

# Promoting Women's Participation In Conflict Resolution In Nigeria: Information Accessibility

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**Abstract:** Conflict occurs when there is disagreement on values, motivations, ideas and desires. It is not an understatement to note that women suffer greatly during conflict because of their gender sensitivity and the fact that their husbands, children, fathers and brothers are killed. Thus, there is need for women who are at the centre of it all to contribute and participate on the platform of resolution dialogue for peaceful co-existence. Information is everything, which is the reason librarians should package information for the purpose of empowering women with knowledge and strategies for meaningful peaceful development. This study was carried out in Anambra state, Nigeria. Thirty five (35) women drawn from members of umuada group, women wing of town union and student union were sampled through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Key Informant Interview (KII). It was discovered that women have various groups in the communities where they participate actively for their welfare and community development. Also discovered were the extreme sufferings of women during conflict as well as the strength and inbuilt power women have in managing adverse circumstances. They revealed their use of dialogue, advocacies to the elders, religious leaders and other stakeholders in preventing conflicts. Another discovered was that provisions of information empowerment like seminar, lectures, pamphlets and film shows for peace building were assessed through NGOs innovative activities. The challenges affecting women participation in conflict resolution were found out to be exclusion from decision making bodies, poverty, cultural norms, inadequacy of information among others. The study recommended that librarians should disseminate information and create awareness on promoting peaceful co-existence in the families, communities, workplaces and the communities. They should partner with NGOs, Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Welfare, etc towards disseminating information for conflict prevention and mitigation.

**Keywords:** community, conflict resolution, information, library, peace building, participation, women.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict has become a house hold name in all over the world that even children discuss war, fights, riots and killings without reservation. According to Headsup (2014) it arises from differences which occur whenever people disagree over their values, motivations, perceptions, ideas or desires. A conflict is not just a disagreement. It is a situation in which one or both parties perceive a threat (whether or not the threat is real). There are daily reports of conflicts in the news, internet, tabloids, etc that paint horrific tales of woes. There are religious extremism, tribal wars, political conflicts, family feuds which have subtly become security threats to the communities and the society (TransConflict, 2014). Presently, there are serious conflicts in so many parts of the world - Africa, Asia, Middle East, Latin America and Europe.

Indeed, Nigeria has its fair share of conflict. It is not an understatement to state that Nigerians have experienced some of the most sordid tragedies arising from difference of opinions and distrust. Thousands of people have been killed in

different clashes over the years with crises from riots, rampage, kidnapping, strikes, ethnic clashes, religious war, land disputes and political conflicts (Igbinijesu, 2013). Reports and documentations noted that people have been inflicted with so much pain and have lost so much, economically and socially. This is why the United Nations (2001) has been continually working to prevent the outbreak of new global conflict, as well as build a world of freedom, progress, prosperity and justice for all nations. But conflict has continued to rave gaining nothing but waste of what is best, resources and precious time.

Unfortunately, the women bear the greatest agony and this is widely recognized as having negative impacts on women. For instance, UNICEF (2014) stated that women and girls in particular experience conflict and displacement in different ways from men because of the gender division of roles and responsibilities. Peace Direct (2014) reported that women make up 80% of those who have to flee their homes with more than 200,000 women being raped in a decade of conflict in Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo). In the same vein, Forced Migration Online (FMO) (2011) asserted that mostly women, children, the elderly, and the disabled – are now the main victims of wars, with estimates that they account for 30–90 per cent of casualties. United Nations (2008) also stated that approximately 75% of the estimated 60 million people displaced from conflict and disasters worldwide are women and children.

Studies have shown that women want peace despite their sufferings and tribulations of conflict. One such study was by Rhenn and Sirleaf (2002) who reported that women want to build peace in their communities (Munuve, 2012) recognizing that the security and satisfaction of one side can never be based on the frustration or humiliation of the other. The reason is that African woman's roles as mothers, wives and aunts were put to effective use in peace building and conflict resolutions in the old Africa (Nwoye, 2006). Women put in so much in preventing, stopping and recovering from conflict with the strong desire to protect their children and ensure security for their families.

Therefore, good reasons abound why women are important in conflict resolution process. Agbajobi (2010) informed that women constitute half of every community and the difficult task of peace building must be done by men and women in partnership. This is where the *Umuada*, among the Igbo of Nigeria are responsible for reconciling the individuals involved in a conflict echoing the words of Haris Silajdzic:

If we'd had women around the table, there would have been no war;  
women think long and hard before they send their children out  
to kill other people's children (Alcid, 2012).

Clearly, women need information to survive the cruelty of conflict and push for peace. This is the reason information access is vital to commemorate the stand of Rhenn and Sirleaf (2002) who affirmed that women have become the worst victims of war and the biggest stakeholders of peace. Women have the right to be empowered with information and the power to find their own solutions to conflict and to build their own better futures. There is need to give women a voice to speak of peace and sustainability for their wellbeing and that of their households.

Libraries can become heavily involved in supporting women with special programs that can cater for their information needs for effective peace processes. The programs can integrate pre, during and post conflict stages with community services, education and information services. The development of relevant organized collection materials could be used in facilitating and enhancing coordination and promotion of research activities relating to conflict management. The greater involvement of libraries and librarians with the women in decision-making will result in great impacts in women and community development.

#### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:**

The agony of killings all over the globe and the local crisis in the country are causing tremendous traumas. It has become common to experience bloodbaths, untold pains and destruction of rich land, mineral and agriculture, destruction of youth, emptiness of treasure and poverty with women crying for their vanished loved ones. The carnage never stops, thus, perpetuating insecurity and loss of dignity of the women.

Here in Nigeria, the women are tired, crying and helpless. They only ask for one thing - peace. Their interests and needs for information dissemination on conflict resolution seem to be overlooked because they are systematically excluded from processes which aim to address and resolve these problems (United Nations, 2008). There is a large body of literature on the impacts of conflict on women's access to services and employment. It is, however, not very clear if there is

information dissemination for women participation in conflict resolution in the Nigerian communities. This study aimed to ascertain this fact with empirical research and literature which address the issues.

#### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:**

The general objective of this study is to examine the women's participation in conflict resolutions in the communities with interest in information accessibility. Specifically, this study aims to:

1. Identify the functional women groups in the community
2. Find out the effects of conflict in their households/communities
3. Ascertain their roles in combating conflicts in their communities
4. Examine the strategies used in conflict resolution
5. Verify if they are empowered with information for conflict resolution
6. Look into the challenges of peace building

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Studies have emphasized the need of women and local people to building peace in conflict zones all over the world. For instance in Sudan, women were brought together in local peace committees to helped them resolve long-term and sudden outbreaks of conflict (Peace Direct, 2014). Indeed, women's organizations have extended the work they took on during conflict to ensure that the social fabric did not collapse, through various forms of community organization and welfare provision. Hence, women have regularly reached beyond themselves to build community connections through friendships, women's groups, social opportunities and volunteering (About.com, 2014). These groups make real difference because it is their homes, so they risk their lives to build peace and prevent conflict in the places where it starts – locally.

Evidently, many women have faced agonies during conflicts. Nicholson (2012) stated that women and girls made up, on average, 47 per cent of the world's 15.4 million refugees at the end of 2010. Mothers have sometimes left their children locked in huts or rooms when they went out to work or scout for food during conflict. This is because, it is not uncommon for babies, as young as seven days old to get their heads cut off or for older ones to get their stomachs ripped open in the course of such clashes (Ogunde, 2002). Women really form the majority of casualties of war as they are raped, turned into targets of sexual violence (International Rescue Committee, 2014), faced with psychological trauma and became objects of mockery. Their husbands, children, fathers and brothers are killed, leaving them without supports. They face discrimination in many aspects of their lives and are badly caught up in conflict, which forces them to flee. Rehn and Sirleaf (2002) lamented:

I have witnessed the impact of conflict on women in many countries.

In the "Valley of Widows" in Colombia, I met women who had lost their husbands and their land – everyone and everything important to them had been destroyed by civil war and drug lords. I have been to Bosnia where women described abduction, rape camps and forced impregnation, and to Rwanda where women had been gang raped and purposely infected with HIV/AIDS.

A lot of studies have been carried out on the role of women in the peace building and conflict resolutions. Such studies by Ntahobari and Ndayiziga (2003), Becker (2003) and Lihamba (2003) have highlighted the roles played by women in conflict prevention and the peaceful settlement of conflicts in traditional society. The concept is to seek people's collective memory on certain traditional values which, once rehabilitated, could enable women of today to carry out the mission of peace which had always been theirs in traditional society (Mathey, et al, 2003). Moreover, Nwoye (2006) commended the role of 'mother as peace builder' noting in her study among the people of Somali that women prepare and train the young boys who will one day become adult men of the society. This is what Mohammed (2003:102) stated: "Mother is indispensable for being and learning. Before becoming adults, we attend a basic school, and that school is mother". This is because through the important mothering role, the culture of peace is entrenched in children as a foundation for peaceful living in families, the community and the clan.

In the same vein, Munuve (2012) asserted that women organized many prayer meetings and other kinds of social gatherings for themselves, their families, their communities, their countries and the world. This is why the African First Ladies summit for peace and conflict Resolution in Africa called for application of feminine diplomatic skills, feminine imaginative powers and feminine statecraft of the highest order (Guardian cited in Osuchukwu, 2005). Women's capacities have been built in applying the skills acquired to resolve conflicts within and outside their communities in collaboration with WANEP Nigeria which implemented a Peace education program to internalize a culture of non-violent approaches to conflict management at an early stage in their lives.

Therefore, there is need for effective and timely information empowerment on conflict resolution and peace processes. Echezona (2007) explained that recent studies have attributed lack of adequate or imbalanced information as the most significant cause of the violent conflicts. This can be taken as true because without knowledge and information, there is likely to be a conflict. So, information on conflict resolution could come in various format like the internet, community radio, television, video conferencing and voice over of Internet protocol (Volp), email, print media, and reference services. In support, Ogunkelu (2001) added that community radio, television, cartoon can be used to alert, inform or resolve conflict in a rural area, while digital information systems such as email, internet chat, web contact, video conferencing, list serve, etc. could be used to disseminate information in resolving conflict. The idea is to let the conflicting parties know what they are going in for. It also serves as reference services to the government, international agencies, NGOs, stakeholders, religious leaders in becoming involved using their influence and position in promoting constructive dialogue.

However, conflict areas are usually volatile which makes accessibility of information difficult. Marginalization and exclusion of women in community decision making has prevented contribution and participation of women. It is this notion that brought in mainstreaming gender into conflict resolution and sectorial decision making which is increasingly recognized and adopted by many organizations like National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) (2012). Hence, creating spaces for women into development planning is one of the key issues through which programs like conferences, seminars, courses, etc can be successfully achieved.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research. The major tools used in the data collection for this study were Focus group discussion (FGD) and key informant interview (KII). These are used to gather opinions on a specific topic. While FGD format stimulates discussion, generates new ideas and promotes exploration of unknowns. A key informant interview works as an in-depth interview that collects information from individual experts (Brown, 2013). This helped us to achieve a focus understanding of the complex socio-cultural context of conflict resolution related problems among women. Hence, discussion guides were developed to reflect the issues of peace building and community development.

These were carried out during capacity building for executive members of umuada, women wing and student union on quality participation and representation in Town Union meetings on 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2014 in Ogidi, Anambra state at the voice to the peoples (V2P) project of Justice Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) Onitsha. The second phase was carried out during the support visit to umuada, religious groups on needs assessment activity on 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> August, 2014 in Urum, Umuoji and Ichi communities in Anambra state.

The discussions were held in three sessions:

- i. Umuada group
- ii. Women wing of the Town Union
- iii. Student union/Youth girls (umuagbo)

The participants were 53 in number and were drawn from twelve pilot local government areas in Anambra state where V2P program is going on. They covered all the three senatorial zones of the state. The local government areas are: Anambra East, Anambra West, Ayamelum, Ogbaru, Idemili North, Idemili South, Ihiala, Dunukofia, Ekusigo, Nnewi South, Awka North and Orumba North. Thus, there were two FGD of umuada made up of twelve (12) participants each. Two FGD of women wing made up of twelve (12) and eleven (10) participants each and 7 participants in youth girl group.

The leaders of the women groups were interviewed. This complimented the group discussion technique, thus, leading to the identification and discussion of historical exigencies, past and current issues relating to conflicts resolutions in the various communities and organizations. These techniques were carried out through the help of three research assistants who acted as note takers and moderators. Our awareness of the local structure and values within the community helped in facilitating the process of learning and sharing of views of the study. The results of the research were stated below.

#### 4. FINDINGS

**Table 1: Identification of functional women groups in the communities**

S/N	Groups	Remark
1.	Umuada	Daughters of the communities
2.	Women wing	Women's version of Town Union meeting
3.	Religious groups	Various religious groups in all denominations e.g, Catholic Women Organization (CWO), Mothers' guild, traditional religion, etc
4.	Otu umuagbo	Youth female usually from 16 years and above who are not yet married in the communities. They are also in different churches.
5.	Age grade	Female wing of certain age brackets in the communities.
6.	Student union	Association of undergraduates in the communities

The Table shows the functional women's groups that exist in the communities. Although, some communities do not have age grades but all the other groups listed are active in all the communities.

##### **Effects of conflict on the women and their households:**

The FGD and interview report highlighted different effects of conflict. The most reported effects from the three groups were:

- Flee from their homes and communities
- Burning of homes and property
- Death of loved ones, starvation, loss of economic and social activities, psychological traumas
- Exposure to hostilities and health hazards especially among the pregnant women, nursing mothers, aged and the children
- Disillusionment, frustration and compromising of woman's dignity in order to feed the children

Participant 4 in the umuada group narrated that during the land dispute in her community, she and other families ran to the church and survived on charity while their economic activities crumbled.

Interview with the stakeholder of umuada group, Urum revealed that during the conflict between her community and Ebenebe community that dwellers fled from their homes while houses and properties were burnt. She said many people were killed and maimed for life.

Another participant from the women wing commented that they left everything they acquired in the North and ran back home. She said they are happy to be alive and are now struggling to make a living.

A participant in the youth girl group said, peoples' houses were burnt and had remained like that.

##### **Roles women play in combating conflicts in their communities:**

The discussions on the women's roles during conflict revealed:

- Settling issues when it is still at embryo stage within their group
- Wading into family issues and settling cases between parents and children, between community and youths, between daughters and mothers in laws.
- Counseling conflicting parties and advocating for peace
- Building resilience and insisting on peaceful strategies
- Volunteer services in supplying food and other welfare packages to displaced people

The key informant from Akili Ogidi stated that she settled a conflict between the youth in her community and the community. She used her position as a woman leader and a patroness of the youth group to achieve that.

Interview also revealed how women from Urum community resolute the peace between Urum and Ebenebe through advocacy to the community leaders and sticking out their necks for peace building.

Also revealed was that some selected women were invited by the Traditional Ruler and stakeholders to be part of peace committee in some cases in the communities.

#### **Strategies used in conflict resolution:**

The strategies that were generally discussed and appraised by majority of the participants were:

- Dialogue
- Advocacies to the elders, religious leaders and other stakeholders
- Peaceful engagement with the deterring parties
- Sanction to the deterrent parties (for members)
- Pleading and crying on behalf of their children, husbands and communities for forgiveness

A key informant defined a scenario where women in a certain community agreed to deny their spouses conjugal rights as a basis for stopping conflict tendencies and going to war.

Participants also narrated how they have threatened to go naked in the public if their men didn't stop planning for war and engage in peaceful approaches.

#### **The kind of information they receive for conflict resolution:**

- Seminars in the communities women meetings and churches
- Lectures in the meetings by members or an outsider organized by the leader
- Film shows, drama
- Pamphlets and teachings from the NGOs

A participant from the girl group said:

They teach us peace building in the school and we are always told in the school and the church to desist from conflict and anything that leads to conflict.

From the interview:

We talk about peace building in our meeting. We are tired of fight here and there, every time. Is it not our children and men that are being killed? After building everything, it will be wasted in minutes. I wish something will be done to restore peace everywhere.

#### **Challenges of peace building:**

The participants from the discussions and the interviews replied thus:

- Sometimes, the stakeholders will not allow us to contribute to the resolution
- Some situations are so big that you don't even know where or how to begin
- We are limited and don't know who to run to for help before the situation worsened
- We need information on what to do and how to do it
- Sometimes, our men and children will not even listen
- Poverty and culture relegate us to the background

A participant complained that women are not allowed to the town union meeting to contribute to decision making. Men do not place much value on our intellect.



A woman stated:

Men make decisions without thinking twice and we bear all the pains

## 5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The indicators from the data analysis reveal the emotions and the importance women attach to peace. There were good representation and active participation of women which showed the various groups women involve in, socially in their communities. This collaborates well with the statement of About.com (2014) which stated that women are more social, more community focused, collaborative and less competitive than men. The indication is that the existing functional groups that are well structured, ensure degree of quality representation and participation on women issues. This is a good platform for information dissemination on conflict resolution which will resonate the words of Richard Nixon “where peace is unknown make it known, where peace is fragile, make it strong, where peace is temporary, make it permanent (Corporation for Public Broadcasting, 2013).

However, that women flee from their homes and communities, experience the loss of loved ones, starvation, loss of economic and social activities, exposure to risks, hostilities and health hazards during conflict shows the necessity to disseminate information that can mitigate the varying effects. This relates to the statement of International Rescue Committee (2014) that women suffer some of the greatest health and social inequities in the world which can and should be prevented. Perhaps this is the reason the recovery of families, communities and nations devastated by conflicts relies heavily on the information services that empower women and girls. Therefore, libraries ought to help with relevant information that will foster an environment in which women and girls not only survive the effects of conflict, but ultimately thrive.

Nevertheless, the findings revealed that women played important roles in reducing conflicts in their communities. It shows the strength and inbuilt power women have in managing challenging situations. It also demonstrates the extraordinary strength, courage and spirit in keeping themselves and their families going, even in adverse circumstances (UNICEF, 2014). This explains why young women like Gulalai worked as a volunteer to stop young people from being recruited into extremist groups in their communities (Peace Direct, 2014). The indication is that women respond to the need of the environment displaying their natural motherhood which is care and protection of life.

The women’s responses on strategies for conflict resolution explained the ingenuity of application of feminine diplomatic skills, feminine imaginative powers and feminine statecraft of the highest order which the First African Women Summit recommended (Osuchukwu, 2005). It aptly points to the need of librarians and libraries to outline their strategies and best practices in providing relevant conflict resolution information to the women so that their skills (International Rescue Committee, 2014) can be built in constructive engagement with the stakeholders.

The provision of information empowerment like seminar, lectures, Pamphlets, film shows, drama and teachings from NGOs shows innovation and creativity from organizations which proves that peace can be achieved through the women. Information dissemination from the NGOs is a reflection of the fact that access to peace information can help women gain the skills needed to prevent and mitigate conflict situations in the communities (International Rescue Committee, 2014).

The challenges women encounter in building peace which are exclusion from contribution to the resolution at the meetings, poverty and cultural norms , inadequacy of information elucidate why the natural endowed intuitive nature of women are not being utilized in conflict resolution. This clearly underscores the cultural pressures against women (Agbajobi, 2010), traditional setting and exclusion of women in community decision making which can be attributed to the poor information awareness in the rural areas.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

In most of the developing countries, the need to involve women in the community decision making has not fully been accepted. Studies and experiences show that women participation is essential for successful co-existence. Its importance in resolution of conflict cannot be over emphasized. Therefore, for the women and girls to participate actively in peace building, they need to be empowered with information resources that can be used to facilitate and enhance the coordination of peace movement.

Pertinent to note is the general implication and understanding that peace is not born but made. Thus, it is this culture of peace in traditional societies by women to their children that will send the central message that peace building is taken

seriously in the environment. Mothers nurture and mould children in the behaviour that aim at reducing conflict because war can actually be avoided while act of good leadership is emphasized. Now if women are relegated to the background of conflict resolution the negative aspects of conflict and hostilities cannot be tackled.

The implication of the findings is that if the women are not furnished with information services that relate to conflict prevention, mitigation and management, the society will continue to degenerate to its lowest ebb. Their natural endowed intuition for problem solving will be wasted and masked with cultural belief that their contributions are naught. This will make them fail in their duties as natural protectors of children and managers of households. It is therefore pertinent that this issue is studied in order to promote the ideal society with the right information service to the right people – women.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The above analysis shows the participation and strategic roles of women in conflict resolutions. The women should be made to realize that it is they who must become more militant not in taking up arms but in search for peace. Libraries can strengthen hope and peace for people living in conflict and war all over the world today. Just as President J.K Kennedy said “together we shall save our planet or together we shall perish in its flames. Save it we can and save it we must”. Full involvement of women in negotiations of peace agreements at local, national and global levels must be provided for, including trainings and information dissemination for women on formal peace processes.

It calls on all actors to ensure women’s participation in peace processes from the prevention of conflict to negotiations to post war information and reconstruction. There is great potential in achieving women’s full participation in peace building. Harnessing this potential requires relevant information dissemination, enhancement of commitment and increase in human resources on formal and informal peace and security sectors.

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above, the following recommendations are made as a way forward in the current effort towards conflict resolution in the society.

- Information on early warning and awareness of promotion of peaceful co-existence in the families, communities and nations can be packaged for dissemination.
- Information services and resources should be taken to women’s groups and meetings in order to ensure wide reach to different communities and organizations. This will encourage active involvement of women in conflict resolution.
- The mindset of the stakeholders, especially in some rural communities should be worked on to allow women into the decision making processes, especially in conflict resolution.
- Librarians should establish continued relationship with NGOs, Ministries of Women Affairs and Social Welfare, NEMA etc in order to gain more insight on the issues of women and peace building.

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