Conflict Resolution and Peace Building: The Gender Question in the Niger Delta Crisis in Nigeria

Ogege, Samuel O. **-** Department of Sociology, Delta State University, Abraka
E-mail: samtase@yahoo.com

Abstract

The paper examines the strategic approaches adopted by women and the socio-cultural obstacles that impede women active participation in conflict resolution and peace building process in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Conflict has become a recognizable feature in the oil rich region. The activities of the multinational oil companies have ushered in various manifestations of conflict, resulting from intra/ intercommunity feud, communities agitation for resource control, fulfillment of social exchange obligations and widespread protests over the monumental degradation of the Niger Delta environment by the activities of the multinational oil companies and the repressive measures adopted by the Nigerian state in suppressing the inhabitants from expressing their displeasure. The various forms of conflict have a far-reaching but negative effect on the womenfolk and as such should be made to participate in conflict resolution and peace building process. On the contrary, they are made to believe that their rightful gender role is in the home front as housewives, mothers, and caregivers while the men carry on with important societal roles of conflict resolution and peace building. The paper argues that women by their nature are home managers, calm and lover of peace. Thus, adopt non confrontational or violent free strategies when tackling issues of conflict and peace building. The paper suggests that gender discriminatory policies and legislations in our society should be jettisoned so

as to give women the chance to actively participate in conflict resolution and peace building process in the Niger Delta.

Keywords: Nigeria, Women, Conflict, Peace

Introduction

One of the fundamental issues in conflict resolution and peace building in the Niger Delta has been that of the exclusion of women from the process. The involvement of women folks in decision making, conflict management and post conflict process of where peace building features, is limited in the Niger Delta as well as in other societies in Nigeria. This could be explained from the socio-cultural impediments placed on the women folks that facilitate their relegation to the background. The contributions of the women in any of the above mentioned areas are mere suggestions and most often jettisoned at critical decision times. The relegation of women to the background even in matters that affect them directly like peace and security emanate from the home or the private domain into the general society (Sheila 1999, Shertima, 2001). However, women have been able to force their way through protest and dialogue though, to a very little extent in tackling issues and matters that affect them in the Niger Delta region.

It is a common knowledge that in conflict and war situations, women suffer most alongside their children, even though they were neither consulted nor partook in the disagreement that snowballed into conflict. Nevertheless, they are forced to bear the loss of spouses, children and care for the wounded, displaced, raped and lived with the psychological trauma for life. However, when it is time for conflict resolution and peace building, only the men are involved as members of delegations to negotiate peace. (Oppong and Oppong 1987, Scott 1996)

Irrespective of their relegation, the women folks have tried in various ways in averting, checking and halting otherwise threatening situations to peace and security in the history of Nigeria in general and the Niger Delta in particular. There were women like: Madam Tinubu of Lagos, Queen Amina of Zaria, Margaret Ekpo of Calabar/Abia, Fumnilayo Kuti, to mention a few. These women held sway, amidst exercising political powers and employing diplomacy, a prominent tool in achieving peace. In the African scene, the peace building process, women form organizations to achieve their goal in that direction. Mano River Women's Peace Network MRWPN, Liberian

Women's Initiative (LWI) Association of Female Lawyers in Liberia (AFLL) Sierra Leone Women's Movement for Peace (SLWMP) among others (Oluyemi - Kusa 2004). In the present time, as a result of the women not being part of formal decision making, women have to rely on alternative mechanisms to voice out their demands. Thus, in spite of the exclusion of the women, they have been influential in peace processes as was the case in the oil-rich Niger Delta where major Multinational oil companies like Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), Exxon Mobil, Chevron, Texaco, Elf Petroleum Nigeria, Agip, etc, explore oil. According to Ransom et al (2001), women are not usually inclined towards violence; they get involved in a purposeful fashion, to either protect themselves or their children. Their aggression also is often not out of control, unlike men who seem to be innately violent. In a corroborative manner, Oluyemi - Kusa asserts thus:

> Men tend to go into negotiations expecting one side to win and another to loose whereas -women look for points of commonality and less afraid to compromise... This admirable trait of talk to finish rather than fight-to-finish distinguishes the female gender. ...In many instances, when talks breakdown on the big issues and the men walk out, the women are left at the table and... pave way for the men to return and discuss...(Oluyemi Kusa 2003:8).

Against this background, the paper examines the strategies adopted by women in conflict resolution and peace building and the socio-cultural obstacles that impede their active participation in the resolution of conflict and peace building process in Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Conflict Resolution and Peace Building: Conceptual Clarification
Conflict resolution is most times used to mean the same thing with conflict management and conflict transformation. Conflict resolution according to Miller (2003) is a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through the constructive solving of problems, distinct from management or transformation of conflict. Miall et al (2001) stress that in any conflict resolution, it is expected that the deep rooted sources of the conflict are addressed and resolved, and behaviour is no longer violent, nor are attitudes hostile any longer, while the structure of the conflict has been changed. Mitchell and Banks (1996) succinctly bring out the meaning of conflict resolution. According to them it:

> It is an outcome in which the issues in an existing conflict are satisfactorily dealt with through a solution that is mutually acceptable to the parties, self-sustaining in the long run and productive of a new positive relationship between parties that were previously hostile adversaries;   and any process or procedure by -which such an outcome is achieved. (Mitchell and Bank 1996:14)

Conflict management is the process of reducing the negative and destructive capacity of conflict through a number of measures and by working with and through the parties involved in the conflict (Burton 1990, Laung & Wudi 1990). Conflict transformation on the other hand, has to do with the coming into being of new situations involving conflict issues, perceptions, relationship and communication pattern (Lederach 1995, Otite & Albert 1999, Jeong, 2000).

What can be deduced from the above assertion is that conflict resolution connotes a sense of finality, where the parties to a conflict are mutually satisfied with the outcome of a settlement and the conflict is resolved in a true sense. Conflicts in the Niger Delta which are conflicts over resources could be permanently resolved. From the point of view of needs, a conflict is resolved when the basic needs of the parties have been met with necessary satisfiers, and their fears have been allayed (Dudley 1994, Alao, 2004).

Peace building according to Rogers and Ramsbotham (1999) is the act and process of laying structures/ activities to bring about and sustaining peace in any society. Peace includes not only absence of war, violence and hostilities at the national and international levels but also the enjoyment of all economic and social justice, equality and the entire range of human rights and fundamental freedoms within the society (Rawwida, 2005; Alazonba, 2006; Lederach (1997) maintains that peace building touches on the underlying structural, relational and cultural roots of conflict. For him, peace building comprises all those multi level strategies that seek to address the underlying causes of violent conflicts, either to prevent them from arising initially or a re-occurrence if conflict had once erupted. Fetherson (2000) lend credence to the above position.

In the United Nations (UN), an Agenda for Peace Document (1995), peace building was said to consist of a wide range of activities associated with capacity building, reconciliation and societal transformation. Peace building is a long-term process that occurs after violent conflict has slowed down or

come to a halt (Adibushi 1997, Mani 2002). Peace building therefore, specifically connotes moves after conflict to restore peace. Peace building is a process of facilitating the enthronement of lasting peace, attempts at exhuming and then addressing the root cause of violence for prevention of reoccurrence, minimizing and obliterating the effects of conflict, institution building, political and economic transformation carried out through a set of physical social and structural initiatives (Rosario: 2005). The central intent of conflict resolution and peace building is to create a positive peace and security that translates into a stable, social equilibrium in which the reoccurrence of fresh disputes does not escalate and degenerate into armed conflict (Azakar, 2003)

Women Initiatives in Conflict Resolution and Peace Building in the Niger Delta

Protests be it (violent and non violent) in the Niger Delta do not occur in a vacuum, they arise as a result of economic exploitation and the social injustice meted on the inhabitants of the host communities of this region. In most cases according to Ogege (2007), they are violent outcome to articulate the desires of the people while expressing their heart-felt displeasure against the economic repression and criminal neglect of the oil producing areas by the federal government as well as the multinational oil companies. The forms of protest include the halting of oil production, prevention of construction work, damage to property, sabotage, theft and hostage taking. (Kubeuinje & Nezianya, 1999, Jike 2004).

There exists a relationship between the exploration and upstream activities of the oil companies and the experience of the people in the respective host communities in the region. It is a known fact that there is a gross level of deprivation and violation of socio-economic rights of inhabitants of the host communities. The impact of these hardships is more visible on the women because apart from the social services they render as result of their gender role, the woman is the food provider and care taker of the children, her spouse and vulnerable dependant relatives within her household. In addition to this, women are involved in farming, fishing, food processing, marketing etc in the rural setting of the host communities (Igube, 2007). The life of the woman in the rural communities naturally revolves around these activities; it is the core of their livelihood (Ijere, 1999). As a result environmental degradation by oil companies in the regions, the economic activities and means of subsistence of inhabitants especially women are adversely affected.

Women in the Niger Delta have contributed individually and jointly with their male counterparts for the resolution of the incessant disturbances that often arise in the Niger Delta. However, it is commendable to note that it is non-violent strategies that are always adopted by the women in the quest for social justice. In an attempt to register their displeasures, women have used a variety of resistance forms such as dancing and singing, demonstration and strikes, testimonies and silence, cultural specific responses like stripping naked, refusing to change work routine, participating in women's meeting and struggling to maintain their daily routines amidst the chaos and violence that surrounds them (WARDC, 2006). The role of women in mobilizing for social justice being a dimension of peace building in the Niger Delta represents a significant development. In the past, elders and young males have been the arrowhead of communal struggle against the oil companies. These demonstrations often times end in violent confrontations.

The testimony of the Niger Delta women of the Ogoni region at the Oputa Panel set up by the federal government in 1999 gave a scary picture and provides a troubling example of the extent women suffered, being at the receiving end of the several conflicts that have characterized the region. The women became widows, they were sexually assaulted, raped and became a weapon of conflict in the hands of the ethnic militia and the Nigeria security forces who were supposed to protect citizens from both internal and external invasions.

The Niger Delta women have embarked on series of initiatives and had truce with the foreign oil explorers, who on their own part reneged on their agreement with the women. In the Delta State experience, the role of women may be seen in their mobilization to take actions that may in turn cause a conflict. In most cases, when thing are getting out of hand, women carry out peaceful actions to provoke a reaction on the responsible parties to correct the perceived anomalies. In several occasions, the enormity of the circumstances forces the women to march around town naked to protest on injustice or the other, and at times these actions may then result in a major conflict. It is also known that women tends to discourage their husband's sons and brothers from taking part in conflicts to enable them pursue their businesses unhindered as they are in most cases the 'breadwinners' in the area.

The role played by the Ugborodo and Gbaramatu women of Delta State, over the alleged illegal occupation of the oil rich area by the multinational oil

companies, (Okpowo, 2002) shows the possibility of a meaningful resolution of conflict, an enduring intervention and post conflict reconstruction. It reveals the role of women as critical stakeholders in conflict situation and that survival is no longer only a male concern. Women's struggle for liberation in Warri for instance, was seen in their efforts towards using a non-violent approach in resolving the various conflicts. The Ugborodu women's invasion of the Chevron/Texaco Escravos tank in July, 2002 was historic in different ramifications. This was followed suit by the women of Gbaramatu. In both cases, the effect of oil exploration had produced debilitating effects on the people traditional occupation - fishing and farming. The land has become unproductive and only deep-sea fishing which is very expensive and cumbersome is available to the people. The multinational companies in both cases mainly Shell, Chevron/Texaco and Elf treated the people and the environment with utmost disregard and neglect (Jike, 2002; Ogege, 2007a).

The invasion took several fascinating forms while it was hidden from the male folks; it involved a period of prayer/fasting. On the appointed day, the women from both communities divided themselves into groups and took over the Escavos tank and the Chevron flow stations. While this was going on, another group of women drawn from the three major ethnic groups in the Niger Delta staged a peaceful protest in front of Shell Petroleum Development Company headquarters in Warri, singing, dancing and preventing personnel and vehicles' movements in and out of the complex. It was a peaceful protest but the women were dispersed violently when they were swooped on by the repressive security agents (mobile policemen) of the state (Adekunbi, 2002).

The doggedness of the women to pursue their action became very problematic for Chevron management that both parties had to engage in discussion that lasted for eleven days. Although the process of negotiation was quite knotty, the women did not end their invasion until they were sure that their demands were addressed by a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The signing of the five years MOU between the Ugborodo community and Chevron marked a watershed in the agitation spearheaded by the women. The community representatives, Chevron management and the government of Delta State jointly signed the MOU, imposed demand on the oil company and the Ugborodo community. Three years after the signing of the MOU, nothing happened in terms of implementation of those demands.

The socioeconomic conditions of the people further worsened in spite of the existence of the agreement.

In other to redress this non-implementation of the MOU, renewed agitation arose and this culminated in the protest of February 2005 by the Ugborodo women. This time however, the women were confronted and viciously resisted by the security forces. They were beaten, tortured and brutalized by the armed policemen and solders unlike in 2002 when they were treated with kid gloves for eleven days. As a result of the difficulties Chevron faced in keeping the MOU on track, due to the severe ethnic crises on its business, it engaged other stakeholders and this lead to the emergence of a new Global Memorandum of Understanding (GMOU). The new GMOU, in 2005 was an outcome of the community engagement and stakeholder consultation, anchored on multi-lateral relationship and requires all stakeholders to jointly do things in their benefits.

Similar situation occurred in Port Harcourt, River State like the Warri case in Delta State. In that of Port Harcourt, no MOU was signed. The major causes of the conflict in Port Harcourt include the desire to share the proceeds of the natural crude resources in the area. The fight and struggle got worst as a result of the general poverty in the land. For women to demonstrate their hatred for violent conflict in the area there was protest against the move to start any violent conflict or stop the conflict. The non violent approach of the women was for the Ogoni women to protest through March to the Rivers State house of Assembly in April 2005 against the moves to revive the suspended Andoni/Ogoni crisis. There was also protest/rally by the Kalabari women to speak against violent conflict in the area in 2004 and 2005.

In the light of the above, it is seen that women have successfully intervened in non-violent manners for clean environment and resource control following extreme pollution of their waters and lands by the activities of the multinational oil companies which pose not only environmental and health hazards but a threat to the economic life and survival of the people. A case in point explained above was the Escravos women referred to as "The Amazons" who explored a non-violent approach to achieve their goal and peace in their area. This provides a window of opportunities in conflict transformation and could be described as a best practice and also reinforces the fact that women could become great actors in conflict resolution and peace building (Ezello, 2003). The women's strategic insurgency brought a

new refreshing and effective approach that forced Chevron and Texaco to negotiate and sign agreements with the women.

Obstacles to Women Participation in Conflict Resolution and Peace Building in the Niger Delta

Despite international calls for expansions of the peace processes frontier to enable women actively participate in peace processes; inclusion of women especially in the Niger Delta is on a very low scale. Certain factors impede the involvement of women in conflict resolution and peace building in the Niger Delta. Some of these impediments are:

- **Cultural Restrictions**: Women have been confined and prevented from participating in public life, in conformity with dictates of tradition, culture and religion. This also extends to conflict resolution and peace building processes. This is because most conflict resolution and peace building processes occur far away from original abode of the women and sometimes last for weeks or even months. The peculiar function of women as mothers and home managers further jeopardize their involvement in conflict resolution and peace building process, as their reproductive role is used to undermine their productive roles.

- **Wrong Perception of Women Activities**: Women conciliatory activities beginning from home manifests in peace and stability at both the family and societal levels. However, this is not considered as political issue as women are often seen as lacking the ability to exhibit much needed diplomacy associated with conflict resolution and peace building, hence their constant exclusion by the men folks.

- **Financial Incapacitation**: Poverty has been observed to assume a woman's face, leading to the feminization of poverty. While on the other hand, conflict resolution and peace building process and issues demand time and finance, not being a one off activity. Women are therefore, constrained from participating even when they are not expressly excluded by cultural factors but due to their financial incapacitation.

- **Educational Dispowerment**: In most communities, educating the girl child is frowned at. Thus, women are largely uneducated and uninformed, and for a sustainable conflict resolution and peace

building process, background of issues that erupted into the conflict has to be articulated and addressed. In this situation, women mostly are found wanton and excluded on the basis that they lack appreciation of the issues. This of course is unjustifiable as women understand war and bear the brunt more than any other species. However, women being victim of conflict is not to understand the intricate issues of conflict eruption.

- **Gender Stereotype**: The society arbitrarily attached roles on the basis of gender and sex. As a result of this role sharing, managing the home front and giving care etc are for the women while leadership, governance and protection of the society is exclusively allotted to men. So the women have no business in discussions concerning conflict resolution and peace building, which is directly linked to sustainable governance.

- **Source of Negotiation Team**: At the levels of conflict resolution and peace building, the negotiating team is usually drawn from the high echelon of the political class. In reality, very few women in the Niger Delta belong to this class due to the patriarchal nature of our society. This low involvement of women in politics facilitate marginalization of women in issues that border on conflict resolution and peace building in the region

Conclusion

The Niger Delta women adopt non-confrontational strategies. This is evident in the series of peaceful demonstration which though in some cases, are misunderstood by the multinational oil companies, who in collaboration with the repressive agents of the state (police and soldiers), torture and inflict injuries on women whenever there is a protest. One would want to query the attack on the women irrespective of their non-violent approach in conflict resolution and peace building. The simple explanation to this could be the absence of national legislation and legal framework backing the women despite International Declaration in Fourth World Conference on Women at the Beijing 1995, where it was asserted that:

> In addressing armed or other conflicts, an active and visible policy of mainstreaming gender perspective into all policies and programmes be promoted so that before decisions are taken, analysis is made of the effects on women and men respectively (Beijing Declaration, 2001).

Five years later, in the Beijinh + 5 special session of the United Nations General Assembly, the outcome document that state parties be called to ensure as well as support the participation of women at a level of decision making and implementation in development activities and peace processes. These statements lack force of law, but was reiterated in the groundbreaking United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 adopted on October 31st, 2000, which urged member states to ensure full inclusion of women and gender perspectives in all aspects of peace making, peace building, conflict resolution and post conflict reconstruction.

This resolution marked a milestone for women all over the world, since it recognized the significant value of gender mainstreaming in the conflict resolution and peace building operations.

It should be noted, however, that involving women in peace process and security matters should not be merely on tokenism but on account that they bring invaluable experiences from their home front into conflict resolution and peace building arena. While the men tend to focus on their own political and economic interests, women adopt the principle of prevention rather than finding solution after the event has occurred. Women's natural ability to promote peace as well as avert conflict can yield result in a non-hostile environment. For women to get involved in peace building in Niger Delta and Nigeria the government should put in place sensitive legislations and administrative polices. In other words, to ensure active participation of women in conflict resolution and peace building in the Niger Delta, the prevailing cultural obstacles should be eliminated at both community and state levels.

References

Adekunbi E. (2002): Women At War. *Tell Magazine* 26 August.

Adibushi K.. (1997): After Conflict: The Peace Building Process. *Journal of Social Issues* Vol. 19 (2).

Akiyode, A. (2000): The 11 Day-Siege: Gains and Challenges of Non Violent Struggles in the Niger Delta *A Publication of Women Advocates Research and Development Center* (WARDC).

Akiyode, A. (2004): The Paradox of Penury in the Midst of Plenty. *A Publication of Women Advocates Research and Development Center* (WARDC).

Alao A. (2004): The Role of African Regional and Sub-regional Organizations in Conflict Prevention and Resolution. *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance* vol. 16 No. 1

Alazonba C. (2006): *Conflict Resolution and Peace Building*. New York: Praeger Publisher.

Azakar B. (2003): *Conflict Resolution and Peace Building: Skills and Strategies.* London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action with Beijing + 5 (2001): Political Declaration and Outcome Document,   (United Nations Department of Public Information, New York)

Boutros-Ghali, B. (1995): Agenda for Peace, New York: United Nations.

Burton J. (1990): *Conflict Resolution and Prevention* .London: Macmillan

Dudley W. (1994): *The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution*. New York: Putnnan.

Ezello, J. N (2003): Amazons go to War without Weapon: Women and Conflict Making in Niger Delta. A paper presented at the International Seminar on *Local Approaches to Conflict Transformation* [the North and South] by CEPACS, at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, May 27 and 28.

Fetherson A.B. (2000): Conflict Resolution and Transformative Peace Building. *Journal of Peace Research***.** Vol. 29 – 37

Gaya, S.B. (2006): *Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies in West Africa*: Ibadan. Spectrum Books Ltd.

Igube R.B (2007): The Development Paradox: Women and Poverty in Nigeria*. Nigerian Sociological Review* Vol. 2(1).

Ijere M.O. (1991): *Women in the Nigerian Economy***.** Enugu: ACEA Publishers.

Jeong H.W. (2000): *Peace and Conflict Studies***.** Aldershot: Ashgate

Jike V.T. (2002): Environmental Disequilibrium and the Renaissance of Women Activism in the Warn Metropolis of Delta State *Knowledge Review***.** Vol. 5 (6).

Jike V.T. (2004): Environmental Degradation, Social Disequilibrium and the Dilemma of Sustainable Development in the Niger Delta. *Journal of Black Studies* Vol 34 (5)

Kubeuinje K.E. & Nezianya T. (1999): Oil: Mixed Blessings for Nigerian Economy. *African Recovery* Vol. 13 (1).

Lederach J.P.(1995). *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures.* New York: University Press.

Lederach, J.(1997):*Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies.* Washington DC, US Institute of Peace Press.

Leung K & Wudi, P (1990): Dispute Processing: A Cross-cultural Analysis. *Applied Cross Cultural Psychology* Vol 4 No 2.

Mani R. (2002) *Beyond Retribution: Seeking Justice in the Shadow of War.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Miall, H. Ramsbotham O. and Woodhouse, T. (1999): *Contemporary Conflict Resolution: The Prevention, Management and Transformation of Deadly Conflicts.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Miller, C.A. (2003): *A Glossary of Terms and Concepts in Peace and Conflict Studies.* (Geneva: University Press).

Oppong C. & Oppong A. (1987): *The Seven Roles of Women.* Geneva: International Labour Organization.

Ogege S. O.. (2007a): Contradictions of Democratic Governance and Its Implications for Sustainable Development in the Niger Delta. *Nigerian Sociological Review* Vol. 2 No. 1.

Ogege S.O. (2007): Externally Regulated Environment: its Implication for the Niger Delta People. *South-South Journal of Culture & Development.* Vol. 9 No.2

Okaba B. (2004): Democracy, Human Rights Abuse and Environmental Degradation in the Niger Delta. *African Conflict Profile*: Vol 1(A)

Okpowo B. (2002): Protest of Niger Delta Women. *Vanguard* 17 August.

Oluyemi - Kusa, D. (2003): Men as from Mars, Women are from Venues: Gender Roles in the Peace Process in Nigeria. A paper presented at the *National Peace Forum,* Abuja. May 10.

Oluyemi-Kusa, D. (2004): Gender, Peace and Conflict in Africa in Best (ed) *Introduction to Peace and Conflict Studies in Africa.* Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited.

Otite O. & Albert I. (1999): *Community Conflicts in Nigeria.* Ibadan: Spectrum Books.

Rogers, P. & Ramsbotham (1999): Then and Now: Peace Research Past and Future. Political studies Vol 19 (4)

Sertima I.V. (2001): Black Women in Antiquity. New Brunswick: Transaction Books.

Sheila R. (1990): Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis. *American Historical Review* 9(5)