



Meet-A-WISCAR: Interview with Aziza Atta

1. Kindly share with us briefly Ma'am a bit about your professional background and your career journey so far.

After attaining my Masters-in-Law from University College London and completing Law School in the UK, I decided to start my professional career by working for an NGO in Guatemala. Developmental work has always been a passion of mine, particularly working at the grassroots level where one sees impact much quicker. I worked in the Educational Department and was responsible for rolling out a Ministry of Education literacy programme for indigenous Q'eqchi Mayan Indian girls in the Rio Dulce region. I then worked in the Niger Delta with an NGO on a vocational training programmes for various communities. Once the vocational programme was up and running, I returned to London to work for international law firm Freshfield Bruckhaus Deringer and later Norton Rose Fulbright for many years. My work in both firms was in the project finance and finance departments in the emerging markets. I worked in their various branches in Europe and UAE. It was a very intense time and long working hours. I learned an incredible amount and met amazing people. After many years, I returned to Nigeria to work as a consultant on projects for BBC Media Action, working on developmental radio drama scripts to reduce infant mortality and the Home-Grown School Feeding Programme, which focuses on encouraging literacy and school attendance by providing school meals.

2. You attained significant success in your corporate career, what inspired you to branch out as an entrepreneur in the fashion and lifestyle industry?

I have always been involved in and interested in the arts. I have a background in theatre, film and poetry and have worked on artistic projects throughout my career. I believe that the arts are a very effective tool for the communication of concepts and emotions and can be a strong tool in developing positive social change globally. Once I was back in Nigeria, I started to take an interest in Nigerian fabrics. I saw that there was a lot of demand in this area, so I decided to create a platform for celebrating African fashion, African visual arts, African décor and artefacts. Ozoza Lifestyle was born. We have also expanded this scope over the last few months and now run a blog, a podcast and a book-club which deals with various issues from the African context.



3. Did you have hesitations branching out as an entrepreneur and how did you overcome the fear?

I had serious trepidation in branching out as an entrepreneur. I was very accustomed to the formal work sector, where I had been for decades. This was a whole new area. It was some time before I took a dive in and launched the business to the market. It was a leap of faith. Very frightening, but at the end of the day, I thought the most important thing in life is to have made an effort to do something and not the outcome of that thing. It is a bonus to have a positive outcome but the emphasis should be on the effort.

4. How have you been able to balance the demands of entrepreneurship especially in such a fast evolving space like fashion and lifestyle and still find expression in your career as a lawyer (consultant)?

Every field is constantly changing, so no matter which field one is in one has to adapt to change and be innovative. The fashion and lifestyle industry is evolving very fast but at the end of the day, you have to be true to your own style, passion and your ethos. That is what will make you uniquely you. My experience has been that by working in a diversity of fields it fuels energy and one can apply different experiences across industries. It gives distance, it gives perspective. It's not for everyone, but certain personality types enjoy this diversity of work.

5. Can you share some challenges you have faced building Ozoza Lifestyle and how you have been able to overcome them?

The initial challenge was coming to terms with the technology and setting up systems. This just takes time and work and keeping at it. The other challenge was understanding the market in different jurisdictions and the various demands of different demographics. It is almost like a study in anthropology. When one is involved in commerce, one gets a huge insight into human behaviour and psychology. It becomes quite fascinating and adds to the richness of the work.

6. Ozoza lifestyle is an African heritage and style brand embracing the beauty of our prints and African style clothing, what is your take on normalizing African clothing as everyday work wear for corporate jobs, because for many in the more formal professions it is still considered unprofessional?

We design clothes contemporary African-inspired clothing. Our clothing is actually tailored for professional women. Ozoza Lifestyle focuses predominantly on everyday wear that is modern and African-inspired. Women seek to be smart, comfortable, chic and also want to identify with their culture. Others simply enjoy the beauty of African patterns and fabrics. We strive to cater for these needs. I think that the design and the style is the important thing.



There are cuts for different occasions which make one look professional. One has to cater for the different occasions in terms of the style and the design in order to ensure that your clothing will enhance the positive impact required in those forums.

7. As you know Africa day is now celebrated on the 25th of March annually, and the theme for this year is Arts, Culture and Heritage as a lever for building the Africa we want. Incidentally your brand was set up to promote African history and Heritage, and we see that you use story telling in a myriad of expressions in pursuing Ozoza's mission. Can you share why fashion, history, culture and the arts are levers for development and how we can tap into this soft power as Africans in better positioning the continent?

We need to start by asking the question, what is an artist? An artist is an individual who uses various creative means to communicate concepts and emotions. If there is one thing that every human being can do it is communicate. This in itself is creativity. The challenge thus far has been the mindset that people have when it comes to discussions about art. They start from a place of lack rather than a place of abundance and adding value. I would argue that Arts, Culture and Heritage has a great deal to bring to the table. Several international economic analysis bodies have agreed that Art, Culture and Heritage adds value to GDP and the economy. But I would go further than that. It does not just add value to GDP, it actually does what other industries cannot do. It adds social cohesion, openness and aesthetics. Studies have shown that individuals with high artistic experience are more likely to participate in civic activity. What do we need for development? Civic engagement. Civic engagement shapes our social, economic and physical environments. It's no mystery that the more developed a society is, the more there is investment in the arts. Art adds to the emotional well-being of people. When we come from a place of emotional well-being, social cohesion and openness which is nurtured by artistic expression then we can really be change-makers for the continent.

8. Who are some of the African Sheroes who inspire you, and what is the future you envision for African women?

I would say that the women in my family have been great Sheroes for me. Moving outside of that circle however, if we look at people of African heritage not simply African women, Maya Angelou has been a great Sheroe of mine and I wish I had met her before she passed on. I learned a great deal from her, she reminds you that everything can be found if you look inside. Another Sheroe of mine is Leyman Gbowee, Peace Activist and Nobel Peace Winner. Her work on the Young Girls Transformative Project is inspiring. I hope that such projects expand further and get more traction.



9. Do you have a mentor? If so how has mentorship supported you in your Career journey?

Throughout my career, I have had a series of mentors for various aspects of life. I would say that my strongest mentor has been my mother. A lot of things in life can be distilled down to one's mindset. Being willing to grow and learn, being willing to be open, being willing to take risks, dealing with failure and getting up again, being grateful, being willing to believe in oneself and others, letting go when necessary, investing in and nurturing others, comfort with solitude, knowing what will be, will be, comfort with diversity. My mum taught me and continues to teach me all of these things and more.

10. This Africa Day what are your hopes and aspirations for the Continent?

For all the people on the Continent to believe in themselves, be authentic and tap into their potential.

Thank you Madam for sharing some of your Career reflections with us and for inspiring us.