



## *Interview of the Month*

# **ANITA KOUASSIGAN**

*Business Catalyst, Social Impact Advocate*

INTERVIEWED BY VIBEKE THOMSEN, SHECANHECAN

1) Can you tell our readers more about the mission and objectives of the media platform you founded, Investing in Women?

I set up *Investing In Women* in 2018, after having overcome some personal challenges in isolation and during a time when I felt that no one was really listening as I shared a traumatic experience of emotional abuse. It was also during this time that I came to realise that many universal causes are inextricably linked to women. This is hardly surprising, given that women make up half of the world's population. As women fight their own unique battles so that their voices are heard and their rights protected, they create awareness about many other important causes that affect other oppressed groups of people. I include people that have been "silenced" into the equation of oppression. Therefore, a strong person can also be oppressed.

Let me provide an example of how a woman's struggle can also benefit a man. Because some brave women have come forward to speak up about sexual or physical or emotional or financial abuse, male victims are increasingly coming forward to express the same grievances. The matters are not always confined to equal access to education, equal pay, board positions, but any kind of human right that has been violated. In 2018, I said I firmly believed that when a woman decides to speak up, the world has no choice but to wake up. Three years later, it's not only about women speaking up about women's issues but about universal social issues. I chose to include the language of "invest" in my brand identity because for me, what this word really means is to give women the time of day, because they matter. The world needs women, and not just for women. Believe her, listen to her, educate her, hire her, promote her, protect her. All these actions described - and they are not necessarily financial - are acts of investing in women.



**2) You are also the Director of the Women's Rugby League in Nigeria. Can you tell us more about the attitudes and perceptions towards female sports and how the coverage compares to male sports in Nigeria?**

To provide an accurate and recent personal observation, I'll focus specifically on what I know about women in the Nigeria Rugby League. It's a brand new sport for Nigeria which was established in 2019. Right from the outset, when the directors were being selected, I was invited to represent the women's interests. The women's team was not an afterthought and was part of the plans for the sport from day one. In recent press releases, it was confirmed that part of the 2021 plan is to see an increased participation not only in the men's competition, but in the women's and wheelchair competitions. The Rugby League World Cup (RLWC2021) is taking place in Autumn 2021 and it will be a breakthrough moment in the tournament's history with the men's, women's and wheelchair competitions being staged concurrently for the first time ever. So, I would not say that Nigeria promotes women's sports any less than any other nation.

As a young girl, I was a keen track and field athlete and when following Nigeria's participation in The Olympics for instance, I never noticed women being underrepresented. I also competed against many Nigerians in the UK so that suggests that they were also encouraged to do sports. I have some Nigerian family friends (The Ojoras) and I see them investing in both their son (Tade) and daughter (Temi) to pursue their careers on the track and field respectively. I would say that any underrepresentation of women in Nigeria may have occurred more due to lack of funding from the government and private sector investment in sports than due to gender. Nigerians are generally known to be very sporty and athletic as a nation, so I believe its women have been encouraged rather than discouraged. Nigeria is also a 50/50 Christian and Islamic country, but I haven't heard about any restraints due to religion either - except in the Sharia States as part of other restrictions such as the education of the girl child.

**3) In the UK, the initiative "Everyone's Invited", a movement created to eradicate rape culture was recently launched and the responses and testimonies have been overwhelming. What do you think the high level of participation indicates about British society and its approach to handling rape and other forms of sexual abuse? Concretely, what do you think can be done to better handle rape accusations and assist survivors?**

The British culture - like every other - has its pluses and negatives. In a nutshell, when it comes to uncomfortable topics such as rape, I would describe it in two ways: "just get on with it" and "stiff upper lip". We are programmed to show "fortitude and stoicism in the face of adversity" and as a nation, we generally don't like to share (or over share) too much. Naturally, social media has changed that slightly, but one could argue that social media is not really a true depiction of reality, therefore are people really sharing their stories of age-old taboos? Not really, I would say.

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Therefore, it's not surprising that Everyone's Invited has been well-received. It's really about time that the British society had more outlets for sharing taboo topics in a safe way, moving away from the "stay strong", and "suffer in silence" culture. Just submitting an anonymous testimony must be pretty liberating for those sharing their harrowing experiences. To illustrate my point further, look at the strides that have been made in promoting the opening up about mental health and how to deal with it in the UK recently. Even some of the young Royals are mental health advocates and have put their names on mental health campaigns. I think the two things are related because an ordeal of abuse is equally as bad for one's mental, as well as physical health.

I would suggest that another problem lies within the police, followed by the judicial system. Unfortunately, the balance is still tilted disproportionately in favour of an evidence-based approach to the detriment of a victim first approach. And "in the interests of justice" those systems do adhere very strictly to the rules of evidence. Therefore, unless someone is caught on camera actually forcing themselves upon another, how can the full conditions needed for a conviction be met? In most cases, it ends up being "her word (or his, in some cases) against the perpetrator's. Even when DNA samples are taken and proven, how can the victim prove that "NO" really meant "NO"?

In my opinion, the best way to tackle rape culture is to get into the minds of the perpetrators before they even try it, which is why the testimonials on a platform such as Everyone's Invited could really help matters. Perhaps as part of the education or therapy of previous offenders they should be invited to read these testimonials. Perhaps some real empathy towards the victims' ordeals will be achieved from these candid and graphic accounts. Except for true sociopaths, narcissists or psychopaths, perhaps even a perpetrator who gets to read these testimonials would feel guilty and think twice about re-offending. After all, we are all human. That man who raped someone may have a daughter. It's all about empathy for me. Let me share my formula for empathy. There are three stages. First, there must be KNOWLEDGE (the presentation of the facts). Next there must be UNDERSTANDING (listening and really grasping what the issue is) and last of all EMPATHY (putting yourself into the shoes of the person suffering the grievance or complaint). I applied this test to the matter of advocating for women. If you can't listen to a woman who has been raped or suffered a miscarriage, then understand her story in the first place, and then put yourself in her shoes, there is no hope of achieving empathy.

**4) You're a strong advocate of encouraging women to break the silence, not only in terms of abuse but more generally, in politics, courtrooms and society in general. How can we challenge the fact that women and girls are often not believed and hence silenced when speaking up? What can be done concretely to better support survivors?**

I am afraid the culture of women not being trusted fully still exists. Rape matters aside, there are still so many scenarios where a woman telling the truth is questioned. I have personally witnessed and experienced it in Family Law (an abused woman leaving a marriage) Employment Law (a female employee speaking up about workplace bullying or unfair dismissal due to pregnancy), even where real evidence is presented.



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I also learned a lot from one particular case of advocacy in my local Borough in London where I had to lobby on behalf of a terrified woman who ended up homeless then displaced because she had to flee her home due to domestic violence and she couldn't get another council flat in the same area. Even with that fact that she had an autistic daughter, which compounded the issue of displacement, she needed a lot of help before she was finally heard.

Back to the matter of rape, sadly there have also been cases of "crying rape" which has spoilt the sexual abuse judicial process for genuine victims and it seems that there is still a conservative approach to confirming that a rape actually took place. What I am trying to say is that there is still a gap in trusting women or taking them seriously. It is going to take a long time to achieve this, therefore a good step in the right direction is to encourage women to keep speaking up – no matter what. I believe if survivors are counselled in this way, this will offer some productive support. Survivors could then also be encouraged to take on roles of advocacy in a safe way, and perhaps with some compensation attached as an incentive. As a woman, I often feel empowered, or in turn I tend to empower women when we share our stories. My message to women is that you mustn't believe the negative things people say about you, but believe in yourself and in your purpose. Consider the verbal attacks Donald Trump carried out against Kamala Harris then the Democratic vice-presidential nominee, yet she is now the Vice-President of the US.

#### 5) Can you tell us what is in the pipeline for you in 2022?

As mentioned above, I have matured from simply *Investing In Women* and the website will no longer exist, although the actual brand and its social media platforms will continue as a group of a wider network. I am setting up a social networking platform called *The Social Impact Network*. It's an actual social media network. The platform needs just a few finishing touches before we launch but it's really drawing from what I have learned about the world's social causes from my advocacy on the events and articles I have produced in relation to that platform. My idea was also born from my belief in the amazing and genuine people I have come across (both personally and in the media) who seriously want to make a change. I can't say much more at present, but if you ever post about a social cause, or invite your friends on one of the popular social media networks to support a fundraiser you are running and you feel you are not generating enough interest (eg likes or actual donations) then you may want to sign up and see how we plan to fill that gap of engagement in posts about social causes.

#### *About Anita Kouassigan*

*Anita Kouassigan is a business catalyst and consultant between London and Lagos with extensive expertise in media, inclusion programming, human capital investment, and corporate social responsibility. She is the creator of Investing In Women, a global social impact brand centred around connecting, empowering and amplifying women via the creation of media content, her engagements as a speaker, and the hosting of live media events.*



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