The Role of Women Organizations in Conflict Resolution in Benue State

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Abstract

This paper examined the strategic role women and women organizations play in the resolution of conflicts in Benue state especially in the last five years (2011-2016), with the persistence of the pastoralist / farmers clashes. Benue state has the unfortunate lot of attacks and women have been at the receiving end as majority of them are engaged in agricultural production that sustains the economy and the population. Government has responded in addressing these conflicts, but we must reckon with the great role women under several organizations have sought to interface government in preventing these conflicts and also offering relief materials to the displaced populations. The paper surveyed some of these women organizations and the strategies they have adopted in reducing the conflicts. Using liberal feminist theory as a framework of analysis, the paper showed how socio-cultural factors are constraining the women organization's effort at resolving conflicts. The study demonstrated how the non-confrontational approach adopted by women has continued to douse out the conflicts and helped to ameliorate the conditions of women, children and men affected by the conflicts. It is hoped that stronger collaboration of these women groups and government through legislative provisions will seriously address these conflicts and their negative consequences on the people.

Keywords: women, women organizations, conflict resolution

Introduction

Violent conflicts ranging from communal, ethnic, religious, and political have become a recurrent decimal in Nigeria. The situation has become extremely worrisome since the return to democratic rule in 1999 (Imobighe, 2003). In Benue state, the story is not different! Communal, inter-ethnic, political, and more recently, herdsmen and farmers conflict have led to loss of lives and property, increased poverty, and massive displacement of people. Generally, conflict affects all members of the society but in most cases, it is women that suffer the most. During periods of conflicts, women suffer from sexual abuse, psychological pains and carry the burden of caring for children and the aged. In a study conducted in 2001 by USAID cited in Scheper (2002) which analyzed the impact of deadly intrastate conflict on women and women organizations from Rwanda, Cambodia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Georgia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina showed that there are five major impacts of intrastate conflict on women and gender relations:

a. Violence against civilians, of which 95% is female
b. Internal displacement, of which 90% is women and children
c. Redefinition of female identities in the society, both as victims and as perpetrators
d. Increased poverty and starvation, as a result of targeted destruction of civilian property *and*
e. Communal violence leading to lasting bitterness, anger and hatred.

The research concluded by observing that in all six countries, the most traumatizing factor for women in conflict is the lack of physical security, both during the conflict and the post conflict demobilization of the militia. It keeps women confined in their homes, not being able to move around freely. Rape was used as a regular tool of warfare and torture in all six case countries (Scheper, 2002). Moreover, many women saw themselves forced to engage in prostitution in the post conflict era, as the only available means of income. Family structures were damaged through death and trauma, resulting in women becoming heads of households and an increased incidence of domestic violence.

Despite the fact that women suffer the most during the period of conflicts, formal conflict resolution mechanisms exclude women in the decision-making process. Falch (2010) underscored the above view by stating that women are often excluded from formal peace negotiations and are marginally involved in political decision-making process. However, since the passing of the United Nations Resolution 1325 in 2000 which advocates for the equal representation of women in key decision bodies, greater political space was opened for women groups to play significant roles in conflict resolution globally (Falch, 2010). While extolling the role of women organizations in the formal mechanism of conflict resolution, Falch (2010) acknowledged that, even though the role of women has not been appreciated, women have continued to play significant roles in community peacebuilding and have made valuable contributions to peace during and after conflict.

In Nigeria and Benue state in particular, since the return to democratic rule in 1999, there has been a proliferation in the number of women organizations that have been playing significant roles in conflict resolutions. For instance, women groups such as Women in Nigeria (WIN), Country Women Association of Nigeria (COWAN), Women, Law and Development Centre (WLDC), Community Women and Development (COWAD), International Federation of Female

Lawyers (FIDA), Women's Right Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA), and Catholic Women Organisations (CWO) have all played key roles in conflict resolution in Nigeria. Despite the significant role women organizations have played in conflict resolution in Benue state, their contributions have been neglected. There are two reasons for this. First, due to cultural and religious reasons, women are treated as second class citizens and therefore not given a seat at the table of conflict resolution process. Second, most people in Nigeria tend to believe that the issue of conflict resolution belongs to the realm of government and the business sector only. As a result of this, a comprehensive understanding of the role of women organizations in peacebuilding and conflict resolution has continued to be a major gap in the available literature particularly in the context of developing countries such as Nigeria. It is because of this gap in knowledge that this paper seeks to examine the contributions of women organizations in conflict resolution in Benue state.

Conceptual Clarification

In this paper, concepts such as women organizations and conflict resolution will be explained to sanitize the reader to their meaning and usage in this work.

Women organizations: refer to all voluntary organizations led and managed by women that promote women's welfare and gender equality (Kumar, n.d.). Examples of these organizations in Benue state include Women in Nigeria (WIN), International Federation of Female Lawyers (FIDA), Women's Right Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA), Catholic Women Organisations (CWO), Association of Market Women, Mzough U Kase, among others.

Conflict Resolution: is a range of processes aimed at alleviating or eliminating sources of conflict (Pisagih, Degri, Ajemasu & Muhammed, 2015). Miller and King (2003) define conflict resolution as "a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through the constructive solving of problems, distinct from management or transformation of conflicts." In their view, Miall, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse (1999), the essence of conflict resolution is to identify the root causes of conflict, address and resolve them, and behaviour is no longer violent, nor are attitudes hostile any longer, while the structure of the conflict has been changed. Mitchel and Banks (1998) refer to conflict resolution as:

i.   An outcome in which the issue in an existing conflict are satisfactorily dealt with through a solution that is mutually acceptable to the parties, self-sustaining in the long run and productive of a new, positive relationship between parties that were previously hostile adversaries; and

ii.   Any process or procedure by which such an outcome is achieved.

Whatever the definition offered, the purpose of conflict resolution is to ensure that conflict is resolved for peaceful co-existence between individuals, groups, communities, and nations.

Methodology

The study adopted descriptive research design. Secondary sources of data were obtained

from the organizational records of women organizations involved in conflict resolution for a period of five years (2011-2016). In addition, other secondary sources of data such as newspapers, magazines, government records were also used. There are many registered and unregistered women organizations in Benue state. As a result of this, the study used purposive sampling technique to select only registered women organizations that were involved in conflict resolution in Benue state. The rational for studying women organizations involved in conflict resolutions is because, these organizations have made significant contributions to peace and conflict resolution, but their contributions have not been well documented and acknowledged.

Theoretical Framework

In this paper, liberal feminist theory has been employed to explain the role of women organizations in conflict resolution in Benue state. Liberal feminism is premised on the idea that gender inequality in society is a product of patriarchal and sexist patterning of division of labor (Idyorough, 2005). Based on the assumptions of liberal feminism, gender is socially constructed and is manifest in the division of labor where domestic work that is devalued and not remunerated is assigned to women while work outside the home is highly remunerated and is assigned to men. This whole phenomenon is perpetuated through patriarchal ideology (Idyorough, 2005).

The theory explains the lack of recognition for the role of women organizations in conflict resolution to our cultural beliefs and attitudes. The theory argues that the society believes that it is the men who are supposed to be involved in outdoor activities such as conflict resolution while women are supposed to be involved in menial jobs such as childcare and housekeeping. Consequently, even though women organizations have played important roles in conflict resolution, their roles have not been recognized simply because they are women organizations. Perhaps if these organizations were formed by men, their roles would have been acknowledged. This paper therefore states that, for the women organizations to be deeply involved in conflict resolution and their contributions to be appreciated, there has to be a change in our cultural beliefs and attitudes.

The Role of Women Organizations in Conflict Resolution in Benue State

The contributions of women organizations to conflict resolution cannot be over emphasized. According to Scheper (2002), the responses of local women's groups in dealing with conflict, rehabilitation and peace appear to be remarkably similar around the world too. The women NGOs are mostly active in trauma counselling, micro-credit, voter education, gender awareness, law reform and political advocacy. They draw the attention of authorities to civilian security, e.g. through security sector reforms and greater participation of women in police forces, judiciary and in peace committees (Scheper, 2002).

In West Africa, Alaga (2010) states that women have played significant roles in situations relating to peace and war for centuries, primarily as traditional peace-makers, as priestesses who confer with gods to determine whether it was right to go to war or not, as praise singers for men during battles as a boost to ensure their victory, or as custodians of culture. In each culture there are stories of women who have played some leadership roles as peace envoys or harbingers of peace in their communities (Alaga, 2010).

In Nigeria, there are well documented accounts of the exploits of Nigerian women and women organizations in conflict resolution. According to Idris and Habu (2012), women organizations in Nigeria have played significant roles in conflict resolution. For instance, Pisagih, Degri, Ajemasu and Muhammad (2015) observed that the role of women organizations in conflict resolution in Nigeria can be traced as far back as to the Aba women riot of 1929, the Egba women movement of the early 1920s to the 1950s, the Ogharefe women uprising of 1984. These are circumstances where women organizations in Nigeria organised and exercised their collective power to resolve conflict and build peace.

In Benue state, women organizations have also played significant roles in conflict resolution. Their role has been demonstrated particularly in the conflict between herdsmen and farmers in Benue state between 2011 to 2016 which led to loss of lives and property and left a lot of people in refugee camps, towns and other settlements including Agaigbe, Naka, Atukpu, Tse-Iorbogo and other missionary centers outside the conflict areas, including Mission Station Ajigba of the NKST Church and other Christian centers like the Catholic Church premises in Agaigbe and the voluntary organization in the Local Government Areas (Women Environmental Programme, 2012). In a similar view, the herdsmen have dared not to go near the boundaries of Gwer-west Local Government Area. They were also displaced from where they had found pasture.

During this conflict, Women Environmental Programme (2012) organized a multi-stake holder meeting that brought together the Benue state government, Miyetti-Allah Cattle Breeders Association, traditional rulers in Benue state, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) - Benue state chapter, Ja'amatu Nasiru Islam (JNI), Benue state and Civil Society Organizations. The forum provided a platform for farmers and herdsmen to come together to discuss how to resolve their differences and to educate both parties on other topical issues in the society like population increase and desertification which has increased the migration of herdsmen into the Benue trough/valley thereby exacerbating the conflict between the two groups.

In a similar vein, women organizations such as Catholic Women Organisations (CWO) in Benue state have at different times reached out to different groups for deliberation, negotiation, compromises, and agreements on conflict resolution (Ikelegbe, 2003). Apart from helping to resolve conflict in Benue state, the organization has been able to provide a neutral ground where parties involved in conflict can come together to build bridges of trust, understanding and confidence (Ikelegbe,2003). They have also participated in providing relief materials to victims of conflict. For instance, during the herdsmen and farmer's conflict in the state from 2011 to 2015 for which many citizens of the state particularly women were living in refugee camps across the state, the CWO donated relief materials such as food items, clothing, and free medical treatment to the victims of the conflict.

Other women organizations such as market women association have at different times in the course of the farmers-herdsmen conflict in Benue state used different strategies such as street protest and closing of shops in the market places to draw the attention of local, state and Federal government for peace to return to the state.

Challenges faced by Women Organizations in Conflict Resolution in Benue State

There are different factors limiting the role of women organizations in conflict resolution.

One of the major problems facing women organization in Benue state is lack of funds to implement conflict resolution programs (Ahule & Ugba, 2014; Abari, 2014; Akuadna, 2014). Most of these organizations do not have adequate funds to organize workshops and seminars to educate members of the public on the need to live in peace. Besides, creating a platform where stakeholders involved in conflict can come to the negotiation table also requires funds which most women organizations in Benue do not have. This greatly limits the potentials of women organizations in conflict resolution.

Secondly, in Benue state and Nigeria in general, people still believe and look up to government for the resolution of public problems and conflict. As a matter of fact, Ikelegbe (2003) observed that groups and communities in Benue state have more confidence in the ability of the state to resolve conflict. The implication here is that, even when women organizations have made concerted efforts to reach out to groups involved in conflict, people still believe that they do not possess the requisite influence, resources, integrity, and credibility to intervene and resolve conflict (Ikelegbe, 2003).

Thirdly, both the local, state and federal government in Nigeria have given women organizations and groups outside the realm of the state a marginal role in conflict resolution. There is poor partnership between government and other institutions outside the scope of the state in conflict resolution. In some cases, the state view other organizations and women groups with suspicion. Infact, Odeh (2012) observed that state officials view other groups outside the purview of the state as competitors of power and influence in the public sphere rather than partners in peace process. This also serves as a major setback for women organizations working in the area of conflict resolution.

Fourthly, most women organizations that are involved in conflict resolution lack experience, exposure and skills in negotiation, advocacy, and lobbying techniques (Agbalajobi, 2002). Women have always been kept secluded from the political arena and sphere of decision-making; therefore, in many situations they are unable to participate.

Lastly, women organizations in Benue state are also faced with the challenge of marginalization and stigmatization by powerful government and other non-governmental organizations (Munuve, nd). Besides, they also suffer from physical harassment from local men and security forces which is especially likely to happen in post conflict situations where gender tensions are usually high.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the foregoing, the following recommendations have been made to improve the involvement of women organizations in conflict resolution in Benue state.

First, there must be change of attitudes among the people regarding the role of women and women organizations in Benue state and Nigeria in general. Women groups should be given greater role in all segments of the society. This can be achieved by sensitizing members of the public through printed and electronic media on the need to give women more political space to participate in decision making process.

Secondly, government at all levels in Nigeria need to partner with women organizations

and other groups to resolve conflict. The state alone cannot resolve conflict in Nigeria. It is the submission of this paper that one-sector-approach would be inadequate to resolve conflicts in Nigeria. Therefore, the government needs to engage a broad-based coalition of actors, and women organizations need a seat on the table if any meaningful progress is to be made. This is because, according to the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, Conflict Resolution Unit states that partnering with women groups in conflict resolution fosters a wider popular mandate for peace, making it more sustainable.

Thirdly, women organizations in Benue state working in the area of conflict resolution needs to be strengthened in terms of training, skills and methods of operation and functioning (James, 2003). Most of these organizations are not well trained and properly equipped to resolve conflict.

Lastly, women organizations in Benue state need to develop alternative ways of raising funds to implement their programs. Most of these organizations depend heavily on foreign donations and this is not adequate.

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