

# Women, Community Leadership and Conflict Transformation in Nigeria

I. Bola Udegbe

Department of Psychology  
University of Ibadan, Ibadan

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines women's role in community leadership and implications for their involvement in conflict transformation processes. Using content analysis of selected third-party interventions in conflict transformation in some Nigerian communities, the paper discusses the structures and processes through which women were excluded. Furthermore, the paper analyses women-driven peace initiatives and suggests strategies for actively increasing women's participation in conflict transformation in their communities.*

**Keywords:** *community leadership, conflict transformation, gender differences, peace initiatives, conflict*

## **Introduction**

In recent times, especially since the commencement of the Fourth Republic, the occurrence of conflicts in Nigeria, be it religious, ethnic, communal or environmental, has increased tremendously. Examples abound: Ife-Modakeke conflicts, Ijaw-Ugbo Ilaje crisis, Eleme-Okrika conflict, Odi crisis, Yoruba farmer/Fulani herdsmen conflict, Warri crisis, Zangon Kataf crisis, Oduduwa People's Congress-cattle dealers clash, Mambila-Fulani conflict, Jos crisis and the Tiv-Jukun conflict. The consequences of these conflicts include loss of lives and properties, increased number of displaced persons and increased sense of insecurity. There are also associated feelings of uncertainty, higher disposition to conflicts or potential for recurrence of conflict due to heightened sense of distrust, prejudice and vengeance among members of opposing groups. The resulting reduction in the potential for external investment and growth serve as impediment for the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria.

Attempts at conflict transformation by conflicting parties, the government, or neutral parties, generally involve representatives of the conflicting groups and other stakeholders. Such representatives, who are usually leaders in the communities involved in the crisis, are exposed to the different approaches to conflict management in order to reduce the violence or solve the problem at the root of the conflict. In joint problem-solving approach to conflict transformation, one of the popular approaches to conflict management, the aim is to bring conflicting parties together to express their feelings, listen to the views of the other parties and then jointly find solutions, which are acceptable to both sides. Consequently the conflict is transformed, first by cognitive restructuring, and second by increasing commitment to changing the status quo. Through

cognitive restructuring, the representatives of the conflicting parties break communication barriers, change their perceptions and analysis of the conflict. They are, therefore, motivated to generate solutions that have the potential to be more effective and enhance cooperation between the parties. As community leaders, the representatives are expected to have the capacity to persuade their group members to accept specific conciliatory concessions that normally would have been rejected by their group members (Makanju, 1996).

Evidence shows that despite inroads made by women in some spheres of lives (e.g., education, employment) the domain of conflict resolution is still very much male dominated. Representatives of conflicting groups usually exclude women or at best involve only a token number of women. Reports of interventions in the conflicts (discussed in more details in another section of this paper) showed that representations from both parties reflected male domination of the peace process. The tendency in most cases is to assume that conflicts are perpetrated by men (as combatants), while women are the passive victims. However, women do indeed assume significant roles in waging and supporting wars, crisis and conflicts. Even in seemingly exclusively male conflicts like those of the Lagos state Abattoir or the Yoruba farmers and Fulani Herdsmen, women may support conflicts through the nurturance and expression of prejudices and behaviour that escalate or sustain the crisis situation. Both men and women are victims in conflict situations though the condition affects both groups differently. Women tend to be victims of rape, suffer deprivation, displacement as well as physical, social and psychological consequences of losing their husbands and sons to the conflicts. Yet, women's participation in conflict transformation is very low and in some cases women are excluded.

Civil society organizations and the United Nations agencies have emphasized the need for the full involvement of women in conflict prevention and have lobbied the Security Council to adopt a resolution on this issue. Resolution 1325, therefore, has implications for the protection of women in conflict zones and the inclusion of women in peace processes. In order to strengthen women's involvement in conflict transformation processes, we need to understand the structure and processes through which women's involvement is excluded or discouraged. This paper therefore focuses on this broad objective. First, the paper examines leadership from the perspective of social influence and the implications for gender and leadership. Secondly, it identifies women leadership roles in the community. Thirdly, using examples of third-party interventions in conflict transformation in some Nigeria communities, the paper highlights the processes through which women are excluded. Using examples, the paper further analyses women's own peace initiatives. Finally, the paper suggests strategies for increasing women's participation in conflict transformation.

### **Leadership, Social Influence and Gender Differences**

Although leadership has been defined in several ways by various authors, one of the recurrent themes in leadership definition is social influence. The concept of social influence refers to attempts (whether successful or unsuccessful) to affect another in a desired fashion (Greenberg & Baron, 1997). From this perspective, leaders are seen as those who significantly influence the thoughts, behaviours and/or feelings of others (Gardner, 1995). They are people who mobilize people and resources to accomplish mutual goals (Cronin, 1993). In other words, leaders exert influence by changing, moulding or strengthening the beliefs, feelings and sometimes the behaviours of others consistent with the goals of the group. How does social influence operate?

French and Raven (1959) developed a typology of social power as bases by which people exert social influence. According to the French and Raven model, the extent to which a person (P) can influence another individual or group (O) depends on the relationship between P and O, and in particular the way O perceives P. Broadly speaking, a person P or a leader has five sources of power to influence O: reward, coercive, legitimate, expert and referent. A person possesses reward power when others believe that he or she has control over desire or valuable resources to reward them. Conversely, coercive power derives from the ability to muster resources to punish. When others believe that a person or leader has expertise, or is highly knowledgeable in a specific or general domain, he or she has expert power. In our culture, age and experience are strongly associated with expertise. That is why many communities give titles to the oldest member of the community (e.g., *Odionwere* among the Edo) or have council of elders. A person P or leader can also exert social influence if others accept and recognize that he or she has a right to exert influence by virtue of the particular office he/she occupies or if he/she holds a social role that commands respect and authority and others feel a certain obligation to defer to him or her. Paramount rulers at different levels such as the *Baale*, *Oba*, *Obi*, *Igwe*, *Waziri*, *Emir* and *Sultan* command this respect. On the other hand, a person need not have the privilege of occupying a particular office or have control over resources to have strong impact on group processes. Rather, by virtue of their being admired, liked and respected, they may be leaders. This power base, referred to as referent power, is highly personal and is based on a feeling of identification with the liked personality.

Does a person's gender determine the ability to influence others? In many communities, relative to men women possess lower levels of status and power, and consequently, the influence style open to them is limited. For example, women have limited access to land and do not occupy significant traditional positions. These structural and external disadvantages of women relative to men serve as obstacles to the equitable contributions of women to the stability of their societies. Thus, men possess higher levels of coercive, reward, expert

and legitimate power than women. Women, on the other hand, tend to possess higher levels of referent power (Carli, 1999).

Consistent with gender stereotypes and expectations, women are expected to behave more communally than men, being kinder, more thoughtful, more sensitive to the feeling of others (Rudman & Glick, 2001) and peace loving. Men are expected to be more agentic, that is, being competent, domineering, forceful, directive and competitive. These traits further place women at a disadvantage because people, particularly males, resist influence by women who are agentic. Yet, issues relating to conflict management may be seen as tasks that require agentic behaviour. Thus, women may find themselves in a double bind situation in that if they enact communal behaviour they may be perceived as too soft or pacifists and when they enact agentic behaviour they violate social expectations.

Carli (2001) observed that the male advantage in influence is reduced in domains that are traditionally associated with the female role and in group settings in which more than one female is present. Evidence suggests that women exert higher amounts of influence in gender-balanced groups (e.g., Taps & Martins, 1990). This is because minority status creates a disadvantage for women by highlighting gender stereotypes and also elicits gender congruent behaviour (Yoder, 2001).

### **Women and Community Leadership**

Four groups of female traditional leaders were identified in a qualitative study of gender and leadership in Nigerian communities: leaders of women in the community, wives of kings or chiefs, religious or spiritual leaders and honorary chiefs. Apart from traditional leaders, other groups of leaders were identified and classified as political/modern and opinion leaders (Udegbe, 2001). In this nation-wide qualitative research conducted by the Social Science and Reproductive Health Research Network (SSRHN), findings revealed that attempts to involve traditional leaders yielded very few female leaders particularly in the traditional leadership category (Akingbade, 2001). Table 1 presents the summary of males versus females in the traditional, political, opinion leadership categories for communities in six states comprising north and south Nigeria.

**Table 1: Number of males versus female leaders in each of the three categories in the North and Southern regions of Nigeria**

Leadership category	Male		Female		Total
	North	South	North	South	
Traditional	12	8	-	1	21
Political/modern	10	7	2	2	21
Opinion	5	8	8	10	31

*Source: Adapted from Akingbade (2001)*

The study reflected the difficulty of obtaining significant number of women, who were traditional leaders. Rather, opinion leaders constituted the larger proportion of community leaders obtained for the study. Exhibit 1 presents a brief description of the women in the three categories used in the qualitative study under reference.

**Exhibit 1: Description of the female community leaders obtained from the qualitative research in the SSRHN study**

<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>
Traditional leaders	Chiefs (mainly by virtue of their husband’s status)
Political	Zonal leaders of political association politicians
Opinion/influential	Leaders of market women association. Women leaders of mixed gender associations. Leaders and chair ladies of women’s associations. Successful business women. Women, who play prominent roles in religious groups. Retired head teachers.

No doubt, the study has its limitations of sampling, yet the result reflect three points for consideration in our discourse of women and community leadership:

1. The number of formal or distinct traditional leadership positions occupied by women relative to men is very low. It also appears that over the years apart from the role of the traditional title of women leaders (e.g., *Iyalode*), many female traditional roles like the spiritual heads, traditional healers are less favourably perceived as significant leadership positions. Furthermore, because many of the honorary chieftaincy titles for women are given in recognition of their husbands’ contribution to the community, the relevance of such titles is reduced.
2. Leadership in its conception and perception is gendered. Thus, there is a tendency to view leadership as men exerting power and authority (Udegbe, 2001). There are several seemingly invisible leadership positions that women occupy in the community as opinion or influential leaders. As retired head teachers, women leaders of associations, successful and reputable women in the community or leaders of groups in churches or mosques and elderly women, opinion leaders can enact reference or expert power to help shape and influence the goals, objectives and achievements of their societies. These groups of women who get far less recognition than they deserve, work mostly behind the scenes to influence community life and grassroots peace efforts (Jordan, 2003).
3. Yoder (2001) noted that because social status and power are confounded with gender, the playing field is tilted against women leaders before they even begin to act as leaders. This field may be levelled by ensuring that

community leadership is perceived in gendered terms such that, the conception of leaders or representatives of communities take into account the difference influence roles played by men and women.

### **Women and Conflict Transformation in Nigeria: Participation in Third Party Interventions**

The leadership of communities is usually held accountable for the conflicts involving their communities because of the high levels of influence such leaders possess. Thus, attempts to mediate in the conflicts either by conflicting communities, government, neutral or third parties usually involve community leaders and representatives of conflicting communities. As noted above, because of the gendered nature of leadership, as reflected in the power and status associated with the role, women are grossly under-represented. Examples of the separate attempts at third-party interventions through training and capacity development in the conflicts between Ife and Modake communities (Albert, 2001), Yoruba Farmers and Fulani Herdsmen in Oke-Ogun (Ogunsanya & Popoola, 2001), Arogo Ijaw and Ugo Ilaje (Davies & Hammed, 2001) and Lagos Abattoir conflicts (Oyedele & Akinteye, 2001) are analysed to examine the process of exclusion of women.

Exhibit 2 presents a breakdown of the community representatives and their gender composition in four conflict situations in Nigeria. It appears that the usual pattern in the process of intervention is to identify the stakeholders in the conflicts. This usually includes mainly the combatants (the male youths) and the community leaders at different levels from the village to the state. This justifies the inclusion of village leaders, community leaders, representatives of local governments and relevant professional bodies. Consciously or unconsciously, guided by negative attitudes to women, there is a tendency to perceive that the combatants are the only aggrieved parties, and as such women as victims or supporters of combatants are neglected in conflict transformation. Where present as minorities (e.g., in the youth groups in the Ife-Modakeke case), there is a tendency to present gender uncongenial situations such that the solo presence of the female is ineffective for representing women's position in the conflict. Furthermore, it is only in one of the situations that a group of women leaders participated in the intervention process.

**Exhibit 2: Community representatives and gender composition in third party interventions in four conflict situations in Nigeria**

<b>Conflict Situation</b>	<b>Community representatives</b>	<b>Gender Composition</b>
Ife-Modakeke	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Village heads</li> <li>2. Youth</li> <li>3. Professionals/artisans</li> <li>4. Community leaders</li> <li>5. Ife-Modake Peace Advocacy Committee</li> </ol> Mostly males**	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mainly males</li> <li>2. Mainly males (only one females)</li> <li>3. Mostly males*</li> <li>4. Mainly males (only one female)</li> <li>5. Mainly males (only one female)</li> </ol>
Yoruba-Fulani (Oke-Ogun)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Community leaders from both groups</li> <li>2. Community Development officers</li> <li>3. Representatives of peace and security committee in the local government</li> <li>4. Peace Monitoring Group** formed during the meeting</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mainly males</li> <li>2. Mostly males*</li> <li>3. Mostly males*</li> <li>4. All males</li> </ol>
Arogbo Ijaw – Ugbo Ilaje	<i>First Leg</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Community leaders</li> <li>2. Women leaders</li> <li>3. Professional groups (representatives)</li> </ol> <i>Second Leg</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Youth leaders</li> <li>5. Local government representatives</li> <li>6. Other professional groups</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mostly males*</li> <li>2. All females</li> <li>3. Mostly males*</li> <li>4. Mostly males*</li> <li>5. Mostly males*</li> <li>6. Mostly males*</li> </ol>
Lagos Abbatior	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Cattle dealers</li> <li>2. Cattle butchers</li> <li>3. State ministries of health and agriculture</li> <li>4. Local government representatives</li> <li>5. Cattle Utilities limited</li> <li>6. Oke-Oba community Association</li> <li>7. Sate house of Assembly</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mostly males</li> <li>2. Mostly males</li> <li>3. Mostly males</li> <li>4. Mostly males</li> <li>5. Mostly males</li> <li>6. Mostly males</li> <li>7. Mostly males</li> </ol>

\*Information not clearly stated but deduced from the report

\*\*Formed as an outcome of the intervention

*Source: From the reports of third party interventions (Albert, 2001; Ogunsanya & Popoola, 2001; Davies & Hamed, 2001; Oyedele & Akinteye, 2001)*

### Women's Initiatives for Conflict Resolution

The past three decades and the associated international Women's conferences, coupled with the support of international organizations, have contributed to the growing consciousness around women's issues and the need for women to have strong voices on issues that impinge on their lives and those of their families. Consequently, despite the limited opportunities for women to participate in peace initiatives, women's groups and associations are gradually being empowered to actively contribute to peace processes.

Women's strategies range from holding meetings and forming alliances with other sister groups (for the purpose of strengthening their positions) to organizing protests and rallies. Using examples of three women peace initiatives (in Ife-Modakeke conflict, Ijaw crisis and among West African First Ladies), the paper highlights the actors, objectives and strategies utilized (See Exhibit 3).

**Exhibit 3: Examples of women peace initiatives (actors, objectives and strategies)**

Conflict situation	Actors	Objectives	Strategies	Reference
Ife-Modake	Women's groups 1. Network of Women in Southwest Zone 2. FIDA <sup>c</sup> 3. Yeye-Oba Ife <sup>c</sup> 4. Deputy Governor of Lagos state <sup>b</sup>	1. To benefit from the potency and power of women in bringing about a truce between the warring parties 2. To form an alliance between mothers and the warring parties with a view to brokering peace	1. Peace rally involving emotion laden peace songs 2. Vests with Peace messages 3. Emotion laden speeches and slogans 4. Gender congruent enactment (deference, pleading) 4. Media Coverage	<i>Nigerian Tribune</i> , Thursday, 4 May 2000
Ijaw women's protests over troops deployment	Groups 1. Niger Delta Women for Justice 2. Ijaw market women	1. Seek justice and peace 2. Seek withdrawal of soldiers from Ijaw 3. Seek release of all the bodies of the youths killed during the crisis 4. Request for enquiry into the	1. Peace protest 2. Being dressed in black outfit is symbolic of their message 3. Picketing 4. A letter to the head of state 5. Public address	1. <i>The Guardian</i> , Tuesday 12 January, 1999 2. <i>The Guardian</i> , Wednesday, November 24, 1999

		looting, raping and extra-judicial killings 5. Request for community-government dialogue		
West African First Ladies Peace Initiatives	1. First Ladies in the sub-region	1. To encourage swift response to crisis and emergencies that threaten peace and stability in the region 2. Work towards ensuring full involvement of women at all decision making	1. Lobby their various governments to formulate policies to ensure 30 per cent representation of women in all national endeavours by year 2000. Work in concert with existing UN and ECOWAS committees.	<i>Daily Times</i> , August 10 1998

- a. King's mother, a title bestowed on Chief (Mrs.) H.I.D. Awolowo
- b. Senator Kofoworola Bucknor
- c. Federation Internationale De Abogadas

Exhibit 3 reflects some trends in women peace initiatives. The actors tend to be strong and broad-based women's groups, usually led by well-known and respected female public figures. The women groups, such as First Ladies in the sub-region, FIDA and market women associations are recognized entities, with adequate capacity for social influence. Professional women groups like FIDA are seen as having the legitimate and expert power to intervene in peace talks and are therefore more likely respected. In all the situations, the objectives of the peace initiatives included increasing the participation of women and highlighting issues particularly related to women such as rape and extra-judicial killings of their children. Their strategies are also consistent with traditional African women's protests. In a study conducted by Ikelegbe (2005), which identified categories, roles and engagements of women's groups involved in resource conflicts in the Nigerian Delta region, it was observed that community women organizations, with the support of numerous grass-roots women organizations, have been the most active and frequently engaged in the local oil economies. They have also constructed and appropriated traditional women protests as an instrument of engagement. This is consistent with the observations reflected in Exhibit 3.

In general, Exhibit 3 also shows that the protests are strengthened by alliances with other zonal, national and international groups. For example, the activities of FIDA, Network of Women in Southwest zone, Niger Delta

Women for Justice and the First Ladies reflect zonal, national and international input in the objectives and strategies. No doubt, coalition building is an effective influence strategy and the women's associations have effectively tapped into it. To a large extent, these alliances and external influences have assisted in conceptualizing the problems, adoption of effective strategies and development of appropriate skills for peace initiatives. Depending on the actors, the strategies adopted vary from more formal and legal approaches to the enactment of gender congruent traditional behaviours such as deference to the paramount leaders through pleas, appeals and peace songs. Across all situations, the use of effective communication (mode of dressing, media coverage, and letters to the government and IEC materials) and emotional appeals were effective tools in the peace initiatives.

### **Improving Community Women's Participation Conflicts Transformation**

One of the points made in this paper is that women are systematically excluded in conflict transformation activities. Thus, sensitivity to gender composition of representatives and the inclusion of gender perspectives is critical to making recommendations for effective conflict intervention or management. Evidence also shows that as tokens or minority among community representatives, women's involvement is as good as non-existent. How then can we ensure that we achieve gender balance among community representatives when power and authority is tilted in favour of men in terms of legitimate traditional offices? As suggested earlier, recognizing that conception of leadership is gendered, the concept of community leadership among women should therefore include women, who occupy seemingly insignificant or less visible roles when viewed from masculinized lenses. However, such women should be judged to have high levels of referent power. The concept of community leadership among women should be expanded to include leaders of women's groups, female leadership structures parallel to those of males, leaders of women's professional groups and other relevant opinion leaders. Furthermore, as observed in the Argbo Ijaw-Ilaje Ugbo crisis intervention, leaders of women's groups should be deliberately selected and included.

One of the concerns around the issue of gender balance in representation is whether women and men should be in joint sessions or in gender-specific sessions. Also, concerns about discussing private issues with men in attendance may be uncomfortable to women. Generally, there is no single formula to address this problem; therefore, it is important to examine the nature of the context. In general, it is better to hold separate sessions first so that through sharing of ideas and view points, female and male participants will be more comfortable with the gender sensitive discussion.

Women's initiatives should be supported by empowering women's groups in the warring factions to intervene through training and support. National and international governmental and non-governmental agencies should also continue in consciousness-raising around the issues of gender representatives even in the context of issues that appear relevant to only males. It must be

noted, however that enhancing women's involvement in conflict transformation at the community level should involve both increased participation of women (through involving greater number of women) and incorporation of women's issues and approaches to conflict resolution (Marshall, 2000).

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