Gender and Peacebuilding in Nigeria: Exploring Women's Engagement, Contributions, and Risks

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Abstract
Rising reports of violent conflicts across the world have necessitated calls and advocacy to promote gender perspectives in conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives. This is to ensure that both men and women have an equal opportunity to be an integral part of peacebuilding processes and decision-making. The study adopted a qualitative approach, utilised secondary data, and in-depth key informant interviews with a diverse representation of women and policy experts across the six geographical regions of Nigeria to capture their perspectives and lived experiences on women's roles in peacebuilding. Using a feminist peace theoretical lens, the paper examines the gender dynamics of peacebuilding in Nigeria, focusing on the contribution of women in promoting peace in informal sectors and challenges to their meaningful engagement. It argues that while the involvement of both men and women is relevant to peacebuilding, the conflict management processes in Nigeria have largely been confrontational and male-dominated without fully utilizing women's unique roles, skills, and experiences in promoting security and peace. The study recommends various institutional, and policy interventions to integrate women, utilise their skills and recognise their contributions to Nigeria's peacebuilding initiatives.

Keywords
Gender, Women, Conflict Resolution, Peacebuilding, Security

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Introduction

There is a growing awareness of the significance of gender mainstreaming in conflict management initiatives and the efforts of both men and women are increasingly regarded as valuable resources for promoting sustainable and inclusive peace and security (Puechguirbal, 2012; Kangas et al., 2015; Hassan, 2017; Bigio and Vogelstein, 2019; UN Women, 2021). The essence of promoting peace through a gender-sensitive lens is to ensure that both men and women have an equal opportunity to be an integral part of conflict management in a manner that will effectively build peace and trust in conflict-affected communities. Mainstreaming gender in conflict management and peacebuilding has also become imperative because of the differential gender roles and distinct experiences of men and women in advancing peace. However, the recognition of women's strategic role has been limited particularly in formal security sectors (Kangas et al., 2015; Bigio and Vogelstein, 2016, 2019; UN Women, 2021).

Recognising the disproportionate participation of women in peace and security efforts and the impact of conflict on women and girls, the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 was adopted in October 2000 to promote women's participation at all levels of the peace and security agenda including conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction. The resolution acknowledges that women and men have different experiences and challenges (UNSCR S/RES/1325, 2000). It affirmed its commitment to increasing women's role in decision-making, expanding the role of women in UN field-based operations, providing training guidelines to all member states on the protection of women, ending impunity concerning rape and sexual abuse of women and girls, and increasing financial, technical, and logistical support for a gender-sensitive approach to conflict resolution (UNSCR S/RES/1325, 2000). Consequently, the Federal Government of Nigeria adopted the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and its related resolutions at the state, and local government levels in 2010 and 2017, respectively. Additionally, efforts have also been initiated by various civil society organizations to mainstream gender issues in peacebuilding mandates and minimize the impact of conflict on women and girls (UN Women, 2021). Despite the initiation of such efforts in the country, there is still a wide gap in the realization of the noble objectives of UNSCR 1325.

During conflict situations, women in Nigeria suffer from untimely widowhood, while others face death, abduction in schools, and assaults such as rape, sexual slavery, forced marriages, or coercion into serving as suicide bombers and human shields. This is especially true for women in the northern region of Nigeria, which has been a hot zone for various forms of violent conflicts, manifesting through Boko Haram terrorism, ethnic and religious violence, banditry, and kidnappings (Bloom and Matfess, 2016; Bigio and Vogelstein, 2019; Zena, 2019). However, some studies have noted that women are not only victims in conflict situations but also participants either as combatants or indirect participants serving as informants,

fundraisers, or actors who incite their partners, children, or relatives to commit acts of violence (Cunnigham, 2013; Bloom and Matfess, 2016: Krause, 2019; Khan, 2019)

Women in Nigeria have been engaged in promoting peace at formal and informal levels. Historically, Nigerian women have played significant roles in conflict situations and peacebuilding through mediation, persuasion or direct engagement in battle. The heroic efforts of Queen Moremi of Ife, Queen Amina of Zazzau, and the women who led the Aba Women's Riot showed that women were not passive in the face of conflict (Emeka-Nwobia, 2015: Olaitan, 2018). In recent times, various women groups have emerged with the purpose of promoting peace in their communities. Despite their contributions, conflict resolutions led by the government have largely been confrontational and male-dominated, without fully utilizing women's unique roles, skills, and experiences in promoting security and peace. Thus, women are usually excluded at negotiation tables and formal structures for peacebuilding (Hassan, 2021; UN Women, 2021).

The gender influences on conflict resolution in Nigeria can be understood from the feminist peace theory which critiques traditional security paradigms for their emphasis on military power and state-centric conceptions of peace, arguing that such approaches overlook the gendered dimensions of conflict and the diverse experiences and contributions of individuals affected by violence (Cohn, 2013; Hudson, 2016; Woo and Nam 2024). Additional complexities arise due to traditional and cultural beliefs in Nigeria that predominantly ascribe domestic roles and house chores to women, while men make decisions regarding power and security issues. These cultural beliefs often relegate women to the background when decisions regarding conflict resolution are made as it is traditionally regarded as the affairs of men. The paper further explains the gender dynamics of conflict management in Nigeria, focusing on women's role in peacebuilding.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptualizing Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution

Generally, peace means freedom from violence or the threat of violence. Since peace is much desired, it must be built. Thus, the question – what is peacebuilding? And how can peace be built? According to Albert (2001), peacebuilding is the art of "repairing" relationships, institutions, and social facilities and putting in place schemes that can help disputing communities unite once again. Peacebuilding can be understood as a set of actions designed to support political, economic, social, and military initiatives that reinforce political agreements and address the root causes of conflict. These efforts focus on establishing

mechanisms that promote lasting peace, foster confidence and social stability, and contribute to economic recovery.

In his report, An *Agenda for Peace,* Boutros-Ghali categorizes peacebuilding into two phases: pre-conflict and post-conflict. The pre-conflict stage involves measures such as demilitarization, small arms control, institutional reforms, improvements in law enforcement and judicial systems, human rights monitoring, electoral reforms, and socio-economic development (Boutros-Ghali, 1992). Similarly, Rechler (1997) views pre-conflict peacebuilding as a preventive strategy aimed at narrowing economic disparities, upholding human and minority rights, fostering sustainable development, and creating a just and equitable society free from discrimination.

Conversely, conflicts are adversarial relationships involving at least two individuals or collective actors over a range of issues such as resources, power, status, values, goals, relations, or interests, with expected outcomes such as victory, defeat, domination, surrender, discrimination, neutralization, conversion, injury, destruction, or the elimination of the opposite party, whether real or imagined. Thus, conflict resolution facilitates the peaceful ending of conflict and retribution, with an emphasis on "ending it." This conception can be seen in Miller (2003), who posits that conflict resolution is "a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through the constructive solving of problems, distinct from management or transformation of conflict." For Miall and Woodhouse (2001), conflict resolution means that the deep-rooted sources of conflict are addressed and resolved, behavior is no longer violent, attitudes are no longer hostile, and the structure of the conflict has been changed.

In principle, conflict resolution implies 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 the true sense of the term. Some conflicts, especially those over resources, are permanently resolvable. However, to scholars like Best (2005), some conflicts may be "non-resolvable but can at best be transformed, regulated, or managed." Therefore, peacebuilding and conflict resolution are essential processes for fostering stability and addressing the root causes of disputes. Peacebuilding is more proactive, focusing on repairing relationships, strengthening institutions, and implementing mechanisms that sustain peace, whether through political, economic, social, or military initiatives. In contrast, conflict resolution is reactive and outcome-driven, addressing deep-rooted causes and fostering mutual satisfaction among conflicting parties. Ultimately, both concepts are interdependent, emphasizing the need for holistic approaches to achieving sustainable peace in human societies.

Feminist Peace Theory

Feminist peace theory emerged in the late 20th century as a response to male-dominated perspectives in peace and conflict studies. Rooted in feminist thought, it critiques traditional security approaches prioritising military power and state-centric notions of peace while neglecting gendered experiences and perspectives on conflict and violence. One of the foundational scholars of this theory is Cynthia Enloe, whose book *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases* (1989) explores how global politics and militarism are deeply gendered. Carol Cohn further advances the discourse in *Women and Wars* (2013), arguing that war and peace must be understood through women's lived experiences. Johan Galtung (1969), although not explicitly a feminist theorist, laid the groundwork for structural violence analysis, which feminist scholars expanded to examine how gender inequalities perpetuate conflict and insecurity.

One of the core arguments of the feminist peace theory is that war and violence affect men and women differently. The theory states that women often experience gender-based violence as a weapon of war (Woo and Nam, 2024). It argues that the militarization of societies reinforces patriarchal structures that marginalize women from peace negotiations and security discourses (Woo and Nam, 2024). Unlike traditional peace theories that focus on state security, feminist peace theory prioritizes human security, social justice, and nonviolent approaches to conflict resolution (Hudson, 2016). The theory firmly argues that sustainable peace is only possible when women are meaningfully involved in peace negotiations, decision-making, and post-conflict reconstruction (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002).

The feminist peace theory is particularly relevant to the study of gender and peacebuilding in the Nigerian context, as it highlights the critical role of women in conflict resolution and the unique challenges they face. It provides a framework for understanding how structural inequalities, patriarchal norms, and political exclusion hinder women's participation in peace processes. In Nigeria, women have historically played informal roles in peace mediation, yet their contributions remain under-recognized. Thus, the theory deepens one's understanding of why women are excluded in formal peace negotiations and how policies can be restructured to foster gender-inclusive peacebuilding efforts.

Despite its significant contributions, the theory has faced criticisms centering on its excessive emphasis on gender differences while neglecting other structural factors such as class, ethnicity, and geopolitics in peacebuilding. Additionally, critics suggest that the theory lacks a unified methodology, as feminist perspectives vary across different contexts and cultures (Parashar, 2014). Nonetheless, these critiques do not diminish its importance but demand a more intersectional approach to feminist peace research.

METHODOLOGY

Our study adopted a qualitative research design, utilising secondary sources of data and primary data from Key Informant Interviews (KII) to explore women's engagement, contributions, and risks in peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria. Given the complex and deeply contextual nature of gendered experiences in conflict and peace processes, a qualitative approach provides the necessary depth and nuance to capture diverse perspectives, lived experiences, and socio-political dynamics influencing women's roles in peacebuilding. To achieve this, we targeted 15 key informants from a diverse representation of women and policy experts across the six geographical regions of Nigeria during fieldworks in 2021 and 2024. Due to higher levels of conflict and population in Northern Nigeria, we targeted three participants each from the Northern regions and two each from the Southern regions. However, 11 target participants comprising of mediators, negotiators, civil society actors, community leaders, women in government peacebuilding agencies, and academics with expertise in peace and security showed willingness and gave their consent to participate in the research as shown in the table below.

Table 1

Description of research participants

S/N	Profile	Affiliation	Region
1	Academic / peacebuilding expert	State institution	North Central
2	Community worker	NGO	North Central
3	Program Director	NGO	North Central
4	Women's leader	Religious group	North East
5	Community leader /mediator	NGO	North East
6	Program officer	NGO	North East
7	Academic/ consultant	Higher Insituition	Northwest
8	Community worker/ mediator	NGO	North West
9	Social/community worker	State Agency	South South
10	Legal practitioner/ Activist	NGO	South East
11	Security Consultant	Private Institution	South West

Furthermore, the study employed semi-structured interviews, allowing for both open-ended discussions and guided inquiries into key thematic areas such as women's engagement, contributions, risks, and policy suggestions. Interviews were conducted in face-to-face settings and via virtual platforms. We were also aware that as female researchers in conflict and peacebuilding, our positions and perspectives may shape the approach and outcome of the study. Hence, careful attention was taken to ensure the interviews accurately captured the views of the respondents while the assumptions of the secondary data were critically evaluated. The data was recorded with participants' consent, transcribed, and anonymized for confidentiality. The study used pseudonyms to capture some of the reports of the participants. This ensured an ethically grounded and contextually relevant exploration of women's roles in peacebuilding in Nigeria, contributing valuable insights to academic discourse and policy formulation.

THE STATE AND GENDER STRUCTURES OF PEACEBUILDING IN NIGERIA

Various institutional platforms exist in Nigeria for the inclusion of women in conflict resolution processes. The Nigerian government is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, 2003. Also, several actors have made efforts to address women's involvement in peace processes, such as the establishment of the Women Political Empowerment Office and the Nigerian Women Trust Fund; reviewing the National Gender Policy and creation of the Women Situation Room, Nigeria; the adoption of a Gender Policy by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC); the creation of the National Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue; the initiation of interventions to implement the 35% Affirmative Action; and the convening of the Nigeria Women Strategy Conference (UPR Working Group, 2018).

However, these formal measures are often accompanied by legal documentation with little or no practical implementation. The measures adopted by the government to resolve conflicts do not give adequate opportunities for women's contributions to peacebuilding. For instance, although the Presidential Committee on Security in the North East emphasized gender-based violence with initiatives such as economic empowerment and psychological support, it lacked substantial gender-inclusion strategies in conflict management and peacebuilding. Additionally, some committees and panels on conflict resolution established by state governments did not include women's representation (UN Women, 2021). A case in point is the various panels of inquiry set up by the government to investigate the conflicts in Jos, Plateau State. The composition of various panels rarely included women. For example, there was no female member in the 2001 panel, only one in the 2004 panel, and none in the 2008 panel. The 2015 Panel on

Peace and Reconciliation between the Fulani and Berom Communities of Jos South, Barkin Ladi, and the Plateau State Interreligious Council also lacked female representation, despite the presence of various women-led faith-based groups in the state (Oluremi, 2021; UN Women, 2021; K. Mafeng, personal communication, May 21, 2024).

The exclusion of women from formal peacebuilding processes reflects a broader structural bias within governance institutions in Nigeria. Despite international commitments and policy frameworks, implementation remains weak, often due to entrenched patriarchal norms that view security and conflict resolution as the exclusive domain of men. As a result, women's grassroots contributions such as early warning systems, community mediation, and post-conflict reconciliation continue to be overlooked in national security strategies. This marginalisation limits the effectiveness of conflict resolution efforts, as studies have shown that sustainable peace is more likely when women are actively involved in negotiation and mediation processes (Puechguirbal, 2012; Kangas et al., 2015; Hassan, 2017; Bigio and Vogelstein, 2016, 2019; UN Women, 2021).

Nevertheless, women organisations have continued to push for increased participation in formal peacebuilding mechanisms. Advocacy groups such as the Nigerian Women Mediators Network and Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) have engaged in high-level dialogue with policymakers to demand more inclusive decision-making structures. In some states, women-led initiatives have successfully lobbied for the appointment of female representatives in peace and security committees. For instance, in Adamawa State, local women's groups worked with international partners to secure seats for women in the state's security council, setting a precedent for gender inclusion in conflict resolution (J. Sati, personal communication, May 28, 2024; Z. Hammana, personal communication, June 7, 2024). These efforts highlight the resilience of women's movements in challenging gendered barriers and underscore the need for sustained institutional reforms to ensure women's voices are heard in national and regional peace initiatives. Against this backdrop, it is pertinent to take a deeper look at the role of women in peacebuilding in Nigeria.

WOMEN'S ROLE IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND PEACEBUILDING IN NIGERIA

As violent conflicts spread in Nigeria in the last two decades, women in the country have also been actively involved in peacebuilding in their communities. While the involvement of women in the formal processes of conflict resolution involving state institutions has been limited, they have played significant roles in the informal processes of dialogues, mediation, protests, and negotiations through their links with non-state actors such as non-governmental organizations and religious bodies.

Women's Involvement in Civilian Joint Task Force and local vigilantes

The Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) was formed in 2013 to support the Nigerian security forces in the fight against Boko Haram and to protect local communities from continuous attacks by Boko Haram. The CJTF, which originated in Maiduguri, later spread its operations to other states in the northeast. They work with various security agencies to curtail the terrorists' activities been very instrumental in curtailing the advances of the Boko Haram insurgency. However, the success of the CJTF has been highly gendered in favour of male members of the group, while the contributions of women have been largely overlooked (Salaudeen & Dauda, 2019; B. Ahmed, personal communication, June 5, 2024).

The research findings reveal that women contributed to the success of the task force specifically in the secret ways they operated. Some women have been reported to often dress in plain clothes, go into dangerous places, identify threats such as suicide bombers, and provide intelligence to their team. At the peak of the insurgency in the North, women were involved in conducting body searches and using metal detectors to detect explosive devices. They also provided security to Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in the Northeast (Idowu, 2016; Salaudeen & Dauda, 2019; B. Ahmed, personal communication, June 5, 2024; J. Hammana, personal communication, June 7, 2024).

Apart from the women employed by the task force, women also volunteered to work for the CJTF and joined local vigilantes, either to fight or provide support for rescued abductees or children whose parents were abducted by Boko Haram. They showed bravery in their attempts to help in the fight against insurgency in their communities (B. Ahmed, personal communication, June 5, 2024; J. Hammana, personal communication, June 7, 2024; T, Bello personal communication, May 30, 2024). Most notable was a 67-year-old woman named Hajiya Zara, who was among the first women in Borno State dedicated to fighting against the Boko Haram insurgency. Defying societal gender norms, she was pushed to take up arms against the terrorists after the killing of her husband and children by the insurgents. Her bravery accorded her the rare privilege of achieving many feats including the ability to apprehend a female bomb carrier on a 'Sallah' (festival) day and hand her over to the military JTF. Her dogged determination to ensure that the criminals were apprehended and that peace was restored to her war-torn community earned her the popular name 'Zara JTF' (Chinade & Bivan, 2015; B. Ahmed, personal communication, June 5, 2024).

Women were also recruited in Amotekun, a local vigilante security initiative established in the South West region to address insecurity and crime at the local level. Akinleye (2022) and Oriabure 2025)

established in their studies that Amotekun played a significant role in reducing kidnapping and armed robbery through regular parole and intelligence gathering. Women in the local vigilante played pivotal role to the success of Amotekun and were periodically trained to effectively support the group's activities and deal with gender sensitive issues (Obarayse, 2021; Tyessi, 2024).

Mediation, dialogues, and advocacy by women-led groups

Women-led Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have also contributed to advocating not only for girls' and women's rights, but also in preventing violent extremism and building peace within their various communities. The activities of women agencies in peacebuilding are noted to have more significant impact on communities when compared to efforts by government agencies (Uzuegbunam, 2013; UN Women, 2020; Mafeng, personal communication, May 21, 2024; I. Onotu, personal communication June 18, 2024).

In the South South region of Nigeria, NGOs such as Kebetkache Women Development for Women Advocacy and Education worked with women to build their capacity and facilitate their participation in community affairs and advocacy in more than 15 oil-impacted communities in the Niger Delta. They organised protests independently, recognised the interests of women and their desire to act, and trained women in conflict management and peacebuilding. The organisation also mobilised women for peace marches in Ogoniland, Emohua, and Ogbakiri communities. Since 2007, the group has also ensured that many boys and young men surrendered their weapons to the police and empowered them so that they would not return to violence (Osah and Odedina, 2017; I. Onotu, personal communication June 18, 2024). Similarly, the 'Tere-Ama Women's Association,' took direct action to persuade young men in the creeks of Okrika to refrain from participating in armed violence in the run-up to the 2007 general election. These women also contributed to resolving a land ownership dispute that threatened the main community market and livelihoods by calling upon the traditional leader to convene a meeting to prevent bloodshed. The market remains a major source of income for the Tere Ama community, in Rivers State (Kolawole, 2021).

A notable woman, Annkio Briggs, also worked relentlessly through advocacy in championing the Niger Delta cause. Briggs has collaborated with some of the most proactive groups, including the Rivers Democratic Movement (RDM); Environmental Rights Action (ERA); Ijaw Youth Council (IYC); the Save Nigeria Group (SNG); Traditional Rulers of Oil Mineral Producing Communities of Nigeria (TROMPCON), and others engaged in peacebuilding operations to restore peace and secure justice for the Niger Delta region. Her contributions led to amnesty for several militant groups and a disarmament exercise in 2009 (Osah, 2014).

The Igbo women in South East of Nigeria are credited for mediating and deliberating on matters to promote peace in their community through groups such as the Umuada (Daughters of the Clan). During their annual August meetings, they help to settle disputes among their members and other groups in the community (Emeka-Nwobia, 201; Ogbu, 2021; O. Uzor, personal communication, June 11, 2024).). Similarly, women in South West actively engaged in reconciliatory roles during chieftaincy conflicts in the region. (Ifedayao and Gbadeyan, 2022). In Plateau State, Nigeria, where thousands of people have been killed in recurring, multi-faceted violence since 2001, women's NGOs, in partnership with international and local agencies, have engaged in sensitisation, mediation, and advocacy that have contributed to promoting peace in their communities. The Women's Peace and Security Network and Women Mediators' Forum were established by women's groups to synthesize peacebuilding activities in the state. The umbrella group was part of the organisations that partnered with the Plateau State Peacebuilding Agency to sign peace agreements between the Irigwe and the Fulani of the Bassa Local Government Area. The peace agreements have contributed to promoting significant peace among conflicting communities in Bassa L.G.A. (K. Mafeng, personal communication, May 21, 2024; J. Sati, personal communication, May 28, 2024).

Religious women's groups in Kaduna State, such as the Catholic Women Organisation in Nigeria, Zumunta Mata, and the Women's Interfaith Groups, contributed to resolving conflicts and peacebuilding in their communities. The Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, Nigeria, which begun advocating for more women's involvement in peacebuilding at the formal level, has raised awareness of women as credible actors in peacemaking and peacebuilding. They also use their influence to spread messages of peace, counter hate speech, and dissuade youth from participating in violence(Alaga, 2010; J. Sati, personal communication, May 28, 2024; UN Women, 2021). Through these platforms, women have successfully brokered peace agreements, organized relief efforts for displaced persons, and lobbied local leaders for nonviolent conflict resolution mechanisms.

Galvanizers of political action and protests against conflict
Women in Nigeria are usually at the forefront of protests against insecurity at the national, state, and local government levels. The One Million Women March in 2015, the Bring Back Our Girls protest in Abuja, and several protests and marches against violent conflicts in the country have been spearheaded by women's groups in both urban and rural areas. Despite intimidation and harassment by some security officers and civilians, peaceful protests have been a continuous form of civil action that Nigerian women have taken to secure peace in their communities.

In 2012, the Niger Delta, women were able to seek redress through a non-violent protest to resist Chevron's environmental destruction that affected the livelihoods of many local villages. The angry women protested on the streets and held Chevron officials in captivity for ten days. While the negotiations were going on, all operations in the corporation had to be put on hold, and the firm was forced to declare 'Force Majeure'. This resulted in the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the women (Iruloh & Uche, 2017). Women in Jos and Kaduna have held several protests to decry the killings in their communities. In 2014, women in Borno held a riot-like protest for two days at the gate of a military base to seek support for their husbands and sons, who were sent to fight against the Islamist terrorists without adequate ammunition. Women in the South East, from Enugu East, Udi, and Ezeagu L.G.A., also protested the killings perpetrated by herdsmen in their communities. Similarly, Ekiti State women also staged a protest over the loss of lives and property in the northern part of the country because of violent conflict (Bulus et al., 2020; B. Ahmed, personal communication, June 5, 2025; K. Mafeng, personal communication, May 21, 2024; O. Uzor, personal communication, June 11, 2024).

Detection of early conflict warning signs

Through various trainings and forums, women in Nigeria have also been involved in detecting early warning signs of conflict and reporting to their community heads and women's leaders. The capacity of women to detect early warning signs of conflict has been enhanced by the training and awareness provided by several non-governmental organisations engaged in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Nigeria. Beyond merely reporting signs of conflict, women actively engage in grassroots mediation to de-escalate tensions before they spiral into violence. In some rural communities, women played a key role in intervening in disputes related to land ownership, political rivalries, and inter-ethnic disagreements. Their informal networks allow them to relay intelligence swiftly to local authorities or traditional leaders, fostering early interventions. This ability to identify potential triggers of conflict has been particularly useful in states prone to communal clashes, such as Plateau, Kaduna, and Benue, where women's groups have helped prevent deadly outbreaks of violence through dialogue and intervention (Bulus et al., 2020; J. Sati, personal communication, May 28, 2024; UN Women, 2021). Ogbu (2022) also revealed that the interconnected and relatedness of women in one of the biggest markets in Nigeria, the Aba market, help to detect early signs of conflict and strengthen bonds of and promote peace in the community.

Moreover, women's unique access to social spaces often inaccessible to men enables them to gather information from diverse segments of the population, including children, elderly people, and marginalised groups. One of the respondents revealed that women who engage in daily transactions with

people from different communities often overhear conversations about brewing conflicts or impending attacks (K. Mafeng, personal communication, May 21, 2024). These women leverage their social influence, economic interdependence, and cultural standing to foster reconciliation and mitigate tensions between conflicting groups.

Provision of post-conflict relief materials and recovery support

Women from government-partnered agencies, civil society groups, religious organisations, and individuals make significant interventions in providing relief materials such as food, clothing, shelter, and medication to displaced persons and victims of conflicts. Some women have also offered counselling and provided safe spaces for women facing the trauma of conflict and sexual abuse. In Jos, Plateau State, the Women Initiative for Sustainable Development (WISCOD) works to counsel women who have experienced trauma due to conflicts or sexual abuse. It also provides training to women on skill acquisition and the detection of early warning signs of conflict. The Displaced Women and Children Foundation (DWCF), in partnership with PPBA, introduced an annual football tournament where Muslim and Christian youths, aged 18 to 25, play matches together to promote a culture of peace and tolerance. The Women Peace Initiative contributed to creating shared spaces for Christian and Muslim women to foster interpersonal and group dialogue among them. This platform encourages women to participate in building a culture of peace in their communities and contribute to the healing process (Bulus et al. 2020 J. Sati, personal communication, May 28, 2024; UN Women 2021; United States Institute of Peace Report, 2023). In the Southeast, the influential members of Umuada also initiate projects to rebuild their communities by establishing trust funds, providing scholarships and medical services to vulnerable people and those affected by conflict (Emeka-Nwobia, 201; Ogbu, 2021).

With Nigeria having one of the highest numbers of internally displaced persons in Africa, the efforts of women in peacebuilding have aided in rehabilitating displaced communities and preventing further escalation of conflict. These initiatives, often informal, play a critical role in helping victims regain their sense of dignity and hope, strengthening social ties within the affected populations. Despite being marginalised in society, women have organised themselves outside the formal structures of government agencies and have tenaciously broken the barriers restricting them from playing active roles in public affairs. Their resilience, leadership, and unwavering commitment to humanitarian efforts underscore the indispensable role of women in conflict resolution and national stability.

GRASSROOTS PERSPECTIVES ON THE CHALLENGES AND RISKS CONFRONTING WOMEN EFFORTS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND PEACE BUILDING IN NIGERIA.

Having established that women play a critical role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Nigeria, particularly as mediators, advocates, and community mobilizers, the findings of the study also showed that they face numerous challenges that limit their full participation in formal peace processes, from deeply rooted cultural and traditional norms that reinforce gender exclusion to financial constraints and sexual assaults. Additionally, the absence of institutional support, coupled with societal stereotypes and overwhelming domestic responsibilities, further marginalises their role in decision-making structures. This section explains the key challenges and risks confronting women in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Traditional and cultural limitations

Tradition, culture, and religion, which have dictated male-female relations for centuries, have deeply entrenched male dominance in Nigeria's social, economic, political, and religious spheres. In a predominantly patriarchal society, men control decision-making structures, while women face systemic marginalisation in areas such as education, the economy, labour markets, politics, business, family inheritance, and, crucially, conflict resolution (Salaam, 2003). These historical structures reinforce the perception that peacebuilding, like leadership and governance, is a man's domain, while women are relegated to domestic and caregiving responsibilities.

The traditional belief systems in many Nigerian communities place women in subordinate roles, depriving them of access to land, inheritance, and quality education—resources that could otherwise empower them to take on leadership roles in peacebuilding. This marginalisation extends into mediation efforts, where women's contributions are often dismissed as insignificant or symbolic rather than substantive. Even when women serve as intermediaries in community disputes, they are rarely granted a formal role in reconciliation processes. A female mediator from Kaduna noted that:

> "Women often facilitate informal peace talks behind the scenes, yet when official positions are given in government to resolve conflicts, particularly at the national level, we are not usually unrecognized. But some women in Kaduna State are playing active roles in the Kaduna State Peace Commission" (D. Akut, personal communication, May 30, 2024).

As gender roles gradually evolve in contemporary Nigeria, there has been increasing recognition of the value women bring to peace efforts. Some communities now engage women in advisory capacities, leveraging their unique ability to communicate across societal divides. Yet, the full potential of women's

mediation efforts remains underutilised, with deeply embedded norms continuing to restrict their full inclusion.

Financial constraints

Due to women's generally lower economic status, many lack the financial resources and assets necessary to effectively engage in peacebuilding efforts. Women, particularly in rural areas, are disproportionately affected by poverty and often have to prioritise survival over activism. The burden of providing for their families forces many to abandon education or employment, further limiting their ability to participate in peace processes. Even organised women's groups engaged in conflict resolution frequently rely on external donors whose funding is often inconsistent. Biogo and Volgelstein (2019) observed that local women's groups in fragile states receive a mere 0.4 percent of aid from major donor countries, making the long-term sustainability of their peacebuilding initiatives almost impossible.

A leader from a women's organization recounted a time when their group received funding for a peacebuilding project, but after a few months, the funds ran out so they could not continue working effectively since they needed funds to organise programs, travel to different communities and support with relief materials (D. Mase, personal communication, June 21, 2024). The absence of consistent funding and institutional support prevents many women-led initiatives from having a lasting impact. Rural women are particularly disadvantaged, as state interventions in these areas are often short-term initiatives rather than sustained efforts to enhance their capacity. The effects of persistent conflict including herder-farmer clashes, insurgencies, and communal violence further diminish women's ability to mobilise resources for peace work. Thus, implying that without financial support, peacebuilding efforts remain short-lived.

Sexual violence, abuse, and intimidation

Sexual violence remains one of the most devastating barriers to women's participation in peacebuilding. In conflict zones, women are often targeted for sexual harassment, rape, and other forms of violence, both by armed groups and security personnel. The use of sexual violence as a weapon of war has been documented, with cases of forced marriages, sexual slavery, and the coercion of girls into suicide bombings becoming prevalent in conflict-affected regions (Bloom and Matfess, 2016; UN Women, 2020; Awino, 2021). Survivors of such violence suffer long-lasting psychological and emotional trauma, which not only affects their ability to contribute to peacebuilding but also reinforces societal stigmatisation.

In Nigeria, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015) criminalises various forms of gender-based violence, including sexual assault, yet enforcement remains weak, particularly in conflict-affected

areas. Reports by Amnesty International (2022) and UN Women (2021) highlight that insurgent groups, such as Boko Haram, continue to use sexual violence as a weapon of war, targeting women and girls in displaced persons camps. Beyond the immediate trauma, these violations reinforce patriarchal norms that discourage women from taking on leadership roles in peacebuilding, as survivors often face social stigmatisation and exclusion from their communities.

Beyond conflict zones, the mere threat of sexual violence serves as a deterrent to women's involvement in leadership and mediation roles. Women mediators navigating volatile regions sometimes face direct threats from armed groups and community members who view their involvement as inappropriate or dangerous. A leader and mediator from Borno stated, "

> "I have received unknown threats warning me to stop my work in conflict communities or to face the consequences" (A. Hamza, personal communication, June 3, 2024)

Consequently, the fear of attack prevents women away from public mediation roles, further weakening their potential contributions to sustainable peace.

Lack of awareness, training, and education

Education is a critical tool for empowering women in peacebuilding, yet many Nigerian women, particularly those in rural areas, remain excluded from formal education due to cultural, economic, and security-related barriers. The lack of education not only limits women's awareness of their rights but also reduces their ability to advocate for themselves and their communities effectively. Women who are uninformed about conflict resolution mechanisms or negotiation strategies are less likely to participate in peacebuilding discussions, even when they have valuable insights to offer. The research findings reveal that training and capacity-building programs for women in peacebuilding remain limited, and when available, they are often conducted in urban centers, making access difficult for women in rural communities (B. Ahmed, personal communication June 5, 2024; K. Mafeng, personal communication, May 21, 2024). Thus, women mediators in rural areas could operate based on instinct and communal experience rather than formal training in conflict resolution strategies. Without the relevant training and resources, women's contributions will continue to be undervalued and underutilised in formal peace processes.

Household burden due to uneven gender roles

The division of labour within households in Nigeria places a disproportionate burden on women, leaving them with little time to engage in peacebuilding activities. As primary caregivers, women are responsible

for child-rearing, cooking, cleaning, fetching water, and other domestic chores, in addition to their economic activities. In cases where women do engage in peace work, they often have to juggle multiple responsibilities, leading to burnout and reduced effectiveness. Some women rely on the support of extended family members, but this is not always a sustainable solution. A female peace activist expressed her frustration:

> *"Even as an educated woman, there are times I want to attend community dialogues, but childcare and household duties make it impossible. It feels like a constant struggle between family responsibilities and my peace work"* (I. Onotu, personal communication, June 18, 2024).

This overwhelming workload leaves many women unable to participate in community meetings, mediation efforts, or capacity-building programs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Women in Nigeria have played an essential yet often unrecognised role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. They have actively engaged in various initiatives, including enrolment in the Civilian JTF, mediation, advocacy, and campaigns spearheaded by women-led NGOs and activists. Additionally, they have taken the lead in galvanising political action and protests, identifying early warning signs of conflict, providing intelligence, distributing relief materials, and supporting the recovery of conflict victims. Despite these significant contributions, their participation in formal peace processes remains severely limited, as men continue to dominate decision-making structures, leaving women with minimal opportunities to contribute meaningfully to institutional conflict resolution mechanisms.

However, the effectiveness of women's grassroots-led peacebuilding efforts cannot be overstated. Unlike the formal peace processes, which often operate within bureaucratic and political constraints, the informal mechanisms led by women have been more responsive, adaptable, and deeply embedded within affected communities. Women in Nigeria have leveraged their positions as community mobilisers, caregivers, and negotiators to mediate disputes, rebuild social trust, and foster long-term reconciliation. The reality that women remain underrepresented in official peace structures, yet remain fully committed to peacebuilding at the grassroots level, underscores the urgent need to bridge the gap between informal and formal peacebuilding structures.

To utilize the contributions of women in peacebuilding, several structural, institutional, and policy interventions are necessary. First, gender-inclusive policies must be implemented to guarantee women's representation in formal peace and security frameworks at all levels. Public awareness campaigns and advocacy efforts should focus on shifting cultural perceptions about women's roles in conflict resolution,

highlighting their successes and the tangible benefits of their involvement in peacebuilding. In the long run, achieving sustainable peace in Nigeria requires a holistic, inclusive, and gender-sensitive approach that recognises the unique contributions of women. By fostering stronger collaboration between women-led grassroots initiatives and formal peacebuilding institutions, policymakers, civil society, and international actors can harness the expertise, resilience, and dedication of women to create a more effective and sustainable conflict resolution framework. Bridging this divide will not only empower women but also strengthen the overall effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts, ensuring lasting stability and development across conflict-prone regions in Nigeria. The study further recommends the following:

1. The government should mandate a minimum quota for women's participation in peace committees, mediation teams, and security dialogues at all levels. Policies should be enacted to ensure gender inclusivity in decision-making processes related to peace and security.

2. Targeted training programmes on conflict resolution, negotiation, and leadership should be implemented to equip women with the necessary skills for effective peacebuilding. These initiatives must be decentralised to reach rural women and integrated into university curricula to promote long-term participation.

3. A dedicated funding scheme should be established to support women-led peace initiatives, ensuring financial sustainability beyond donor dependency. Training in financial management should also be provided to women's peace groups to improve resource mobilisation and sustainability.

4. Law enforcement agencies should strengthen protection measures for women involved in peacebuilding, particularly in conflict-prone areas. Community security strategies must be gender-sensitive, and laws against gender-based violence should be strictly enforced to safeguard female mediators and activists.

5. Flexible and community-based approaches should be adopted to ease household burdens on women peacebuilders. Initiatives such as childcare services during peace meetings and campaigns for shared domestic responsibilities should be encouraged to increase women's engagement in conflict resolution.

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