

Breaking the Silence: Women's Grassroots Engagement in Sustaining Peace in Fragile Communities.

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[0208] Abstract

This study 'breaking the silence: women's grassroots engagement in sustaining peace in fragile communities' explores the unnoticed yet transformative and encouraging role those grassroots women play in promoting peace in communities that are vulnerable to conflict. Despite their frontline presence in settling local disputes, meditative role, fostering healing, and repairing damaged societies, their contributions to peace initiatives are still mostly ignored in official peace procedures. Through a qualitative approach, the study draws secondary data from scholarly publications, international organization reports, and documented materials while thematic content analysis was used to examine the data. The study observed the effectiveness and efficiency employed by the grassroots women in settling conflicts through various means which are usually not noticed by the formal institutions, the data shows that grassroots women play a crucial role in fostering reconciliation and fostering resilience in those conflict-ridden communities. But patriarchal conventions, a lack of institutional backing, inadequate money, and exclusion from official peace talks limit their activity. The study then recommended among others that acknowledging and formalizing the contributions of women at the grassroots level is crucial to maintaining peace in vulnerable areas and the formal institution should create gender-inclusive peace policies, providing local women peace builders with specialized resources and training, protecting female activists legally, and purposefully incorporating their work into national and international peace building plans.

Keywords: Conflict resolution, Fragile communities, Grassroots women, Peacebuilding

Introduction

Peacebuilding is usually seen as a male-dominated or state-centric in character in many conflict-affected societies but, increasing numbers of data has shown women at different grassroots, maintaining, avoiding and reducing the escalation of conflict in most communities. The women involved in the peacebuilding frequently serve as caregivers, mobilizers and even mediators before the state actors in peacebuilding steps in yet, their actions and contributions are usually overlooked. Most inherently, in order to maintain peace and foster stability in society the involvement of women at every stage is vital. In any war or conflict, the women and children are the most disproportionately affected. The unspeakable horrifying barbaric nature of war are witnessed by this vulnerable groups and they often viewed as helpless victims of the unimaginable bloody conflicts rather than seen as agents of change which might utilized peace initiatives in their capacity as mothers. Their contributions are usually seen or limited to a passive role despite the on-noticed character of women in peacebuilding initiative, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) has brought women's involvement in the front for historic involvement in peace efforts at all stages.

The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) comes as a necessity because women make up half of the population of any nation; therefore, they have a right of participation in the decision-making process as it affects their lives, and more so, available data indicates that when peace and reconciliation initiatives engaged women to some degree, they measured reasonable success. Women in nations like Nigeria and others with leadership roles are actively tackling causes and effects of protracted violent conflict but do to the fact that the activities in peacebuilding by these women are extremely underrepresented in the formal realm where peace procedures are sometimes delayed, underfunded or even politically limited, their activities can adequately be seen at the grassroots level

frequently mediating in ethnic and communal disputes, those who negotiate ceasefires, assist casualties and mend community relationships (UN 1325, 2000). This article 'breaking the silence on women participation in peacebuilding' is intended to bring to notice the contributions women make through community healing, informal justice systems and economic resilience even though they are rarely noticed and included in the formal peace talk.

Objective of the study

This study is guided by the following objectives: (a) to examine the nature and patterns of grassroots women's involvement in community peacebuilding and sustainability and (b) to identify the socio-cultural and structural barriers that limits their participation.

Conceptual Discourse Peacebuilding: In the words of Boutros-Ghali (1992), peacebuilding encompasses a wide range of specific tasks that could result from an all-encompassing peace agreement, such as assisting in the disarmament of parties, canton troops, and weapons; monitoring elections; deploying individuals law enforcement; and repatriating refugees; as well as more general and intangible goals like restoring order, advancing human rights efforts, updating or fortifying governmental institutions, and encouraging both formal and informal political participation processes. Peacebuilding is defined by Kofi Anan (1997:35) as the different integrated and concurrent efforts carried out at the conclusion of a conflict to strengthen and avoid a repeat of armed confrontation. Finding a balance between "positive" and "negative" peace is the aim of peacebuilding. Building a self-sustaining peace is never an easy undertaking because conflicts typically leave their imprint on the post-settlement process in the shape of broken lives, fractured and split communities, mistrust, and hatred. In these situations, post-settlement peacebuilding turns into what Grenier & Daudelin (1995) refer to as the "peacebuilding market-place" where the end of violence is exchanged for other goods like political chance (election) and financial gain (land). They contend that the most important kind of "trade" in peacebuilding is "exchanging resources of violence against other resources"

In the words of Galtung, (1996) peacebuilding is the present of equality and social justice, negative peace and absence of violence which throw more light on changing institutions and culture in order to address the hidden causes of conflict in societies such as poverty, prejudice and inequalities experienced in the societies. Also United Nations (1992), established peacebuilding to be a lasting and assisting institutions that prevent a return to violence, reinforce and deepen peace. An important idea in peacebuilding is an increase in society's instinctive capacity to resolving conflict in a well peaceful capacity, create human rights, democratic governance and equal access to resources. The establishment of institutions that eliminate the causes of conflict and provide alternatives to violence in potential conflict situations is known as peacebuilding and the main objective of peace building is to increase a society's instinctive capacity to resolve conflicts peacefully. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) (2002) defines peacebuilding as an endeavor to improve the chances of internal harmony and reduce the probability of violent conflict. The ultimate goal of peacebuilding is to create human security, which encompasses environmental security, sustainable development, human rights, democratic governance, and equal access to resources. In addition to conflict resolution and prevention, peace building may also include a variety of post-conflict activities, it emphasizes the humanitarian or political and socioeconomic background.

Conflict Resolution: There is conflict at every level of society and in every nation therefore, conflict is a natural expression of social difference and of humanity's ongoing quest for justice and self-determination; it need not be a bad thing in and of itself but to describe the procedures and techniques used to help conflict and retaliation resolve peacefully. The goal of conflict resolution is to comprehend conflict processes and other peaceful approaches that assist disputing parties in coming to mutually agreeable conclusions that end their disagreements. In contrast to conflict management or transformation, Miller (2003) views conflict resolution as a range of strategies intended to end disputes through the constructive solution of issues. According to Miall, Ramsbotham & Woodhouse (1999), conflict resolution is supposed to address and resolve the underlying causes of conflict, stop violent behavior and hostile attitudes, and alter the conflict's institutional framework. Conflict resolution,

according to Mitchel & Banks (1998), is the process or procedure by which the issues in an existing conflict are resolved in a way that is mutually acceptable, self-sustaining over time, and productive of a new, positive relationship between parties that were previously hostile adversaries.

Burton (1990) advocates for conflict resolution processes that identify and satisfy these basic needs to achieving lasting peace, he speaks on rooted identity, recognition and security which cannot be resolved by compromise alone. Building on Burton's work, Azar (1990) developed the theory of Prolonged Social Conflicts (PSC) and applied it to post-colonial and multiethnic communities. According to him, constant conflict usually results to poor administration, discriminatory and presence of marginalized group while settling those disputes calls for inclusions of groups identifications. Mitchell (1981), viewed conflict resolution as a cooperative process of problem-solving that seeks to satisfy the requirements of each and every group irrespective of the class while Lederach (1997) broadened the definition of conflict resolution to include the alteration of social institutions, attitudes, and relationships and inclusion of grassroots players, such as women and traditional leaders, in establishing enduring peace. Kriesberg (2007), who saw conflict as a force for good when handled through inclusive and democratic procedures believes that constructive discourse and institutional transformation, rather than repressing dispute, are the paths to peaceful civilizations. His method is especially applicable to peace building and social movements in transitional cultures.

The UN has been instrumental in operationalizing conflict resolution as such gave the definition of conflict resolution thus as an element of a larger conflict managing methodology that covers peacemaking, post-conflict reconstruction, and preventative diplomacy. It portrays the significance of addressing the fundamental causes of conflict, such as poverty, discrimination, and political marginalization, as well as inclusive discourse and the involvement of women and young people and vulnerable groups in the society. Deutsch (1973) highlight the fact that not all conflict is necessarily bad but the idea of productive and destructive conflict is maintained and managed via cooperative tactics, clear communication, and the development of trust, which can result in constructive societal transformation.

Grassroots Women: Grassroots women referred by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM, 2008), as those who work and reside in underprivileged and marginalized areas. They are local actors who usually are excluded from official systems; they are builders who are ingrained in their communities. The women under this group use their experiences, social connections, and local knowledge to resolve conflicts, aid in healing, maintain peace in their homes and their communities. Mama (2011:4-20) sees grassroots women as individuals who, in spite of their exclusion from official power structures, they use their cultural ties, religious networks, and customary duties of caregiving and conflict resolution to influence communal affairs. Women at the grassroots level are individuals who, through unofficial organizing, offer services, organize for community development, and promote social justice in underprivileged or conflict-affected areas. Tripp, Casimiro, Kwesiga, & Mungwa (2013) acknowledge grassroots women as local-level players who employed agency and strategic competence. They mobilize for social, political or economic change in their local communities.

The International Alliance of Grassroots sees grassroots women as group through local leadership, group activity and self-identification. Enloe, (2004) views grassroots women as women on ground, whose lives are most dramatically impacted by political and military decisions, fostering peace, organizing and caring for others by opposing militarism. In a nutshell, "grassroots women" refers to women who actively participate in local advocacy campaigns, social movements, and community-based projects. They strive to address issues like social justice and human rights, environmental sustainability, economic empowerment, healthcare and education, and violence against women and girls; they frequently serve as the catalyst for positive change in their communities. Grassroots women may involve: Community leaders: women who have become influential in their communities, frequently through volunteer work, advocacy groups, or local organizations; Activists: women who actively participate in political and social activism, using their decisions to advocate for change and bring attention to significant concerns; Organizers: women who organize their communities behind certain causes or issues, frequently via the use of tactics like petitions, rallies, and lobbying; Women

entrepreneurs: those who have started their own companies or projects, frequently concentrating on the effects on society or the environment; and Caregivers are women who provide vital support and services to family members, neighbors, or community members.

Thus, grassroots women can then be referred to as female actors who are rooted in the community and are often marginalized in formal structures. They are grassroots actors who exercise their peacebuilding nature through informal leadership, care, resolving community conflict, and societal mobilization, in their environments that are fragile or consumed in conflict. The grassroots women in the frontline in conflict resolution are essential to long-term reconciliation and social development in those communities since they are based on indigenous customs, lived experience, and local knowledge, they typically participate in these initiatives in relational, restorative, and frequently nonviolent ways, with a focus on community resilience, social healing, and conflict resolution.

Women Building Peace in Fragile Communities: Women in fragile communities typically participate in peacebuilding initiatives in relational, restorative, and frequently nonviolent ways, with a focus on community resilience, provide social healing, and resolve conflict. They feature in local NGOs, various women organizations, unseen faith-based networks and through their traditional councils. Yet their various means of interactions seen in several ways achieved success, which are frequently disregarded or unnoticed. Nigeria as nations have a long history of women at the grassroots level leading peacebuilding efforts, they in several ways calls for social cohesiveness, agitation to ending violence, and relentlessly advancing sustainable development. These women activists dedicated their lives to mediating, negotiating, and the advancement of peace and reconciliation in their various communities. In various capacities advocated for the release of abducted girls; peaceful settlement of disputes; conflict resolution among young people via work on the National Peace Committee and to promote peace and social cohesion, particularly among women and children affected in conflict.

In conflict-affected communities, grassroots women are essential to peacebuilding in conflict communities by constantly filling in for absence or inefficiency of governmental organizations, their responsibilities lie in livelihood restoration, advocacy, trauma recovery, reconciliation, and community mediation. The restoration of peace in those conflict communities depended on these efforts made by the grassroots women, which are usually disregarded or not noticed in official peace procedures. The impact of grassroots women's interventions in peacebuilding is motivated not only by necessity but also by their cultural legitimacy as nurturers, caregivers, and mediators, their closeness to the effects of conflict, and their integration into local communities. The grassroots women are more sensitive to minute changes in social dynamics that could turn violent due to their frequent encounters in places like, the market, water collection stations, educational institutions, and places of worship, they are first to sight any escalating hostilities which could lead to deadly violence or conflict. Women's social networks facilitate the quick spread of information and the rallying of group action to avert conflict in most communities. For instance, women's organizations like the Umuada in Eastern Nigeria, and the August Meeting associations which is done annually were crucial in helping their communities settle many troubled issues before they escalate into violence (Akinyemi & Alabi, 2019). As a nonviolent alternative to court litigation, Chukwuemeka (2022:78-94) observes that Igbo women in Umuada forums in Nigeria actively address issues of domestic violence, land disputes, and intergenerational conflicts, the women of grassroots constantly serve in different capacities such as intergroup, the family-related crisis, and in various communal disputes, as informal mediators. Their presence in their community's network provides them with moral power this, allows them to reach out to dispute or warring parties who might in one way reject formal legal systems.

It is worthy of note that these women play vital roles in providing care that promote emotional healing and trauma healing to troubled families or communities in their various capacities. They do that through encouragements to grieving families, they sometimes conduct rituals that in some way strengthen ties within the community, and offer informal counseling where needed. This can be seen through organized prayer groups, counseling and healing circles. They are done in order to assist those survivors in overcoming trauma associated with deadly violence and war thereby reintegrating them

into the community and society at large (Gbowee, 2011). The grassroots women also contribute in their little way to peacebuilding by lowering the factors that lead to violence, such factors like unemployment and poverty to promote economic resilience. These were done by setting up savings cooperatives, microcredit programs, and skills training courses. Their activities in community-level through economic empowerment of women, constantly lowers gendered vulnerabilities in post-conflict settings and promotes home and community stability.

The grassroots women also through awareness campaigns, prayer vigils, and protests, regularly inspire communities for peace. These activities demonstrate how, even in very patriarchal environments, use moral leverage and nonviolent opposition to affect political outcomes. The women create and maintain connections across political, religious, and ethnic divides; they promote understanding and reconciliation by planning gatherings for the community, storytelling events, and intergroup discussions which is relational and essential for long-term stability in any community or society. They are powerful social healers and restorers of trust because of their everyday contacts across social barriers. In Nigeria, violent-conflict has taken many forms ranging, from resource-based conflict in the Niger Delta down to communal and ethno-religious conflicts in the Middle Belt to insurgency in the North-East (Boko Haram). Women at grassroots level have been instrumental in reducing some of this violence and promoting harmony. For instance, in the Northern part where insurgency has consumed some of the communities, the women have stepped in through trauma healing, interfaith mediation, and community dialogues. The associations of Christian and Muslim women have been brought together by groups like the Women's Interfaith Council (WIC) to resolve those conflicts and advance interreligious understanding amongst the people. Through the use of "backdoor diplomacy," this involves talking to their husbands, kids, and local youngsters to dissuade them from participating in violent acts. Their hidden activities have been successful in deterring retaliatory attacks and disseminating messages of coexistence by implementing peace education in social and religious settings.

Obstacles Encountered by Women in Peacebuilding Communities: Women grassroots peacebuilders all over are acknowledged in the role they played in resolving conflicts and promoting lasting peace. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325), highlights the importance of women's engagement in peace processes, but their actualization has been inconsistent and frequently symbolic rather than important. Their existed some notable barriers preventing women from fully and effectively engaging in peacebuilding in conflicts and violence communities such as gender conventions and strongly ingrained patriarchal ideals as a major barrier, it minimizes women's engagement to public life and further reinforced by customary and traditional authority which are usually male dominated. Rather from being active change agents, these cultural attitudes frequently characterize women as passive victims of conflict (Tripp et al., 2013). Women are routinely left out of official peace efforts and forced into unofficial or community-based positions.

Women of grassroots continue to be notably underrepresented in post-conflict governance structures, in official peace negotiations, and most political appointments. The viability of peace agreements is threatened by this lack of representation, which also makes it impossible to include gender-specific issues in them. Sexual harassment, constant rape and various kind of gender intimidation also discouraged women in grassroots from taking part in peacebuilding efforts in conflict and post-conflict settings due to the possibility of physical and sexual violence which is frequently employed as a weapon of war and to suppress female activists (Mazurana et al., 2013). The absence of legal recourse and protection procedures deters women from assuming leadership or advocacy positions, even during times of calm. This is frequently made worse in post-conflict economies, which deny women access to getting the financial resources, having property rights and the possibilities for earning adequate living and to worsen it the foreign donors who constantly give preference to official institutions over grassroots women organization. All these limits their commitment to achieving maximum peace is actually limited by their incapacity to finance their involvement in peacebuilding.

Lack of educational attainment equally affects the engagement in peacebuilding capacity which also makes it harder for them to participate in policy discussions (Krause, Krause, & Bränfors, 2018:985-1016). The contributions that these grassroots women can make to peacebuilding are still limited in the absence of sufficient capacity-building programs and leadership training. Though the grassroots women might be included to satisfy donor expectations or international standards, but have little actual negotiating power (Paffenholz et al., 2016). Although the women constantly spearhead community-level efforts at healing and reconciliation, but they are not included in official peacebuilding frameworks. Their influence is diminished by their lack of financial resources, technical assistance, and political networks (Smyth, 2003:102-110). They are also further cut off from national and international peacebuilding platforms by linguistic and logistical difficulties.

More so, grassroots women's experiences in peacebuilding are not all the same. Issues on ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, and disability are some of the factors that influence their vulnerability and level of engagement. Example can be seen in many types of prejudice which prevent indigenous or minority women from being included in peace initiatives (Crenshaw, 1991:1241-1299). Exclusion is made worse when peacebuilding initiatives do not use an intersectional perspective. Real political commitment and institutional responsibility are essential for women's involvement in peacebuilding to be successful. Nevertheless, a lot of countries and peace organizations show little political will to put women's participation above rhetoric. The lack of sanctions for breaking gender pledges jeopardizes international efforts, and monitoring systems are frequently ineffective or gender-blind (True, 2013).

Discussion of Findings

Grassroots women have an essential role at the family, the community and national level, their daily actions of compassion, bravery and their teamwork as seen by the interventions in conflict-ridden communities on restoring peace, bringing warring communities together, helping survivors, fighting for justice, and reviving economies, they function at the nexus of survival, resistance, and transformation which is not just the purview of diplomats and elites. The women at the grassroots level have been instrumental in trauma healing, mediation, reconciliation, and community reconstruction. Cultural legitimacy and community trust have made traditional institutions like Umuada in Eastern Nigeria and community healing circles in resolving localized conflicts. The women used various means to achieving peace in some conflict-ridden community through Women's interfaith alliances, peaceful campaign, jointly prayer, and symbolic protests to help heal religious and ethnic divisions in Nigeria.

Despite the role these women played in achieving peace in their different communities which is unnoticed, they have little access to basic technical training, availability of resources, policy engagement, lack of education, patriarchal norms, exclusion from official peace processes, lack of institutional recognition and adequate security. It is cleared that despite the barriers challenging the effective and efficient peacebuilding by the grassroots women in their communities it is most likely for their peaceful activities to result in long-term stability and reconciliation as a result of consistent community presence, great emphasis on human security and restoration of harmony, bringing lasting peace when formal peace institutions are weak and mistrusted, averting reoccurring conflicts, fostering healing and rebuilding shattered families and communities.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The voices of grassroots women must be incorporated into all negotiation teams at every level and stage; there should be some level of basic education and initiatives to foster the growth of grassroots women's leadership, advocacy, negotiating, and mediation abilities. The women peacebuilding initiatives should incorporate digital empowerment and literacy initiatives; establishment of financial channels with streamlined application and reporting processes for grassroots women's organizations by donors and development partners.

There should be an established and implemented legislation to shield women peacebuilders working at the grassroots level from threats, violence, and reprisals; Develop networks of support and safe areas for women who labor in conflict areas to also provide mechanisms for gender-sensitive monitoring and assessment to track the effects of grassroots women's efforts to peacebuilding and guarantee accountability from donors and governments. There should also be an avenue to acknowledge and encourage indigenous conflict resolution practices as valid and successful peacemaking tools, such as women-led reconciliation ceremonies of employed by the grassroots women in peace reconciliation. Given their distinct experiences and difficulties, make sure that widows, young women, rural women, women with disabilities, and other marginalized groups are included in peacebuilding initiatives.

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