Assistant to former President Goodluck Jonathan, on Social and Political Development, talks to the Editorial/Lifestyle Director, Nkarennyi Ukonu on some of the projects she is involved in including her interest in wanting to represent the people of Jere, Borno State, in the House of Representatives.



You are very well known for your work in the education and legal sector. But you did have a stint in the banking industry. How and why did you make the switch?

I started off my career in a law chamber, practiced for a few years and then lectured at the Nigerian law school where I was head hunted to FSB International formerly Federal Savings Bank. I was there from 1995 to 2000 as the special assistant to the CEO and the Head of Corporate Affairs. Banking gave me a bird eye view of the entire banking operations. But I had to leave because I was a lawyer and I somehow felt that there was an extent to which I could attain in the industry as I didn't have a financial background. I felt disadvantaged to an extent. I then went back to law practice, set up my own law firm with one of my partners who used to be in the law school. The chamber has metamorphosed through the years and is currently called Prodiverse Legal. My husband had just moved to Abuja so it was a perfect time for me to move back with him and start afresh. Having understood how the banking industry functioned, it was only natural that most of them became my clients. In addition to the law practice, my partner and I set up Temple Legal Consult, a specialized training for law students using our experience as former law school lecturers. The law school curriculum is quite deep and some students found it very useful to have the coaching. Our success rate was extremely high. A lot of people who had failed the first and second time passed after we put them through.

You are also an author and co-authored a legal book, 'Quick Reference Materials on Nigerian Law & Practice'. What is the book about?

It is used by legal practitioners

and law students and it was based on the Nigerian Law School experience that we both had. The book was an instant success when it got published. It is a very practical

book as it gives one everything, from law students to lawyers and judges, about the law practice including the practical side of law that is not theoretical. Unfortunately, we had problems with the pirating of the



book. It got updated from time to time as the laws changed. The book is still very relevant though even though it hasn't been updated for a while. The training my partner and I were giving to the law students transcended into organizing trainings for big institutions after noticing the dearth of well qualified and skilled man power. We targeted the lower middle class and you will be surprised how the most basic things are actually the most difficult things for some. We were training them on report writing skills, how to conduct meetings, take minutes of meetings and presentation skills. That aspect of training was quite successful.

How did you get involved with civil society?

Through networking from travels and conferences. I got myself involved in Pan African projects; things that will promote Africa. Also I got involved with the Civil G8, a coalition of civil society organizations from all over the world like Amnesty International, Water AID,

Action AID etc. Being part of it afforded me the opportunity to travel to many African and international countries like Russia, Germany and engaging with the government of these countries to discuss the concerns of civil societies. That really opened my eye to how strong civil society can be, how seriously taken they are and how much government works side by side civil societies. The level of the seriousness of the meetings we held with Angela Merkel and Vladimir Putin when we met with them showed me that civil societies in developed countries really contribute to nation building and development. After experiencing that,

I felt it would be quite important for us here in Nigeria to also build civil societies and get involved in nation building. I really believe that civil societies have an important role to play in nation building and I can say that 50 per cent of the work done in nation building is actually by civil societies. Here in Nigerian we put about 90 per cent of our expectations and burdens on government and contribute only 10 per cent but when we are asked to make some sort of contribution to nation building, we resist it. We are not very supportive of government. It really bothers me about how we neglect our responsibilities.

And your work in the education sector, what prompted it?

The then Minister for Education, Oby Ezekwesili was trying to reform the education sector. She wanted to over haul the entire sector and rebuild it so she got a team of people from different sectors. I was a legal consultant heading a team called 'Access and Equity'. My job then was to develop a strategy for the girl child, boy child, people with special need (blind, deaf, disability) and adult education, from early child hood to adult education. At the end of the day, we came up with a very comprehensive report for government to implement. Unfortunately it couldn't be implemented because former President Obasanjo was leaving office then. I also drafted the 2007 education sector bill which was supposed to provide the legal frame work for the reform. The bill included teacher training, changing the whole exam system, unity schools, early childhood education, children with special needs etc. So now it has to be updated because it was drafted ten years ago. I am also a board member of a charity organization called ACE charity. What we do is to plant libraries in public schools and engage librarians to teach the kids English language and computer skills during their library period. This is in addition to being the Proprietor of the 'Centre for Children with Special Needs School' in Abuja, which focuses on educating children and adolescents with disabilities. This was prompt-



ed because I have a child with special needs. He has cerebral palsy which affects one's mobility and impairs one's speech and so going to a regular school was not possible. My son was already 4/5 years old when the issue of schooling arose. There weren't any schools for children with special needs in Abuja and since I didn't want him to be at home all day, I decided to set up one. I went to the state Universal Basic Education Agency and told them of my plans to build a center that caters for children with special needs in a public school. I was given half a block in Maitama Model Primary school and my husband and I transformed it.

I got special education teachers from Colleges of Education and engaged them. We have been running the school for a couple of years now, my son has actually finished from school there but many kids still go there and it provides the education that kids with special needs may otherwise not have been able to get.

Do you plan to replicate such centers? We had planned to do so in Kano but the challenge is funding which is unfortunate.

How about your work in nation building? To what extent have you gone to keep your passion burning?

I have a new project on nation building called the Revive Nigeria Group and it is a movement, a pressure group to advocate for social justice, peace, unity, good governance etc. It is just a

few months old. A group of us with like minds, came together from all over the country to see how we can help in nation building. I sincerely believe that nation building should not be left to government alone because we all have a role to play. We say we have values but we don't act on them and I think there is more to having values and believing in ideologies, there is more to it than just saying it. This is where I think a call for action is necessary especially when things are getting really ugly with calls for division. I believe we are all one and should strive to keep it that way. I come from Borno State so when you talk about violence and all the terrible things that can go wrong with society, I think I can literarily give you an idea of what that means. So we really need to do



something otherwise we will end up destroying this country. Most countries have problems externally but we actually create our own problems by ourselves. A handful of people in government cannot do this enormous work. We are not political, we are not for or against any party, we are also not for or against any candidate.

So you are just sitting on the fence?

We are not sitting on the fence as you put it. We are with Nigeria, it is what we care about and not about anyone's interest. Nigeria needs to be nurtured and loved. This is what Revolve Nigeria Group is all about. The youths are the ones that are easily influenced and right now, social media is full of all sorts of negative contents. So our aim is to put out as much positive content as possible, to dilute the negative content. We must secure the country because that is the only way we can get things done.

What informed your interest in politics?

I feel the time has come for people like me to go into politics because of the kind of work I do which involves the people. I am very close to the grassroots but limited in terms of my ability to influence decisions. Because I haven't been in politics that has seriously tied my hands as it were. There is so much that I want to do but because I am not in politics that makes it difficult. We have a very pathetic situation in Borno State and the politicians have been very selfish – there is that feeling of distrust. So I hope to change all that and get things done for my people

How are you able to manage all of the different things you are involved in without one aspect suffering?

I delegate and I think I am the best at doing that. Just give instruction properly, motivate people and treat them well, they will do your work well for you.

What is most challenging about running all of them?

It does require hard work but I won't call hard work a challenge. I see myself as a problem solver. When I get challenged with a problem, I simply crack my brain and find a creative way of solving it rather than get myself discouraged. I don't like to feel helpless as I like to be in control of any situation and rise to the challenge.

What would you point to as being your greatest achievement in life so far?

In my personal life, it would be with my son who is 23 years now. I am so happy

that I gave him a normal life and integrated special needs into our day to day life with very minimal problems. It was no burden at all. I see other parents with special needs children and it is like a burden to them but for me I feel blessed that I never once saw it as a burden. It was a blessing and fun. It is my greatest joy that I never felt bad at any point raising him. I just took it in my stride and that is the attitude I think everyone should have because anything can come your way. Just take it in your stride and accept because there are things you can't change anyway.

What would you say must have significantly shaped you into who you are today?

I attended Queens College Lagos and because it was my formative years, it was when my view about life was shaped, my drive and my positive attitude developed. Queens College taught me not see people from the perspective of the language they spoke or where they come from. If someone is nice, the person is just nice. In life when you meet people, don't judge, don't see any bad in them, just accept them the way they are unless they do something contrary.

What motivates you?

I am a multifaceted personality and depending on the kind of mode I am, that is what determines what motivates me at that point in time. I love life; I like to always see the good in everything. For me, the glass is always half full.

Has there ever been a time where your cultural background posed to be a stumbling block as you rose in your career?

I haven't allowed that to be. I am somebody who pushes boundaries. I am not conservative and I took that from my father who was very liberal. I try to conform but within the boundaries of what is comfortable. However I respect my culture and I believe in my religion which I think is a very important tool to help you go through life.

What other things do you like to do besides advocacy and being a legal consultant?

I love travelling. I am also very social, I love meeting people, I like to do yoga, swim and read

