

Portrait de Yewande Odia

Yewande is the type of lady Africa would like to have in greater numbers to support her on its path towards achieving gender balance and respect for women's rights. One of her fellow countrymen, the writer, Nobel Prize, Wole Soyinka, in response to the proponents of "Negritude", would say ***"a tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces on his prey and devours it!"*** With this image, I simply mean that Yewande doesn't need to proclaim her feminism; she is the embodiment of feminism, which she preaches by example, by asserting her presence and carving out a place for herself and doing so on her own. She is the typical modern African woman, well grounded in her culture – a culture which she understands and proudly carries on her everyday life. Those who know Yewande well describe her as an outspoken woman with accurate statements, and who chooses and uses her words with impeccable accuracy. Her tone of voice is calm and her speech clear. But who is she and what does she do?



"I am from Nigeria, my father worked for the United Nations, thus one could say my choice of the UN came naturally, by watching the selflessness and humanity he exuded. I was educated in Nigeria, as well as Switzerland, Tanzania, the UK, and the US. I have advanced degrees in law and public administration. I am a member of the Nigerian bar, and also a member of the New York state bar. After my studies I practiced law in Nigeria for a little while, before joining the United Nations. I started off in the UN as a Legal Officer, handling rule of law related work; then I was a human rights officer for a while. Thereafter I served as Legal Officer with the Senior Legal Adviser's office in a number of Peacekeeping Missions. I returned to New York in the late 1990s to work with UNDP as Legal Adviser working on mostly administrative law issues".

And yet she says she initially had a Plan A, and that is to ***"be an actress and singer"***. Then, clear headed and realistic, she decided she would have to choose a profession that could feed her. So she opted for a Plan B, and to our greatest pleasure, because otherwise she wouldn't have been with MONUC/MONUSCO. She would have gone on to become a ***"Beyoncé"***, and we would have been obliged to admire her from afar! ***"I chose law because I couldn't stand injustice. I also think I was drawn to the fact that the legal profession was somewhat theatrical. In my country the legal system is modeled on the British system so a lawyer wears a wig, a black gown, and white neck collar, which could be likened to an actor putting on a costume. There is a court room, which could be likened to a stage, and you argue and make your case to the judge, similar to an actor's lines to the audience."*** Who would have believe this? Human beings will always amaze me.

Since last year Yewande has been heading the Integrated Office in the DSRSG/RC/HC Pillar, where, she tells me, ***"I ensure integration between the Mission and UN agencies, funds and programs. The Integrated Office also coordinates and oversees the field offices in the West of DRC where MONUSCO has a minimal presence. I find coordination of the Pillar's different units - such as the Stability Support Unit, the Electoral; the Peace,***

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Security and Cooperation Framework; and Security Sector Reform -- particularly interesting. The teams in this Pillar are led by experts in the respective fields, so I am learning a lot from them too.” In your opinion, Yewande, is the “ONE UN” on good track? “Yes, we are gradually moving in that direction; it is not easy, but with the perseverance and commitment of everyone, this can be fully achieved in the near future.”

Yewande came to the DRC in October 2008 to lead the Conduct and Discipline Team (CDT). *“On my arrival in DRC, the Mission, which was then called MONUC, was still faced with issues relating to sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and the attendant reputational risk. But I am happy to say that my team and I worked hard to change the image of MONUSCO. Over the years we developed and implemented groundbreaking measures to combat SEA and other misconduct, which are now best practice in other missions. Our SEA statistics showed a steady decline during my tenure and for three consecutive years the Secretary-General’s Reports on SEA described MONUSCO as the best performing Mission. I am proud to say that the MONUSCO CDT remains the best performing among all Missions.”* It should be highlighted that as head of the Conduct and Discipline Unit, Yewande successfully fulfilled her role as chief controller of compliance with the standards of conduct.

Before she came to the DRC, Yewande was in New York where she established the Conduct and Discipline Unit and proceeded to open field offices. *“In those days, the phenomenon of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) in DRC was rampant and caused great concern in the UN Secretariat and among Member States. Prince Zeid, who is now the High Commissioner for Human Rights, was Special Adviser to the Secretary-General Kofi Annan on issues of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), with Jane Holl Lute who is now Special Coordinator for the fight against SEA in New York, and they handed the responsibility over to me and this new office to address SEA. It was a tough job. I had to engage Member States, particularly Troop and Police-Contributing Countries. As a founding partner in the struggle against SEA, I am proud to say that my team and I developed the initial framework in place today. Of course it has been developed further over the years.”* She adds that since joining MONUC/MONUSCO, she has also chaired the Special Post Allowance (SAP) panel, the Performance Management Group and been a member of the Field Central Review Board. In this regard, she encourages colleagues to do things outside of their immediate work area because it enriches them.

Florence Marchal, one of her close collaborators, tells us that what readily comes to mind concerning Yewande, is *“her commitment to respect for women’s rights. In a world generally, and a mission in particular, where women are underrepresented at the leadership level, it is encouraging and reassuring to have a female boss who has what it takes to get things moving in order to break the proverbial glass ceiling that hinders women from accessing managerial and top positions. It is a fight that Yewande is pursuing with conviction and one that inspires respect.”*

Another close staff member, Taïb Diallo, highly appreciates *«Yewande’s style»* in these words: *“that is essentially based on a consultation and synthesis approach. In other words, the decisions she takes are the result of a good deal of consultation which in the end she synthesizes. She likes learning from others, so much so that as new chief of the Integrated Office -- the key coordination office --, she insists that one should never underestimate the quality of information they may share with her. With respect to her work, she is results-oriented while attaching great importance to keeping track of the implementation of the decisions taken by the different coordination frameworks that we run.”*

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A woman of action, Yewande thinks that in the United Nations generally, *“there is much rhetoric and not as much action on the issue of empowering women and gender parity, but it is changing slowly. As Focal Point for Women in MONUSCO I have tried to raise women’s concerns where and when appropriate.”* For example? *“I noticed that only senior men were selected for a particular training on leadership– and it was always two men from the mission who would attend. I requested that one of the candidates to this training be a woman, however I did not get the necessary support. So I wrote to New York and advocated for female participation. And I was pleased to see that when the next selection round came two women were selected to attend that training. With the new mission leadership, I already see a change in mindset and that gives me satisfaction.”*

Will a change of mindset alone be enough? Often, what we see is just an expression of good intentions, but things remain the same. Women should start by believing in women themselves before expecting men to do so, that’s one of the barriers to women’s access to into managerial positions. Do you agree with that? *“No, I don’t. I am optimistic because more and more women are pulling together. Again, a change in mindset and the way women are viewed is necessary, but it is happening. Of course we need processes that concretely address the gap in women’s representation, particularly at senior levels, and which hold managers accountable. I see opportunities opening up for women – and if we get a female Secretary-General at the end of this year, it will be a watershed moment. I think the time is ripe ...”* And as regards the DRC? *“I am impressed by the strength of Congolese women, and I hope and pray they will channel this strength appropriately”.*

Regarding the celebration of 8th March, Women’s day -- is it too much or not enough? Some will say it is caricatural...What do you think about it? *“I think every day should be a day to celebrate women as mothers, sisters, and daughters”.* Quite right, but more importantly, there should be a day dedicated to men also, because, at the end of the day, they are the ones who need to become aware of the benefits of the gender balance, parity, equal opportunity and so on. What about the attitude of your male colleagues generally; do they support women in this effort to break through the “glass ceiling” that, at one point or another, may prevent women from serenely progressing in the professional realm? Response: *“Throughout my career I have often had good male colleagues and even where I don’t think they see things from my perspective, I try to make my case. Most men are reasonable (humh, humh) and will listen if you make a good case”.*

Tell me, Yewande, women in your country are known for being women of action, very enterprising businesswomen, as well as great politicians. Have you ever been tempted to go into politics? She answers with a sigh: *“Ha, maybe; no one can ever say never...”* I personally feel she would make a good president for Nigeria. What about you? Well, maybe my dream will come true one day. Meanwhile, Yewande enjoys the best things in life. She says she loves *“listening to music, all types of music as well as the dramatic arts.”* Yes, I understand that’s your Plan A, when MONUSCO talent contest comes around, you will be asked to perform in a play, so get ready!

She is with us within MONUSCO, armed with her loving-kindness which she carries like a gift she offers you whenever you meet her. Yewande, in her mother tongue, means *“mother has come back.”* So, like children who are told their mother has returned home, we will sing and dance so that you stay with us. You are such a brilliant and pleasant person.

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