

Ethnic Conflict and African Women's Capacity for Preventive Diplomacy

Olaifa Temitope¹

¹ Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta. Nigeria.

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Abstract

The spate of the occurrence of Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria and indeed Africa is sporadic and to say the least alarming. To scholars of Ethnic Conflict in Africa, it has defied all logical approaches to its resolution. Based on this fact international organisations have begun to look for alternative means of approaching these conflicts. Not a few have agreed that wars are better and cheaper prevented than resolved or transformed. In the light of this, this paper had set out to look at the concept of Preventive Diplomacy, Ethnic Conflict, Women and the role they play in mitigating conflict by researching into activities of women in pre and post-conflict situations in selected African conflict and has been able to establish the peculiar capacity of women in dousing tension both at domestic and communal levels.

17

18 *Index terms—*

1 Introduction

20 Ethnic wars in Nigeria assumed a sporadic and seeming intractable dimension at the inception of the Democratic rule in 1999. It was an awakening of self realisation, self assertion and self expression among Ethnic groups that hitherto, had lain comatose in the preceding long era of military rule. Every ethnic group became stakeholder in the new democratic dispensation, and to be able to belong one had to align significantly to one ethnic group or the other to be relevant. Strong and propelling interest in politics became manifest in the Nigerian polity and elites who had abandoned their lands of descent started expressing renewed interests in the lands of their origin and started ploughing their ways back home. The urge to belong in the national political landscape and share in the brewing dividends of democracy largely spurred the various ethnic groups into political competitions that inadvertently led into conflicts. Joseph (1987) rightly observes that 'Ethnicity has become one type of political grouping within the framework of modern state. Such a grouping is called into being as a result of the keen struggle over new strategic positions within the structures of a new state'.

31 Ethnic affiliation ordinarily, is a progressive issue. As a matter of fact it should be a strong chord binding people of the same historical and cultural descent and propelling them to cooperate in working out developmental agenda for their communities. Selfhelp projects are mutually agreed upon and carried out to the progress of societies and structures are determined and built into the system to regulate behaviours and interaction between the people. This is as far as ethnic cooperation goes.

36 Ethnicity takes a destructive form when it becomes competitive. When groups begin to agitate, against perceived marginalization, for stakes in scarce resources especially in governance and distribution of economic resources, a measure of coercion is introduced and if not well handled, conflict ensues. At this stage, ethnicity becomes a tool for political bargaining, power and resource control. African nations have often quaked under the yoke of elitist manipulations of ethnic differences which ultimately and quite frequently becomes volatile and highly destructive.

42 The interventionary measures of both the international community and the regional watchdogs have always been therapeutic rather than preventive. Most of the time they appear on the theatre of war to mop up the blood that has been shed rather than intervene at crucial points to prevent bloodshed.

6 WOMANHOOD AND FEMINISM

45 In the light of the above this paper undertakes to look into the possibilities of preventing conflicts even from
46 the family level. It looks at the subjugation to which women have been hitherto subjected and the peacebuilding
47 roles which if allowed, they could play to mitigate conflicts and ameliorate its impact on the society.

48 2 II.

49 3 Preventive Diplomacy

50 Preventive Diplomacy could be defined as those activities put in place to mitigate a brewing conflict from
51 escalating. It is action to prevent disputes from arising between parties and to prevent existing disputes from
52 escalating into conflicts.

53 For effectiveness, Preventive Diplomacy relies on accurate information about the causes, dynamics and nature
54 of the potential conflict to be able to design appropriate preventive action. Apart from these, Preventive
55 Diplomacy depends on good timing to be effective. The conflict must be ripe for effective intervention ??Zartman,
56 2003; ??dekanye, 1999:112).

57 Preventive Diplomacy relies on certain skills in its processes. These skills include: Early Warning
58 Monitoring and Response, Fact Finding, Early Deployment, Demilitarized Zones and Confidence Building
59 (<http://wwics.si.edu/topics/pubs/ACF19D/pdf>).

60 As the United Nations and regional organizations as well as global and regional powers discovered the high
61 cost of managing conflicts, there is a strong common perception of benevolence of Preventive Diplomacy; hence
62 the search for mechanisms that could be employed in preventing conflicts. This paper therefore projects the
63 natural and cultural endowments of African women which place them in an opportune position to nip conflicts
64 in the bud.

65 4 III.

66 5 Ethnicity

67 An ethnic group is a people of similar cultural, historical background of shared common heritage, ancestry and
68 migration. They share a cohesive existence aimed at protecting their common interests and values. ??noli
69 (1978:5) observes that an ethnic group is a social formation, distinguished by the communal factors which may
70 be language, culture or both. ??ashmere (1992:97) represents an ethnic group as that possessing some degree
71 of cohesion and solidarity, composed of people who are at least latently aware of having common origins and
72 interest.

73 Ethnicity as a concept connotes struggle. It implies either an overt or covert competition between two or more
74 ethnic groups. The trigger of the competition might be political, economic, social or even cultural in nature.
75 When two or more ethnic groups come together to form a nation, battle for supremacy, justice and equitable
76 distribution of resources is inevitable. ??saghae (1995:11) sees ethnicity as "employment or mobilisation of ethnic
77 identity and differences to gain advantage in situation of conflict, competition or cooperation". Mobilisation for
78 ethnic purposes can either be positive or negative, competitive or cooperative, depending on the groups' target.

79 Cohesion is an issue of paramount importance in the analysis of the nature of ethnicity. It is the 'collectiveness'
80 which sustains the driving force of all ethnic struggles. Cohen (1969) perceives ethnicity as a strife in which ethnic
81 groups stress their identities and distinguishing characteristics. Each ethnic group separates itself based on shared
82 values, interests and common goals which are distinct from those of the 'outgroup'. It is this 'collectiveness' that
83 forms the thrust of the strength of the group to agitate either constructively or destructively depending on the
84 issue at stake.

85 Political agitation is one of the greatest hallmarks of ethnic struggle. It forms the nucleus of the motives for
86 strong ethnic affiliations. In political interplays, marginalisation and inequality are common parlances among
87 ethnic groups and these form the basis for political conflicts which are the main issues behind inter-ethnic conflicts
88 in Africa. Thus, ethnicity becomes a political behaviour which is exploited by elites and the political class (a
89 social minority). It is rife in the African political milieu to find these elites and politicians instigating ethnic
90 violence to intimidate the opposition and in extreme cases to eliminate them.

91 Stuart ??aufman (2001:220) observes that 'political entrepreneurs' and extremist groups use the emotional
92 power of ethnic symbols to reconstruct the larger group's preferences.

93 It is apparent therefore that ethnic conflict does not just erupt. It usually has sinister manipulations of some
94 elite groups at its root.

95 IV.

96 6 Womanhood and Feminism

97 The Webster Dictionary and Thesauraus defines 'woman' as 'an adult female of the human race' ??Olaifa,2009:5).

98 Although the term 'woman' is generic, covering all the female kind of human, it is usually employed
99 in describing an adult female while 'girl' is reserved for describing females younger than eighteen years
100 (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/woman>). 'Women' is the plural form of the word 'woman'.

101 It is obvious that we cannot discuss womanhood without making recourse to gender. Nature itself has made
102 the distinction when during creation woman was moulded distinct from man. This in essence establishes that
103 in physical representation, man is different from woman. It is therefore pertinent to discuss the female gender
104 as it relates to this topic. The B.B.C English Dictionary 6 defines gender thus: 'a person's gender is their
105 characteristics of being male or female. Simon Fisher et al 2 The UNDP 8 defines gender as follows:

106 The term gender denotes the qualities associated with men and women that are socially and culturally, than
107 biologically determined. Gender includes the ways in which society differentiates appropriate behaviour and
108 access to power for women and men. Although the details vary from society and change over times, gender
109 relations tend to include a strong element of inequality between women and men and are strongly influenced by
110 ideology'.

111 Gender is not synonymous with sex? Rather, it is an all-encompassing term embracing all that go with
112 femininity, masculinity, womanhood or manhood as dictated by beliefs, psycho-social and physiological details of a
113 human being who could be identified as either male or female ??Olaifa 2009:5). The environment in which man
114 finds himself also input so much in the gender roles he grows up to perform. ??upta (2000:10) opines that gender
115 is a social and cultural construct that differentiates women from men and defines the ways in which women
116 and men interact with each other. In many prehistoric cultures, women assumed a particular cultural role. In
117 gatherer-hunter societies, women were generally gatherers of plants foods, small animal food and fish, while men
118 hunted meat from large animals (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/woman>). The feminine gender therefore is not only
119 distinguished by sex but also by the whole gamut of sexuality and the dialectical dictates of her role expectation
120 and performance.

121 Looking at this issue from an ideological point of view, one is propelled into perusing the idea of feminism.
122 Feminism is an ideology that came to the fore in the 19 th C and it seeks to position womanhood on equal terrain
123 as its male counterpart. In essence it advocates equal rights and privileges for both the male and the female.
124 Mbah (2006) in one of his numerous postulations defines feminism as:

125 '??a philosophy embracing politics, economics, literature and indeed every aspect of the humanities and which
126 seek its position women on equal footing with men, and in doing so its show how men have established and
127 reinforced their historical dominance.

128 Nbah's assertion above depicts accurately the yawning gulf existing between the male personality and his
129 female counterpart, which has inadvertently invoked a revolutionary thought against gender discrimination. The
130 intensity of the seeming marginalisation is further couched in Namda 2003: 212 as quoted by Mbah:

131 '??the main common theoretical assumption which gets shared by all branches of the movement has been that
132 there has been a historical tradition of male exploitation of women stemming originally from the sexual differences
133 which led to a division of labour, as for example, in child rearing practices'.

134 Feminists believe that gender differences are invented by the society and therefore they are artificial. They
135 contend that it is the society that trains the woman to be feminine, submissive, passive and docile while on
136 the other hand it trains the man to be aggressive, coercive, masculine and highly competitive. These gender
137 stereotypes are amenable to change and improvement depending on the political will of the society to effect
138 changes in fundamental gender roles.

139 It is on the premise stated above that this study looks at the feminine gender as structurally oppressed, violated
140 and dominated by the male gender.

141 **7 V. Hallmarks of Discrimination Against Women**

142 We would want to reiterate at this point that discrimination against women is more of a structural problem than
143 of any other forms of violence. The African cultural belief does not allow women to be seen and in most cases
144 not to be heard. Her counterparts in Saudi Arabia do not fare better as they are not even allowed to drive a
145 car. Likewise, the Pre 9/11 Afghanistan women were denied education and prevented from going out of their
146 homes unaccompanied. The German Nazi has stereotyped its women with the following expressions: 'Kinder,
147 Kirche, Kuche' which means children, church and cooking. The Nazi women therefore have been boxed into a
148 strait stereotype.

149 Violence against women manifests in myriads of forms. The most obvious of which is the category of physical
150 violence. Wife battery is the commonest of the violence of this category. Men batter their wives for reasons
151 ranging from insubordination to outright disobedience. Wife battery inflicts indelible injury on the women in
152 most cases as she often engages in a defenseless battle against her husband who would employ all available means
153 to shut her up. Another form of wife battery is rape. Some men rape their wives and they consider this despicable
154 act legitimate.

155 Apart from the example given above, women undergo various forms of psychological violence. They belong to
156 the vulnerable group that suffer both directly and indirectly the pangs of war. Their husbands get drafted into
157 war; their underage children are not spared from the child guerilla group and their female children, targets of
158 rape. What greater form of violence do we have?

159 Many women all over the world still live in squalor. It is understood that 80% of the world poor are women.
160 The majority of the women who live in the rural communities expend their energy on the struggle for survival
161 oblivious of any feminist campaign and impervious to distractions from their socially assigned routine. Such do
162 not understand the import of "sexual liberation" campaign and, in the rare event that they understand, they

163 regard such a clamour as alien and unrelated to them. They exist in abject poverty, an unending squalor that
164 affords no hope of better tomorrow. Yet they supply the needs of the man: physical, mental and moral.

165 The young African woman does not have any right of choice. Her choice of husband is largely determined for
166 her by her father. She is naturally transferred from a state of gender discrimination to another state of perpetual
167 slavery in her husband's house. Many underage women have been seeded as wives to men who could conveniently
168 be their grand fathers. As a result of under developed pelvis, the majority of these victims of early marriage
169 suffered V.V.F. during childbirth -a condition which left them perpetually maimed for life or, worse still, dead.

170 The female species of the human race is not only oppressed at the rural rustic level, but also at the political
171 terrain where most of the plum jobs are reserved for men. In the area of peace building and peace making in
172 the society, areas where women are naturally endowed to function effectively, they are sidelined by men who are
173 usually at the fore-front in conflict issues. As observed by Naomi Akpan-Ita :

174 Traditionally, women are not encouraged to become involved or concerned in Peace building and conflict
175 interventions even though they are victims of atrocities in violent conflicts situations. Being usually the most
176 adversely affected in the course and aftermath of conflict; they are raped, forced into prostitution, become
177 concubine to their abductors, tend to the wounded, bury the dead and sometimes actually hold sway for men
178 within communities, pending their return from the 'warfront' and hide-outs after a violent conflict.

179 Women have always been and if care is not taken will always be at the receiving end of violent conflict if
180 something decisive is not done to curb the scourge.

181 8 VI.

182 9 Women in Preventive Diplomacy

183 The potency of the feminine influence on peace processes can not be ignored. At whatever level peace building
184 is required, women have always been found at the forefront of activities. This is particularly borne out of their
185 innate ability to socialize, mould and build characters. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
186 has identified four levels of gender equality analysis which are: Welfare, Access Conscientization, Participation
187 and Control (Idyorough: 2005:9). The fourth level which is participation is considered paramount in peace
188 building. ??Chowdhury 2005: 7) believes that when women are marginalised, there is little chance for an open
189 and participatory peace process.

190 Women's participation in peace processes begins at the conflict formation level where emotions begin to switch.
191 The woman is so strategically placed that she notices the early warning signs of an impending conflict. She is the
192 one that notices the mood swings of her husband, she notices unusual visits paid on him by strange acquaintances,
193 she notices his nocturnal movements and his skipped meals. Her sensitivity is kindled and her curiosity ignited.
194 This is where she brings her natural acumen into force which could either douse the rising passion or fuel it. The
195 way the pendulum of her participation swings depends on the level of recognition and opportunity afforded her
196 by the society to demonstrate her peace building capabilities.

197 Nevertheless, women have often defied sociocultural barriers to engage in meaningful and landmark interventions
198 in conflicts. In Africa history is replete with women's involvements in peacebuilding even at fullblown
199 conflict level.

200 On the 8 th of March, 2000, at the occasion of the International Women's Day, the President of the UNSC
201 issued a statement that recognised the underutilised and undervalued contribution women can make to preventing
202 was to building peace and to bringing individuals and societies back in harmony. It played a crucial role in the
203 adoption of the UNSC RESOLUTION 1325 which was later adopted that year.

204 The preoccupation of the woman's mind during and after any war is how her family would be safe. She realises
205 that she stands to loose all when war breaks out. Her husband is at risk, so are her children that could be drafted
206 as child soldiers and she who could also be drafted into war and if not, become target of rape and sundry assault
207 ??Chowdhury 2005:4).

208 Women keep the future of their societies and communities at heart when they participate in peace negotiations.
209 They think ahead and seek to provide a conducive, living environment for their future generations. Their
210 interest in the society is larger and broader compared to their male counterparts whose negotiations predicates
211 on immediate gains in terms of authority and power.

212 The Mano River Women's Peace Network (MWPN) facilitated the coming together of the heads of government
213 of guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone to accede to their call for disarmament. This initiative earned these women the
214 UN recognition and the network won the UN Human Rights Prize for 2003. In their declaration, MAWOPNET
215 stressed the need for more room for women participation in peace processes in Africa. It reads thus:

216 The only way to ensure that African women become equal partners? is to support their struggles for full
217 participation in national, political, economic and social life. In the face of entrenched discrimination, controversial
218 ensures to increase opportunities women, including quotas for women in parliament and the civil service, should
219 be supported as a step on the path to gender equality.

220 To achieve enduring peace, gender perspectives should be mainstreamed into peace processes. Grassroots
221 women groups can facilitate peace processes in inter-group, inter-ethnic and interclass lines.

222 The Peace process in Rwanda has its roots in the full participation of women and this is broadly acknowledged
223 as a cultural attribute of the Rwandan women ??John Mutanba and Jeanne Izabilla 2008:15) and to Archbishop

224 Emmanuel Kolini of the Anglican Church in Rwanda, "A woman is the epitome of peace. It is from her that
225 peace flows and radiates to the other members of the family". "A woman does not belong to any particular family
226 or tribe. She has no boundaries (Nyampinga) and therefore she is there to unite families because she is neutral".
227 A woman does not do things halfway. If she believes in a cause, she goes headlong to defend it. The women who
228 participated in the Rwandan genocide were ruthless and those who had the courage to defend their neighbours
229 did so with all vehemence.

230 Women are naturally equipped with conciliatory tactics with which they reconcile warring parties. This is why
231 they can be referred to as bridge builders. They mend broken bridges between friends, relations, communities,
232 ethnic groups etc. They mould the bricks to fill existing gaps in relationships.

233 The Somalis believe that mother is a school. The values, with which children are brought up, precede their
234 actual birth. "In deed before becoming adults we attend a basic school, and that school is mother" ??Mohammed
235 2003:75-115) Apart from these women have been observed to be capable of the following peacebuilding processes:
236 a) Spearheading socio-economic processes. b) Participating actively in resettlement initiatives c) Decision-making
237 d) Opposing Gender-based Violence e) Initiating income-generating activities.. Women are accustomed to settling
238 disputes in a way that all the parties in conflict benefit eventually.

239 **10 VII.**

240 **11 Conclusion**

241 Given all that have been located and affirmed as potentials in women in the area of peace building this paper
242 believes that if allowed, women can nip the seed of violent conflict in the bud. Considering their strategic positions
243 in the home and their contact with the early warning signals of conflict, they can galvanise resources together
244 towards successful mitigation of conflicts. If the society having recognized women's capability in this crucial area,
245 is able to repose confidence in women and explore their natural skills in Preventive Diplomacy, most conflicts
246 would not grow beyond the formative stage.

247 Peace is not born but made. The culture of peace in the African Traditional Society was implanted in a child
248 through responsible upbringing and socialization undertaken and supervised by mothers. African women are
249 exposed as girls to salient virtues that were passed down to them through folktales, folksongs proverbs, anecdotes
250 and sometimes voice inflections. Such virtues include (1) responsibility through reciprocity (2) Honesty and
251 loyalty through mutuality and deference (3) faith and compassion through inner strength and selfcontrol (4)
252 Communalism and mutual responsibility through love.

253 Lihamba (2003:115) observes that Tanzanian women have always played a critical part in maintaining
254 equilibrium in their society by bringing up their children as responsible members of the community .Women
255 taught their daughters and sons proper behaviour and the ethos of the society, and impressed on them the
256 importance of such values as honesty uprightness and the necessity to compromise. As such, women have always
257 been active promoters of harmony in the community which can be referred to as a culture of peace.

258 These and many other attributes support the notion that women and indeed, grassroots women groups can
259 facilitate peace processes in inter-group, inter-ethnic and inter-class divides because they are naturally and
260 culturally equipped for it.

261 However, women themselves need to rise above frivolities and excesses that would incur societal confidence.
262 Pettiness, frivolous appearance, gossiping, backbiting, jealousy and complacency should be shunned. Rather,
263 women should ascribe a high level of dignity to themselves. This would prevent unnecessary harassment by the
264 men folk. They need to be moderate, urbane, gainfully employed, moderately independent and be very decent
265 in speech action and dressing to earn the respect of men ??Olaifa 2009:12). ¹

¹Ethnic Conflict and African Women's Capacity for Preventive Diplomacy

11 CONCLUSION

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