



# Welcome Speech by Afolabi Aiyela, Executive Director of The Initiative for Equal Rights (TIERs) 2025 Human Rights, Sexuality & The Law Symposium.

Distinguished guests, esteemed colleagues, partners, friends, and champions of human rights, Good morning, and welcome to the 2025 Human Rights, Sexuality & the Law Symposium. It is an honour to stand before you today as we gather once again for this important convening—one that has become, over the years, a defining space for reflection, truth-telling, and collective action. My gratitude goes first to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) for graciously hosting us here at the headquarters once more - just as you did last year and in times past. Your continued support is not only deeply appreciated but also symbolic of the critical role national institutions must play in safeguarding the dignity and rights of all Nigerians.

This year's theme, "Responsive Democracy: Protecting Human Dignity through Diversity, Equity & Inclusion," could not be more timely. As our nation begins to look toward the upcoming elections, we are confronted with an urgent question: What does democracy truly mean if it does not protect everyone?

Nigeria today is navigating a period of profound insecurity, economic strain, and declining trust in public institutions. From the tragic violence in different State's, to the relentless rise in kidnappings, hunger, and structural inequalities, citizens across the country are calling—pleading—for justice, for accountability, and for governance that listens.

Those of us who live at the margins— Key populations, persons living with HIV, persons with disabilities, women, young people, ethnic and religious minorities—continue to bear the heaviest cost of criminalization, stigma, and neglect. Laws like the SSMPA, along with pervasive moral panic and sociocultural queer-phobia, legitimize violence, fuel blackmail, and deny our fellow citizens safety and belonging.

These realities remind us that the erosion of rights is not merely a social issue; it is a democratic issue. A democracy that excludes, that selectively protects, or that turns its back on the vulnerable is not a democracy functioning as it should. And so today, we gather not only to discuss challenges, but to reimagine the possibilities of a Nigeria where dignity is non-negotiable, and inclusion is foundational—not optional.

At its core, this symposium is a call to action. A call to move beyond symbolic gestures toward governance that is truly responsive—governance rooted in empathy, in historical awareness, and in a commitment to protect the dignity of every Nigerian. It challenges us to imagine, and then build, a democracy where



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diversity is not feared nor misunderstood, where equity is not contested, and where inclusion is not a privilege but a promise kept. I want to extend my heartfelt appreciation to our Keynote Speaker, Arit Okpo, whose voice continues to reshape narratives and amplify truth in powerful ways. Thank you for lending your wisdom and presence to this year's convening.

To our distinguished panelists—thank you for your courage, your advocacy, and the depth of expertise you bring to these conversations. Your interventions today will help us chart new paths toward equity and justice.

And to every organization represented here today—diplomatic missions, government partners, civil society colleagues, religious leaders, educators, media professionals, and members of diverse human rights movements—thank you for choosing to stand with us. The work ahead requires all of us, in solidarity and in truth.

I must also recognize the exceptional team at TIERs. Your commitment to truth, your resilience in the face of immense pressure, and your unwavering belief in a more just Nigeria and beyond, are the reason we can convene spaces like this. Thank you for your brilliance and your heart.

As we begin today's conversations, let us remember: The measure of a nation is not how it treats the powerful, but how it safeguards those most at risk.

Thank you for being here. Thank you for your courage. And thank you for choosing to imagine a Nigeria where every person—no matter who they are—can live, love, and thrive in dignity.

I wish us all meaningful conversations and a transformative symposium.

Welcome.