Women in community development: Interrogating the role of women August meeting in South East Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the involvement of women in community development with a view to interrogating the impact of the annual women August meeting in the South East, Nigeria. The paper shows how a combination of community development and August-meeting can be a viable project that has the potential of making women even more relevant and capable of being a model in the quest for sustainable development which is part of the Millennium Development Goals. It discusses the role of women in the quest for sustainable development through community development. The paper argues that the involvement of women in community development promotes peace and consequently gives room for sustainable development and good governance. Thus, ways of realizing these objectives are highlighted. Also in focus is the need to separate politics from the activities of the women August meeting as the paper revealed that the annual gathering has assumed the status of a political jamboree. Therefore, the research submits that the yearly August meeting should be used to consolidate peaceful relations and create an environment which deters the emergence or escalation of tensions that may lead to violent conflict. Thus, giving room for community development for no development thrives in an environment where there is violent conflict. Methodologically, primary and secondary data were used and for theory, social responsibility theory was used in the study which proved effective in carrying out the research.

Keywords: Community development, conflict management, gender, peacebuilding, peace education, August-meeting.

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INTRODUCTION

The argument in extant literatures is that Nigeria profiles a large amount of violent conflict which have resulted to destabilization and dislocation of the populace. Series of regional, ethnic, political and religious conflicts have been experienced in different parts of the country and together they have led to the loss of many lives and many cases of internally displaced persons.

All of these violent conflicts have contributed in no small measure to underdevelopment in Nigeria. Each of the conflicts leads to wanton loss of human lives and property as well as human displacement (Nnoli, 2003; IPCR, 2003). Both family and community lives are disrupted and destroyed. They particularly undermine family systems through the deliberate targeting of women and the recruitment of child soldiers. The loss of livelihoods, due in part to the destruction of infrastructure and natural resources, and lack of employment opportunities coincides with a weakened social safety net and the capacity of the state to provide services, such as health and education (Albert, 2012). The experience so far in Nigeria since the transition to democracy in 1999 shows that violent conflict impacts negatively on the rule of law, state capacity, and democratic political processes. Experiencing violent conflict can be extremely traumatic especially to the vulnerable groups like children and women. Those that are residents in communities experiencing violent conflicts suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome, which contributes to poor mental and physical health, reduced quality of life, and in some cases increased violent behavior. There are always the feelings of humiliation and betrayal, and the desire for revenge, can also perpetuate a cycle of violence which ‘underlings’ rise to power, engage in extreme acts, inflicting indignities on those who had done the same to them.
The South East is not extricated from these series of inter-communal conflict and of recent the activities of kidnappers who often demand for big ransom before the release of those they held hostage. The level of crime in the South East especially those associated with kidnapping is now a serious threat to corporate growth. Unfortunately, most of the perpetrators around are youths whose mothers, equally participate in the August meeting.

In spite of the Beijing declaration on affirmative action, women in Africa are not yet in the mainstream in the political, socio-economic, as well as peace and conflict related spheres. A strong case is therefore made for gender equity especially in the peace and conflict resolution sector. This is because the vast majority of those affected by any armed conflict, including refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), are women and children. Factoring in women's talents and insights in community development would lead to responses to peace and conflict resolution issues that are more people-oriented and therefore more sustainable. The mechanism for achieving this is through mainstreaming women into community development, conflict management and peacebuilding through the women August meeting in South East Nigeria. Besides, it is the children of these women that are involved in violent conflicts. The paper therefore looks into the possibilities of preventing conflicts even at the family level. It examines the subjugation women have been subjected and the peacebuilding roles which if allowed, they could play to mitigate conflicts and reduce its impact on the society.

The idea behind this August occasion is superb and indeed, should have been a model for the rest of the world in the participation of women in community development which is a veritable aspect of the Millennium Development Goals. This is because by embarking on peace building and conflict management, they create the room for development in every aspect of the society. For no development strives in an environment where there is violent conflict. But the irony of the whole programme now is the fact that the annual gathering no more achieves some of its aims as emphasis has shifted from it being a conscious effort at community building to it assuming the status of a very big jamboree. The paper wishes to close this gap by pointing the way forward through which the annual gathering can be made a veritable avenue for bringing about positive peace and meaningful and sustainable development. This is done against the backdrop of conceptual clarification and providing a theoretical background to the study in order to sharpen our perception of the issues in contention.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

Community development

Community development is an activity of people living in a particular area or people joined together by a common interest mainly for the sole purpose of a development agenda. The aim must be to the good of the community. This was the idea behind the formation of the Women August meeting in the South East Nigeria. People ravaged by war and known for their self-help initiatives mobilized scarcely available resources for community development after the Nigeria civil war of 1967 to 1970. During the colonial times, Igbo men and women who were mostly peasant farmers mobilized themselves to raise funds to send their children especially the indigent but brainy ones abroad for studies and in search of the Golden Fleece.

The women formed groups, cooperative societies and unions that made their voices heard and also contributed to the socio-economic development of their communities especially in the area of poverty alleviation, and provision of social and religious amenities. Schools, roads were built and potable water provided by the women for the use of the community. They advocated for women rights and removal of cultural practices that keep women in the doldrums.

Peacebuilding

The former United Nations Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros Ghali, in Agenda for Peace in 1992, introduced “Peacebuilding” as a concept. According to him, peacebuilding involves:

Action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict...rebuilding the institutions and infrastructures of nations torn by civil war and strife and tackling the deepest causes of conflict; economic despair, social injustices and political oppression (Ghali, 1992:5).

He further notes that peace building consisted of “cooperative work to deal with underlying economic, social, cultural and humanitarian problems”. This was in line with the original vision of the August meeting that immediately after the Nigeria civil war, the women of the South East Nigeria which comprise of Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi and Imo came together for the purpose of post-conflict peace building. Peacebuilding is therefore a process that involves the establishment of programs, policies, and associated efforts to restore stability and effectiveness of social, political and economic institutions and structures in the wake of a war or some debilitating or catastrophic event. International Alert (1995) defined peacebuilding as the employment of measures to consolidate peaceful relations and create an environment which deters the emergence or escalation of tensions which may lead to conflict.

Ibeanu (2006:10) avers that peacebuilding is a process involving activities that are directly or indirectly linked to increasing development and reducing conflict, both within
specific societies and in wider international community. This can be explored by women by using August meeting to promote the confidence of various communities and give them sense of belonging. Lederach (1997) sees peacebuilding as a process which involves a wide variety of roles and activities, the goal of which is to ‘create and sustain transformation and the movement toward restructured relationships’. The field of peacebuilding is a challenging one considering the nature of programmes that are involved. Efforts at peacebuilding are borne out of recognized connection between security and development. It aims at creating and fostering stability through institutionalization of democracy, development, human rights, social justice, gender equity and other issues which could promote development in the post conflict society. All these are targeted at consolidating peace and to prevent a relapse into conflict.

**Conflict management**

Considering the fact that in an environment where people identify themselves with particular social, economic, cultural and political interests, there are bound to be conflicts and women constituting greater number of this group, it becomes necessary for them to be involved in peace processes especially conflict management. Hence, Akpuru-Ajaa (2007:34) states that conflict management represents the enforcement mechanism, strategic responses for the achievement of the ideals and goals of conflict resolution as a peace agenda.

Boutros-Boutros (1995:215) provides the following definitions of conflict management: “Conflict management is a process and spans the full spectrum of early warning system, peace education, conflict avoidance or conflict prevention by peacemaking, peacekeeping, peace enforcement, and post-conflict confidence building measures”.

The indication so far in the literature, as well as in real life experiences, is that women in Africa suffer disproportionately in conflict situation. Yet, their negligence in peace processes and post conflict reconciliation have remained the major feature of modern society. They have not been given their rightful position in the search for peace and harmonious co-existence, even though they occupy a strategic position in the heart of the family.

Through the August meeting activities, women can enlighten people or groups from different communities on how to live harmoniously and the benefits of good communal relationship. The status of the women as mothers, wives, co-wives and care givers places them in a better position to be involved in conflict management.

**Women**

The Webster Dictionary defines a woman as “an adult female of the human race”. It connotes the feminine gender. This in essence establishes that in physical appearance, man is different from woman. Certainly, we cannot discuss womanhood without recourse to gender. It is therefore pertinent to discuss the female gender as it relates to this topic. Williams et al., (1994) describe gender thus:

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

The United Nations Development Programme Report (1986:3) 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 behavior and access to power for women and men. Although, the details vary from society and change over time, gender relations tend to include a strong element of inequality between women and men and are strongly influenced by ideology”.

Be that as it may, gender is often seen as loosely synonymous with sex and lazily synonymous with women. Hence, in many contexts, one finds that a reference to gender is a reference to women. The paper takes cognizance of this line of argument.

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. 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. On the other hand, the term is widely used to denote the different and unequal perceptions, positions, views, roles and relevance, rewards etc which society assigns to men and women through its culture (Anifowose and Enemuo, 1999).

From the above discourses on gender, it is quite obvious that there are different conceptions and understanding of the term gender, this present study examines the impact of women in community development. It focuses on how women contribute to the quest for sustainable development.

**August meeting, origin and objective**

The “Mothers’ Summit”, popularly known as “August Meeting”, is a concept common among women of South East Nigeria who are resident in Nigeria or abroad. This meeting, usually organized during the month of August, is the exclusive preserve of married women. These Igbo
speaking women gather in their home towns in a grand meeting that lasts for days to discuss and deliberate on issues that affect them in common. The meeting is structured so that the women first meet in their villages and wards to articulate ideas based on community development. From the second day, they converge at the central venue where all the women from different towns will commence the five-day heated and fruitful discussions that have helped in different ways to erect town halls, community health clinics, civic centres, secondary schools, initiate income-generating ventures and even make peace.

It was conceived a few years after the Nigeria civil war in 1970, when the displaced Igbo people of the South East – the area then known as “Biafra,” returned to homes, communities and towns that had been devastated and ravaged by war. Schools were destroyed and hospitals were razed to the ground. Expected government help was not forthcoming, and the people known for their resilience, determination and enterprise adopted the self-help method to rebuild their communities (Nwankwo, 2010). As a matter of fact, the August meeting was a strong chord binding the women of the same historical and cultural descent and propelling them to cooperate in working out development 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 interactions between the people. The period for this meeting is usually the month of August that gave rise to the mantra ‘August meeting’.

**Social responsibility theory**

The conflict analysis tool of social responsibility theory is considered useful for explaining the reason why women must be involved in conflict management and peacebuilding. This theory puts lots of responsibility on the women. Social responsibility theory gives theoretical explanation of women involvement in conflict management and peacebuilding activities through the organization of programmes that would promote tranquility and development.

The thrust of this theory is that conflict can be prevented if the stakeholders especially women can take peace education and advocacy as part of their institutional responsibility and that women have the task of putting community interest above their parochial interest. The unique nature of women makes society to expect a particular role which they should play in getting rid of social evils, educating people, criticizing government policies and exposing other wrong doings in a society. This theory emphasises sense of responsibility on the part of women.

In the words of Middleton (2009), social responsibility entails the necessity for the women to keep society’s interest as a top priority. This can also be seen as a collective responsibility or public interest responsibility. The responsibility in the context of this study does not only apply to women in positions of authority but also the whole women in the community wherever they are located.

**Rationale behind women involvement in conflict management and peacebuilding through August meeting**

In the closing address of the conference on African conflict held at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in 2000, Salim (2000:176) declared that:

In dealing with the conflicts of our continent, we need the involvement of everybody, we need the involvement of our government, of our political leaders, of the civil society, of our media people, of our intellectuals, of our students, you name it, because at the end of the day, it is only through a combination of sectors that we can succeed in dealing with conflicts.

This paper is partly a response to the challenge by Salim Ahmed Salim to African leaders, students, intellectuals and civil society including women to search for the resolution of conflicts in their communities.

Again, women’s vulnerabilities in times of conflict are obvious issue that calls for concern. Though, no one is immune from violence during violent conflicts, the fact still remains that women and children are particularly affected by its effects. Therefore, women should be in the forefront in peacebuilding and in the resolution of impending violent conflicts since the person that wears the shoes knows where it pinches most. In this way, women will not be viewed as victims of violence only but as positive contributors to conflict resolution.

Most of the conflicts that have escalated to the point of violence in Africa have their origins, partly or wholly, in the various indigenous communities of the continent. It is logical to assume that since such conflicts that have generated national and international attention are rooted in the local communities, the methods for their successful resolution should not be unrelated to the local conditions of the people where they originate or emanate.

Besides, it has become more less a general consensus by scholars (Anifowose and Enenmu, 1999; Albert, 2005; Olaiya, 2009) that women are marginalized in different aspects of leadership positions by the men and therefore gender should be mainstreamed into leadership positions. The persistence marginalization against women has become a routine reality especially in the South East Nigeria where you find wide gap in leadership positions between the men and women. In the area of peacebuilding and peacemaking in the society, areas
where women are naturally endowed to function effectively, they are sidelined by men who are usually in the forefront. Akpan-Ita corroborated this when he said:

Traditionally, women are not encouraged to become involved or concerned in peacebuilding 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 hideouts after a violent conflict (Akpan-Ita, 2005).

But here, is already veritable platform for getting involved in leadership position through conflict management and peacebuilding by getting the original vision of the August meeting revisited. Furthermore, women undergo various degrees of physical violence. Wife battering is the commonest of the violence of this category. Women 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 child soldiering and their female children are targets of rape (Olaila, 2010).

Again, the South-East geopolitical region has been bedeviled by violent land disputes between communities (Umuleri and Aguleri, Umunze and Obinze etc). The region also contends with the problem of kidnappers and hostage-takers who often ask for big ransoms before releasing their victims. The region is also facing the violent activities of the members of the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). The three major problems are rather escalating than getting de-escalated.

Furthermore, in recent time the South East recorded unusual incidents of violence and armed banditry fuelled by the proliferation of arms which culminated into kidnapping and other criminal activities. The Commandant-General of Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corpse, Ade Abolurin (2011:230) in his book ‘Terrorism: Nigerian and Global Dimensions’, outlined the kinds of kidnappings, namely: kidnapping for extortion, ideological or political purposes. Kidnapping for ransom or extortion is the kind of kidnapping that was rampant in the South East, even though there were cases of kidnapping for political purposes in the region.

Women in their capacity as wife, mother, caregiver, friend, companion and a builder stand in the better position to get involve in conflict management and peacebuilding. The South East women are highly dedicated, supportive and family oriented. They are dedicated and hardworking. In most cases they endure challenges in order to support their husband and family. As mothers, their influence on their children is overwhelming and by extension their influence on the society. Women August meeting, if well organized would have awesome influence on the society.

August meeting and the aberration of the original objectives

The original objective of the annual gathering as stated above is for the good of the women folk in particular and the community as a whole. The women conceived the idea of August meeting as a platform to make their contributions to the development of their communities. Before long, the concept had spread and it had become a rallying point for women in service of their communities. The women used their organizational skills to raise money, which was used effectively for the reconstruction of schools, hospitals, markets and civic centres.

But in recent time, the original aim of the August gathering has been distorted. Some have used the occasion as an avenue to flaunt gold jewelries, hollands wrapper and or to show that they live abroad and as such underrate their fellow women living at home. In Igbo parlance the word “abroad” stood for anyone who lived outside Igbo land and such persons are often treated with respect and cordiality (Ifebigbo, 2008). The broad women carried themselves with an air, stamping their superiority on the home-based women. And it was something of pride for every home-based granddaughter to have an abroad daughter in-law who she showed off at the August Meeting. That summarized the jamboree status the August Meeting ritual now enjoys. There is already a home movie called “August Meeting” depicting the nefarious activities of women before, during and after the meeting. The annual gathering ipso facto turned from an issue oriented one to one in which ladies from all over the world flock back home to show off how successful they were. There is usually a high level of competition and a conscious effort to outdo each other in the kind of car you came home with, the grade of the wrapper you had around your waist, the quality of the jewelry around your neck-gold or diamond- and of course, how much you can cough out as donation when a call for it is made.

Women who did not turn out in their best or whose best was not good enough, that is, did not meet the prevailing standard were treated as second class and their opinion in the meeting was more often than not disregarded. In fact, they can be hushed up while speaking by the more richly dressed ladies who by their dressing not necessarily their intelligence are assumed to have better suggestions to make (http://nzesylva.wordpress.com/2008/08/09/august-meeting-jamboree-%E2%80%98808/).

This phenomenon leads women to go to every length in order to prepare well for this annual gathering. Many women have been known to go fornicating, or even steal...
from their husbands or from their offices to meet up. Women from lower economic backgrounds would rather save up money all year round to attend the meeting. These funds would have found better use if deployed for the payment of their children’s school fees or for placing more nutritious food on their dinner table. Now, when the emphasis is the dressing to the event, can anything meaningful be discussed at the event?

That is why the paper in all honesty prefers to refer to the annual gatherings as a jamboree. For instance a young mother interviewed said she was not only going to miss work for a whole week but she was also going to do so with or without permission just to satisfy the need to announce to the whole world that she was not living and working in Lagos for nothing. This is actually the audacity of abnormality. What meaning then does the meeting now have? Is there any moral justification of the remotest form for the kind of money spent within this period?

On the reverse side, a few women in the guise of being participants at August meetings have attracted shame to the vision of its founders. Some husbands are known to have faced severe financial pressure, whenever their wives are to participate in the programme. This is consequent on the high profile demand from participants. As a result some women are known to have exchanged blows with their husbands in order to extract sufficient funds to prepare for the August meeting while some others, whose moral pedigree are in doubt, go an extra mile of extra-marital relationships for the purpose of raising money for the annual ritual.

On the side of government, the programme has been used for politicking. For instance, the politics of PDP controlled local government and APGA controlled state government in Imo State almost marred the 2013 women August meeting in the State. The wife of the governor broke protocol and tactically sidelined the wives of the local government chairman. Hence, the August meeting was held under zonal levels where bags of rice, wrapper and some other articles were shared to some women just to fulfill all righteousness. Women were subjected under the hot sun in the name of march pass, dancing and as such become instruments of entertainment to the wife of the governor and her entourage in the name of August meeting. Besides, a close observation showed that it was only the poor village women that were doing the dancing and march pass while the so called women living in abroad sit down to watch.

August meeting model and nexus for national and sustainable development

In the south east in particular the series of kidnappings and the inability of the Nigerian state to find lasting solutions to the conflict issues produce a breakdown in law and order and the perpetuation of human rights abuses. Left unaddressed, there is the risk that grievances in this and several other communities in the zone will persist and societies will remain locked in conflict dynamics. Above all, the resources that could have been channeled into the development of the health, educational, energy and related sectors are wasted on expensive “internal peacekeeping operations” and setting up of commissions of inquiry into the problems.

Women getting involved in conflict management and peacebuilding are thus a vital infrastructure of sustainable development. On the other hand, sustainable development enhances peace. As Ikenga-Metuh (1992:12) notes:

Underdevelopment breeds deprivation, poverty, hunger and disease. A hungry man is an angry man…whether his hunger is caused by other man, by underdevelopment or by natural disasters. Thus, development by removing strains and deprivations from human life, and making it possible for men to live a life worthy of their human dignity, brings about harmony and peace. No sustainable development can take place where community members are not at peace with one another.

At this point the question would be what does sustainable development mean? There are several definitions of the term but the most widely accepted is the one provided by the world commission on Environment and Development (WCED) which opines that “sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987: 43). The term has to do with the need to harmonize the needs of humanity and nature. It is based on two important assumptions:

1. That human beings, not necessarily economic indicators, are at the centre of development; and
2. That we are borrowers of earth from our grand children and must hand it on to them in reasonable usable shape (Fenton 1992:2).

The involvement of the final/direct beneficiaries of any development project in the planning, execution and general running/maintenance of any development project cannot be overemphasized. Here, for peace to be sustainable everybody must be involved in the peace project including women. Development that removes strains and deprivations from human life, thereby making
it possible for men to live a life worthy of their human dignity eventually brings about peace and harmony.

The point has been clearly made in extant literature that one of the factors threatening sustainable development in many parts of the world today is violent conflicts. Every violent conflict carries in its trail destruction of vast human, material and natural resources that could have been used to further make life easy for man. Positive conflict transformation is thus a vital infrastructure of sustainable development (Albert, 2012). 

In the light of the above, there are possibilities of preventing violent conflict even from the family level by rethinking the involvement of women in conflict management and peacebuilding through the women August meeting. The subjugation to which women have suffered and the peacebuilding roles they could play if given the opportunity would have a great impact on the society. Even though women are worst victims of conflicts, they are hardly involved in conflict resolution. This is in spite of the United Nations moves to have women as key players in conflict resolution and peacebuilding missions.

Women as vessels for social transformation and peacebuilding through August meeting

The theme for the 2013 women August meeting in Imo State, Nigeria also known as “Eastern Heartland” was women as vessel for transformation. The topicality and aptness of the theme cannot be overemphasized. This theme could not have come at a better time when most communities and groups in various parts of Nigeria were faced with one form of conflict or the other. And also at a time when the government of Imo State was trying to bring the government more closer to the people through a third tier of government known as community government.

The South East women are highly dedicated and supportive family oriented persons. In the past the records of achievements of some sons and daughters of the south east speak volumes of the role of the women. In most cases they endure challenges in other to support their husband and family. As mothers, their influence on their children and the society in general, is overwhelming. The potency of the women’s influence on peace processes cannot be ignored. At whatever level peacebuilding is required, women have always been found at the forefront of activities. They often defied socio-cultural barriers to engage in meaningful and landmark interventions in conflicts. This is as a result of their innate ability to socialize, mould and build characters. Women’s participation in peace processes starts at the conflict formation level where emotions begin to rise. The woman is so sensitive that she notices the early warning signs of an impending conflict.

The future of the societies and communities are at the heart of women when they participate in peace processes. Their interest in the society is larger and broader compared to their male counterparts whose peace processes are predicated on their immediate gains in terms of authority and power. Woman knows that she stands to lose all when war breaks out. Both her husband and children are at risks so is she. The children could be conscripted as child soldiers and she could also be drafted into war and thus become target of rape and sordid assaults (Chowdhury, 2005: 4). Therefore, the preoccupation of the woman’s mind during and after any war is how her family would be safe.

Women taught their daughters and sons proper behavior and the ethos of the society, and impressed on them the importance of such values as honesty, uprightness and the necessity to let go sometimes. Hence, women have always been active promoters of peace in the community which can be known as peace culture. No wonder the Somalis believe that mother is a school. The values, with which children are brought up, precede their actual birth. “Indeed, before becoming adults we attend a basic school, and that school is mother” (Mohammed 2003:115). These and many other attributes support the notion that women are vessels for transformation and peacebuilding.

However, women themselves need to rise above excesses and frivolities that would compromise the goals of the August meeting. The women August meeting if well organized will have awesome influence on society as seen in women’s roles in various societal organizations including the schools, the church, the markets and so on. It is this important influence on the society that allows many new programmes or policies to operate smoothly at the community levels and the society in general. The ability of women to successfully address the multitude of divisions that exist in contemporary society, communities, homes, meetings, etc makes it significant in managing conflicts.

The government must partner with these women groups. The South East women must carefully design this forum to ensure that peace and love reign in their communities and that they keep their dignity intact so as to give womanhood the pride of place it deserves in national integration and development.

There is always a new beginning when people collaborate to address whatever challenges they face. The collaboration between the women from different communities and with the effort of the government can yield the expected result. It will help to consolidate peaceful relations and create an environment which deters the emergence or escalation of tensions that may lead to conflict. The outcome of events in the south east offers opportunity for stakeholders to take peace education and advocacy as part of their institutional responsibility. Community leaders, kings and chiefs, elders, parents, youth leaders all have roles to play in the peace project. If people took peace education seriously at
community level and families, it would have been difficult for youths in the south east to embrace kidnapping for ransom as source of livelihood without considering the consequences and government’s response. Attainment of Millennium Development Goals is likely to be far-fetched if women are not involved in conflict management.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“August Meeting”, is an example of grass root mobilization of women towards community development through self-help. In the past through it, women have fought against cultural malpractices against them attracting government intervention resulting in legislation in some instances.

Many Igbo women participate in the “August Meeting”, but some, such as the “born again”
Igbo women, are yet to embrace the idea. The gathering is, however, popular and appears set to continue if given the necessary support and encouragement.

The yearly August meeting should be used to consolidate peaceful relations and create an environment which deters the emergence or escalation of tensions that may lead to violent conflict. The August meeting should be made in such a way that even the resolutions coming out of the meeting will be forwarded to houses of Assembly for consideration and when appropriate enacted as laws. Whereas women’s words are not taken as strong as that of men in the community, resolution coming out of the August meeting should be taken seriously.

Sensitization of women during the August meeting should be one of the priorities. During the August meeting, the well informed women should be involved in sensitization of their fellow women on natural Family Planning and Reproductive Health issues. The organisation should take the opportunity of the traditional August meetings in Igbo land to reach out to fellow women who are educated and more informed on the acceptable practises of Family Planning, Reproductive Health and women Rights. The organisation should use the occasion of the August meetings to reach out to a number of communities in this regard.

The need for peace education cannot be over emphasized. It is necessary so as to overcome misconceptions about cultures and values and to dispel cultural ignorance thereby promoting social dialogue. It is recommended that peace education is introduced in all parts of the states in the south east and Nigeria as whole to enable people especially youths acquire necessary skills and knowledge that would reinvigorate harmonious relationship. The paper is of the view that if women took peace education seriously at community level and families, it would have been difficult for youths in the South East to embrace kidnapping for ransom as source of livelihood without considering the consequences and government’s response. Hence, through the August meeting activities, women can enlighten people or groups from different communities on how to live harmoniously and the benefits of good communal relationship.

It should be made compulsory for all the women attending the meeting to dress in uniform, their status notwithstanding. Furthermore, the August meeting must be brought nearer to the village women by allowing the use of Igbo language as a medium of communication during deliberations thereby dropping its elitist trait.

Apart from legislative intervention in terms of making law against kidnapping more effective, it is pertinent to restore cultural values at family level and proper reorientation of young people to prevent kidnapping. Kidnapping should no longer be tolerated in any part of the country to prevent unnecessary loss of lives. Above all, students and youths should be taught that life is sacred and that kidnapping is part of criminality and not different from murder. The need for state police cannot be overemphasized. State policing remains a better strategy to tackle insecurity in all parts of Nigeria because of the nearness of authority and the level of commitment that effective community policing will offer through the establishment of state police. In other to achieve lasting peace, gender perspectives should be mainstreamed into peace processes.

Finally, the paper is of the conclusion that August meeting can be used to trace the causes and management or resolution of conflict and can also be even used to prevent violent conflicts in the society. It considers August meeting as one of the non-adversarial methods in African alternative dispute resolution. Therefore, it should be given more attention in order to get to the root causes, information, understanding and management or resolution of violent conflicts.

REFERENCES


5 “Born Again” here, refers to those Christians who push their Christianity to the extreme by not participating in almost all cultural practices of their community like the August Meeting. They see most of these cultural practices as “paganism”
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