

Mrs. Josephine Effah-Chukwuma is a study in tenacity of purpose. Early on in life she knew her calling was to defend women's rights. So when she formed Project Alert in January 1999, she knew she was in her natural habitat. Project Alert, of which she is the Executive Director, is a non-governmental organisation aimed at providing information on various forms of violence against women as well as rendering practical support services to women and young girls who are abused. "I knew for sure what I wanted to do. I said look, I am not going to work in a bank, I am not going to work in the civil service'. I want to work in a human rights organisation. I want to work with abused women," Effah-Chukwuma told **TheNEWS**.

Ten years on, her tenaciousness has paid off. Not only has Project Alert moved a notch higher by making artistes its goodwill ambassadors, it is set to celebrate 10 years of existence as well as eight years of setting up Sophia's Place, the first shelter for abused women in Nigeria.

On Tuesday 17 March, Effah-Chukwuma alongside some of the artistes, Stella Damascus-Nzeribe, Olusola Idowu aka Weird MC, Foluke Daramola-Sobowale and Suzanne Harvey paid a courtesy visit to **The NEWS** in order to sensitise the public on the celebration which comes up in May," We are here to ask for the support of **TheNEWS**. We want a better society in which under no circumstances should any form of violence against women and young girls be tolerated or condoned.

Meaningful development cannot come to a society that violates half of its population," she contended. Asked why she set up Sophia's Place, Effah-Chukwuma responded: "Sophia's Place takes in women who are physically and socially abused in marriages and other forms of relationships. The shelter was set up because the first help to give any abused woman or young girl is to take her out of the abusive environment," Effah-Chukwuma stated, as she appealed to individuals and corporate organisations to support the shelter financially. Effah-Chukwuma said he decided to work with the artistes because they are role models the youths look up to and emulate. "What gladdens my heart really is that these celebrities looked out for us. Somehow they heard about us and agreed to partner with us. They wanted to give back to society what they had gained from it she enthused.

Effah-Chukwuma is not far from the truth. Popular actress Foluke Daramola, Sobowale for instance, told **TheNEWS** her decision to join showbiz was predicated on the fact that she wanted to be a role model. "I wanted people not to see me as the showbiz Foluke Daramola but as friend. A lot of individuals don't have the opportunity to have a one-on-one rapport with us. A lot of them go the extra mile to add something to our pockets. And at one point in time we have not been able to give them something back. So I want to give back what I have been able to gain from the outside world," she said.

She believes that by identifying with Project Alert, most people will be aware of what is happening in the society through her. "I discovered that most non-governmental organisations have good aims and objectives but they have not been able to bring out those ideas because they don't have people like me to back the cause," she remarked.

Sobowale, however said, her interest in Project Alert was triggered by her experience with a woman whose husband almost beat her to death.

However, screen goodess Stella Damasus-Nzeribe did not have such nudge. According to her, she has always wanted to be part of an organisation that would fight against gender-base violence. "I have a lot of friends who up till now are still going through abusive situations. If you know the amount of money they spend on foundation and powder just to cover bruises that they get from their husbands, you will be shocked," she said.

The Delta State-born actress also bemoaned the fact that perpetrators of gender-based violence are mostly influential people in the country who commit crimes with impunity. "The funny thing is that these people are educated, and you will not believe they do this kind of things. And because of the way society treat this issue, most of it are swept under the carpet," Damasus-Nzeribe regretted.

Damasus-Nzeribe also said she was shocked when she read the number of women who had died or suffered various forms of mental depression through gender-based violence in a journal published by project Alert. According to her she decided to be part of project Alert because she wanted to use her personality to fight for the voiceless. "Who am I? It is not about Stella Damasus being an actress and known everywhere. It is about knowing that for God to put me in a position like this, I must be able to use it to help others find a way," she averred. She said she identifies with project Alert because she could not imagine any of her two daughters coming to any harm in the hands of a man.

Hip-hop sensation, Olusola Idowu, aka Weird MC, stated she had always been sensitive about women being beaten up by their husbands. "I grew up in an environment where I witnessed gender-based violence first hand. I know what it means to be suppressed," Weird MC revealed.

She revealed that she was taken aback when she came in contact with Project Alert for the first time on Channels Television in October last year. "I didn't believe because I didn't think that such organisation could exist in Nigeria," she told **TheNEWS**.

However, Weird MC is proud of and is thrilled about working with Project Alert. "I can walk into any place in this country right now and the door will automatically open. So why not use that as well to give back to society? To stand as a voice for those women. It is not just about us driving the big cars, playing in the biggest shows, getting the interviews, we must have social responsibility as well," Weird MC said.

Suzzane Harvey believes that creating an awareness about the various forms of violence against women is imperative. "Most of us are not aware. We do not know what we should allow and what we shouldn't. So I think this is a platform through which we can educate women who are facing violence now," she remarked.

Effah-Chukwuma, however, told **TheNEWS** that in its 10 years of existence, Project Alert has recorded huge successes in advocating for women's rights as well as creating awareness about gender-based violence, which according to her could be physical, social,

psychological and also be in form of harmful traditional practices. One of such achievements she said is the setting up of Sophia's Place, which has provided shelter for many abused women and young girls. "We are consistent.

Our message has been the same these last 10 years. The awareness is there because 10, 15, 20 years ago, how many women could come out to speak about what is happening to them? Yet, despite the successes Project Alert has recorded, Effah-Chukwuma said the organisation has faced daunting challenges that are prevalent in a stifling patriarchal society like Nigeria, where women's voice are not only stifled but are relegated to the background. Other forms of challenges, she explained, include deep religious sentiments, unwillingness of individuals and corporate organisations to support the cause as well as threats she receive from perpetrators of gender-based violence. An example of such threats was the one she received three or four years ago at Panti in Lagos, from a lawyer who was beating his wife and sexually abusing his three-year old daughter. Not only did the man tell Effah-Chukwuma that she would "pay the ultimate price," he alleged that she (Effah-Chukwuma) had kidnapped his wife and three children. "It is not the poor man who does things with impunity. It is you and I, so-called educated people," she regretted.

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