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Behind the Achievements and Accolades: A Nigerian American Female Entrepreneur Fights a Private Battle Outdated social norms make it hard for women seeking to forge their own paths in the business world. A Nigerian-born Millennial shares her struggle to prioritize professional advancement in a global society. 

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The Sophia Consulting Firm is honored to share that its Founder and CEO, Dr. Sophia Ononye-Onyia, published an article in Inc. Magazine that highlights her unique story from Nigeria to the United States and her journey from being as a scientist to an entrepreneur.

Behind the Achievements and Accolades: A Nigerian American Female Entrepreneur Fights a Private Battle

Outdated social norms make it hard for women seeking to forge their own paths in the business world. A Nigerian-born Millennial shares her struggle to prioritize professional advancement in a global society.

Few stories are told about [entrepreneurship](#) from the perspective of a [Millennial](#), African-born immigrant woman scientist. That's why I wanted to share mine. It's particularly on point now--during the [Covid-19 pandemic](#) and the economic and mental health crises accompanying it.

I could cite statistics about how Millennials are second only to teenagers when it comes struggling with depression. I could also showcase data about heightened anxiety that small-business owners face daily as they struggle with headcount, vendor management, and liquidity. If you factor in the confusion stemming from Small Business Administration loans and how difficult it has been for the 60 million or so working Americans who are small-business owners, it is no wonder that we all are generally uncertain on how the dust will settle.

I was born in a small town in Southeastern Nigeria. I always knew that I was different because I was a "career woman" from the start. I never really had the googly eyes that most young women had about romance and marriage, possibly because of my own experiences with my family, immediate and extended. But also because I was raised in a male-dominated society where any form of infidelity--emotional, physical or financial--was absolved for men and heavily punitive for women. I had a visceral reaction to this inequity and vowed for myself that I would find financial independence by pursuing my own career instead of chasing boys or cars.

I literally watched my aunt die from a broken heart prior to her 45th birthday--she had three children from a man who never legally married her and showed up whenever it was convenient for him. Her death is probably the most painful event I have ever experienced. The only thing that comes close is the premature death of my PhD. adviser, the late great Amy Anderson, who at the time of her death was the head of the Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences at the University of Connecticut's School of Pharmacy--an accomplishment that was testament to her character and relentless drive.

Dr. Anderson, a cancer researcher, had died of cancer, and this haunted me. She was one of the few people who believed in me. She gave me a research position in her lab without meeting me in person. She allowed me to conduct cancer research, although her background was in antibiotics. Additionally, despite criticism from others, she supported my ambition to earn a PhD. in three-and-a-half years, instead of the usual five to eight years.

I share all of this because my thoughts are heavy with sorrow--the nostalgic longing for the innocence of my childhood and early-adulthood experience. A need for fulfillment urged me to start my own consulting firm in the crowded New York City market and to experience entrepreneurship as a woman, firsthand, with all its perils and triumphs. This is the African-born scientist part of my story.

I worked for more than a decade as a laboratory scientist, with a focus on cancer research. In some ways, working in the lab was a bubble that shielded me from the harsh realities of life and some of the deeply rooted ugliness of human nature. Like others, including my favorite male athlete, LeBron James, I have found that the narrative changes when you don't do what people want you to do. I have found myself feeling abandoned, alone, and anguished in the past five years since I left the laboratory setting to pursue scientific consulting as an entrepreneur.

I have been betrayed, abandoned, and criticized because I have sacrificed much for my career. In other words, I could have just had kids 10 years ago, versus the reality of my life today, and I'm reminded, often in a subtle manner, that my biological clock is ticking rapidly: "Why did you wait so long to start a family?" This is the female Millennial scientist part of my story.

Imagine starting your own business with all the difficulties that I have faced and the many times I've spent either in isolation or feeling like a social misfit. The truth is that I crave and prioritize autonomy. Part of the reason I pushed myself to obtain an honors undergrad degree in biochemistry, a PhD., two master's degrees, and two graduate certificates was because I believed in the power of the future.

Today, I'm not so sure, but I press on--not because I have all the answers, but because it's already been ingrained in me to push, to work hard and to achieve. Yet even in America,

women are judged harshly for prioritizing career over family. Additionally, minority and female-owned businesses struggle the most with securing funding, because their networks are not as developed and their credibility is often questioned. This is the female, minority small-business owner part of my story.

Entrepreneurs are often praised for their boldness and forward thinking. Yet they struggle with keeping their passions afloat, while paying for rents and mortgages. Minority- and female-owned businesses are more likely to fail from inadequate funding and inability to secure and retain customers.

Even prior to Covid-19, Millennials were one step ahead of the curve when it came to adopting new technology and entrepreneurship. Additionally, Millennial women with children struggle with the double roles of caretaker and worker--a load that has been intensified by the perils of abrupt home schooling, remote work, and heightened issues with domestic partners amid the pandemic.

My whole point in writing this article is to showcase just how difficult it is for women to prioritize their career advancement in a global society where we may be praised outside for our ingenuity and judged harshly behind the scenes for a failure to match antiquated societal norms. Additionally, minorities, women, and immigrants experience more financial and emotional hardships stemming from what sometimes seems like constant rejection. If they return to the workplace after having children, Black women in particular are less likely to attain senior positions even when qualified, according to research from the Center for Talent Innovation.

It's hard to not feel weighed down by these realities, especially as many small businesses permanently close shop. While there is still a glimmer of hope for many of these businesses that are owned by female immigrants like me, it has been subdued by the harsh new reality that feels Darwinian in some way. It showcases what we've always known: Survival of the fittest is still the norm, even in a Covid-19 world.

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