

ENGAGING WOMEN IN PEACE AND SECURITY IN AFRICA: A STUDY OF THE UNITED NATIONS WOMEN (UN WOMEN) IN NORTHEASTERN NIGERIA

OLURANTI AYOMOLA

Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria. Email: ayomolao@babcock.edu.ng

MICHAEL AKIN POPOOLA

Department of History and International Studies, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria. Email: popoolam@babcock.edu.ng

OLASUNKANMI OSUNDINA

Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria. Email: osundinao@babcock.edu.ng

OLANIYI EZEKIEL ARIJE

Legal Unit, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria. Email: arijeo@babcock.edu.ng

PATIENCE NEMEZU CHIOMA

Office of the Registrar, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria. Email: chiomap@babcock.edu.ng

DEBORAH EBUNOLUWA ADEYOMOYE

Department of History and International Studies, Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria. Email: adeyomoyed@babcock.edu.ng

SAMUEL CHIMELA

BIMUN Nigeria. Email: samuelc@bimun.org.ng

Abstract

Africa is home to several armed conflicts with their attendant huge human and material costs. This has been identified as one of the major obstacles to development in the continent. Nigeria is one of the countries in Africa currently grappling with security challenges. The North-Eastern part of the country, particularly, has been a theatre of armed conflicts since 2009 when the Boko Haram terrorist group commenced violent attacks in the region. The conflicts which have sent thousands of people to their early graves and displaced millions of people to IDP camps have had more profound effects on girls and women who are being subjected to sexual servitude, forced conversion to the Islamic faith, forced marriage, forced labour, and early widowhood. Sadly enough, the entrenched patriarchal structure of the society, coupled with certain religious beliefs, has caused the female gender, which is so severely affected to be excluded from decisions on peace building, conflict prevention and security initiatives. In order to break the extant jinx the United Nations Women (UN Women) initiated so several activities aimed at engaging women in peace and security efforts in the region. This research found that amidst some challenges, the series of creative programmes initiated by UN Women achieved some measure of success in changing the existing stereotype as the leaders of some communities now include women as members of their councils of chiefs, where decisions on peace and security are taken. The research however noted that the method adopted by UN Women may

truncate the gains recorded so far if some steps are not taken by the agency. A qualitative analysis consisting of desktop research, consultation of organizational reports, and personal interviews was used.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Insurgency, Insecurity, Peace, Security, Women.

INTRODUCTION

Peace and security constitute vital factors in human life. A secure environment is very crucial to the socio-political and economic development of every society. The centrality of peace to human existence spurs families, organisations, societies and states to crave an environment pervaded by peace and security. One of the most important functions of any legitimately constituted government is, unarguably, to ensure the peace and security of its citizens and their properties. Where this cannot be guaranteed, anarchy, confusion and chaos will hold sway and such a situation cannot engender the protection of the fundamental human rights of citizens or give room for socio-economic development. Extant literature as well as lucid evidence show that the fastest growing nations are the ones which have fashioned out structures to ensure peace and security in their societies.

Africa is home to several violent conflicts which reflect a complex tapestry of historical grievances, ethnic tensions, religious fanaticism, and contest over natural resources and geopolitical interests. A research carried out on violent conflicts and wars in Africa revealed that about 236 armed forces and groups participated in 48 violent conflicts which broke out in different parts of the region between 1989 and 2009 (Cohen and Nordas, 2012). There has not been any significant change in this parlous situation even in the present decade. As recent as 2024, violent armed conflicts were recorded in countries such as Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Central African Republic, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, and Sudan, among others. The armed conflicts leave in their trail thousands of deaths and humongous humanitarian crisis. It is also intriguing to know that the most vulnerable in such conflicts are women and girls from targeted ethnic or religious groups, unaccompanied women or children, female-headed households, elderly women, and women with disabilities and children. Women and girls are being increasingly subjected to loss, violence, displacement and rape during armed conflicts. Therefore, it is natural and normal for the gender that bears the burden of conflict to be allowed to lend its voice on issues of conflict prevention, conflict resolution, peace-making and peacebuilding. But the reverse is the case in Africa.

Experts in the field of peace and conflict resolution opine that involving women in peace and security is sine qua non for sustainable peace and development. This is due to the fact that women are important agents in fostering stability in the lives of their families and promoting reconciliation and harmony even in difficult and distressing conditions. In addition, their role in the informal economy and participation in mobilising support during elections make them play vital roles in society. Several international instruments and local frameworks have been initiated to give credence to the importance of women's involvement in creating the condition for permanent peace. For instance, on 31 October

2000, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 which emphasises the uneven impact of conflict on women and girls and underscores the critical role which women could play in preventing and resolving conflicts, negotiating peace and participating in post-conflict peace-building.

Similarly, the African Union Women Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda attaches primacy to women's empowerment and participation in peace and security. In addition to these, many African countries have developed National Action Plans to implement the WPS plan which emphasizes women's representation in peace processes, access to justice and protection from violence while many Civil Society Organisations play vital roles in advocating women's rights and promoting their participation in peacebuilding.

Regardless of these initiatives, the participation and contributions of women in decision-making processes, especially with regard to peace and security, are often overlooked or undermined in Africa. The pervasiveness of gender-based discrimination in the region is based on the fact that women are historically marginalised or never included in decision making process in Africa. This implies that women's voices are hushed, their particular needs are overlooked, and their skills and capabilities are undermined. The situation is worsened by factors such as cultural typecasts, patriarchal society, religious beliefs and practices, a lopsided political structure, the deplorable level of literacy among women, weak legal frameworks and weak capacity of existing government institutions. From Sudan to Central African Republic and from Nigeria to Democratic Republic of Congo, the situation remains the same as women continue to be at the periphery of peacebuilding without any formal role accorded them. This structural disproportion and exclusion of women from formal peacebuilding and conflict resolution processes have severely undermined efforts at conflict prevention because the inability of women to influence decision-making and implementation means that the peace secured is often unbalanced and unsustainable.

Although, some research works have been done on the role which women could play in guaranteeing sustainable peace in African society. But not much has been done to demonstrate a practical example of how the status of women has been transformed from a relegated second class position to becoming a force to reckon with, especially in the Muslim dominated Northern part of Nigeria. The gap which this research seeks to fill therefore is to move away from the realm of projecting or recommending how the status of women could change, towards showcasing how the relentless efforts of an organisation have actually led to a change in the status-quo. This, it is believed, will be a boost to the campaigns against the discrimination against the female gender, which is popular in African society.

Violent Conflicts in Nigeria

Nigeria has gone through some unsavoury experience of violent conflicts in the last two decades. According to a report released by the World Bank and the National Bureau of Statistics (2018), the conflicts which manifested in ethno-religious crisis, herdsman and

farmer clashes, cattle rustling, Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, and agitation for a sovereign nation of Biafra by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) have resulted in the categorisation of Nigeria as one of the places dangerous to live in.

The North-Central states of Benue, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau were engulfed by farmer-herder conflicts. Factors such as climate change, the shrinking of grazing land, incursions of herders into farmland, cattle rustling and population increase made the hitherto localised conflicts escalate. Resultantly, many women and girls were raped, killed, widowed, or rendered homeless and forced to live in IDP camps to grapple with poverty and food insecurity.

The North-Western states of Kaduna, Kebbi, Katsina and Zamfara have also experienced a surge in violent conflicts in the last decade. The escalation of the challenges relating to access to grazing land, cattle, rustling, banditry, kidnaping, and localised ethnic crisis have undermined the peace, security and development of the region. Gangs of armed men have also maimed, raped and killed several women in the region. The South-South geo-political zone (comprising Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers States) was also reduced a hotbed of violent conflicts for more than two decades. Despite the fact that the geo-political zone houses the oil wealth of Nigeria, issues like oil spillage, environmental degradation, a low level of development, unemployment, a surge in poverty level and inequality between the employees of the rich oil companies and the local indigenes of the region led to an increase in militancy, kidnapping, destruction of government facilities, wanton killings and displacement of people from their homes. The economic inequality, economic disruption and high level of crimes perpetrated by the militants also had a severe impact on women and girls in the area (National Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

The South-Eastern part of Nigeria has not been left out of the insecurity challenges which ravaged the nation. The spate of cultism in many communities, the menace of Fulani herdsmen, gun proliferation and the agitation of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) constituted insecurity issues there. Between 2015 and 2024, an estimated 2,000 people were executed, a lot of women were subjected to rape while many public facilities, including police stations were either vandalised or burnt. The situation was compounded by the incarceration and eventual sentencing of IPOB leader, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, whom the people that shared his vision of having an independent nation of Biafra saw as their rallying figure.

The most precarious of the violent conflicts in Nigeria was the insurgency in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria, orchestrated by the Boko Haram terrorist group and its splinter group known the Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP). Although, their attacks disrupted the peace of the North-Eastern states of Adamawa, Bauchi, Bornu, Gombe, Taraba and Yobe states, but the epicentres of their violent onslaught were Adamawa, Bornu and Gombestates (Bappah, 2016). The original name of the Boko Haram Terrorist Group is Jama'atu Ahl-Sunnah li Dawa-I-Jihad (which means "a group of people who were committed to the ways of the Prophet, proselytization, and striving for holy war). The

group belonged to the Wahabi School of Thought which believed in the primitive, immaculate and undiluted practice of Islam or a strict application of Sharia law. Hence, their motive was the creation of an Islamic state (Popoola et al 2019). The terrorist sect, which was formed in 2002, came into global limelight when it commenced terror attacks in 2009, following the extrajudicial killing of its founder, Mohamed Yusuf, by the Nigeria Police. The incessant attacks of these deadly terrorist groups resulted in the death of thousands of people and the displacement of over two million inhabitants of the region (Popoola et al, 2019).

Their methods of attack included kidnapping, abduction, sporadic shootings at crowds, bombing of public facilities such as churches and mosques, suicide bombing, arson, bank robbery, looting of businesses and markets, and occupation of farm lands among others. The height of their daring activities was the constant onslaught against military and police facilities which included:-the military camps at Baga and Munguno, military formations at Sabon Gari, Buni-Gari, Izge, Yamtake, Wulgo, Marte, Rann, and Warjiko, the Police Training School at Gwoza and the Divisional Police Station at Nganzai (Marama, 2025). Maclean (2018), posits that the onslaught of Boko Haram has turned the once peaceful Northern-Eastern Nigeria into a theatre of war.

Effects of Insecurity in the North-Eastern Nigeria

A UNDP report indicates that the terrorist groups have killed about 350,000 people directly in North-Eastern Nigeria. Aside from this, several thousands of deaths were recorded, not directly as a result of gun shot or war-related trauma, but due to poverty, malnutrition, and related diseases occasioned by the poor conditions of living which the insurgency subjected the people to (UNDP, 2021). A report released by the African Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) in 2024, shows that Boko Haram and ISWAP were responsible for 66% of all the violent deaths in Nigeria. (Azeez, 2025).

Their incessant attacks also created a huge humanitarian catastrophe in North-Eastern Nigeria. Internally Displaced People's (IDP) camps sprang up in most parts of the places considered to be relatively safe in the region. A 2020 displacement tracking matrix report released by the International Organization for Migration revealed that over 2 million people from a total of 194, 145 households were displaced from their original homes to the various IDP camps. (IEP, 2020). In 2018, the National Bureau of Statistics, (2018) claimed that the ensuing acute humanitarian crises occasioned by forced displacement had a negative impact on the livelihoods of millions of people, thereby deepening the existing underdevelopment and inequalities in the region (National Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

Nearly every part of the region was nursing the agonising effect of mass killings and unprecedented massive internal displacement. The displaced people were subjected to deplorable condition of living which in turn resulted in acute malnutrition. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) once claimed that malnutrition among children in Bornu state alone rose as high as 19 per cent in mid-

2019(OCHA, 2019). The former Governor of Bornu state, Kashim Shettima, confessed this parlous situation as he lamented that “My state is hanging between malnutrition and famine... people are dying like flies on a daily basis in Bornu State” (Campbell, 2019). Another report released by OCHA in 2025 projected that despite the fact that peace was gradually returning to North Eastern-Nigeria, about 4.6 million people might experience acute food insecurity in the region during the lean seasons of 2025 (OCHA, 2025). The report added that over 600,000 of this figure could face life threatening conditions. Unfortunately, women and children constituted about 80 per cent of the population faced with this calamity because they had limited options for work and survival. They also had difficulties accessing resources as well.

In addition, there was wanton destruction of infrastructural facilities. A position paper presented to the presidency in 2018 by the former Borno State government showed that the insurgents destroyed nearly 5,335 classrooms and other school buildings across 512 primary schools, 38 secondary schools and two tertiary institutions in the region.

The unprovoked destruction of physical facilities also affected 788 healthcare centres, 726 power distribution lines and 1,630 water supply sources (Hassan, 2018). Consequently, hundreds of health personnel migrated from the region to other places which were not as volatile as the three most affected states. Some observers of the Boko Haram attacks in the region noted that the colossal destructions which the insurgency wrecked on the health and educational facilities in the affected states could not be fully restored for many years to come.

Some other effects of the insurgency included; increased insecurity, inaccessibility of people to their means of livelihood, loss of crops and livestock, loss of personal property, disrupted business due to raids on banks, shops and markets, loss of employment, worsened poverty, hunger, inequality, inadequate health services, outbreak of diseases and an increase in the infant mortality rate, among others. According to Popoola (2019) the destructive effect of the insurgency in the region was exacerbated by the pre-existing structural factors arising from the long-time socio-economic retardation of the region in comparison with other parts of the country.

Effects of Insurgency on Women Particularly

Insecurity in North-Eastern Nigeria had a negative effect on the female gender in a monumental way. The terrorist sects adopted gendered tactics to exploit the vulnerability of female gender to promote their anti-Western jihadist agenda. Women were subjected to rape, forced marriage, armed abduction, and captivity. According to Okoli (2022), the sects capitalised on the prevailing perception of women as expendable in the Islamic-dominated Northern part of Nigeria, to target women and instrumentalize them for terrorist violence. Most of the people abducted by the sects were women. This was clearly exemplified in 2014 when Boko Haram abducted about 300 girls from a public secondary school in a town called Chibok in Borno State. In the same vein, a similar incident occurred in 2018 when 101 girls were abducted from another school in Dapchi town, in

Yobe State. In some cases, the abducted girls were used in strategic bargaining. For instance, Boko Haram demanded for the release of their commanders arrested by the Nigerian military in exchange for the release of some of the abducted girls from Chibok.

The Abducted women and girls were subjected to sexual servitude, forced marriage, forced labour and forced conversion to the Islamic faith in insurgent camps. Women and girls abductees were forced to cook, clean, fetch water and collect firewood at Boko Haram camps (Oriola, 2017). They were also subjected to arbitrary rape by the terrorist who were permitted to engage in sexual relations as a form of reward for their brave performance during operations (Iyi, 2018).

The ultimate ambition of Boko Haram was to establish a caliphate or Islamic state which would be populated only by adherents of the Islamic religion. Therefore, their desire to produce the next generation of jihadists that would continue to sustain the cause of the group encouraged them to engage in sexual exploitation of the women in their custody (Botha, 2021). Ogundipe et al (2017) state that about 90% of a group of 234 women rescued from Boko Haram captivity in 2015 were found to be pregnant. Similarly, in July 2025, some of the women rescued from Boko Haram captivity by the Nigerian Police were either pregnant or had children born to the insurgents. According to Iyi (2018) Boko Haram militants usually prayed for pregnancy to occur before they engaged in sex. The early marriage and pregnancy which they subjected the underage girls in their custody to made some of the girls experience vesicovaginal fistula. Sadly enough, some of the women captured by the insurgents always loved to go back to the bush to continue to live with their Boko Haram husbands, even after their rescue (Ibrahim, 2023). This may not be unconnected with the fact that they already have emotional ties with the only life which they had known for many years. Some of them were also burdened with the fear of the scars that may never fade away or stigmatisation which they could be subjected to in their new environment after their rescue (UN Women, 2019).

Another effect of insecurity on the female gender in Northern Nigeria was that many girls were forced to drop out of school for fear of being abducted. Prior to the outbreak of the insurgency, the low literacy rate among the female inhabitants of Northern Nigeria was a matter of grave concern to both the government and some Non-Governmental Organizations, and they took some necessary measures to encourage girls to go to school. Unfortunately, Boko Haram attacks on schools and the abduction of girls thwarted the strong advocacy for girl-child education in the region. A report released in 2024, by UNDP established that, despite a significant reduction in the spate of attack by the insurgent sects, about 2 million students (mostly girls) still remained out of school in Adamawa, Bornu and Yobe states alone.

Furthermore, women and girls were used as spies for Boko Haram. Some women who were arrested in 2014 by the Nigerian military confessed to engaging in information gathering on upcoming military operations and the feelings of the general public about Boko Haram (Olanrewaju, 2014). In addition, the splinter groups of the terrorist sect engaged in using women to gather intelligence about one another. Each faction, seeking

to gain dominance over the other, spied on one another to gain an advantage (Zenn, 2014). The deplorable poverty level in the region made women easily susceptible to this kind of risky assignment at the offer of a little cash gift or food items.

Boko Haram also used women as human shield, arms couriers and suicide bombers. The terrorist group deployed its first female suicide bomber in June 2014 in Gombe state. The success recorded in that made the sect adopt the act as a usual practice (Bloom and Matfess, 2016). A research study carried out by Vesna Markovic and quoted in Botha (2021) indicated that 53 % of the suicide bomber deployed by Boko Haram between 2011 and 2018 were females. The use of female as suicide bombers was considered expedient because, it enabled the group to conserve the men fighters for combat assignment. Moreover, women could not easily be suspected by security surveillance, which often devoted more attention to men.

It is interesting to know too that the most vulnerable displaced group of people at the IDP camps across the North-Eastern region were women and girls. A report released by the International Organisation for Migration in 2019 stated that about 80% of the 2.3 million displaced people in the region were women, girls, and children (International Organization for Migration, 2019). Women and girls (either married or unmarried) at IDP camps were often subjected to various kinds of sexual exploitation and violence, not by Boko Haram insurgents now, but by the men at the camps. The IDP camps experienced food shortages and the resultant malnutrition. Consequently, many women and young girls resorted to hawking and other petty trades which further increased their exposure to sexual violence. Some of them, on their own volition, got engaged in survival sex in order to get the resources which they needed to take care of themselves and their families. A crucial point to be added here is the fact that Boko Haram attacks led to the death of several men, which subjected many women to early widowhood and forced on them the responsibility of being household heads (UN OCHA, 2017).

From the foregoing, one can say unequivocally that the insecurity in North-Eastern Nigeria disproportionately affected women. With this reality, it might therefore be natural and expedient to allocate a very prominent role to women in conflict prevention procedures, as well as in the process of forging sustainable peace and security in the society. Regrettably, decisions on issues of peace and security have always been dominated by men in North- Eastern Nigeria, just like any other African society. The culture of male hegemony and female marginalisation is even more pronounced in the Islamic-dominated Northern part of Nigeria than in other regions. Female subordination in the region is derived from the orthodox interpretation of Sharia law, which is practiced in most parts of the region. The patriarchal structure which gives women little autonomy and socio-economic advantage to men, serves as an impetus to women's marginalisation in social recognition, socio-economic empowerment, civic participation, property rights, inheritance, conflict resolution and peace building. Poverty and illiteracy, commonly found among women more than men, also systemically reinforce the patriarchal structures (National Bureau of Statistics, 2018). For this reason, most efforts of the governments, at

both the federal and state levels, to restore peace to the region did not fully involve the women folk. It is against this background that the UN Women decided to work on engaging women in peace and security in North-Eastern Nigeria.

Resolution 1325 and the Creation of UN Women.

Several research works have been done on the correlation between sustainable peace and women's involvement in the peace process. The acknowledgment of this reality led to agitation at several fora by different women groups, non-governmental organisations, and intergovernmental organisations for the adoption of a resolution at the global level that would recognize the effect of violent conflict or war on girls and women, as well as the critical role that women could play in peace-building efforts. The campaigns resulted in the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on 31st October, 2000 (UN Women, 2018). The resolution, passed by the UN Security Council, reaffirms the important role which women could play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction. This critical role made the former Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon opined that women have a vital role to play in preventing conflict and building peace (Ki-Moon, 2020).

Resolution 1325 also urges all actors to increase the involvement of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts. Furthermore, it calls on all parties to a conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict. The resolution provides a number of important operational mandates, which member states and the entities of the United Nations system are expected to comply with.

On 2nd July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly created UN Women, as the United Nations entity to drive the goal of Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (Olaitan, 2018). The agency was created as a global champion for women and girls to accelerate progress on meeting women's needs worldwide. UN Women supports UN member states as they set global standards for achieving gender equality and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and that they truly benefit women and girls worldwide. It works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls and to stand behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life.

UN Women and the Engagement of Local Women in Peace Efforts in North-Eastern Nigeria

Before the intervention of UN women in North-Eastern Nigeria, it was considered a strange thing for men and women to sit together at a meeting in order to seek solutions to a common problem. But upon its arrival in North-Eastern Nigeria in 2014, the UN

Women commenced the process of breaking the jinx of women relegation by working for their inclusion in the task of promoting peace and security (Olawumi, 2017).

First, the UN Women instituted a programme tagged “Promoting Women’s Engagement in Peace and Security (WPS)” in Northern Nigeria. The programme covered three Northern States at the initial stage. These were Adamawa, Gombe and Plateau States. Four local governments were covered in each of the three states. In Adamawa State, the activities took place in Mubi South, Maiha, Yola North and Numan Local Government Areas. In Gombe State, UN Women worked at Kwani, Yamaltu-Deba, Kaltungo and Balanga Local Government Areas. In Plateau State, its presence was noticed in Jos North, Riyom, Mangu and Wase Local Governments. Four communities were targeted in each local government. This implied that a total number of 16 communities were targeted in each state. The WPS was a four-year initiative (2014-2018), meant to support the Nigerian Government, (at both the federal and state levels) to strengthen women’s leadership and to advance gender equality and improve protection for women and children in conflict settings, through the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325.

One of the innovative aspects of the Women Peace and Security Programme in the aforementioned states was the Women Peace Mentorship Programme. This was a strategic initiative plan to enhance community peace-making capacities of women in the three target States. It involved the formation of a 121-member community-based network of Women for Peace and Security who were also identified as “**Women Peace Mentors**”. There were 40 Women Peace Mentors from Adamawa State, 45 from Plateau State and 36 from Gombe State. Women from Borno and Yobe States joined the Network later on (UN Women, 2020).

Having gone through a series of intense capacity trainings, the 121 Women Peace Mentors were encouraged to get involved in various peacebuilding strategic initiatives in their respective communities. They were supposed to provide mentorship to young girls and other women who were not part of the training before. The women mentors also led communal efforts which were geared towards peace advocacy, community dialogue and an early warning or early response system. In addition, the 121 Peace Mentors held training sessions with the local women in order to sensitise them on the indicators that could help them detect early warning signs of conflict and what they could do about them. Furthermore, UN Women sponsored series of radio and TV talk shows, radio jingles and a peace walk so as to create awareness among more women about their programme and to encourage women to be alive to their responsibility as peace builders.

Similarly, between August 16 and 18, 2016, UN Women, through its Women Peace and Security (WPS) programme, collaborated with the Gombe State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development (MWASD) to organize a three-day capacity-building workshop on gender and related issues (UN Women, 2018). The workshop had participants comprising traditional rulers, women mentors, representatives of the state MWASD, representatives of religious bodies, the Office of the Wife of the State Governor, some

staff of the State Ministry of Justice and the media. The focus of the workshop was to advance strategic advocacy on ending gender-based violence as well as promoting the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill (GEO) in Gombe State. All these were considered critical to women's involvement in peace and security.

In March 2017, UN Women initiated a project to support inter-community dialogue and mediation in Plateau state. The main objective of the project was to empower women at the grassroots level by helping them to acquire the necessary skills and experience in peace building and conflict resolution. Women participants were selected from Wase, Riyom, Mangu and Jos North Local Government Areas (Olawumi, 2017). In July 2017 a Community Women Peace Ambassadors meeting was held in Jos, Plateau State to strengthen the capacity of grassroots women for effective and efficient community-based peace building and conflict resolution initiatives. The meeting was also meant to enable the women to have a good understanding of UNSCR 1325 and the WPS Programme. Participants at the meeting agreed on an action plan to advance the activities of the WPS Project. Proposed initiatives included advocacy visits to traditional and religious leaders; training and capacity building for women and girls on peace, security, leadership and gender-based violence. It also comprised mentoring sessions with women and young girls in target communities and local government areas.

The efforts of the UN Women in Plateau State encouraged the Plateau State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development (MWASD) to launch the state's action plan on UNSCR 1325. This made Plateau State one of the few states that have adopted the plan in Nigeria. In addition, the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Plan was integrated into the Plateau state government's strategic action plan. This demonstrated the commitment of the state government to the implementation of the programme.

Realising the important role of the traditional rulers in helping the UN Women to achieve its objectives, the agency visited some monarchs in the region in order to seek their support. These included the Emir of Kano; His Royal Highness Muhammadu Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, the Gbong Gwom Jos; Jacob Gyang Buba, the leader of the Jenta Adamu community in Adamawa state as well as other traditional rulers in their emirates (Nwadinobi, 2017). They canvassed for the support of the traditional rulers and pleaded with them to raise their voice to advocate for women's right in their domains especially in relation to engaging women in conflict resolution and political participation. According to the leader of UN Women in Nigeria, "Our approach was not to fight and agitate that women should be on the traditional council, but rather, to speak and show the advantages of having women within the system who could be well positioned to mentor other women" (UN Women, 2017). The traditional rulers that they visited responded positively to the visit and some of them promised to include women in their administration.

In 2018, the UN Women WPS established a Media Network called the Nigeria Association of Peace and Gender Practitioners in Media. Its members were to be actively engaged in raising public awareness on UNSCR 1325 and related issues, at all levels in the target states: (Adamawa, Plateau, and Gombe) as well as Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory

(FCT). This was demonstrated by members of the Association through continuous initiation of public enlightenment programmes at national and state levels. Similarly, the UN women worked with the WPS Media Network to train about 160 media practitioners on gender sensitive reporting in Peace and Security. In 2019, UN Women worked with the Nigeria Association of Women Journalists (NAWOI) to organise a 4 day capacity building workshop on gender- sensitive reporting for female Journalist in Northern Nigeria. The workshop was aimed at enhancing the capacity of female journalist on United Nation Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, gender-sensitive reporting, safety during reporting, and other gender-related issues.

In addition, the Girl's Empowerment and Monitoring Scheme (GEM) was established in Government Secondary School (GSS) Mangu in Plateau State. This was done under the UN Women Programme to build the capacity of the girl child by engaging them in peace-building activities and projects. Before the establishment of the GEM club in GSS Mangu, the girls in the school were often marginalized or left out of many school related activities (UN Volunteers, 2019). They lacked the courage to speak up like their male counterparts, hence they were side-lined from participating in school competitions. But their membership of the club gave them a platform to compete equally with the boys in any activity, subject or sports.

Another crucial effort made by UN Women to ensure that the rights of women were strengthened was to push for formal structures and a regulatory/legal framework that would support the Women Peace and Security agenda (WPS). To achieve this the UN Women worked with the Nigeria legislature to include in its Legislative agenda a number of measures towards gender equity and equality. The National Assembly members were involved in the development, implementation and overall oversight of the various action plans on their role in supporting the UNSCR 1325 agenda as well as the National Action Plan. In addition, the UN Women hinted that through its appropriation and budget-approving powers, the legislature could also ensure that sufficient funds were committed to WPS issues, and that the resources so appropriated were not only disbursed in a timely fashion, but also spent in tandem with the budget provision (UN Women 2020).

The Impact of UN Women Activities on the Target Communities

When “properly supported, women’s peace movements can affect large sectors of the population and be a powerful force for reducing violence and building democratic and participatory public institutions, particularly in the post-conflict period”. This is the view of the International Crisis Group. True to this opinion, the various programmes executed by the UN Women to ensure the participation of women in peace and security led to a shift from the traditional system of engaging only men in peace and security matters to a notable increase in representation of women in decision-making positions in the region under study.

This was a major milestone which broke the discriminatory cultural practice that excluded women from decision making positions. For instance, Plateau state which did not have

any woman in the traditional councils before the intervention of UN Women eventually had about 107 women (across local governments) as members of the traditional institutions within the four years of the WPS programme. In the same vein, Adamawa had very few women as members of traditional institution at the commencement of the UN Women programme in 2014. But in 2018, about 485 women were involved in decision-making in various communities in the state. In Gombe state too, the number of women in local governance rose from 40 to 240 (UN Women 2019).

The traditional ruler of Gindiri District Traditional Council, in Plateau State, His Royal Highness (ARH) Tanko Umaru Adamu did not only include women in his council, but also instructed all the 22 traditional rulers in the local communities within his domain to include women in their councils too. Similarly, the Emir of Kaltungo in Gombe engaged over 40 Women as advisors in his Traditional Council (UN Women, 2018). Hence, when the UN Women paid him another courtesy visit in August 2016. He was appreciated for recognising the importance of women in peacebuilding and for involving women in his administration. During the visit, the Emir said that women were formal educators, social agents, peace makers, and disputes settlers in the family and the community and he had realised that if women were fully equipped or mobilized and effectively organised, they could contribute immensely to the development of their community.

One could say without any equivocation that these were great feats in areas where women were not given any sense of inclusion before. While sharing her testimony, one of the women members of the traditional council in Gombe State, Ilya Mariam said that “Although, we as women could not talk directly before, but now when we go to meetings we are actually the ones advocating for ourselves at our respective traditional councils. This is a great improvement from where we were before” (UN Women 2020).

The appointment of women to serve in advisory capacity in the traditional council and their involvement in decision-making processes have brought about many changes in terms of how conflicts are being resolved. Men and women view conflict from different perspectives. Therefore, consulting women on security matter has had a significant impact on the security architecture of many communities in the target states.

After repeated advocacy efforts and strategic meetings by the UN Women to increase women’s participation in peace and security within the Bacha Kingdom in Adamawa state, the monarch of the kingdom, His Royal Highness, Honest Irmiya Stephen, agreed to involve women in peace and security processes in his domain. He lived up to this promise as he appointed 49 women as assistant advisers in the traditional council of Numan Kingdom (Abdulah, 2024) In addition, the monarch instructed each of the four villages in his kingdom to select and install four women as assistance to the village head. Having observed the scintillating performance of the women in reducing tension, promoting peaceful coexistence, and fostering mutual relationship across ethno-religious divides in the Kingdom, the king acknowledged that “if we had been involving women in peace and security in the past, we wouldn’t have had this rate of insecurity which we faced. I thank

UN Women because the Women Peace and Security Programme is coming at the right time” (Dangana, 2024).

Another significant impact of UN Women in North-Eastern Nigeria was the appointment of more women into strategic government positions in the affected states. In Plateau state, there were 54 female appointees as at 2018. Some of the WPS Women Peace Mentors were appointed to occupy positions such as Senior Special Assistants to the Executive Governor, State Coordinator of the Social Investment Program and the Director of Programs for the Plateau Peace-building Agency. In Gombe state too, the number of women holding public offices rose from the baseline of two female Commissioners to 6 female commissioners and from 2 female Permanent Secretaries to six female Permanent Secretaries.

In addition, the efforts of UN Women made it possible for more Women Peace Mentors to participate in conflict resolution at the local level. For instance, women peace mentors were able to resolve conflicts such as the clash between youths and herders in Shinga community as well as a conflict which ensued at a prayer ground at Awak community in Gombe State. More so, 54 divorce cases were successfully resolved by women while 10 girls with teenage pregnancy were reconciled with their parent and enrolled in school at Shinga community (Moses, 2024)

The activities of the Nigeria Association of Peace and Gender Practitioners in Media resulted in regular hosting of TV/radio enlightenment programmes, social media and online publications, publishing of newspaper articles, reporting incidences of gender-based violence, and advocacy to stakeholders at state and local government levels. These activities created a lot of awareness about the important role which women could play in the peace process. It also boosted their self-esteem and created the consciousness in them that women were not created as inferior beings to men. This Media Network has always called the attention of women to peace and security issues in their day-to-day work. It has also provided tremendous support in educating and spreading best practices through their various communication channels (UN Women News, (2018):

Knowing full well the connection between engaging women in peace and security and gender equality opportunity, UN Women canvassed for the passage of the Gender Equality Opportunity Bill (GEOB) in the three states (Adamawa, Gombe and Plateau). In Plateau state, the GEOB was passed into law by the State House of Assembly and signed by the Executive Governor. UN Women provided support to the Plateau State Government to gazette and popularize the implementation of the GEO Act (UN Women, 2019). The lessons drawn from Plateau facilitated the process in Adamawa and Gombe states. Committees with a wide range of stakeholders were established to facilitate the processes for the drafting and passage of the GEOB into law.

One of the successes recorded by UN Women was the formation of Peace Clubs at secondary schools, with school girls as members. The major aim of this was to inculcate the idea of peace and security in the minds of the young girls who were expected to grow

with the idea of being peace makers. Eight of such clubs were established in Plateau state with 400 school girls as members. The peace club established in Gombe state had 200 school girls as members. The students in the clubs were being mentored by the Women Peace Mentors. The students were actively engaged in various innovative intra and inter-school peace-building initiatives, including peace songs, peace drama and peace debate competition, among others. This always gave them the consciousness of being Peace Ambassadors.

Suffice it to say too that the training programme which UN Women organized to teach women about public speaking, advocacy, trauma healing and the role of women in leadership in some communities in Plateau State produced a very good result. Before the training, Muslim and Christian communities were very much alienated from each other. But the programme was able to bring the people together and helped them see the beauty that lies in their diversities. The workshops and trainings brought together many women from communities, such as Angwan Rogo, Nassarawa, Farin Gada and many other communities affected by the segregation of Christian and Muslims. After the training programme, Christian and Muslim women were able to come together and discuss solutions to the challenges in their communities and this succeeded in building more religious tolerance and respect(UN Volunteers,2019) The women were taught to share their problems and they got to understand that their issues were very common.

From the foregoing, one could say without mincing words that the various programmes executed by the UN Women have gone a long way to impact the lives of the women by creating an enabling environment where women can advocate for peace in their communities.

Some of the Challenges of UN Women

The inability of UN Women to completely break the entrenched culture and religion which prevented women from being heard in the public sphere was a serious set-back to the agency's efforts. The prevailing culture in most of the communities is such that women should limit their roles to the responsibility of cooking, house chores and farming rather than contesting for the same space with men on the issue of being involved in public administration or peace and security. While the UN Women succeeded in changing this orientation in some areas, it has not achieved success in making some communities abandon this archaic and obnoxious practice.

The activities of the organization have been counterproductive in some areas. The quest to secure some measure of autonomy for women created crisis in some families which in turn led to domestic violence. Some family heads found it very strange that their wives suddenly became outgoing, vocal and were demanding to be heard. These change in attitude, to such men, were regarded as affront which could not be condoned. While sharing her experience in this regard, a Woman Peace Mentor in Gombe, Jemila Baba, narrated how her husband chased her out of her matrimonial home after battering her just because she went to attend a peace and security meeting in the community (Baba, 2024).

Furthermore, some men considered it bizarre for men and women to sit down together in the name of conducting peace and security meeting. They regarded this as a breach of cultural as well as religious norms which they have been used to for ages. This is why it might be expedient for the UN Women not to concentrate on educating only the women in that kind of environment. Men and husbands also need a lot of education and understanding about what their wives are going into. Otherwise, the gains recorded over the years may soon whittle away if some men continue to see the agency as an interloper whose activities would only end up making their wives rebellious against them.

Continuous attacks by Boko Haram insurgency as well as bandits also constitute a serious challenge to the efforts of UN Women. Many of the women that have been trained in their communities and who were supposed to be trainers of other women in the same communities have been killed while some fled to IDP camps.

CONCLUSION

From the record of the activities of UN Women in Northern Nigeria, chronicled by this research, it is clear that, if given the right kind of orientation, women can prove their mettle like their male counterpart in the area of fostering peace and security in the society. Women are as brilliant as men and they are not to be looked down upon as inferior beings or second-class citizens. All efforts should be made by both the federal government and the states' governments in Nigeria to domesticate the UNSC Resolution 1325 in every local government in Nigeria. Efforts should also be made to extend the kind of work done by the UN Women in Northern Nigeria to other places in the country. This is the way by which our society can reap a great dividend of peace and security as well as harmonious living.

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