

Women in Peace Building and Conflict Resolution in Africa

Aborisade Olasunkanmi

Philosophy Unit, Department of General Studies,
Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomosho,
Oyo State, Nigeria
Email: Aborisaderose {at} yahoo.com

ABSTRACT—*In this paper, we described conflict is an unavoidable component of human activity. It is a normal daily occurrence. When it happens the next thing is resolution of conflict. Studies have shown that women are often exonerated when it comes to building peace and resolution of conflict. Given the second-class status of women in Africa, their skills and contributions are often under-valued and under-utilized. It this situation of women that lead the U.N. Security Council in Resolution 1325 reaffirmed the important role of women in peace building and resolution of conflicts and called for “their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security”. This paper draws upon known capacity of traditional Africa women in peace and resolution of conflict to better understand the implications of SCR1325, and proof that African women deserve to be included in peace building and resolution of conflict in Africa.*

Keywords — Building, Conflict, Peace, Resolution, Traditional

1. INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a normal and even healthy part of relationships. Two people can't be expected to agree on everything at all times. Conflicts are inevitable, learning to deal with them in a healthy way is crucial. When conflict is mismanaged, it can harm the relationship. But when handled in a respectful and positive way, conflict provides an opportunity for growth, ultimately strengthening the bond between two people. Conflict exists in all countries and in every level of society, it “is an unavoidable component of human activity”.(Brahman, Margavio, Hignite, Barrier and Chin 2006) Conflict is not necessarily a negative force; but a natural expression of social difference in human's struggle for justice and self realization. There are different forms of conflict; we have social conflict which defined economic scarcity that manifests in poverty that impairs human existence. There is also armed conflict that is defined by socio-political differences over territory and mineral resources which manifests in political assassinations, violent confrontations and low-intensity warfare. We also have inter-gender conflict which is manifested in male violence against women. The consequence of all these form of conflict resulted to the breakdown of social relations between individuals and groups in societies. Conflict is inevitable and is rooted in relationships (see Lederach 2005; CASS 2005; Amisi 2008).

However, in this new millennium (2000s) all available evidence shows that many countries in Africa are involved in armed conflict and some are passing through a crisis situation which may explode into full armed conflict. The Congo DRC, Ethiopia and Eritrea, Rwanda, Sudan and South Sudan are countries presently involved in armed conflict. Liberia, Mali and Guinea Bissau, , and Nigeria are examples of countries passing through a crisis situation that may eventually result in serious armed conflict. The dominant features of most of these conflict and crisis are: conflict leads to population migration and social displacement which resulted to abject poverty conditions, acute level of malnutrition due to chronic food insecurity and deteriorating health condition.

Conflict resolution is an attempt to reach mutually acceptable positions that resolve differences among contending parties. According to Miller (2003), conflict resolution is “a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through the constructive solving of problems, distinct from management or transformation of conflicts.” Miall et al. (1999) indicate that by conflict resolution, it is expected that the deep rooted sources of conflict are addressed and resolved, and behavior 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: 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 any process or procedure by which such an outcome is achieved.

2. KEY CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILL

The ability to successfully manage and resolve conflict depends on four key skills. Together, these four skills form a fifth skill that is greater than the sum of its parts: the ability to take conflict in stride and resolve differences in ways that build trust and confidence.

2.1 Conflict resolution skill 1: Quickly relieve stress

The capacity to remain relaxed and focused in tense situations is a vital aspect of conflict resolution. If you don't know how to stay centered and in control of yourself, you may become emotionally overwhelmed in challenging situations. The best way to rapidly and reliably relieve stress is through the senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. But each person responds differently to sensory input, so you need to find things that are soothing to you.

2.2 Conflict resolution skill 2: Recognize and manage your emotions.

Emotional awareness is the key to understanding yourself and others. If you don't know how you feel or why you feel that way, you won't be able to communicate effectively or smooth over disagreements. Although knowing your own feelings may seem simple, many people ignore or try to sedate strong emotions like anger, sadness, and fear. But your ability to handle conflict depends on being connected to these feelings. If you're afraid of strong emotions or if you insist on finding solutions that are strictly rational, your ability to face and resolve differences will be impaired.

2.3 Conflict resolution skill 3: Improve your nonverbal communication skills

The most important information exchanged during conflicts and arguments is often communicated nonverbally. Nonverbal communication includes eye contact, facial expression, tone of voice, posture, touch, and gestures. When you're in the middle of a conflict, paying close attention to the other person's nonverbal signals may help you figure out what the other person is really saying, respond in a way that builds trust, and get to the root of the problem. Simply nonverbal signals such as a calm tone of voice, a reassuring touch, or a concerned facial expression can go a long way toward defusing a heated exchange.

2.4 Conflict resolution skill 4: Use humor and play to deal with challenges

You can avoid many confrontations and resolve arguments and disagreements by communicating in a playful or humorous way. Humor can help you say things that might otherwise be difficult to express without creating a flap. However, it's important that you laugh *with* the other person, not *at* them. When humor and play are used to reduce tension and anger, reframe problems, and put the situation into perspective, the conflict can actually become an opportunity for greater connection and intimacy.

However, the goal of this research on women in peace building and conflict resolution is to reveal that women are relevant to questions of peace and conflict resolution. Though scholars have addressed the subject of gender and peacekeeping (Fleishman 2003; Beilstein 1998; Olsson 1999; Whitworth 1998), but there is a lack of systematic research on the role of women in peace building, because most of the available literature cast women as victims rather than participants at the peace table. This paper will attempt this issue regarding the questions what is women's involvement in peace building-processes and conflict resolution? Why and how do they participate? What obstacles do they have to face? What successes can they reach? What implications can this have for improving future involvement of women in peace building and conflict resolution?

3. PEACE BUILDING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Feminist studies in Africa have a number of limitations. One is their one-sided emphasis on the theme of woman subordination in Africa. They failed to give account of the positive aspects of *women* in traditional Africa. And also fail to draw out the immense contributions of women in peace building and conflict resolutions in African societies. This act creates the unnecessary impression that African woman as victims rather than givers and builders of culture within the society. And the result is the prevailing opposition that now exists between women and men in contemporary Africa. Were the positive contributions of women in African societies to be seriously reviewed and noted, both groups would have seen the indispensability of the other in the arduous task of nation building and harmonious living in contemporary African societies.

Thus at the end of 2000, the U.N. Security Council in Resolution 1325 reaffirmed the important role of women in peace building and resolution of conflicts and called for “their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.” Woman possessed the power to organize the family and the society at large. There was an enormous task and responsibility conferred on womanhood. In fact the responsibility of both men and women were seen as complementary to one another “there was a codependence and a balance that existed” (St. Clair, 1994: 27).

In African societies, it is the belief that the African woman possessed the power that binds the people in the society together. In fact the survival of the family and the future of marriage depended a great deal on the African woman. This is why Leith (1967: 34) emphasizes that:

Culturally, African women were the transmitters of the language, the history and the oral culture, the music, the dance, the habits and the artisanal knowledge. They were the teachers and were responsible for instilling traditional values and knowledge in children. Men were also essential in the transmission of knowledge to the youth because they had a different type of knowledge of the earth and environment, and also of ceremonies and traditions that were performed exclusively by men.

Leith made it clear that each gender had its role and responsibility to play in the society and this has been responsible for the formation, upkeep and upbringing of children. Furthermore, Leith (1967:40) points out that the

Woman had extensive knowledge of the natural environment; they were gatherers, which meant that their communities depended on them to provide nourishment or they would face starvation. Indigenous women in Africa held vital knowledge of herbs and medicines that also ensured the survival of their communities, they were the healers.

The indication here is that women’s role in traditional Africa is synonymous to societal development. The impacts of the women were felt in every aspect of life of the society. African traditional societies assigned to women the role of educator. African woman played a key role in the education and the teaching of children social, ethical and moral values which were part of the cultural standards for evaluating proper societal behaviour. Such education is the type that starts from the cradle and was affected by means of a variety of activities in which the children participated. Thus the most general implication is the understanding that peace is not born but made and that the culture of peace in traditional African societies was implanted in a child through responsible upbringing and socialization undertaken and supervised by mothers. Indeed the central message in these studies is that peace building was taken seriously in traditional African societies and that it is established, little by little, in young minds and moulded in the behaviour and personality of the young through the agency of the mother. For example, these enduring human values can be implanted in children at tender ages, through storytelling, songs, proverbs and myths. It is argued that meaningful peace is bound to reign if these important African cultural values is not overlooked or trampled upon.

In evaluating women in traditional Africa, Hafkin and Hanson (1976: 59-60) reiterate that:

Women were treated with unparalleled respect because they were seen to be closer to the creator than men ever had the potential of being. This is because women themselves had the ability to create due to the fact that they were able to give birth. As creation of life, they were charged with the sacred responsibility of caring for the needs of the next generation, and because of this, they can be regarded as the originations of the idea that is now known as sustainable developments.

Base on the above, it is a known fact that; sustainable development depends on a solid family structure. The women are often the backbone of the family in traditional Africa. The African family has always been characterized by strong women who usually held pertinent positions in the family (Agarwal, 1970: 75).

Mathey et al (2003: 41) revealed that a fundamental fact of traditional African societies was the sacred character of the respect given to the elderly women. “The elderly woman,” is respected by all, and played a key role in crisis management and conflict resolution. They also commanded important positions in conflict resolution rituals and membership of peace envoys in traditional Africa. Thus, when a conflict degenerated into armed violence, an appeal would usually be made to a third party of mature years to calm the tension and reconcile the combatants. Such an appeal

for mediation was usually made to a woman who enjoyed the consideration and respect of all who knew her.” And it is argued that if given the chance they can do the same in our own context, to the greater glory of peace and tranquility in our modern society. Consequently African women pose as latent resources for peace building and conflict resolutions in Africa today.

Resolving conflict is impossible if you're unwilling or unable to forgive. Resolution lies in releasing the urge to punish, which can never compensate for our losses and only adds to our injury by further depleting and draining our lives. Women by their nature are endowed with soft mind. Soft mind that lead to the development of positive attitude toward others. If you're holding on to old hurts and resentments, your ability to see the reality of the current situation will be impaired. Rather than looking to the past and assigning blame, women focus on what she can do to solve the problem. This culture of peace cannot be built overnight. It is a long term process and it can only be found in women.

African women need to be made aware not only of the negative aspects of the trammels of African culture and tradition in their lives, but also of the crucial role that women had played in the past towards the promotion of the culture of peace and conflict resolution in traditional Africa. For example, some conflict resolutions rituals engineered by women in traditional Africa contain important psychological/spiritual healing powers (Ranger, 1992). Such rituals should not be allowed to pass away. They must be re-interrogated and where they still seem viable, need to be popularized as Africa's contributions to peace building and conflict resolution models to be shared with the rest of the world.

In view of the innate qualities of women and thanks to the position they have occupied and the part they have played in the traditional society, African women can and must be actively involved in conflict prevention and resolution. In this regard, modern African countries can no longer afford to exclude women in important peace process. This must be done not only when working for peace within, but also between nations. Women had in the past played important roles in the membership of peace envoys. That role can no longer elude them in our time. They deserve to be made part of the delegation that is seeking for peace in any part of the continent.

An enemy of peace restoration in modern Africa is the long delays in resolving conflicts in modern society. Adopting some of the traditional methods for resolving conflicts needs to be seriously contemplated. This means enabling African local communities to reclaim some of their lost mechanisms for conflict mediation and resolution. In the same vein, the behaviour and attitudes of administrative authorities in modern Africa, especially those from outside the community, need to be appraised so that they do not become sources of conflict themselves.

4. CONCLUSION

Women are possible and preferred agents of change, but as long as we see these women in the region as vulnerable, we cannot see them as agents. The contributions and roles of the women and women's organisations to the process of conflict resolution and peace building have often been neglected in discussions of war and peace. Due to the multifaceted roles that women play in the region, it is imperative that as active actors, women and gender issues should be addressed in peace building and security issues of the region. Heidi Hudson in Sjoberg (2009) contends that an African feminist consciousness in including women in peace building could make those processes more efficient.

5. REFERENCES

- [1]. Amisi, B.K. 2008. "Indigenous ideas of the social and conceptualising peace in Africa". *Africa Peace and Conflict Journal*, 1 (1), pp. 1–18.
- [2] Agarwal, Bina, (1970), "Socio-Economic Background of Traditional African Family System", New York: Oxford University Press.
- [3] Beilstein, Janet, 1998. "The Expanding Role of Women in United Nations Peacekeeping" in Lorentzen, Lois Ann and Jennifer Turpin, eds. *The Women and War Reader*. New York: New York University Press.
- [4] Brahmam, Margavio, Hignite, Barrier and Chin (2006). *A gender-based categorization for conflict resolution*, Journal of Management Development, vol. 24, pp 197-208.
- [5] Centre for Advanced Social Science (CASS) 2005. *Enhancing the capacity of women leaders of community organizations towards peace-building in the Niger-Delta region, Nigeria*. Port Harcourt, CASS.
- [6] Fleshman, Michael, 2003. "African Women Struggle for a Seat at the Peace Table" *Africa Recovery*. Vol. 16, No. 4, February.
- [7] Hafkin, Jone and Hanson Bay (eds) (1976), *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, Stanford: Heinemann.
- [8] Lederach, John Paul 2005. *The moral imagination: The art and soul of building peace*. Oxford, Oxford

University Press.

- [9] Leith, Ross (1967), *African Woman*, New York: Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
- [10] Mathey, M.J., Dejan, T., Deballe, M., Sapiro, R., Koulaninga, A., & Moga, J. (2003). The Role Played by Women of the Central African Republic in the Prevention and Resolutions of Conflicts. In UNESCO, *Women and Peace in Africa* (pp. 35-46). Paris: UNESCO Workshop. Miall et al (1999): “Conflict Mapping and Conflict Tracking” in *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, Cambridge: Polity Press (3 p.).
- [11] Mitchel and Banksi 1998 *Hand book of conflict resolution: the analytical problem-solving approach* London: Pinter, 1998 - XXII+187 p.
- [12] Ranger, T. (1992). Afterworld: War, Violence and healing in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 18 No. 3.
- [13] Sjoberg, Laura (2009) ^ *Introduction to security Studies: Feminist Contributions*, Security Studies 18: 2, 183 -213)
- [14] St. Clair, William (1994) *Imperialism and Traditional African Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.