Global Journal of human-social science: C
Sociology & Culture
Volume 14 Issue 2 Version 1.0 Year 2014
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Ethnic Conflict and African Women's Capacity for Preventive Diplomacy

By Olaifa Temitope

Federal University of Agriculture, Nigeria

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.

GJHSS-C Classification : *FOR Code : 200299, 160899*

Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:

© 2014. Olaifa Temitope. This is a research/review paper, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/), permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Ethnic Conflict and African Women's Capacity for Preventive Diplomacy

Olaifa Temitope

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.

I. Introduction

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'.

Ethnic affiliation ordinarily, is a progressive issue. As a matter of fact it should be a strong chord binding peopleof the same historical and cultural descent and propelling them to cooperate in working out developmental agenda for their communities. Self-help 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.

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.

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.

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

II. Preventive Diplomacy

Preventive Diplomacy could be defined as those activities put in place to mitigate a brewing conflict from escalating. It is action to prevent disputes from arising between parties and to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts. For effectiveness, Preventive Diplomacy relies on accurate information about the causes, dynamics and nature of the potential conflict to be able to design appropriate preventive action. Apart from these, Preventive Diplomacy depends on good timing to be effective. The conflict must be ripe for effective intervention (Zartman, 2003; Adekanye, 1999:112).

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

As the United Nations and regional organizations as well as global and regional powers

Author: Communication and General Studies Department Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta. Nigeria.
e-mail: topeolaifa@gmail.com.

© 2014 Global Journals Inc. (US)

discovered the high cost of managing conflicts, there is a strong common perception of benevolence of Preventive Diplomacy; hence the search for mechanisms that could be employed in preventing conflicts. This paper therefore projects the natural and cultural endowments of African women which place them in an opportune position to nip conflicts in the bud.

III. Ethnicity

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

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

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

Political agitation is one of the greatest hallmarks of ethnic struggle. It forms the nucleus of the motives for strong ethnic affiliations. In political interplays, marginalisation and inequality are common parlances among ethnic groups and these form the basis for political conflicts which are the main issues behind inter-ethnic conflicts in Africa. Thus, ethnicity becomes a political behaviour which is exploited by elites and the political class (a social minority). It is rife in the African political milieu to find these elites and politicians instigating ethnic violence to intimidate the opposition and in extreme cases to eliminate them. Stuart Kaufman (2001:220) observes that 'political entrepreneurs' and extremist groups use the emotional power of ethnic symbols to reconstruct the larger group's preferences.

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

IV. Womanhood and Feminism

The Webster Dictionary and Thesauraus defines 'woman' as 'an adult female of the human race' (Olaifa,2009:5). Although the term 'woman' is generic, covering all the female kind of human, it is usually employed in describing an adult female while 'girl' is reserved for describing females younger than eighteen years (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/woman. 'Women' is the plural form of the word 'woman'.

It is obvious that we cannot discuss womanhood without making recourse to gender. Nature itself has made the distinction when during creation woman was moulded distinct from man. This in essence establishes that in physical representation, man is different from woman. It is therefore pertinent to discuss the female gender as it relates to this topic.

The B.B.C English Dictionary[6] defines gender thus: 'a person's gender is their characteristics of being male or female. Simon Fisher et al[2] describes gender thus:

> *People are born female or male, but learn to be girl and boys who grow into women and men. They are taught what the appropriate behaviour and attitudes are for them, and how they should relate to other people. This learned behaviour is what makes up gender identity and determines gender roles.*

The UNDP[8] defines gender as follows:

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

Gender is not synonymous with sex… Rather, it is an all-encompassing term embracing all that go with feminity, masculinity, womanhood or manhood as dictated by beliefs, psycho-social and physiological details of a human being who could be identified as either male or female (Olaifa 2009:5). The environment in which man finds himself also input so much in the gender roles he grows up to perform. Gupta (2000:10) opines that gender is a social and cultural construct that differentiates women from men and defines the ways in which women and men interact with each other. In many

© 2014 Global Journals Inc. (US)

prehistoric cultures, women assumed a particular cultural role. In gatherer-hunter societies, women were generally gatherers of plants foods, small animal food and fish, while men hunted meat from large animals (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/woman).The feminine gender therefore is not only distinguished by sex but also by the whole gamut of sexuality and the dialectical dictates of her role expectation and performance.

Looking at this issue from an ideological point of view, one is propelled into perusing the idea of feminism. Feminism is an ideology that came to the fore in the 19th C and it seeks to position womanhood on equal terrain as its male counterpart. In essence it advocates equal rights and privileges for both the male and the female.

Mbah (2006) in one of his numerous postulations defines feminism as:

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

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

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

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

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

V. Hallmarks of Discrimination Against Women

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

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

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

Many women all over the world still live in squalor. It is understood that 80% of the world poor are women. The majority of the women who live in the rural communities expend their energy on the struggle for survival oblivious of any feminist campaign and impervious to distractions from their socially assigned routine. Such do not understand the import of "sexual liberation" campaign and, in the rare event that they understand, they regard such a clamour as alien and unrelated to them. They exist in abject poverty, an unending squalor that affords no hope of better tomorrow. Yet they supply the needs of the man: physical, mental and moral.

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

The female species of the human race is not only oppressed at the rural rustic level, but also at the political terrain where most of the plum jobs are reserved for men. In the area of peace building and peace making in the society, areas where women are naturally endowed to function effectively, they are

© 2014 Global Journals Inc. (US)

sidelined by men who are usually at the fore-front in conflict issues. As observed by Naomi Akpan-Ita:

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

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

VI. Women in Preventive Diplomacy

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

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

Nevertheless, women have often defied socio-cultural barriers to engage in meaningful and landmark interventions in conflicts. In Africa history is replete with women's involvements in peacebuilding even at full-blown conflict level.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Peace process in Rwanda has its roots in the full participation of women and this is broadly acknowledged as a cultural attribute of the Rwandan women (John Mutanba and Jeanne Izabilla 2008:15) and to Archbishop Emmanuel Kolini of the Anglican Church in Rwanda, "A woman is the epitome of peace. It is from her that peace flows and radiates to the other members of the family". "A woman does not belong to any particular family or tribe. She has no boundaries (Nyampinga) and therefore she is there to unite families because she is neutral". A woman does not do things halfway. If she believes in a cause, she goes headlong to defend it. The women who participated in the Rwandan genocide were ruthless and those who had the courage to defend their neighbours did so with all vehemence.

© 2014 Global Journals Inc. (US)

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

The Somalis believe that mother is a school. The values, with which children are brought up, precede their actual birth. "In deed before becoming adults we attend a basic school, and that school is mother" (Mohammed 2003:75-115)

Apart from these women have been observed to be capable of the following peacebuilding processes:

a) Spearheading socio-economic processes.
b) Participating actively in resettlement initiatives
c) Decision-making
d) Opposing Gender-based Violence
e) Initiating income-generating activities..

Women are accustomed to settling disputes in a way that all the parties in conflict benefit eventually.

VII. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

References Références Referencias

1. Akpan-Ita, Naomi (2005). "Examining Inherent Indigenous Sructures in Promoting UNSC Resolution 1325 in Nigeria," in *Women in Peacebuilding"* Journal of women in Peacebuilding (WIPNET) Nigeria. vol.1 no.1.
2. B. B. C English Dictionary
3. Cashmere, E. (1992). *Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations*. London. Ruthledge.
4. Cohen (1969). *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa.* London. Ruthledge and Kegan Paul.
5. Chowdhurry, Anwarul Karim (2005) Womens Study Review. Fall.
6. Galtung J. (1981 "The Specific Contribution of Peace Research to the Study of Violence:"Typologies". in J. Domenach et al (eds) *Voilence and its Causes.* Paris: UNESCO
7. Gupta, G.R. (2000) "Gender, Sexuality and HIV/AIDS: The What, the Why and the How". A Plenary Address at the X111th International AIDS Conference, Durban, South Africa. International Centre for Research on Women 9ICRW) July 2000.
8. Gurr, T. R.(1970) *Why men Rebel*. Princeton (1970) Princeton University Press.
9. Heywood, Andrew (1997) *Politics.* London. Macmillan.
10. Kaufman, Stuart. (2001). *Modern Hatreds.* NY. Cornell University Press.
11. Lihamba (2003) "Women's Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution Skills, Morogoro Region, Tanzania", in *UNESCO: War and Peace in Africa. Paris.* UNESCO Workshop.
12. Louise Arbour (2008). Comment made on The Occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.
13. Mazi Mbah,C.C. (2006) *Political Theory and Methodology.* Rex Charles& Patrick Ltd.

© 2014 Global Journals Inc. (US)

14. Mutamba John and Izabilla Jeanne (2005). *The Role of Women in Peacebuilding in Rwanda: Ten Years after the Genocide 1994-2004.* http://www.peacewomen.org/resources/Rwanda accessed on 19th June 2009. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/woman accessed 4th August 2010
15. Mohammed, A.M. (2003) "The Role of Somali Women in the Search for Peace", in *UNESCO, War and Peace in Africa.* Paris. UNESCO Workshop.
16. Nanda, T.R. (2003) in Mazi Mbah (2006) *Political Theory and Methodology.* Rex Charles & Patrick.
17. Olaifa, Temitope A. (2009) 'Elimination of Violence against Women: Hope for Peace and Sustainable Development?' *International Journal of Development Studies.*Vol.4, No 1. 87-91. International Research and Development Institute. Uyo.
18. Osaghae, E.E (2005); "Violence in Africa: State, Ethnic and Regional Dimensions'. In Albert Isaac O (eds) *Perspectives on Peace and Conflicts in Africa.* Ibadan. John Archers (Publishers) Ltd.
19. .....(1995). Structural Adjustment and Ethnicity in Nigeria. Upsalla Nordic African Institute.
20. Simon Fisher et al: 'The Oxfam Training manual"
21. The Websters Dictionary and Thesaurus (2002) Scotland: Geddes & Grosset.
22. Umar, Lydia(2005) "Women In Peace and Security", in "*Women in Peacebuilding"* Journal of Women in Peacebuilding Programme (WIPNET) Nigeria. Vol 1 no1
23. United Nations Development Report, (1986).

© 2014 Global Journals Inc. (US)