

*Full Length Research Paper*

# The role of women in peacemaking, conflict and rehabilitation management in Elele, Ikwerre Local Government of Rivers State, Nigeria

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**The basic energies common to all human beings have been directed in such a way that men seek power and women protect men from the consequences of excessive power. At the close of every war, destroyed communities have been rebuilt, and much of the physical labour of rebuilding is often heaped on women. Another activity traditionally expected of women is conflict resolution, since it is troublesome to go to war all the time. The old practice of marrying the daughters of one village to the sons of the next was a war avoidable strategy.**

**Key words:** Conflict, Elele, role of women, Nigeria, peace making.

## INTRODUCTION

The roles of women in this modern age have changed after generations of silence. Women's stories of their struggles for social change, justice, and for peace are beginning to be told (Ferris, 2004). There are a significant number of stories in Northern Ireland of women protesting against violence (Shannon, 1989), of Palestinian and Israeli women trying to overcome barriers of distrust and enmity, of the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, of Japanese women protesting racism and nuclearism, of South African women whose long history of non-violent resistance has been central to that country's struggle, of Nigerian women taking over the market place, the aged women from Erei, Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State, protesting in Calabar, half-naked over what they called disenfranchisement and illegal arrest of their sons' during the local government election held in the state recently, etc.

This paper is focused on the heroism of women in maintaining peace in Elele community in Ikwerre Local

Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. Despite the patriarchal nature of the community and the society at large, the women were able to fashion out a role for themselves like peace making amongst other things. This is not an uncommon fit. It is a commendable role. It is with this in mind that we are able to talk about the role of women in peace making in Elele Community in Ikwerre Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria.

## Research statement

Apparently, there is a remarkable difference between the perception of women to peace and that of men, though a variety of approaches and strategies which is a shared conviction is on how to avoid as well as end violence which threatens life.

## Research question

What differences exist in the peacemaking efforts of women and men in Elele Community and the entire human society?

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## Research objective

The objective of the study is to determine the peace making process and efforts of women in Elele community in Ikwerre Local Government of Rivers State of Nigeria, in order to specifically explicate the roles of women in peace making and the motivating force behind their efforts.

## CHARACTERISTICS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF WOMEN'S WORK FOR PEACE

Birgit Brock-Utne, cited in Gnanadason et al. (2005), has enumerated the characteristics and significance of women's work for peace as follows:

- i. It is connected to the concern for human life, especially for children, but also for themselves and other women.
- ii. It makes use of a varied set of non-violent techniques, acts and strategies.
- iii. It is transpolitical, often transnational, and is aimed at reaching other women in the opposite camp.

## The concept of peace

According to Okai (2008), peace means freedom from quarrel, strife, conflict, rioting, disorder, hostility, violence, or war. Halverstadt (1991) maintained that "peace is a state of existence where the claims and needs of all (that is) are satisfied; where there is relationship of communion between God, humans and nature, and where there is fulfillment for all creation". Hence, peace can not be built by following a negative path but primarily concentrating on the positive affirmation of peace.

Peace is a period of time in which there is no war or violence in a country or an area. Peace is therefore, equated with harmony, calmness, tranquility, well-being, etc. The apparent absence of these qualities is seen as the sign of conflicts, which could be either overt and or latent. This harmony and freshness provided farmers with good crops, fishermen with overwhelming absolute catches while hunters with enough game. When there was enough food for everyone to eat, peace would reign in homes, families, communities, clans and kingdoms. No one had any reason to be envious of anybody. Communities could live in peace, visit one another during the off-seasons attending weddings, festivals as well as funerals.

## What is a community?

According to Wehmeier et al. (2005), community is a group of people who have the same religion, race, job,

etc., for example, the Nigerian community in India or the Nigerian Community in the USA and or South Africa. Community therefore could be described as a group of persons living in one place, district or country. These groups of people have the same religion, race, occupation, etc., and with common interests in most cases.

These communities are made up of families. According to Alam et al. (2009) and Alam (2009), families are made up of literate and non-literate people, business executives, farmers, traders, teachers, civil servants, casual labourers, etc. The families and its environments provide the child with his first social experiences. It is a social entity because; it contains a group of people who functions together as a unit. It is a psychological entity because each one of its members has needs, feelings and attitudes, which are of importance to them and to the family and to the economic entity.

## The peace making process

Despite the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society and indeed the entire African continent, women start the peace keeping efforts through positive child care. Especially, the girls are "reared to be docile, obedient and nice. In many places, they are brought up to believe that their role is to serve men, to sacrifice their own needs for the good of the man, for the well-being of the family". When they become women and mothers, they are committed, loyal and are role models. That is why the traditional African society assigns to them the role of educators. The role starts from the cradle and is involved in the activities the child participates in both at home and among his peers. Peace making is implanted into the child's mind gradually and molded in the behavior and personality of the child through the agency of the family and mother (Oluyemi-Kusa, 2007). Certain myths given to the children were meant to emphasize that war was bad as they grow up. The children remained with their mothers, who taught them the behavior and ethos of the society and impressed on them the importance of such values as honesty, uprightness, sincerity and or truthfulness, etc., through their motherly role, the culture of peace is entrenched in the children as a foundation for peaceful living in the family, the community and the society as a whole.

Secondly, peace making through marriage when clan flight and there is death, steps are usually taken by women to forestall future occurrences (Mutunga, 2005). The women go into marriages involving the two parties. The objective is to heal the wounds created as a result of the war and cement the settlement of the cause of the war. The marriage is to bind the two groups and thus minimize the possibility of another conflict. In the thick of the war also, a man's life could be spared when a woman stepped in front of him when he was about to be killed.

In this way, his life could be saved. Women play a key role in saving the lives of those considered to be of high standing in the community. Women soften sentences considered to be too severe or which could also lead to revolt or revenge (Boulding, 1988). The Umuada or Umunwenes<sup>1</sup> are responsible for reconciling and settling individuals in their communities when there is conflict.

Thirdly, the role of the elderly women is very important. The elderly women are respected by all, they play a key role in crisis management and peace making in the community. When a conflict degenerates into armed violence, an appeal would be made to a third party of mature years, to calm the situation and reconcile the warring parties. In a way whenever war broke out, the women of the clan goes out to meet with the opposing clan and places themselves between the fighters in order to make them see reason. If the effort proves fruitless, the women would threaten to expose their nakedness and walk round the community.

Furthermore, in this community, it is structured in ways that encourage cohesiveness and peaceful co-existence from time to time like any other human society. It also experiences conflicts, which may arise between individuals within a family, between different families or between the inhabitants of different territories.

To manage such conflicts, traditional society had well-organized regulatory machinery in which women generally played a major part. A woman under this condition are recognized as playing an advisory role, behind the scene especially where the husband was concerned and as playing proactive role in strengthening solidarity and social harmony in general. It is important to note that in this community, the wife or women exercises a consideration influence over her husband. The wife becomes the most influential adviser of her husband in the intimacy of their bedroom.

It is important to note that, part of the meals shared with the whole family, the traditional wife in the community would reserve a dish called "the bed dish" which she gives to her husband at the bed time. It is during that intimate meal and time that confidential conversations do take place between husband and wife. The wife may call the husband by the name of her first son or daughter as well as give him some topical facts of life. That advice would immensely influence the decisions which the husband may later take. Sometimes, the husband is faced with a problem and would want to postpone his decisions until after meeting with his wife the following night to seek her opinion/consent over certain matters.

Equally, the women in the community arbitrate conflicts between human beings and most times serve as intermediaries in conflicts between human being and nature. For example, any misfortune occurring in the community

brought the women to seek the mediation of the married women. In the community, misfortune and calamities were taken to imply the existence of conflicts between the people. The women can therefore, appease the gods of the land through sacrifice and other related practices.

Women are also used to consolidate peace packs in the community. In a situation where there is serious battle between two communities, a "blood pack" could be reached in which a girl could be offered to the other family of the victim of war as a form of reparation. This will preclude any future conflict between the descendants of the two clans within the two being linked intimately for life.

According to Kure (2010), "women are more tolerant. They are very supportive to the men; and can help in bringing factions together". Traditionally, women are seen as closer to the life-giving earth, associated with fertility and circles. Women as nature, as sexuality, as fertility, as fertility are mythic images deeply embedded in our cultural psyches (Gnanadason et al., 2005).

Apparently, women have played many roles in various societies throughout history. She has been a wife, a mother, a farmer, a labourer, business executive, a teacher, a volunteer worker ... Most women have combined two or more of these roles. Throughout the countries, almost every society has developed definite ideas of what are proper for women (Epstein, 1981). These are divided into two parts. One focuses on overall process, the other is on the role of women in the process

### What motivates women for peace?

Women are motivated to act for peace because they are mothers agonizing over the disappearance of their children; disenfranchisement and lack of justice in the society. They are not happy over continued violence which destroys their families.

### METHODOLOGY

The paper is a meta-analytical study (Babbie and Mouton, 2001) which relied on secondary sources of information such as text book, newspaper, magazines, and journal articles. It is a qualitative study which is based on conceptual, historical and theoretical analysis. It considers women's role in peace-making, conflict resolution and rehabilitation from and an emic perspective (Ukpere, 2010).

### DISCUSSION OF FINDING

It is every community's wish to have a peaceful co-existence with its neighbours. Then, what is peace? Peace is freedom from strife, quarrel, rioting, conflict, disorder, hostility, war or violence. Peace also refers to a state of existence where entitlements and desires of everyone are satisfied. It is also a state where there is intimacy

<sup>1</sup> Umuada stands for the first daughters; Umunwene stands for maternal relations

between God, humans and nature, and fulfillment for all creation. Therefore, peace cannot be built by following a negative path but primarily concentrating on the positive affirmation of peace. Women start the peace keeping efforts through positive child care. Especially, the girls are "reared to be docile, obedient and nice. In many places, they are brought up to believe that their role is to serve men, to sacrifice their own needs for the good of the man, for the well-being of the family and community. More than that, women are more concerned about the maintenance of peace within their families in particular and communities at large because, as mothers they bear the brunt of continued disappearance of their children and the violence which destroys their families.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, there are three characteristics of women's work for peace, namely:

1. The concern for human life, especially for children, but also for themselves and other women.
2. They make use of a varied set of non-violent techniques, acts and strategies.
3. They are transpolitical, often transnational, and aimed at reaching other women in the opposite camp.

More than that, women are the "bedrock" of peace because women intercede for the betterment of the community and society at large. Their role starts from cradle to grave. The substance of any community depends on the way the women decide to nurture the incoming generation. Their natural role has been that of peace making and not of war.

### MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

Women have the tendency to encourage more participatory conflict resolution. They prefer to resolve issues through inclusion and attempt to enhance negotiating member's self-worth. Nowadays, emphases are given to teamwork, flexibility, information sharing and trust instead of rigidity, competitive individualism, control and secrecy. Women seem to have excelled in the former (Robbins et al., 2003). A peace facilitator is as well a good listener and motivator, who provides support to the people within a given community. Several women seem to do these things better. The leadership styles women typically use can make them better at resolving conflict, as they are inclined to treat dialogues from the perspective of an ongoing relationship- working hard to make the other party a winner in its own and other's eyes

(Robbin and Judge, 2009). Hence, women tend to be more polite at resolving conflict than men. They use soft persuasive tactics rather than direct confrontation and threats. They lay emphasis on a win-win solution and create an open and trusting climate to resolve conflict and promote peaceful co-existence.

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