Mainstreaming Gender in Peace building: “Umuada”
As Agents of Peace in Igbo Land

SR. CECILIA MADU OP
Department of sociology Benue state university makurdi Benue state Nigeria. May, 2015

ABSTRACT: Peace building has become a global necessity that all people of every race, male and female need to join forces in order to bring about the needed atmosphere for social development. Many a time, women's experiences during and after conflicts/wars are not taken into consideration in peace building therefore, there is need for mainstreaming gender in peace building so as to get both male and female involved in the process of peace building. The Igbo society though a patriarchal society, still has accounts of women's associations that are strong and contribute to the maintenance of law and order in the communities. One of the most important women's association in Igbo land is the Umuada. The Umuada in Igbo land play lots of role in the society as leaders, peace builders, developers, economists and mothers. However, their role as peace builders is so prominent that every family, community or clan that has any irresolvable conflict invites the Umuada to intervene and in most cases they help to bring about peace. The experience of peace building in Igbo communities that incorporates the roles of women especially the role of Umuada in peace building could be a guide to incorporating women in a larger society in peace building.

I. INTRODUCTION

Igbo tribe originally from the South Eastern part of Nigeria but commonly found everywhere in the world is a very patriarchal society. The importance of the boy child cannot be overemphasized among the Igbo of Nigeria and despite this, the association of indigenous women in most Igbo communities known as Umuada continues to exercise influence in their patrilineal homes even after the exchange of identity through marriage; and despite their new roles as ndiomu (association of wives) in their marital communities. They play important role in peace building in their patrilineal communities as well as in their marital communities. Hence, the need to consider incorporating the role of both male and female in peace building in every community has become a necessity in the society today. Peace building has become a necessity in our society today that all hands are needed on deck to bring about peace in our world. The issue of mainstreaming gender in peace building has also become a necessity because many a time women are left out in the process of peace building. Women take on many different roles during and after wartime and have diverse experiences. Their experiences tend to be distinct from men's and must be taken into consideration in peace building. The role of Umuada in peace building in Igbo land show that women like their men counterparts are very much able to work for peace in their communities and should be given opportunities to participate in the process of peace building in the large society. To be able to understand the seriousness of mainstreaming gender in peace building, some concepts will be clarified.

II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Mainstreaming
This term refers to a strategy to support the goal of equality. This is aimed at the integration of gender equality concerns into analyses and formation of all policies, programmes and projects. It also includes initiatives to enable women as well as men to formulate and express their views and participate in decision-making across all development issues.

Gender
The term gender refers to those characteristics of men and women that are socially determined in contrast to those that are biologically determined. It defines culturally acceptable attitudes and behaviour of men.
and women, including responsibilities, advantages, disadvantages, opportunities, constraints, roles, status, and power assigned to women and men in society. Gender is not static or innate but evolves to respond to changes in the social, political, and cultural environment. Culture however, is the key to gender as what is feminine in one may be masculine in another.

**Peace building**

Peace building represents a way to achieve societal reconciliation. It is important to note that peace building is a very widely used term, one that differs according to who uses the term and in what context it is used. In this case, it is a people-centered, relationship-building, and participatory process. It is therefore necessary to bear in mind that peace building is relationship-centred and it is participatory. Peace building occurs either before violent conflict erupts (a preventative measure), or after violent conflict ends (an effort to rebuild a more peaceful society). Peace building may take the form of activities designed to increase tolerance and promote coexistence, or activities may address structural sources of injustice or conflict.

**Umuada**

The Umuada is an association of daughters of a given community in Igboland. It is an association to which all daughters of a particular village, clan, or town, old or young; single or married; divorced or separated is a member. *Umuada* simply means the daughters of a common male ancestor or “daughters of the soil. It is an absolute right of every daughter of a particular place, without exception whatsoever, to belong to *Otụ Umuada*, an association of the native daughters. As a group, *Otụ Umuada* is a powerful sociopolitical setup in Igbo culture and a functional forum for females that work for the resolving of conflicts and maintaining peace in Igbo communities. Hence, women in the Igbo communities exert enormous powers by virtue of their position as daughters of the lineage. They are therefore, recognized in all Igbo culture as judges, peace brokers and enforcers. When the rule on an issue the decision is final and must be obeyed by all.

**III. MAINSTREAMING GENDER IN PEACE BUILDING**

For many years women's roles in war and other types of violent conflict were quite invisible throughout the world. Accounts of war (through news reporting, government propaganda, novels, the cinema etc) tended to cast men as the ‘doers’ and women as passive, innocent, victims. In poor countries wars were not portrayed in quite the same way, but stories of the courage of men as fighters has tended to eclipse the active roles women have played. However, Ferris (1993) claims that women’s account of wars; their experiences, the ways in which they live through wars - as fighters, community leaders, social organizers, workers, farmers, traders and welfare workers has become more clear.

According to Afolabi et al. (2003), women constitute over half of the world’s population and contribute in vital ways to societal development generally. In most societies, women assume five key roles: mother, producer, home-manager, community organizer and socio-cultural and political activist. Women have utilized their particular roles to minimize the effects of violence, both by actively trying to end wars and acting as peacemakers (Ferris, 1993). There are also some accounts of war that highlight the roles of women in motivating men in their communities to fight (Vickers, 1987). As women in most societies have the active role in passing cultural identities to children, they have also been involved in supporting exclusive and aggressive ideologies about nationalism.

The issues of conflicts and peace-building cannot be handled without mainstreaming gender since both men and women have the potential for peacemaking and the responsibility to build and keep peace. Most approaches to peace building have either ignored or marginalised issues of gender. Women consistently remain a minority of participants in peace building projects; they receive less attention than men in peace building policies; and gender analysis rarely informs peace building strategies. Since peace building is putting relationships at the centre of relief, development, conflict prevention, reconstruction and reconciliation work which is critical in order to achieve lasting social change it is important to consider the experiences of both men and women in times of conflicts and address them.

Unfortunately, in many cases the experiences of women are not really considered at the time of peace building especially after conflict. This has been depicted in the many United Nations and European Commission resolutions which, for more than a decade, have criticized such marginalization and called for gender issues and women's needs to be given more serious attention in all policies relating to conflict and peace.

In the last few years there has been an increase in international attention to the issues of women's involvement in peace and security. United Nation's Security Council's Resolution (1325) of October 2000 recognized that in maintaining and promoting peace and security women's equal participation in decision-making is vital. Hence, it called on all actors to adopt a gender perspective. The approval of Resolution 1325, has brought the issue of women, gender, peace and security to different international and national dialogue table on constant basis, even though the results have continued to vary. To equal promote women involvement in
peace building the UN’ s consolidated appeal process chose women and war as its theme for 2001 (CIDA, 2001).

Despite all the efforts by the UN and other international bodies in promoting women’ s involvement in peace building, the society especially the war turn areas are yet to incorporate women in peace building. Women, have been observed to be more creative and effective in waging peace. It is the women's emotional strength to transcend pain and suffering, and their predisposition to peace that provide them with greater potentials for peacemaking. For example, the women in the South East of Nigeria who rose to the challenges of their time through the Aba Women Riot of 1929 brought about peace in that part of the country through their actions.

IV. GENDER ROLES IN PEACE BUILDING

Both women and men have important roles to play in peace building. The roles men and women play in peace building may not be exactly the same, and they will vary by location and culture, but both men and women are needed for peace building to last. A relationship-centred and process-driven peace building approach requires that men and women, as well as people with different ethnicities and religions to participate in the process of peace building. Many a times, people tend to think that women are natural peacebuilders, but this is not always the case, nor is it always the case that men are natural war-makers. There is need for the presumptions to be explained to the understanding of the people to promote peace building.

However, it is a fact that men and women often experience violent conflict differently and so their contributions to peace building will always be different. Men and women may also be involved in making social, economic and political decisions in different ways before, during and after the conflict. Further, gender role inequalities may fuel conflicts within communities emerging from civil war, or may be part of the structural injustices that need to be addressed in order to build long-term peace in a country or region. All of these highlight why gender mainstreaming is an important part of peace building process in the society.

Peace building programming needs to focus on the unique needs of men and women in the local setting, as well as their common needs, in order to help successfully revitalize the community, and achieve long-term, just peace. Including a gender analysis in identifying peace building activities and where and when to engage in peace building will contribute to the comprehensiveness of the context analysis and ultimate success of programme activities.

WHY CONSIDER GENDER IN PEACE BUILDING?

The difference in the experiences of men and women during and after conflict was recognized and highlighted in the final document of the 4th world conference on women (Beijing 1995), the platform for Action (PFA). Hence, the document in paragraph 135 ascertained the fact that the whole communities suffer the consequences of conflict and terrorism but women and girls suffer more due to their sex. Therefore understanding the gender dimensions of a situation is an important dimension of understanding the overall situation.

Women (as well as men) have a fundamental stake in building peaceful communities. Their contributions to peace building should be encouraged and supported (given women’ s economic and political marginalisation, they are not always well-placed to play an effective role). The PFA states, “ In addressing armed or other conflicts, an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programmes should be promoted so that before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men, respectively” (para 141). Peace is a prerequisite to achieve the goal of gender equality and women’ s empowerment and some would argue that gender equality is necessary for true peace. In some contexts people's desire for justice is actually greater than their willingness to work for negative peace. Thus Jeremy Lester (2012) has this to say, “ If we had women on the table, there would have been no war; women think long and hard before they send their children out to kill other people’ s children. This is true in most cases considering the role women have played in peace building in many communities especially in the recent times, for example, women in Liberia organized themselves to protest against the war in Liberia even to the extent of stripping themselves in public to pass the massage to the government of Liberia and international community (Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf 2002). Considering the role that women have played and continued to play in peace building, it is important to know that women are good at bridging ethnic, religious, political, and cultural divides because they are more collaborative, inclined towards consensus and compromise.

The Igbo has hierarchy system of power and in dealing with issues of peace in the community. This hierarchy is also taken into consideration during intra-family intra-community, inter-community, and inter-tribal conflicts. In many of these cases the women's groups in the communities are usually among the first to call on for an end to conflict. The role women’ s associations among the Igbo play in peace building in their communities is a sign of the transformative potential in women which are often times left out of the official

*Corresponding Author: SR. CECILIA MADU OP
peace negotiations and the formal work of building peace in the larger society. There is therefore, need to consider the role of Umuada in peace building among the Igbo as a guide to incorporating women in the process of peace building in the larger society.

THE ROLE OF UMUADA IN PEACE BUILDING IN IGBO LAND

The Igbo society though a patriarchal society, there are still accounts of women’s associations that are strong and contribute to the maintenance of law and order in the communities. The Umuada in Igbo land play lots of role in the society as leaders, peacebuilders, developers, economists and mothers. However, their role as peacebuilders is so prominent that every family, community or clan that has any irresolvable conflict invites the Umuada to intervene and in most cases they help to bring about peace. The roles of Umuada could be seen in the way the handle the following issues in the communities.

- The settlement of disputes among fellow women and the community,
- Infidelity issues involving offending wives.
- Conflicts involving physical fighting between parties.
- Assault or physical attack of a wife on her mother-in-law.
- Assault on a wife by a husband.
- Plays a husband to all sisters-in-laws.
- Rites of passages especially marriage and burial.

The role of Umuada in the preservation and promotion of peace in communities needs not be overemphasized. When the Igbo women especially the Umuada rise to work for peace in the Igbo communities, peace permeates. In infirming the power of Umuada in peace building Njaka (1987) claims that the Umuada intrude in the affairs of state and can impose sanctions which may include heavy fines, and other measures. Certainly, the elders will go to great lengths to avoid confrontations with the Umuada and in this way the women indirectly exert a strong influence on affairs of state.” Considering the role that women groups especially the Umuada play in peace building in Igbo communities, it is evident then that women’s role in the peace building of the society is vital for a lasting peace to reign in the society.

V. CONCLUSION

Considering the role played by Umuada in maintaining peace in Igbo communities, it is evident that they could be model of peace building in communities round the country and beyond where women are empowered to take up the role of working for peace among citizens. The steps taken by Umuada to bring about justice in the society could also be employed by women in different communities especially in communities in Nigeria. The Boko Haram siege especially the kidnapping of about 200 girls in the Northern part of the country the fact that for every man killed in the north, there are about two or more women assuming the status of widows, shows the urgent need of involving women in peacbuilding since they bear the greater risk during conflicts and wars.

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*Corresponding Author: SR. CECILIA MADU OP