

Nana Ama Agyemang Asante Transcript

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SPEAKERS

Betty Kankam-Boadu, Nana Ama Asante

Nana Ama Asante 00:00

I don't think any generation of women have had it easy, but I think they do it so that the next generation will have it easy. I think once you have the platform, it's a waste of a platform to have it and to censor yourself. It's such a waste of that platform, of your life and of the voice, and of what you could do with it.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 00:27

Hello, and welcome to Inspiring Open, candid conversations with influential women whose careers and open ethos have pushed the boundaries of what it means to build community and succeed as a collective. I am Betty Kankam-Boadu, a journalist and women's rights advocate. Join me as I explore the fascinating backstories behind Africa's most tenacious female personalities. Inspiring Open is a podcast series from Wiki Loves Women, a project of Wiki In Africa. Be inspired, be challenged, be bold!

Nana Ama Agyemang Asante is my guest today. As a journalist covering politics, gender and business, Nan Ama has been speaking truth to power and holding governments accountable for years. She provided the much-needed feminist perspective on national issues and debates on radio. Even though this was what she loved doing, it also opened it up to incessant abuse and made her one of the most abused radio hosts in Ghana. This, however, did not stop her from using her platforms to fight for the oppressed in the Ghanaian society. Nana Ama is a fellow at the Reuters Institute of Journalism at the University of Oxford and the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington DC. Her most recent work is the Ghanaian Women Expert Project, which tracks the number of women experts interviewed in Ghanaian media. I'm excited to have Nan Ama on here today. So let's get right into the conversation. Welcome to Inspiring Open, Nan Ama.

Nana Ama Asante 02:04

Thank you, Betty. It's a joy to be here with you. It's an honour, really.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 02:11

So I'm here we like to start from the very beginning. Can you tell us about your childhood and describe how you were brought up?

Nana Ama Asante 02:21

Oh, gosh. There are parts of my life that I sort of remember. So I remember growing up with my mom first. Which suggests that at the time I was born, my parents were not together. They were not living in the same space. So I lived with my mother. And one of my abiding memories is me sitting on ... we lived in an apartment block, and so I remember sitting on the staircase. So this is in Asante Mampong. My mother was teaching in a secondary school there. I remember, I'd come out, sit on the staircase, and I was always reading. And then I turned about six and I went to live with my dad in Kumasi, my dad and my stepmother and my stepmother's children. So my half siblings. So from age six 'til I went to university, I lived with my dad who was loving and generous and kind, but God, annoyingly strict. He was all about ... I say he was because he died a few years ago, but he was all about you have to read, you have to work hard, you have to stand up for yourself. So, I knew, even before I became an adult, that was a big deal to stand up for oneself. I didn't know what I was being prepared for. But my dad was... he would say things that sort of signal to things I didn't understand at the time. For instance, he would say, "You have to learn how to cook because you may not marry, or you may not marry a man who will have a cook." I'm like, marriage! I don't even know what's the point of this. But now as I'm a grown woman, I get what he was talking about at that time.

So I was raised in a very ... my dad was loving, always present. My mom, who I tell people is a nicer version of me, because she's warmer and open and if she was having this conversation, by now you'd be laughing, she would be dishing, she wouldn't be overthinking it. Sometimes I wish she would overthink some things because ... My mom lived... I think after I left at the age of six I didn't go back to live with my mum. But strangely, we've sort of built a great relationship because the women in my father's life were required to show up whenever he needed them to show up for their children. So we sort of have had a great relationship. And my dad, I think I am who I am because of the way my dad brought us up. I remember him saying a lot, hearing him say a lot, like, you have to know that you're lucky that you're my child, you're lucky because these other children you're driving by, and you see people walking to school, but you are sitting in your father's car. And he would make us tell, do you have friends? Or he'll pick people in the car. Just for me, I think, my

dad was a son of a Methodist preacher. He came from a royal family, he was a chief, but the Ghana he grew up in wasn't a wealthy Ghana. So his experiences with luck, I think, was different. And he knew what his children, even though he gave us everything, he didn't want us to be brats. So it was just being drilled into us, this is a privilege and you have to give it back. He constantly said he didn't want to raise children who would be a liability unto themselves and unto society. So, my goal in this life is, if I fail at everything else, let me not be a burden. Let me just not be a disappointment to my dad.

But yeah, that's how I grew up. I went to church for a bit. Everybody in Ghana goes to church when you're growing up. My dad wasn't ... even though he was the son of a Methodist minister, he didn't go to church. But it was compulsory for us when I was growing up. And at some point, I fell off the wagon and I've been off it since. Yeah that's...

Betty Kankam-Boadu 06:38

We'll drag you back on the wagon very soon.

Nana Ama Asante 06:47

No, no, no. I cannot look at Ghanaian Christianity. We'll talk about it for life.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 06:50

We'll talk about that. Yeah, we'll talk about that later on. What did you study in school? And did you always know that you are going to be a journalist, and why journalism?

Nana Ama Asante 07:01

So I've been told all my life, I loved reading, I loved arguing, I loved speaking my mind, and then I would do well as a lawyer. And so, because of my dad's background, my grandfather was a judge. It was a lot, nearly everybody, the men in my family mostly, had gone into law. So it was a given. I knew that I was going to become a lawyer. Even before I went to UCC. And when I went to UCC, I studied economics and sociology. And while there... it's a such a hazy period. I knew I was going to become a lawyer, because I'd go to court with my dad, and then I come home one vacation ... this is when Joy FM had just started. I started listening to Joy FM, I sat listening to the midday news. And I'm just blown away by this woman who is grilling all of these men all the time, and I want to be her. Which is why I decided I have to move to Accra. I have to. I'd lived at home my whole life. The only time when I was in boarding school or going to uni. And my dad, number one, did not want that. And number two, what? Journalism?! So I didn't know I was going to be a journalist. I just had Matilda Asante.

I had grown up going to my father's community. And I know you know that stretch. And so, I mean, I started going in there when I was seven, when I was 10 nothing had changed, when I was 20 nothing had changed. And I had seen I had been gone to I had gone to Cape Coast. I'd seen the ways people were living at the time and, partly my dad's fault for constantly taking us on these journeys and having these conversations about poverty and privilege with us, so I sort of felt, gosh, we have to do something. I didn't know what, but I thought that whatever it was Matilda Asante was doing, this thing where she was holding people to account, asking them tough questions, and exposing them, was probably one of the ways to contribute and to make sure that life changed. I think we come to journalism with... we're idealistic when you come, you think you're going to be part of the change, you're going to push and things are going to get better. So I came, I was idealistic. I just came and I thought, gosh, I have arrived. We're going to make the change, and I didn't even last two years the first time. I didn't even last two years. I thought too much, it was like, gosh, I'm out of here. Is this what you people do? You report, you ask the questions and nothing changes. I thought things change. Thank you very much, bye. But yeah, I didn't know I was going to be a journalist.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 10:04

And here you are, you've been in it and endured all that you can endure. And you're still going, but tell me about it, because I know you've got to work with Matilda Asante. Tell me the kind of influence she had on you when you had to work within the same office.

Nana Ama Asante 10:21

When I arrived at Joy, she wasn't there. I think she had gone to school, she travelled or something. And, she's Ms Asante, bless her. She's just really strict. So everyone in the building is terrified of matilda Asante. She doesn't play. And it's not ... people say, I think when you work with different types of women, you learn the difference. And so, at some time you think this woman is awful, a lot of people thought she was awful. But in hindsight, I thought she was just strict and disciplined. And she wanted things done when they were supposed to be done. Like you can't just go on air and conjecture, she won't have it. She was... I'll give you a few instances. When I arrived at Joy, I arrived as a national service person. I have to tell you how I went to Joy. I went to Joy by myself and asked to see the news editor who was confused. And I said, "I want to work here. What do I have to do?" And he's like, "We're not recruiting." I was like, "I have to work here, so you have to tell me what..." And he was like, "Go and write an application letter and bring it, and then we'll see. We'll let you know" That's what I did. I finally managed I harassed Ato Kwamena with phone calls and emails at the time. And I think, at some point, he was like, "Okay, it's national service. Let me just bring her in. And I got in. When I got in, I heard about this mean witch, this woman who was going to come and set everything right. But you are a national service person, you go to a place, you're

young. It's also a phase of your life where men are beginning to pay attention to you and newsrooms are like, when new people arrive, all the men are all over you and you think you're special. And so, it was like that. So, when she arrived, I don't know what she saw in me. I think I was assigned to do summaries. Ato Kwamena assigned to me to do summaries. And I did the summaries and he was like, "Did somebody help you?" And I was like, "No." So then it became a thing I do.

And so once she looked at something I'd done and the next day, she said I should come to lunch with her. And she's like... this woman all the men are terrified, the women in the newsroom sort of don't like, she asked me to come to lunch. I'm shaking. But I go to this lunch. She asked me 1001 questions like you're trying to do right now. And then she says to me, she's noticed that the boys like me, the men like me, but in journalism, if I aim to succeed, that cannot be the thing I focus on. I should study. And I should focus on the work. And there were moments. So there was a point where, because Ms Asante had said you shouldn't pay attention to ... you should not do the boys that way, I sort of started becoming aware of some things. I did gender and sexuality so some of the things you study, theoretically, in class, in theory in class become very clear as you're in the workspace. And so I was changing. And as I was changing, the boys I had been goofy and smiley with weren't pleased with the change. A bunch of them stopped talking to me, and it really bothered me to come to work and not sort of be liked by the people you thought were your friends.

And I remember her saying to me, people were horrible to her when she started, people were mean, and people will be mean to me if I stay the way, if I stay the course and I am dedicated to the work, I learn and I do good work, my colleagues are going to be mean, outsiders are going to be mean, but they do not matter because people who care about me will take the time to get to know me like me. So just seeing her, and she was assertive in the newsroom, you could not get around her. I so badly wanted to sort of just be like that disciplined. It wasn't like she was ... she didn't partake in some of the fun moments. But there were lines she was not going to cross. She wasn't going to get too chummy so you were rude to her, or you avoided doing the work. That was not going to happen. So she was kind to me, but I knew that I had to deliver. And so I did what I had to do. It's just like just seeing her work sort of gave me something to model who I wanted to be eventually, if I got into any position of power.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 15:07

And I love that. I mean, I love it when women kind of other women's hands and then carry them across and be mentors and just inspire them to be who they want to be. And so, you left Joy after two years, right? And then you got a job with Jhr. Tell me about that job because I reckon that it was a human rights organisation, right?

Nana Ama Asante 15:33

It's a media... it's a non-profit. It's a Canadian non-profit that focuses on good governance and human rights stories. So they bring in people from Canada to work in Ghanaian newsrooms as sort of as a skills transfer thing, where they learn how we cover these stories, and we learnt some of the skills from them. And so, by luck, I made me their country coordinator completely out of my zone. And what I did was to make sure to build relationships with editors, media owners, and then manage the people they sent to Ghana. Also make sure that the people who were in the newsrooms that we were working, because these people are there, we're working on specific good governance and human rights stories. That's what I was doing. And it was... it also sort of shapes you, right? Because now, when you see that people are struggling, you see it, because in Ghana it's there, it's in your face, it's the Hawkeye, it's the mechanic, you see it, but then you realise, oh, gosh, there are things, these things are connected, because that poverty is a lack of healthcare, it's the inability to pay school fees, is a lack of access to legal systems, to justice, these kinds of things. And you get exposed to other people's realities and experiences. And that also sort of shapes you. So for four years, that's what I did, sort of manage... going to Joy, going to Citi, bringing in even other senior people from... So Jhr will fly in other senior people from Canada to sort of come and see what can we do to help Ghanaian media sort of to strengthen Ghanaian media. So that sort of attunes you to the other side of Ghana, like there's the human rights aspect. And when I went to Joy with the hope of, you know, we're going to change Ghana, that kind of foolishness., it was good governance, it was good governance for me. But these things work together. You cannot have good governance without giving people justice, without delivering rights to people. So that's where that comes from. The four years was just learning, expanding my knowledge in journalism, because also I didn't train as a journalist. I came from economics and sociology, so had to learn like what kinds of questions do you ask if you want people to open up to you. How do you even show up so that people are open to you? All of that was in that Jhr experience, sort of moving with the trainers and the journalists from different places, sort of going to interview people, trying to produce documentaries. That's where it comes from.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 18:36

Yeah. And I just want to react to something you said that when you went to Joy and you wanted things to change, you describe it as stupid. I don't think it was stupid. I really don't think it was stupid at all. Because I think it's that drive for change is what keeps you going and is what it is even... from that same like drive you are doing what you are doing now. Yeah, so it wasn't stupid at all.

Nana Ama Asante 18:58

Yeah, I actually agree. I actually agree. But I think it's a bit of madness. Because to have that kind of hope that change is possible in the face of the evidence to the contrary... because if you look at Ghana, it's really easy to feel hopeless. It's arrogant to think you can save Ghana or one person can save Ghana, but I think we can sort of all of us put our shoulders to the wheel. And despite the pain and the disappointment, just do our tiny, tiny bit and maybe, at some point, we may get some change.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 19:29

That's true. And I also just want to mention that that Jhr programme was so beneficial to me. I learned how to do my first documentary through that. A 30 minute documentary. I'd never tried that. And then also these journalists, they've become friends and for, how many years, some are still lifelong friends. So, it was a very, very interesting programme then. From Jhr, you came to Citi FM, where you became one of the hosts of the Citi Breakfast Show. Obviously, a very big breakfast show here in Ghana and beyond, if I should put it that way. And you became the only female voice on there. First of all, talk to me about how you got to Citi FM. And then how eventually came on the Breakfast Show?

Nana Ama Asante 20:28

Okay. I was working with Jhr, the money was good. And so I thought I'm fine. And one day I came to Citi to speak to... I forget who the editor was. I don't know if it was [Salam, Salam Adunu 20:53]. Or Patrick Ayumu, one of them. Something had happened. We were, I think, whoever the trainer who was in the newsroom was having some challenges. And so, as part of my job, I had to come and speak to the editor. But I had met, when I set out organising these breakfast meetings to talk about how we can cover gay rights and not sort of feed into the criminalization that was happening at the time, I had met [Sameds 21:26] and he and I had become friendly. He wasn't my friend, but we had become friendly. And so when I went to the newsroom, and I had a conversation with the editor and I came down. I'm a Kumasi girl, you're raised to treat your elders with respect. So I went to look for [Sameds 21:42] to say hi, I came around, whatever. And I met him with Bennet. And so, I guess in that in that moment, I don't even remember what we're talking about, but I think I made a comment. And Bennett's when I said I reminded him of another lady I had met at Joy. Her name is [Nana ??? 22:03] she left media quickly. When he said my views reminded him [Nana????] do I want to work in radio, I said, God forbid,. I have had this experience. No, no, no, no, no, no, I can't. No, I cannot do this. God forbid, me, you people, you report these stories and nothing changes. At least this thing that I'm doing, I know that I'm sort of trying to solve a problem, and I have some control. You people have no control. I'm not going to do it. But then he says, "Have you covered elections before?" So this is like getting into 2012. And I said no. He said, "How are you a journalist and you've not covered elections before and you are happy? If you haven't had that experience, you've

not had anything” And that really stayed with me. That thing he said. If you've not covered elections, you've not done anything. It stayed with me.

So I left. I didn't agree that I would work. I left, but I came back and I said, you know when you said you would give me a job? I really want to have the experience of covering elections. So what can I do?” And he said, “Oh, we need an editor, a sub-editor in the newsroom. Is that a role you would want to do?” I said, “I read. And I think I can make a sentence good, but I am not ... That's not my specialty.” And he was like, “ I think you can do it. So, here's your contract, whatever.” And then I come to the newsroom. My first year at Citi was strange. My first maybe six months was really strange for me. I say to people, I'm not a people person. I have to get to know you. And I suppose people have to get to know me to like me. But usually, after a few days, people like me, but somehow at Citi nobody liked me for really long time. And I'd complain to my mother be like, “Mama, [indistinct] I don't do anything but they don't like me. I don't know what to do about it. And my mother would say, “Just do your work. And when you have to leave, you leave. People will like you when they like and if they don't like you, you just have to find a way to survive. And if you say you want to cover the elections, then it's from this period until the election. Then. you can leave. Once you've had that experience, then you can leave..”

So I decided okay, I'll just brace. Just do that. And strangely, things... Eunice became my friend because also I like food and me, if you are eating and you invite me to come and eat and your food is nice, we are eating together. It's a thing. We're going to be eating together.

Nana Ama Asante 24:50

So I think, I suppose when Eunice sort of became friendly with me, she sort of created a pathway for other people to see me as a human being, and not somebody who.. I don't really know. I mean, you and I have had conversations where you've told me why I was disliked and that it wasn't my fault. But for a really long time, I thought it was something I was doing. Because I thought, previously people had told me, I can be snooty and cheeky. But then she became my friend. And she sort of facilitated. everybody else... well, not everybody else, because I still was not wholly liked. At least there was you there was [Ifiah] there was [Sander], these guys . Suddenly I had friends and I actually enjoyed staying longer than I normally would. So I was in the newsroom for maybe a year or two. And then I went on leave. After the elections, I took a break. I come back, and by the way, that election made me want to do journalism even more. I did it and it was like I'd been injected, reinvigorated. I so wanted to do journalism. I come back from the break. And he says, “We need an online editor. You are the editor.” I'm the editor how? I don't have the skills. I didn't really know what happens there. He's like, you will learn like you've learned everything else, you will learn.

So I went online. And I mean, I liked the people I work with, but it was a real challenge. Because first of all, that's not what I was trained to do. I mean, I think in Ghana journalism is you learn on the job, you sort of have to push yourself. It was overwhelming. You set up an online department with five people and expect them to magically deliver all the stories and to have perfect headlines and to have... we have five people, Sir. We can't do that much. But there were all these expectations of us. And because I think, I present a certain way, so they can't bully you but they will bully the people you work with. But these are people you like. And so, until I left Citi, being in online was a real struggle for me, because these are people I care about. And I see all the challenges. It's so like, you go and discuss it with management, they say they hear you. And yet you go to meetings, and they make these guys who are breaking their backs feel like they're not doing enough. There'll be like five writers, maybe an editor and an assistant. That's huge. And they're the ones working the whole day. Not that there's another five come in at 12pm. They're the ones working the whole day. That structure really stressed me out. But mean online, Bennett hosts the CBS and he and I have started having conversations because I thought he would say things and I'd be like, "No, you're wrong," in the kitchen. We'll have big debates and I'd be like, "No, I don't think it's this." Not that my ideas were better. I just thought his ideas were wrong. I argued with him. And for some strange reason he would be on the radio, he would say things and I would run and go and be like, No, you're wrong. Like when he he's playing at, I'll be like this, this and this and this is why you're wrong. Betty, before I know it I'm the producer, one of the producers or CBS, in addition to me being online.

Nana Ama Asante 28:43

Because I am crazy, but I will shut up. So now I'm going to add more responsibility to those other responsibilities. But I'm like, Oh, it's just a few hours. Plus, I love being here and having a conversation with them about some of my wildest thoughts, about some of the things happening in Ghana. So he's on air, sometimes he's on air, because now I'm a producer, I walk into the studio, and I signal to him to put a microphone off, and I will tell him why I think what he's saying is wrong, or whoever is on the radio, whoever is on the phone that he's interviewing, is way off. Please ask him this question. I was constantly writing questions. Please ask him this question, please. I think Bennett thrives in conversation as well. So you get him going. One day, he was like, "Sit down." I sit down, go for like two joints. And then-

Betty Kankam-Boadu 29:42

That's it, you become a co-host.

Nana Ama Asante 29:44

Yeah, I become a co-host. That's it. That's it. Had I known what was going to come after all of that, I probably would not. But I didn't know. I just thought I have these things to say and nobody was

saying it and I could tell Bennet or I could have a conversation with him. And that was because I'd be having a conversation with him, I think I didn't anticipate what the reaction of a woman being on radio would be like for people.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 30:12

So now tell me about the reaction of people. The reaction of people, because, Nana Ama. I think you will be in the top 10 of some of the most abused women online in Ghana, just because you sit on radio, and you have an opinion.

Nana Ama Asante 30:31

Yeah, I'd be having conversations with these men at Citi, and it was okay. It was okay. I mean, they disagreed strongly and vehemently, vigorously, but they went abusive of me. Nobody said I was stupid. My first year was really horrible. First of all, people were calling into the station and saying, "Tell her to calm down." It's not even like they recognised that I am there. It's like they're telling Ben or Gotfried or whichever man was there to tell me to calm down. And it wasn't enough that they were calling into the station and saying, I'd been... it was always I had been disrespectful. I had said something they didn't like. I had said something I shouldn't have said it. Sometimes I would think about it and I have my uncles, I have friends, I would text them be like, "Guys, I said, this is just a wild idea." Because I didn't even think I was anything radical at the time. Some of the things I was saying like... and then I am being trolled. And it's just a whole day. I think people wake up and decide, ah, we have to pick up where we left off because this woman is back on the radio. I think a lot of the abuse was because I was talking about politicians some of the time. I was talking about powerful men in a way that Ghanaian women do not do openly. Some of the things I was saying, I've heard my auntie's, I've heard friends. I've heard people say. It wasn't like they weren't going to say it the way... again, we use indirection a lot in Ghana, especially [indistinct] we're not direct, you sort of have to use semantics and sort of cloak and I would say, I think that was corrupt, or that was incompetent. And just these words alone, just saying I think that was corrupt would gosh, people would take my pictures and make all sorts of claims. I have two children. I am hiding. I am sleeping with a married man. I am ugly. That ugly thing.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 32:49

What? I remember the two children part.

Nana Ama Asante 32:51

Oh yeah. Apparently, I have two children with a politician and I am hiding the children. It was all sorts. So at the time, it was NPP that was in a position. So NPP had paid me and I was sleeping

with some key NPP people that I didn't even know, I hadn't met. Some of them, if they hadn't come to Citi, I was never going to meet them anywhere. But that was a lot of you're ugly. There was a period where... this is why my Instagram is locked, people went on my Facebook and Instagram and took my pictures. And I trended for three days because I said somebody's response to an accusation was... I described the arguments as hollow. They were so triggered that she's ugly, she's... it was a lot. It was hard to take in. I mean, because I had people who affirmed me and my father was around, and I knew... my father had told me I was beautiful. My mother says I'm special. So sometimes I tell myself I am loved. And this does not matter. But that's where you are comforting yourself. Because there are these you look at yourself and you wonder, maybe there's some truth here. There's some truth there. And actually, you take it so much that you don't realise that it chips away at your confidence.. But in the moment, I knew, I'm here to do... this is my job. This is what I have to do. This is my view. And I really, I had said to myself, I wasn't going to silence myself. So these people win. I wasn't going to let them win. So at some point, that was my resolve. Okay, I am ugly. Okay, fine. Okay. You say I'm ugly. It's fine. I'm sleeping with 20 men. Okay, fine. That's your best shot. That's all. If you can't engage me on the points that I am making, I'm not taking you seriously. So once I resolved that to myself that, first of all, they can't even reason. Either they're too upset or can't reason and so I shouldn't take them too seriously. That's how I would sort of on my way home in the car I would will tell myself these things like, they are wrong. They're wrong. Or, actually, this thing that I said, I could have said it better. So I understand why they're triggered. Next time I won't say it like that. But I decided I am not going to up and quit in a way that will let them win. But it wasn't just the external abuse, it was the internal pressure. Because they were abusing me, it put pressure on the management of the company. Politicians were emailing and calling about ... I was blogging as well and saying things that I felt journalists should be saying they weren't saying and I had a blog. It wasn't the station's website, it was my blog. And still, they would get complaints about that. And so there was a lot of take care of the radio. Why have you put this woman who's disrespectful on radio? It was a lot, Betty, but I was really ... I'm lucky that my parents are loving people. My dad was around and so loving. And I lived with my sister who would listen to me and be like, well, maybe this other way. And I had really good friends. And I have these uncles who... when you are related to people, or you're friendly with people, they're going to tell you. They're always going to affirm you, so I was affirmed a lot. There was [indistinct] there was [indistinct] there was [indistinct]. There were all of these people who affirmed me, no matter what was happening online, there were phone calls and family lunches and dinners and walks where people sort of said, you are not crazy. This is not a wild idea, this is not even a radical thought. I was lucky in that way. I don't wish my experience on anybody, especially anybody who does not have that kind of support.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 37:23

And I'm glad you circled into support, because we like to talk about tribes here and finding your people. I've been given examples of how certain people have really pulled me through life, and Nana Ama you are one of them. Because anytime I'm in one of those zones, there are certain people you talk to, and you realise that you are not crazy. First of all, you are not alone. Get up, keep moving, keep moving. It's tough. It's tough for everyone. And I've actually started doing that for people. And I love that. And I keep saying that, when somebody pours into you, you have to really pour into others as well. So I'm glad you had your people who were affirming you, who were telling you you are not crazy. Were telling you your ideas are not wild, were not trying to tame you. And you're still here and I know it took a toll on you, health wise.

Nana Ama Asante 38:19

Yeah. A doctor told me, a doctor told once... I have to sort of backtrack. I had a panic attack. I was having panic attacks without knowing I was having panic attacks. So this went on for maybe a year. And my mother, I think she had clocked that it may be psychological. She actually came with me on my first visit, my conversation with Dr Dume. He didn't tell me immediately that I was having... I was beginning to get depressed. He said, my symptoms points to this. And then after three months of writing down and sending him my notes and everything, he said you are you depressed. I would I thought my life was okay, but I would be getting really sad. And I remember I said this to him. I said I think I'm okay. I think I have a good job and he said "Are you sure you have a good job? The money and everything may be okay, but maybe there are other trade-offs that you've not thought about." And he was referring to the abuse without referring to the abuse. Because in my notes to him in our conversations I would talk about people sharing my pictures. There are pictures where my father had died and somebody took a picture of me and if you see me in that picture, you see that I'm really broken. And these guys were just having fun with that picture. And that was a trigger for me.

You delude yourself into thinking you can bear it, but the body absorbs it, so it lives in your body. And that's what's manifesting in the way that you feel about things. And so it did take a toll mentally, physically. I mean, I'm no longer on radio. And I don't even think I'm over that kind of... because I still... certain things really trigger me. I get breathless. And I didn't used to get panic attacks. I had a happy life. I was fine. But now, there are certain things I can't see online. There are certain conversations I can't even bear to be a part of. Because I was trolled to the point that I thought... it just left a mark that I can go there again with anybody.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 40:52

Yeah, but I'm happy you're still standing and I'm also particularly glad that you're being vulnerable to share the story. So Nana Ama, we can't have this conversation without talking about the state of

journalism in Ghana. You wrote an article for Reuters when you had your fellowship in the UK, and it was an explosive article, because you practically chronicled every single thing that is wrong with the media and the kind of journalism that we do. And I was particularly annoyed when I saw that article, and no media house talked about it, discussed that article. This is about us. But then, of course, I guess the sword was double-edged. So as a journalist I also felt so... But again, I was very disappointed how journalists advocate for everybody, but when it comes to the state of a journalist, and even the media and journalism, we are mum about that. What are your feelings about this?

Nana Ama Asante 42:08

I feel really sad, because I think at the beginning, I said to you, I came to journalism with... I was idealistic, because I really believe the tools we have can be tools of change. They are just tools, but you can use them for change. So I look at the landscape ... I mean, I wrote... I sort of knew that it was not going to be engaged with. I knew it when I was writing, I knew it. And people often ask me, "Why do you keep writing?" And I say, "I just want a record to exist, that we noticed." Because I'm not the only one who's noticed, and you've noticed. A lot of people who leave media have noticed this thing. It's just that there isn't a record of it. Plus, if we do really, those of us who say we want to do this work, but to do it in a way where we are not overworked, exploited or abused and harassed, then there has to be a record somewhere. This is the thing that we no longer want to repeat. So I knew that it wasn't going to be engaged with. I knew. I mean, because to engage with it is then for these outlets to say we have to pay our journalist well. We have to stop these politicians from exploiting the women. Media managers themselves have to stop preying on the women who work for them.

Nana Ama Asante 43:37

You have to provide health care, you have to do right by your... Once you touch it as an outlet, this is what you have to do. And once journalists begin to discuss it, they are signalling to their outlets that we agree with this thing. But we work in newsrooms where people do not have voice. People say, "Oh, when you at Citi, you can say everything." I'm like, no, no, no. I could not. There are things I could not say. Even on the radio. If you paid attention, you'd noticed that I will be saying something and certain things are happening, even as we are on air. You go into newsrooms and you lose your voice because the people who own media, as a media owner told me, "We are not here to do democracy or free press." Can you imagine owning media and saying to a journalist who ... me, I've come I'm like, this is the job we're going to do, and you're telling me that we're not here to do free press or democracy. That means you don't care. You're about the profits. And it's ridiculous because, again, it's not even just about the profits because New York Times, it's imperfect, but at least they do good journalism and they still get a profit. So it's not like you can't do good journalism and make the money. But this is about power, right? Politicians own these stations or people who

are aligned own these stations, and focusing and doing true and meaningful journalism means they have to expose their allies and their friends. And that's where the tension is. So you work in a pro-NPP outlet, or even if the person is not aligned, they live in the Ghanaian economy and if they have other businesses, those businesses are going to be impacted. So they weigh the costs. And they decide it's not worth it. It's not worth it. Let's drop this story. Let's not report it this way. Let's just do the superficial "He said, She said." Plus Ghanaians are not serious anyway. They're not going to demand change, forgetting that if you did true storytelling, where you provided evidence to back your claims, were Citi or Joy said our findings suggest, not that some people will say, or NDC says NPP says. I read some stories, and I'm like ... when I was at Citi, I used to do this "What does our investigation say? What have we found ourselves?" Because we can't go on air and say the NDC or the NPP or this group said, but what we... because this is our job, right? That media is in the state that it is in really frightens me. You have young people in Ghana on social media calling for coup, and that's a failure of media that people do not know what they have. Your whole life changes when you have a coup. The idea that people think development will come when you have a dictator when our history even tells us that that's that's not how it works on the continent. everywhere. The evidence is there that this is not how it works. So for me, I look at the state of things and I worry that all you need is for somebody to come in sheep's clothing and distil all of these complaints that people have about this system and decide that I'm changing the constitution even. People will applaud, because we as media have not even shown people that they can liberate themselves. It's incredible to have all of that media... my one of my uncle says, "We have too much media, not a lot of journalism." Which is true. Everybody's on radio, we're all talking, but we're not doing the storytelling, there isn't room for new ideas new. If you have a new idea in Ghanaian media, you're going to die trying to share that idea. I don't know if anybody's listening to this, and they have some money and they want to fund media, please come to Ghana. We're desperate. I mean, we have a lot of media. The perception in the West is that Ghana has free media, we rank highly on the Press Freedom Index. But that's not all there is, because at some point, people are going to ask, "What do we benefit from these people?" I mean, it's gotten so bad that when journalists are assaulted, people are happy. It's crazy to me,

Betty Kankam-Boadu 48:15

It's crazy, Nana Ama and of course we can go on and on and on and on and on about this. And sometimes, it's so terrifying, because you don't see the light at the end of this tunnel that we are in. We can only hope and then pray that when we get the chance, we will be that change that even in a very small way that we seek and I hope that chance comes as early as possible.

Nana Ama Asante 48:44

I hope so I really also.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 48:15

Now you are in the US and you're schooling. And it's amazing, because for somebody who fell off the church wagon, it's amazing what you are studying. We've had this conversation before, when you decided to go that route, people were like, we know your views on this on that on that. Why are you going to church route? Why are you doing this? Tell us what you're studying. And why you're doing that? Because I think you'll find it interesting.

Nana Ama Asante 49:16

I'm studying religion right now with a focus on Christianity. Because I think Ghana is the way it is for a variety of reasons. And one of them is the way we do religion, and by religion I'm looking specifically at Christianity because it's the dominant religion. 70% of Ghanaians, or 71%, at some point, identify as Christians. And I'm interested in how the theology of the church, the Ghanaian church, in the last 30 years has impacted the way people engage with Ghanaian States. There was a tweet by Dr Mensa Otabil, one of the prominent pastors in Ghana, something along the lines of don't let the economy determine your blessings. And I found it deeply problematic. And I was talking to... at the time I'd quit the church for years, so I said, I think this is a dangerous... this is a ridiculous tweet. It's wrong. It doesn't make sense, because we live in this economy. The economy impacts everything. And so to suggest that it is possible to succeed outside the economy, is to endorse corruption. Because how else are people going to do it? How? God has stopped raining manna. There are all of these ideological problems that we have to contend with. And so the work I have to do, I want to do, is to engage with how Christianity has impacted... and I think there's a specific kind of Christianity, and that Christianity came from the US. Those are the questions I'm sort of trying to...I'm exploring and trying to see. I mean, I don't think I have an answer. But I'm just trying to put it out there to say, this kind of Christianity is really not even your Christianity, first of all. That's what I am doing. Maybe things will change, maybe they won't, but I just know that our country will not change until the Christianity changes, because the church is too powerful.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 51:22

The church is so powerful. And I always say that I think the State is the way it is because of the church, honestly. I agree. I just wish that as Christians, we could like you saying, engage differently and read the Bible, even for ourselves and not rely on the various interpretations these so-called Men of God give to the bible.

Nana Ama Asante 51:45

Read the text yourself, just you might find something else. But also like, for me, at the heart of all of this is, if you say you are a follower of Christ, there are certain things Christ did. He was never on

the side of the powerful. So I find the alliance between the... that's why I can't be in the church. I am like, you're on the wrong side. The Ghanaian masses are struggling, and you are exploiting them together with the political class. I don't understand.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 52:18

Yeah, that's true. So now, let's talk about open. Because this whole podcast, it's also centred on open. So when we say open, even as a personal philosophy, what does it mean to you?

Nana Ama Asante 52:35

I think, for me, coming from the background that I come from, I think it's just being transparent and being inclusive. These things mean a lot to me. I think to be open is to share, to share is to be transparent to say I called the minister in XYZ and this is the backstory. All the details we hide from people, if we're being open and transparent. Like if we're being open, we'll be transparent and disclose these details. That's us being open. I think being open for me in life is being generous and loving with my community.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 53:22

I feel people who have seen what you've been through as a journalist, as a woman on air sharing your opinion, I can bet you there are a lot of women on air right now who are really self-censoring, because they are afraid to, of course, go through what you went through. Because it was it was really intense, Nana Ama. And it's still intense because you still have a voice on Twitter, a loud voice on Twitter. You still get it there. But what would you want to tell a woman who has this platform on air and is self-censoring because she doesn't want to be abused because she's seen what you've been through?

Nana Ama Asante 54:05

I don't think any generation of women had it easy. I mean, we spoke to Dr Gadzekpo, Audrey Gadzekpo, who also used to be on TV and I don't even think ... because that was a different generation, so I'm sure Dr Gadzekpo was much nicer than I was, and even she did not have it easy in public life. So I don't think any generation of women have had it easy, but I think they do it so that the next generation will have it easy. I think once you have the platform, it's a waste of a platform to have it and to censor yourself. It's such a waste of that platform, of your life and of the voice and of what you could do with it. I feel once you have that platform, just make it a point to advocate for yourself and for the women coming, because that's an example you're setting. And I know that it took a toll, I still have triggers, but if I had to do it all over again, I'd probably do it the same. Not a lot

will change. I think that once you have a platform, it's a waste to not use the voice, and to censor yourself and to be chummy with the people who are actually oppressing you.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 55:33

Yeah, that part.

Nana Ama Asante 55:38

Why are we smiling with these people? They don't like us.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 55:40

Yeah, I guess for a lot of journalists is what they will get.

Nana Ama Asante 55:45

Yeah. And I know. And I also think I should probably say this here, because I think I have to say I come from privilege. It's not like I was born into lots of money. But I come from privilege. So I always knew I could go home if I was sacked. And I recognise that a lot of journalists do not have that. And so there's a delicate balance there. But in our quest to free ourselves, we have to work together. I am amazed that we still don't have unions in places because journalists need protections to assert themselves. Just be smart about how you do what you have to do in standing up for yourself and in using your voice.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 56:30

Yeah, that's a very important point. So Nana Ama, I've asked a lot of women advocates that I've actually interviewed for this podcast, and because you, in particular, I was there when somebody we worked with asked if you have a love, you have a man and I told the person, Nana Ama is in a relationship.

Nana Ama Asante 56:53

I don't know where people get that idea from, because I think you really have to be weak to be intimidated by this thing that I'm doing or radio. The whole time I was on Citi I was in a relationship. I've always been in a relationship. A loving, warm and happy relationship. A relationship that I'm happy with. The relationship I am in was a relationship I was in for the last six years. Yes, six years. He's not intimidated by me. I do some things, and he thinks I like fighting but it's not a source of tension between us. I suppose it's also because we sort of have the same politics. We care about some of the same things, and my work has never been a source of tension. In fact, I think it is what attracted him to me. So that I don't have the man, that is so-

Betty Kankam-Boadu 57:50

And it's also crazy for me how people make those connections. I'm doing my job, what has that got to do with whether I have a man or I don't have a man?

Nana Ama Asante 57:58

It's control, right? I think it's because women are not supposed to speak like that or write like that. We are not supposed to in the Ghanaian context. We are not supposed to be seen and not heard. That's ridiculous. That's not how it works.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 58:16

It is ridiculous. Nana Ama, this has been such a delightful conversation.

Nana Ama Asante 58:21

Thank you. I'm really glad we did this

Betty Kankam-Boadu 58:24

Thank you Nana Ama for not backing down despite the abuse and all the attempts to silence you. Thank you for listening to Inspiring Open, a podcast series from Wiki Loves Women. This first series of Inspiring Open was funded through the International Relief Fund for organisations in culture and education 2021, an initiative of the German Federal Foreign Office, the Goethe Institute and other partners; and an annual grant from the Wikimedia Foundation. If you enjoyed today's show, subscribe on Spotify, Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to your podcasts so you never miss an episode. Feel free to share, rate and review us. We appreciate the support. You can also tag us in your posts. We are @WikiLovesWomen on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. I'll leave you with the words of Ntozake Shange. "Sisterhood is important because we are all we have to stand on. We have to stand near and by each other, pray for one another and share the joys and the difficulties that women face in the world today. If we don't talk about it amongst ourselves, then we are made silent by the patriarchy. And that serves us no purpose. Until next time, look after yourselves and your sisters. And remember, be inspired, be challenged, be bold. I am Betty Kankam-Boadu and you've been listening to Wiki Loves Women, Inspiring Open.