

## In Conversation:

*Sandra Mbanefo Obiagwu*, Film Maker, Writer and Founding Executive Director of ‘Communicating Change’ discusses her work with Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah, African Women’s Development Fund Communications

*Sandra Mbanefo Obiagwu is a woman of many creative talents. She is a poet, writer, film producer, director and a communications teacher. Sandra is passionate about creating documentaries and has a special interest in portraying African women’s stories and images. This conversation took place during the first ‘African Women in Film Forum’ organized by the African Women’s Development Fund and the Lufodo Academy of Performing Arts.*

**Nana:** Can you tell us about yourself and the work you do?

**Sandra:** I founded ‘Communication for Change’ thirteen years ago. The focus of my work is to tell positive stories about Africa from an African viewpoint to Africans, and the world. I’m concerned about the fact that we download a lot about ourselves yet upload very little into mainstream media, no matter which media we are talking about. I’m a film producer so I focus on documentary film. I also teach communications, and I’m a poet. I am particularly passionate about how we tell our stories and what sort of images we project about African women. Usually, there is a great deal of misrepresentation- even locally - so what we’ve tried to do is to talk about issues such as health, education, women’s empowerment, environment and other key challenges, but to do it through human interest stories that touch people in some meaningful way. I think we’ve been quite successful, our films have been broadcast in forty countries, and all over Nigeria.

We also serve as content providers to television stations in Nigeria. We have about 100 television stations and we organize fora on topical issues. So for example, when we did our three films on maternal mortality, we organized a broadcasters forum and we invited broadcasters to discuss the issues with us. We bring in experts and then at the end of that session we distribute our films.

We used to be able to do this for free, but we don't do that anymore. Now, we charge broadcasters a modest fee for our contents. It's usually a very subsidized amount but worthwhile because we have found that the partnership we have with broadcasters have grown very strong – such that some of our films have been broadcast across Nigeria and also in local languages.

About five years ago, we started looking at how to bring development issues into mainstream Nollywood cinema. We organized a conference at the Lagos Business School, which looked at how you ensure that the content of Nollywood films is actually inspiring and addressing social issues in a responsible way. One of the issues that came out of that whole discussion was the lack of support for the Nollywood industry, and the fact that these are SME's in full that have a very loose structure and are not being run in a sustainable way which means the film makers cannot get the kind of financial support they need. So we worked with the Lagos Business School and we helped to develop a curriculum that is in the SME program. So now there's a four months course not just for filmmakers but for people across the whole spectrum of the creative industry. It has been really helpful because once people go through that program they can approach banks and insurance companies so they package their ideas in a more professional way. The course also deals with all issues of running a creative business from issues of tax structure all the way through to content. Two years ago, we also did another conference that looked at intellectual property rights on how to protect your intellectual property and use it as an asset.

In terms of the kind of work I'm passionate about, it's creativity in general, and it's about drawing very close links between the different sectors of the creative community because I do believe that the only way we can strengthen our films is to invest in literature, invest in literary ventures and the training of our writers. Some of my writers are here at the Feminist Film Forum today. We found that there is poor knowledge about social issues that writers need to work on. We have also found that it helps to have people actually go through an editorial process in which even the basic information in their script is improved by working with content specialists. When we write about health we send our script to health experts, I'm not an expert on HIV and AIDS for example. In other words it's very important to consider how you link your creativity with good information on the socially relevant and responsible issues you want to cover.

**Nana:** One of the things that struck me in today's forum, (and I think this was mentioned by Prof. Busia) is that there is no need for any sort of distance between the commercially viable films and socially responsible films.

**Sandra:** Absolutely, I mean look at the film *Blood Diamond*, There have been a lot of documentaries about the illegal diamond trade but that Hollywood feature film did more to raise consciousness and inform the public about looking at the source of your jewelry than all of them. We've also decided to partner with Nollywood directors, that is how I came to work with Tunde Kelani over the last couple of years. I actually have invited him to direct some of our films, so that he brings in his art and we bring in our social responsibility side. Those have been very successful.

**Nana:** I think it's a very strong myth that socially responsible films are not commercially successful.

**Sandra:** Well, I think there are some propaganda films that are not artistic that some of the agencies have used here - the more conventional "ABC's of HIV/AIDS" is not as engaging as a popular show like "Soul City" which is also on HIV/AIDS but is based on research, it's also a very entertaining series and has high production values. I think some of the reasons why people here believe that socially responsible films may not be entertaining is because they often work with low production budgets. I don't think there is enough investment in the artistic side.

**Nana:** Where did your passion for creativity come from?

**Sandra:** I started off in school wanting to act so I was in all the plays, I went to drama school and I actually realized that I didn't have what it takes to be in front of the camera, I didn't have enough grit. I branched into education, and then into educational film, and that is really how I got into documentary film. My real love however is photography and poetry and now that I'm forty-six years old I'm trying to do more of that type of creative work. This is an important forum and I definitely share a lot of the main themes and the importance of having the main themes here but I just find that there is not enough time to do creative work, you end up being asked constantly to speak, and when you are running an organization you don't have much time to do creative work. I do direct, but I don't direct all of our projects, so right now I'm just in a transition phase where I'm trying to move away from administration and do more creative project management.

**Nana:** One of the things that struck me is that a number of people when speaking about you mentioned that even when you are not there your mark is there, and the people who you work with they do what you've trained them to do so it almost sounded like you don't need to be there to make sure the work gets done the way you will like it to be done.

**Sandra:** Sometimes I think my problem is that I am such a perfectionist, I end up focusing on the weeds, not focusing on the big picture and I'm trying to change that. Strategically how can we move the industry forward? Strategically, in a year's how much time am I going to spend on what? It is very challenging to run small organizations in Africa, specifically in Nigeria where there is no supporting infrastructure and you spend all your money on running your generator and keeping your organization going. I calculated that in the last two years I spent an average of US\$3000 a month on electricity and generator, this doesn't include other costs like salaries, so it's unbelievably expensive to run a small scale business. I have a staff strength of between 10 to 15 people depending on the type of project we are working on. The whole process of creative enterprise management is a big one and I think the problem in Nigeria is that we have a lot of creative people who are running enterprises which they shouldn't be, simply because there are no big studios that you can leave the business side to, you end up doing everything and that takes away from your creative time and I think that is an area you should be dealing with. How do you strengthen small scale enterprises in the creative sector? How do we ensure that people doing theatre, jewelry and fashion can actually continue to do that and have managers to manage the business? It's really tough; even abroad it's very tough.

**Nana:** What have you liked about today's forum?

**Sandra:** I thought it was intellectually stimulating. The two papers were excellent, I loved the first paper specifically because it was very broad and it really created a very strong foundation for the discussion. We tend to often look at ourselves in isolation. I think as Nigerians generally we are too over confident, we believe that we are it, and then you realize that there is this whole historical perspective of the misrepresentation of Africans and misrepresentation of black women, and how do you as a responsible creative person address that? So I didn't agree with some of the our speakers this afternoon who said, '*I make only what sells*', and I did agree with what one of the people from the floor said about 'creating desire'. We do have to

create the desire. It's very important, but I thought what was good was that we had different perspectives so you are not only speaking to the converted (and that is what makes it sometimes very boring when its just civil society talking about issues) - you are now talking to mainstream Nollywood people. Amaka Igwe is a mainstream big time Nollywood producer so if you can get her on your side you've won over a convert and that's very important in our whole struggle for enlightenment in our artistic endeavors.

**Nana:** Anything you would have liked to see differently in today's forum or any subsequent forums that may be held?

**Sandra:** I think it was very well organized. It's very difficult to find well-organized events in Nigeria today. I've gone to a lot of events in Nigeria and I just constantly shake my head and say they didn't give attention to detail. As a speaker in this forum, I was specifically under a lot of pressure to make sure that I had provided all the information required and there was a lot of follow-up. I guess just getting real Nollywood people in the room is really tough. I was happy to see one of the big distributors from *Alaba* who was here this afternoon. I remember when I went to *Alaba* market 5 years ago and they were saying, "*Ah Madam you have to pay us to come,*" actually we gave them the transportation fare just to get them to come and once the relationship started they realized that the programme was actually for their benefit. We also organize events, at the last conference a big Nollywood actress came and passed a paper to Tunde Kelani and said "*when are they going to announce me?*" and T.K wrote back, "*it's not about announcing, it's about learning*" and the lady left.

I think you've done a good job and the biggest challenge is to broaden the waves, broaden the ripple effect. It's a continuous discussion; it's not a one-stop thing. It is just constantly reminding ourselves of what the prize is, and then taking baby steps to get there. There are a lot of young people in the room today, many of whom I have mentored, and they are so open, they are hungry to learn and these kind of fora are very important for them to get new perspectives. Even the paper this afternoon about orature, the wealth of language, and the nuances, we rarely think about that, and how we need to translate that onto the screen because people are not reading. I struggle with my own children, my daughter just read *Things Fall Apart* and she loved it but I had to almost force her to read it. That comment from Steven Spielberg that movies are our literature is so true, and I will probably say that facebook

is the literature of this generation. So how do we ensure that the message is that we are creating, and getting onto these types of small platforms, how do we ensure that messages get onto mobile phones and catch the attention of these young people that are making decisions?

We conceptualized a whole series of films on HIV/AIDS and did some audience research, a lot of the young guys are buying antibiotics, mixing it together and drinking it and they believe that is going to protect them from all kinds of STD's. I was so shocked, we created a whole script around that and when we went back and did the post analysis, it was just amazing, and the young people were like "*Oh my God!*" 99% of people we spoke to say, we understand now that this is not the way. And we're saving lives. So how do you challenge perceptions, knowledge and attitudes about certain issues if it's not through exciting media? The power of the media is the power of stories to influence our decisions.