

Keynote Speech by Frank Nweke II

At the African Women Lawyers Association Conference,

held on August 27th, 2025 in Enugu

**Theme: Unleash Your Inner Hero – Strategize • Overcome •
Evolve**

Introduction

1. Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, sisters, colleagues, friends — I am deeply honored to be with you today and stand before you today with a heart full of gratitude. Gratitude for this invitation, gratitude for the work that the African Women Lawyers Association has been doing for decades, and gratitude for the opportunity to reflect with you on a theme that touches the very heart of human existence.
2. Permit me a small confession. If I were ever asked to choose between the two genders, my vote would go without hesitation to the female gender. This is not a sentimental preference. It is a recognition of an unchanging truth: that women are the custodians of life itself, and by extension, the foundation of society.
3. Consider this: the first sound a child hears in the womb is its mother's heartbeat. The first touch it feels is from her hands. And it is no accident that in countless languages across the

world, the very first word that children speak is often “Mama.” Before a government shapes a citizen, before a teacher shapes a student, before a lawyer shapes a client, it is a woman, a mother, who shapes and interacts with the individual.

4. This is not to diminish the role of men. But it is to state with clarity that if the world has any anchor at all, that anchor is the woman. And if Nigeria has any hope for a better future, that hope rests, in no small measure, on what our women are willing to embrace, to carry, and to build. This is why the theme before us — Unleash Your Inner Hero: Strategize, Overcome, Evolve — is not just inspiring, it is urgent.

What It Means to Unleash the Hero Within

5. When we speak of “heroes,” the mind often jumps to warriors on battlefields, presidents who change nations, or activists whose names make the headlines. But a hero is not always one who wears a medal. A hero is one who recognizes the weight of their responsibility and chooses to act.
6. For women, that responsibility is profound. You are not only birthing children; you are birthing nations. You are not only shaping households; you are shaping moral foundations. You are not only influencing families; you are influencing history.



7. To unleash the hero within, therefore, is not to wait for the grand moment. It is to be deeply conscious of the quiet but decisive choices you make every day; choices that ripple far beyond yourself. It is to see your life as an instrument for collective transformation.

And here lies the beauty of this theme: to unleash your inner hero is to strategize — to carefully study the challenges before you and chart a wise course through them. It is to overcome — to refuse to be paralysed by setbacks, whether external structures or internal doubts that whisper, “you are not enough.” And it is to evolve — to adapt, to grow, to expand the boundaries of what you thought possible, knowing that heroism is not a one-time act but a lifelong calling.

The Heritage of Courageous Women

History leaves us with no excuse. Time and again, when nations faltered, women rose with courage and reshaped destinies.

8. From Nigeria, we remember Queen Amina of Zazzau, who expanded territories and fortified her people in the sixteenth century. Queen Moremi Ajasoro risked everything to deliver Ile-Ife from bondage. In the colonial era, Margaret Ekpo transformed market women into a political bloc that could not be ignored, while Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the Lioness of Lisabi,



forced colonial powers and even kings to bow to the will of women. We recall Chief Folake Solanke, SAN, who broke barriers as Nigeria's first female Senior Advocate, clearing the path for women lawyers to aspire without limit. Justice Amina Augie continues this legacy with distinction on our Supreme Court.

9. Across Africa, the same thread of conviction runs deep. The Agojie of Dahomey stood as an all-female army feared across West Africa. In South Africa, Albertina Sisulu led the 1956 Women's March of 20,000 women, declaring to apartheid, "*You strike a woman, you strike a rock.*" In our legal profession, we celebrate Bience Gawanas of Namibia, who served as AU Commissioner and later as UN Under-Secretary-General; Fatou Bensouda of Gambia, former Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court; Unity Dow of Botswana, the first woman High Court judge in her nation; and Yvonne Mokgoro of South Africa, whose Constitutional Court judgments advanced human rights across the continent.

10. Around the world, women carried this same flame. Harriet Tubman risked her life to guide enslaved people to freedom. Rosa Parks ignited the civil rights movement by refusing to surrender her seat. Sojourner Truth demanded recognition of



Black women's humanity. In Britain, Emmeline Pankhurst and the suffragettes endured prison until the ballot was won.

11. And let us not think this is only history. In our own lifetime, we have seen women break boundaries that once seemed immovable. Gambo Sawaba, "Nigeria's most jailed woman," demanded education and political rights in the North when it was dangerous to do so. Justice Aloma Mukhtar became the first female Chief Justice of Nigeria, and Justice Olukayode Kekere-Ekun now carries that torch as our current one. On the global stage, Amina Mohammed serves as Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala leads the World Trade Organization. Oby Ezekwesili stood as Vice President for Africa at the World Bank and remains one of the continent's fiercest voices for transparency and education. Beyond Africa, Hillary Clinton broke precedent as the first female flagbearer of a major political party in the United States, and Kamala Harris has gone even further, serving as the first female Vice President.

12. The question, then, is not whether women can lead, fight, or transform societies. History and even our present — has already answered that with resounding clarity. The real question is whether the women of today, here in this hall, across Nigeria,



and across Africa, will take up the same mantle with the same resolve for the battles of our own time.

The Question for Today

13. So, the question before us is not whether Nigerian or African women are capable of heroism. History has already answered that with resounding clarity. The question is whether you in this room, in this time, are prepared to summon the same conviction for the battles of today. Because make no mistake, our nation is in desperate need of heroes.

Not only the kind that stand in courts, or in parliament, or in movements but the kind who raise children in integrity, who defend justice in their daily work, who refuse silence in the face of abuse, who turn their professions into platforms of impact.

Nigeria cannot afford the passivity of its women. Africa cannot afford the silence of its mothers. The time to rise as the hero you are is now.

AWLA's Heroism Story

14. This is why I salute you women of the African Women Lawyers Association. Yours is not just an organization; it is a movement of women who have refused to wait for permission to lead. You have taken the law, often seen as a distant, elite



profession, and turned it into a weapon for justice in the hands of the marginalised.

15. Through your pro-bono legal clinics, you have opened doors of justice to thousands who would otherwise remain unheard. Through your policy advocacy, you have fought for the domestication of the Child Rights Act, the enforcement of the VAPP Act, the criminalisation of harmful widowhood rites, and the protection of women from harassment and violence. Through public education, you have gone into markets, schools, and prisons — over 100,000 women empowered, thousands of students sensitised and prisoners counselled. These are not numbers; they are lives touched, destinies altered.

16. Your strategy is powerful. You begin with the micro; the walk-in legal clinic, the single case, the individual woman. But you connect it to the macro; law reform, national advocacy, systemic change. That is the genius of your approach: transforming private struggles into public victories, and individual pain into collective progress.

And what you have done as AWLA is precisely what this nation needs: women who are not waiting for change, but who are building it, one case, one client, one campaign at a time.



The Kunie Foundation — A Shared Conviction

17. Permit me also to share briefly from the Kunie Foundation, which I have the privilege to lead. Our focus is on women and families in Nigeria's urban slums — places often overlooked by policy and society. There, I have seen heroism in its rawest form. Mothers who wake up before dawn to fetch water, trade in markets, and still ensure their children attend school. Mothers who face deprivation daily, yet carry a dignity and resilience that humbles me every time.

At Kunie Foundation, we provide skills, resources, and networks to these mothers, not out of charity but out of conviction. Because when a mother learns to read, she becomes the teacher of her children. When she gains economic resilience, she uplifts her family. When she is empowered, her entire community changes.

18. And again, it is women who stand at the centre of this transformation. If the family is the first school of values, then the woman is the first teacher. And if nations are built on values, then women are already nation-builders.

Strategize. Overcome. Evolve.

19. Let me now return us to the theme that has brought us together: Unleash Your Inner Hero – Strategize, Overcome,



Evolve. These are not three random words strung together. They are three stages of a journey, three imperatives for anyone who desires to rise above mediocrity and to leave a mark on society.

20. To strategize is to acknowledge that progress does not happen by chance. Nothing changes simply because we wish it so. Change is intentional. It requires planning, foresight, and wisdom. It demands that we take stock of our strengths, our networks, our opportunities, and then chart a deliberate path toward the future we desire. The women of AWLA understand this. Your work is a testament to strategy. You did not stop at winning individual cases for women in your legal clinics; you built structures for systemic change. You moved from one woman's story to community empowerment, from community empowerment to advocacy for national policies. This is how strategy multiplies impact — it turns isolated victories into collective transformation.

21. But strategy alone is not enough. One must also overcome. Because, make no mistake, obstacles will come. They may take the form of entrenched cultural stereotypes that tell women their place is only in the home. They may take the form of economic barriers that deny women access to capital,



land, or education. They may take the form of institutions designed to intimidate, silence, or frustrate. And sometimes, the obstacles come from within: the quiet voice of self-doubt that whispers, “you are not enough, you cannot do this.” Heroism is not the absence of challenges. It is the refusal to be defined by them. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti faced harassment, jail, and insults, but she overcame. Rosa Parks faced humiliation and threats, but she overcame. Every heroine we admire today did not rise because their path was easy, but because they chose to rise anyway.

22. And then comes the final call: to evolve. Because the world is not static. The challenges of today are not the challenges of yesterday, and they will not be the challenges of tomorrow. A heroine who refuses to evolve risks irrelevance. But one who learns, adapts, and grows becomes a force across generations. Queen Amina expanded her territory with armies; Margaret Ekpo expanded hers with political alliances; AWLA expands yours today with law, advocacy, and education. Each one evolved, using the tools of their time to fight the battles of their day. And so must you. To unleash your inner hero is to embrace evolution as a lifelong calling — to see growth not as optional, but as the very condition for leadership.



23. This, my sisters, is the rhythm of heroism. To strategize. To overcome. To evolve. And to repeat this cycle for as long as you live.

Let me also be clear. This is not a task for women alone. Men, governments, institutions — all of us must play our part. Women's voices must be heard—not as a concession, but as a rightful recognition of equal worth. Men must stand alongside, not above, in this work. Institutions must respect women's contributions, not with tokenism but with genuine inclusion. Governments must nurture women's leadership, not as a favour but as a necessity for national development. But while these responsibilities fall on all, the truth is this: if women abdicate their own responsibility, if you underestimate your own power, then our nation loses its surest anchor.

Conclusion and a charge to the women

24. The heroines of history have already shown us the path. They have left us a heritage of courage, sacrifice, and resilience. The women of AWLA show us what is possible now — in your legal clinics, in your classrooms, in your campaigns for justice. The Kunie Foundation, in its work with mothers and



families, reminds us that even in the most deprived communities, heroism is alive and well.

25. The only question left is this: will you rise? Will you take your place in this long continuum of women who have changed the world by refusing to be silent, by refusing to shrink, by refusing to abdicate their responsibility?

26. The future does not need perfect women. It needs willing women. Women who will strategize, who will overcome, who will evolve.

27. So, unleash your inner hero!!!

Nigeria is waiting. Africa is waiting. The world is waiting. Waiting for you to rise again, as you have always risen. Waiting for you to shape the destiny of our children, and to build societies that honor justice, integrity, and human dignity.

Thank you.

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