
The Indispensability of Women in Conflict Resolution in the Niger Delta **Ijeoma Aniemeka**

Abstract

Nigeria is beset with many problems and the Niger Delta crisis is one of them. Niger Delta crisis has persisted because the appropriate strategy for resolving it has not been employed. Women have not been recognized as major stake holders in all the peace processes undertaken and they possess the natural, inherent peace building ability that need to be tapped. This paper discussed how women have helped in peace building and urges the Nigerian Government to include and empower women in peace building and political leadership in order to move the country forward.

Introduction

The richness of oil in the Niger Delta made Nigeria one of the major oil producing nations. Nigeria as a member of the Africa Union (AU), NEPAD, and ECOWAS, plays a prominent role as a peace keeper in West African sub-region. Ironically, in the Niger Delta, Nigeria has not been able to maintain peace. The area has not known peace but chaos, abduction, killing, armed robbery, prostitution and kidnapping. The effect of this, is devastation, sabotage, unemployment, militancy, lack of amenities and abject poverty.

The traditional occupation of the people is mainly fishing and farming, and therefore the Delta have a high dependency on the river and their land for survival. The rivers and the land are polluted by oil spillages and pollution. (Ukoko 2005).

The women and the children are the ones mostly hit by this devastation. The men have either fled the area for greener pastures or away on combatant

duty. The situation leads to a shift in gender roles with a dramatic increase in the number of women heads of households McAskie 2003, in Erin 2005. This happens because the women in the absence of their husbands fend for their families. As the women are the ones that feel the pinch more, they ought to be included in peace building and also women possess the natural ability to maintain peace and tranquility. (Ekiyor 2009). This paper exposed the natural abilities of women in conflict resolution and implore the appropriate authorities to always include them in any agenda for conflict resolution such as the case of the Niger Delta.

Women of Niger Delta

Women of Niger Delta face many tragedies due to the oil richness of their land. They live in fear, poverty, deprivation, degradation, environmental destruction, flowing from irresponsible oil exploration, chemical Pollution, gas flaring, high infant mortality rate, rape, dehumanization etc. The Delta woman is not different from any other African woman in terms of the numerous “hang over” the men and society have about them. Women appear to be inferior to men due to largely to their ascribed and acquired role. Women are accentuated by socio-cultural orthodoxy with a concomitant Vulnerability to deprivation, intimidation and extreme suffering, (Nkamebe 2009).

The Delta women inspite of the violence in the area still carry on these ascribed roles. According to Ijere, (1991) “Women are the back bone of rural development, they are found in Agriculture and outside it, they hold an unassailable pre-eminence, tending the children and even the husbands. The degree in disorganization and chaos that occurs when they are absent in the

house confirms the extent of their importance”. (P.1) Delta women suffer from mental torture from the killings of their sons and husbands. Ukoko (2005) wrote that in 1995, “the women of the Niger Delta watched in agony and helplessness as Ogoniland was attacked and occupied by Nigeria’s military forces ... In the process Ken Saro Wiwa and his colleagues were hanged ... the world was outraged but the tragedies continued unabated”. (P.3)

The women continue to suffer the effect of military evasion of their land. He went further to say that a soldier was caught on camera as he raped a woman in the bush. Multinational corporation’s expatriates appear to be among the clientele that patronize women whom poverty has turned into prostitutes.

Four years after the attack on Ogoniland, the Federal Government of Nigeria ordered a military attack on Odi in Bayelsa region. As Odi was destroyed many mothers buried their sons, brothers and fathers while the women of the re-region watched helplessly. In August 8th 2002 the Delta women organized themselves and went on a peaceful protest at the gate of Shell Nigeria. Shell called in their military partners, the military force who then converted a peaceful protest to into a painful experience for the women. Women in the Niger Delta have used and continue to use a variety of forms of resistance. According to Green 1999 “Women have used dancing, singing demonstrations, strikes, testimonies, silence and the use of culturally specific responses such as stripping naked. Refuse to alter work routines and habits such as opening up market stalls, collecting water participating in women’s meeting” (P.7). Despite the chaos and violence that surrounds them; they were undaunted in carrying on with their daily routines.

Women Initiatives in Conflict Resolution

The Occurrence of women's leadership and peace building initiatives has historically led to making right decision. When women's voices are heard and recognized as valuable a more sustainable economic and social stability is achieved. Several international declarations have affirmed a woman's right to participate in politics, peace building and economic development of their societies. Ironically women continue to be systematically excluded from peace talks, decision-making and societal change. In Niger Delta Nigerian Government had utilized various plans to ensure that peace reigns in Niger Delta but all to no avail. Recently the Federal Government have offered Amnesty to militants in Niger Delta, though a bold step in peace process, but according to a report from Ledum Mitee, lawyer, he said that Amnesty as it stand alone can not work. He said that militancy feeds on the sentiments of injustice and under- development of the region, Amnesty as stand alone that fails to accompany some attempt to address the issue could be counter productive. This is because it is not those who carry arms that only need to be appeased, this will mean rewarding violence.

Though women are excluded from official peace- building and conflict resolution efforts they still organize themselves in many "unofficial" ways. This they do through participation in non – profit organizations, support groups and grass roots activism in their communities in Niger Delta (Currier, 2009).

In 2002, the Niger Delta women (Nigeria) was founded. It is a charity organization, registered and based in United Kingdom. Its formation was

consequent on the August 8th 2002 military brutalization of the women's peaceful protest in Warri Delta State at Shell Nigeria's gate. The aim of this organization is to work in partnership with the Nigerian Government and the oil multinational companies to enthrone justice, peace and development in the region. The women wish to participate in conflict resolution and decision making in matters that concern them and the well being of their children. The United nation security Resolution 1325 and the 1995 Beijing women's conference recognized the need of women to work in partnership for the management of their country and empower the women of Niger Delta to seek and actively participate in the decision making process in Nigeria (Ukoko 2005).

Women play tremendous roles in the Niger Delta conflict and they must be encouraged. Ekiyor, (2009) said that the roles women play in Niger Delta are defined by their perceptions of conflict in general. She said that men view conflicts as a "struggle or war" which needs to be won and in the process of winning there are casualties. Women on the other hand view conflicts as a necessary evil in communities, and the injured and dead in these conflicts are sons and husbands to them. So unlike men they focus on the cessation of violence and rehabilitation of their homes.

There are other women organizations such as the Federation of Ogoni women's organization FOWA. Through the actions of FOWA women actions became highly publicized. The women engaged actively with the elders and the youths in the struggle against shells activities and for the political autonomy of their land. Together with the youth branch of the

movement for the survival of the Ogoni peoples (Mosop), the women of FOWA was given “Unprecedented power within a democratic configuration” (Iumer 1997).

The FOWA members also used their position as and status as mothers to work with the youths who were in effect their sons or the age of their sons. Barikor – Wiwa (1996) as quoted in Ekinne (2000) said that FOWA in opposition to some locally politically motivated traditional leaders actively advocated the boycott of the 1993 presidential elections. She said

Of course they spoke, they tried to work on that at home. But besides they had lots of strike with their children, especially their sons. It was most effective with their sons and of course somebody’s husband is another women’s son. And so it was that bond. It is a traditional thing. You were a great man if you could respect your mother. So they did that.

Niger Delta women are agents of change using their culturally specific methods and their positions as mothers to persuade their husbands and sons, thereby the mosop the Technical committee on Niger Delta (TCND) the MEND to take decision that the women advocate for.

Ekinne (2001) found out that between June and August 2002, thousands of women occupied no less than eight oil facilities belonging to Chevron, Tetaco and Shell petroleum including Chevron main oil terminal at Escravos in Delta state. He went on to say that:

First, never before had so many women taken series of actions against an oil company within such a short period. Second the actions in particular the initial occupation of Escravos oil terminal, were highly organized. The women divided themselves into seven groups, each occupying a different strategic area of the complex, including the main office building third, because the actions taken by the women – all mothers and grandmothers whose age ranged from 30 to 90 – had been organized collectively in the interest of their community at large, they had the complete support of their communities including their husbands, the youth elders and chiefs etc.

Women of the Niger Delta were relentless in their pursuit of freedom and demands. They confronted the oil companies with ingenuous and powerful weapons. Some of these weapons are “Sitting on one’s self” that is to stand silently with dignity as a mature woman. Mamhela Ramphele opined that inclusion of women’s coping mechanisms “the decision not to act as a powerful act in itself” (Cited in Green 1999; 153). “In other words what appear as doing nothing is, in effect making a choice not to do anything” This appears that some women in the Niger Delta region had survived by a silence that allowed them to disengage from their surroundings and continued to live and hold themselves with dignity that denied their violators any sense of victory.

Women in the Niger Delta had also resorted to using the “curse of nakedness’ as a weapon after they had failed to have their demands met through more conventional protest actions. Through greatly feared and rarely used nakedness as a form of protest is illegitimate within the cultural context of the Niger Delta.

There is also the existence of Niger Delta women for justice. This organization facilitates the empowerment of the women especially those at the remote villages. This they do by creating awareness amongst them as regards to their human and environmental rights. The member of this organization publishes abuses meted on the women in the dailies. They call upon the government officials and the first ladies to come to the rescue of these disadvantaged women.

Traditionally, peace making has been the role of women. Ijere (1991) said that “women are the impartial arbitrators in family or clan disputes or disagreements”. In situations of war, between ethnic group women are called on to initiate a ceasefire. This is because they are regarded as life givers, life sustainers and society builders. They are also responsible for nurturing children, and also taking care of their feeding health and training. Experience from the international scene asserts the benefit of involving women in decision making.

Many countries had implemented this resolution like Rwanda. In Rwanda, women were mobilized for peace and its sustainability is unique. In Rwanda culture, women are perceived as being better skilled than men. At

reconciliation women provided the political space necessary for women to obtain greater role in Government Operations. Women were mainstreamed. Into every level of political bodies a triple – balloting system ensured women received their own ballot, women council were developed to parallel local councils.

Today Rwanda has more women in government offices than any other country in the world. Ekiyor Thelms writing on women of Africa network peace WANEP said

Women are rising to the occasion of transformation and peace building processes they now actively participate in decision that affect their lives in very encouraging ways. Like Sierra Leonean and Liberia women are increasingly being heard and seen demanding from political leader and the international community their right to be included in processes that affect their lives and the lives of their children (P.5).

She went further to assert that this lesson from Sierra and Liberia justifies the saying that women have the natural and inherent peace building attributes. And for this they have greater role to play in the African society and by extension the world.

In this same vein a study conducted by Zur, Monrism and Zaresky 1990 in Ekiyor (1991) on gender attitude differences towards war shows that men are more prone than women to accept, condone or justify any acts of violence, killing and destruction during war. Men, more than women, accept stereotypical sex roles during war. Men as warriors and protectors of women and women as care givers to the injured and the sick support war at least as

enthusiastically as men when an appeal is made based on empathy for oppressed and vulnerable human being or an emphasis is placed on group cohesion and intensification of interpersonal relationships in the country during war. The authors went on to highlight various attributes of women that lean towards peacemaking. One of such attribute they say is affection. They asserted that scholars have proven that girls think more in terms of relationships than boys do, that they care more for other human beings show more empathy, and think more about human and social consequences of acts.

This cultural belief that women are the peacemakers of society and the respect for mothers, should be believed as vital cultural resources to draw on in order to assert the women folk on the male dominated political societies. Jenni Williams (2003) Director Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) Bulwayo Zimbabwe said

The proposed solution to this dilemma's civil resistance or what she calls "tough love" In other words, Zimbabweans need to love their country enough to fight for its sustainability. She observed that throughout history, women have been the true liberators of societies. By opening minds and encouraging people to think about their dilemma's women can help to foster change in these challenging circumstances. (P.2)

Williams also urged humanitarian organizations to continue to bear upon presidents to give peace a chance by allowing and encouraging women organization.

Eulie Nibizi in Ukoko 2005 gave her own experience from Burundi. Her experiences provided another context for understanding the role of women. The organized women appealed to the male – dominated peace negotiations, lobbying for permission to participate in them. Nibizi observed that when the goals of women resonate with government policy objectives, the possibility for full implementation is enhanced. She said that it is easier to talk about peace when there is commonality of economic and social interest.

Some scholars also acclaim the efficacy of women in peace-making. His holiness the Dalai Lama (1990) emphasized in his forward to the book *All her paths are peace*, that mothers are crucial to the affective development of all human beings. He points out that all of us receive our first lessons in peaceful living from our mothers. The lesson he said is the very foundation of human existence. He went on to describe peaceful living as “trusting those on whom we depend and caring for those who depend on us. He said that both of these qualities were initially experienced in our relationships with our mothers. In any situation of conflict the basic factor is usually lack of trust without trust, parties conceal their needs fears, aspirations and cling to positions. They are blinded to the humanity in themselves and others. Such unconscious behaviour inhibits transformation, which is the recognition of the humanity of one self and others and being empowered to rise above fears, hatred and guilt to seek workable solutions. The presence of women no doubt will help in stabilizing tensions in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Another attribute of women is their concept of power. At the heart of any conflict is the issue of power. It is the manifestation of power that leads to

the protection of positions. Feminist peacemakers such as Alice Utoko argue that the dominant and competing form of power to which men are oriented is in actual sense powerlessness. Women maintain that the ultimate goal of any power should be happiness or pleasure and felicity. Co-operation with nature, the willingness to be vulnerable risk taking, empathy listening, caring for humanity and co-operating with even those we consider our enemies is power in its highest existential understanding.

Even the former prime minister of India Mahatma Gandhi on a speech on world peace in (1963) expressed his faith in women's potential for peacemaking. He said that he has absolute faith in women's potential for peacemaking, that women are the only ones who could save the world. Another notable scholar Anns Msekwe (2001) former Agricultural Minister in Tanzania describes women as the "Missing link in the peacemaking chain (P.7) he also said that women's nurturing qualities, now muted must come out into the public light to purify politics and to tip the balance to peace and decency.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted various attributes of women that leans towards peacemaking. Women are more affectionate in their relationship with others, more than the men. Women care more for other human beings, they show more empathy, and think more about human and social consequences of acts, more than the men. Although the UN and EU have stated that women should be included in peace-keeping efforts. Responsibility rests with various national government, state government, local government and even town union government to imbibe the decision of these international bodies

Nigeria in as much as she is a signatory to international instruments for involvement of women in decision making and conflict resolution has not done much in encouraging and empowering the women in this direction.

Therefore, women should be given every necessary assistance and encouragement to bear on conflict areas so that Nigeria will move forward and have a better image outside the country.

Recommendations

As we have seen that the biological makeup and socialization process of women endow them with peacemaking qualities. The Federal Government is

1. Urged to streamline plans on how to integrate women in decision-making and peace building approaches in order to end the Niger Delta crisis.
2. The ministry of Niger Delta should be headed by a woman because of women's innate abilities for conflict resolution.
3. The Federal Government should encourage the Niger Delta women to achieve their goals by giving them every necessary assistance. Also the WANEP, women of Africa network for peace building should be encouraged as well to promote women participation in politics.
4. Nigerian first ladies, that is the presidents wife and the state Governors wives of the Niger Delta as well as the wives of the presidents of the town unions and the local government Chairmen should all be involved in peace making

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