



The Role of the Church in Mobilizing Women for Sustainable Peace in the Niger Delta

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Abstract. The paper explores the role of the church in mobilizing women to promote sustainable peace in the Niger Delta region. Its aims are to investigate the roles women play towards peace building and discuss how the church can effectively mobilize them towards sustaining peace. The data for this paper are based on secondary sources, while it is examined through the lens of Feminist Peace Theory. It was discovered that the women contribute to peace through prayer for peace, peaceful protests, formation of women groups and organizations and by discouraging their husbands and sons from taking part in conflicts. It was also discovered that the church in the Niger Delta can mobilize women through rereading of Biblical texts on gender; faith-based peacebuilding; women education and healthcare system; encouraging women organizations in the Church to be involved in peace building, and organization of programmes and outreaches for women. Others are: advocacy for women's rights and interest; encouragement of women's active participation in politics; reintegration of female combatants and victims of conflicts into society; promotion of gender equality and campaign against root causes of conflict. The study concludes that the church's focus on mobilizing women for sustainable peace is essential for addressing the complex challenges facing the Niger Delta region. The study recommends among others, that government should provide resources and support for church-led peacebuilding initiatives by encouraging and supporting women's participation in peace processes and decision-making and encourage increase in women's participation in politics as well as ensuring gender equality in the society and in all government appointments.

Keywords: Church, Women, Peace, Peacebuilding, Niger Delta

1. Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been affected by years of crisis, environmental degradation, and social unrest, resulting in significant humanitarian, economic, and environmental challenges. According to Sarah (2022:7), despite these challenges, the region has also seen remarkable resilience and efforts towards peacebuilding, with various stakeholders, including the church, playing crucial roles. The church, with its extensive reach and influence, has been instrumental in promoting peace and stability in the region. Stating the importance of the region in the country, Chinda & Frank (2022) note that the richness of oil in the Niger Delta made Nigeria one of the major oil producing nations. Nigeria as a member of the Africa Union (AU), NEPAD and ECOWAS, plays a prominent role as a peace keeper in West African sub-region.

Ironically, in the Niger Delta, Nigeria has not been able to maintain peace. Over the years, the region has witnessed violence and insecurity in diverse dimensions: abduction, killing, armed robbery, and kidnapping. The effects of this are devastation, sabotage, unemployment, militancy, lack of amenities and abject poverty. Abimbola (2019:39) is right when he asserts that oil and gas are among the problems causing unrest, confusion, destructions, underdevelopment in the nation of Nigeria, especially the Niger Delta region. The Niger Delta region continues to grapple with persistent conflict, environmental degradation, and social unrest, despite efforts towards peacebuilding. Unfortunately, women, who are often at the forefront of community struggles and peace initiatives, remain underutilized and underrepresented in formal peace processes (Ekiyor, 2005:7).

Women, often disproportionately affected by conflicts, are key agents of change and peacebuilding. If women are positively mobilized, they can serve as

formidable agents of change and the church has an important role to play in this because of her comparative advantages over other sectors in society. But it seems much has not been done in the area of the role of the church towards mobilizing women for peacebuilding in the region. This is the problem that this paper aims to address. By exploring the church's initiatives and strategies in mobilizing women for peace building, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of peacebuilding in the Niger Delta and the potential for sustainable peace (Ogege, 2009:11). The paper seeks to investigate the roles that women in the region have played in the past towards peace (building) efforts. It also aims to find out the different ways the church can mobilize women in the Niger Delta for them to be more effective in their efforts towards sustaining peace in the region. The paper is examined through the lens of the Feminist Peace Theory. Feminist Peace Theory posits that effective peace cannot be achieved when prescribed by a detached external source. It therefore stresses the importance of those who are directly affected by violence in peace process. Among others, the involvement of women in peace process is emphasized (Choi, 2021, Dersso, 2023).

2. The Concept of Peace

Peace is generally defined as the absence of war, fear, conflict, anxiety, suffering and violence, and the presence of peaceful coexistence. As noted by Olusakin and Sibani (2023:86), peace can be seen as a stress-free state of security and calmness that comes when there is no fighting or war, everything coexisting in perfect harmony and freedom. This indicates that peace comprises activities intended to create conditions that favour tranquillity. Coser (2006:44) is of the opinion that peace is a comprehensive and broad concept. At the macro parochial level, peace is the absence of conflict and war. At micro level, peace is subjective, depending on the internal state of mind, body and perceptions. The indispensable nature of peace for individual wellbeing and communal stability prompts Essien (2020^a:149) to say that peace is an important ingredient for harmonious co-existence. According to her, individuals, families, nations, and even the whole world need peace. The absence of peace within the community brings chaos and lack of progress, and for the individual, it ushers in personal disequilibrium. This reveals the multi-dimensional value of peace not only as a societal necessity but also as a personal condition essential for stability and development. Overall, peace is dependent on economic, political, religio-cultural, geographical, climate and internal systems. Ibeanu (2006:13) asserts that peace is a process and peace is not a condition. He defines peace as a situation that is directly or indirectly linked to promote development and minimize strife or struggle, both in specific communities or larger societies. This

indicates that peace is harmony in personal relations. Faleti (2007:23) opines that peace can either be negative, which is simply the absence of war or positive, which is the presence of justice.

According to the famous human rights activist Martin Luther King Jr., peace is the presence of justice in the society. In his words “True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice, peace can only last where human rights are respected, where people are fed, and where individuals and nations are free” (cited in Abdul- Fateh, Yaser and Salem, 2019:79). This means that peace encompasses all aspect of the society where justice is upheld. Hence peace is a state of calmness and justice which aids development (Sampson, 2023:7). Galtung notes that the term “peace” and “violence” are linked. Peace is the absence of violence, and should be used as a social goal. Galtung further states that like a coin, peace has two sides; negative peace and positive peace. Negative peace is the absence of personal violence, while positive peace is an absence of structural violence or social justice (cited in Ercoskun, 2020:3). Finally, Sampson, Olusakin and Essien (2023: 158) see peace not as a condition, but as a dynamic socio-economic process involving activities that improve development and reduces conflict both in specific societies and in wider international community.

Idoko & Mpigi (2021:12) opine that, in traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group. This idea of corporate life served as an important tool for maintaining peace in traditional Africa

3. Sustainable Peace

The term sustainable peace or sustaining peace emanated from the twin resolutions of the UN General Assembly and the Security Council on Peacebuilding (A/RES/70/202 and S/RES/2282) in 2016. The term was arrived at based on a recognition that efforts to sustain peace are necessary both when conflict has broken out and even long beforehand by addressing the root causes to prevent “the outbreak, continuation and recurrence of conflict”. It builds on and expands the scope of post conflict peacebuilding. It is built on the foundation of social justice, equality and community engagement. It involves taking proactive measures to strengthen peace where it already exists by “reinforcing the structure, institutions and societal mechanisms that underpin it”. It makes any work on peace and security more effective (Peace Infrastructures.com, Mahmoud & Makoond, 2017). It is a shared task that requires the primary

responsibility of national governments and authorities to identify, drive and direct priorities/strategies and activities to sustain peace. Prevention is the highest priority and it is at the center of sustainable peace. To sustain peace and prevent conflict, there is the need to address exclusion, injustice, inequality, corruption and other factors that drive conflict. It requires partnership among stakeholders. The aim of sustaining peace includes prevention of outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict, addressing root causes, assist parties to conflict to end hostilities, ensure national reconciliation and move towards recovery, reconstruction and development (Peace Infrastructures.org)

Peacebuilding focuses on where conflict exists to transit from war to peace, but sustainable peace makes a peaceful society its starting point. It seeks to understand the mechanism that facilitates peace in such society and seeks the adoption of such to maintain peace where there is conflict. According to Mahmoud & Makoond (2017:2), “sustaining peace begins with identifying those attributes and assets that have sustained societal cohesion, inclusive development, rule of law, and human security-the factors that together contributes to a peaceful society”. It states further that “Peace is not so much as absence of conflict as it is the ability to manage and transform conflict in a peaceful and constructive manner” (Mahmoud & Makoond 2017:12). The factors that foster peace include solidarity and compassion between different ethnic groups, equitable distribution of resources, well-functioning institutions, tolerance for diversity, respect for rights of others, security from physical harm, and access to food and clear drinking water. “Inclusivity is key to sustaining peace. By inclusivity we mean the involvement of all stakeholders: private sector, women, and youth” (Mahmoud & Makoond, 2017:2). Sustaining peace is also context specific. The importance of national government cannot be compromised. Partnerships among people and incentives to maintain it foster sustaining peace not the peace imposed from the top, but the one within and below. Everyone in the community should see the need for peace and work toward it with the support of an inclusive leadership at all levels. In 2018, the UN Secretary General remarks “Sustainable Peace will only be realized through committed, inclusive national ownership that considers the needs of the most marginalized, including women, young people, minorities and people with disabilities” (Peace Infrastructures.org, Lee, 2025)

The UN’s approach to sustaining peace includes shifting the primary agency to sustain peace from international to national and local levels. Also, it leverages on its three pillars of engagement which are peace and security, development, and human rights in addition to humanitarian action. Further, its emphasis has been shifted from re-active to pro-active as it

responds to emerging risks of violent conflict. According to Peace Infrastructures.org, the UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) informed and inspired the concept of sustainable peace. Its Goal 16 aims at building peaceful and inclusive societies. Among the 12 points of the 16th goal that national government and societies and international community are expected to focus on to achieve the goal, 4 are germane to peace. They are promotion of rule of law and access to justice, reduction of corruption, development of effective and accountable institutions and ensuring access to information. Peace Infrastructures.org therefore submits that the SDGs emphasis on inclusion, access and a right-based approach make the whole of the Agenda 2030 directly relevant to sustaining peace and vice versa. Also, all policies must be patterned to sustain peace. Sustaining peace must be housed at the apex of national and local government structure (Mahmoud & Makoond, 2017:3). The UN twin resolutions of sustainable peace of April 2016 underscores the importance of women in sustaining peace. Hence, the importance of this paper.

4. The Niger Delta Region and Violence

The Niger Delta region is a vital area in southern Nigeria, known for its rich oil and gas reserves. The Niger Delta is the delta of the Niger River sitting directly on the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean in Nigeria. The region is located within nine coastal southern Nigerian states, which include: all six states from the South-South geopolitical zone, one state (Ondo) from South West geopolitical zone and two states (Abia and Imo) from South East geopolitical zone Sarah, totaling none states (Sarah, 2022:62). These states are Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers States (Sarah, 2022:69). The region has over 30 million people according to 2006 population census, with diverse ethnic group speaking over 100 dialects spread in about 5,000 communities. The region has 185 out of the 774 local government areas of the country (ND links, 1)

Notably, the traditional occupation of the people is mainly fishing and oil palm farming. Therefore, the Delta has a high dependency on the river and land for survival. Unfortunately, the rivers and the lands are all polluted by oil spillages and sundry pollutions frequently happening there (Ogege, 2009:7, Olusakin, 2014, Olusakin, 2020^a). The Niger Delta is a very densely populated region sometimes called the Oil Rivers because it was once a major producer of palm oil. The area was the British Oil Rivers Protectorate from 1885 until 1893, when it was expanded and became the Niger Coast Protectorate. As noted by Adebajoko, (2021:7), the delta is a petroleum-rich region and has been the center of international

concern over extensive pollution which is often used as an example of ecocide, due to oil spills by multinational corporations of the petroleum industry among others. However, one of its major impediments to development is corruption.

Obi (2018:187) argues that the nature of oil as a commodity of immense economic and strategic importance feeds into a combustible type of politics, clearly linked to zero-sum struggle over the vast providential wealth, it bestows on those who control it. This often leads to the monopolization of power over oil by the few who seek to defend their control of oil by any means and attempts to destroy any opposition or challenge to their monopoly of oil power. In a country of ethnic heterogeneity and elite fractionalization as in the Nigerian case, the struggle over oil merges with the struggle for power to fuel intense intra-ethnic competition in the Nigerian federation. What this indicates is that the elites in Nigeria have hijacked the country's common patrimony for personal aggrandizement. Despite the heterogeneity of Nigeria, when it comes to our collective resources, all the factional, ethnic and religious sentiments are not acknowledged. All these can be traced to corruption, which is the major institutional problems that have impeded sustainable development in the country (Oko, Olusakin and Sampson, 2023:2).

Olusakin (2019:234) states that the agitation for resource control in the Niger Delta region has witnessed the formation of various militant groups. It is pathetic that the region contributes over 80% to the national revenue and there is no serious development going on, despite huge Federal Government allocation to the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs and Niger Delta Development Commission. It seems the little it has allocated so far has not been adequately used for the purpose for which it was released. It is a sad reality that the people in charge of these funds are sons and daughters of the Niger Delta. Sampson (2023:54) in agreement with Olusakin when he avers that the exploitation and exploration of oil wealth from their land reawakened the struggle for a better Niger Delta. This gave rise to the high rate of militancy, violence, insecurity, destruction of oil pipelines, kidnappings of oil workers from foreign nations which makes the region to look like war zone. In addition to being a major hub for Nigeria's oil and gas production, the region is home to mangrove forests, wetlands, and diverse wildlife.

The experiences of marginalization, corruption, environmental degradation among others, have plunged the region into countless conflicts over the years. The series of conflicts faced by the region can be grouped into communal tensions, political competition, organized criminality and resource-based conflict. These manifest in militancy, piracy,

cultism, election violence, armed robbery, kidnapping, human trafficking, mob violence and land disputes, which has forced many people to run away from their homeland (ND links, 2021:1, Mpigi, 2023:78). However, recent trends in violence in the region is expressed in two forms: communal violence and cultic war, though this does not mean that other forms of violence like election violence, personal conflict and others are not rampant in the region. The manifestation of these forms of violence is made worse by emerging issues like increase in the prices of food, unemployment, farmer-herder clashes, economic recession among others (ND links, 2021:1). Government responses to violence have been in form of proscription of cult groups by law, prescription of huge consequences for cult members, establishment of special response unit against cultism, setting up of panel of inquiries or special committees which are mostly government appointee for conflict between communities and for election violence, tribunals or special committees. However, these approaches have not ensured sustainable peace, because they in most cases, do not focus on drivers of conflict, are not prefaced with conflict analysis and are set up after conflict had ensued and there is no provision for conflict prevention (ND links, 2021: 4).

To ensure holistic peace and security framework in the Niger Delta, there is the need for efforts to bring sustainable peace which does not focus on solution after the escalation of violence, but proactive efforts before violence begins. Hence, ND links (2021:5-6) recommends the following: focus on conflict prevention rather than mitigation. This will be based on early warning and early response and peace building. This approach requires participation and inclusion of civil society organizations and other non-security actors to complement the efforts of security agents. Conflict prevention will include adequate peace education, sensitization and awareness and other issues. Also, there is the need to set up peacebuilding roadmaps that 'highlights the steps to take in propelling the peace process forward', 'promote sustainable conflict-resolution planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and involvement of women in the post conflict intervention. Steps to achieve this include, one, engagement of stakeholders that will include, government agencies, civil society organizations, community leaders, academics, community groups and community-based organizations, vigilante outfits, Faith Based Organizations, security institutions and the media. Two, creation of a peace vision for the region may be in each state, that will be based on careful analysis of the conflict situation in the area, identifying stakeholders, trend and patterns. Three, creation of Peace Building Commission in each state which will draw members from the executive, judiciary, security institutions, Christian and Islamic

leaders, traditional leaders, women and youth (ND links, 2021:10).

While this recommendation is laudable, especially due to its involvement of women. It needs to be further emphasized that women's participation in any peace efforts in the state/region is sacrosanct, because in most cases, they are the carriers of the effects of conflicts. They suffer displacement, rape and other sexual assaults, loss of children and husband and become homeless, cheated and abandoned by their late husbands' relatives. The UN security council recognized the link between gender equality, peace and security in its Resolution 1325 adopted in 2000 when it calls for "an increase in participation of women at decision-making levels in conflict resolution and peace processes" (cited in Krook, Anlar, Aissa, Corredor & Vojvodic, 2019:). Also, its twin resolutions of sustainable peace of April, 2016 underscores the importance of women in achieving sustainable peace. It is therefore important to investigate the contribution of women in the Niger Delta towards peace efforts in the region. However, we need to ask the question, who are the Niger Delta women.

5. The Women of Niger Delta

Women in the Niger Delta region play vital roles in their communities, despite facing numerous challenges Sarah (2022:8). They have been at the forefront of activism, advocating for environmental justice, human rights, and peace. Women contribute significantly to local economies through various activities, including farming, trading, and small-scale businesses. For Mbonu (2011:60), women often take on leadership roles in their communities, promoting social cohesion and peacebuilding. Women in the Niger Delta face challenges such as environmental degradation, lack of access to education and healthcare, and gender-based violence. These challenges faced by them have affected the economic situation. Women in the Niger Delta mangrove forest ecosystem engage themselves in mainly fishing and gathering of seafoods. A dense vegetation of mangroves in their marine and brackish habitats found along numerous rivers and creeks have become dependable sources of fuel wood for domestic and small-scale food processing as well as income generation.

According to Ogege (2009:7), the Niger Delta women are known to be engaged in household subsistence activities and are highly dependent on the environment for their task. Women are expected to be caretakers of the welfare of their children and the home. Iruloh and Uche (2017:27) note that rural women are the last to be hired by the oil companies. This is where employers, stakeholders and sundry by pretense or ignorance have been unaware of inflicting the women folk with various unjust treatments in

which most of them are languishing, and by all evaluation, if things continue to be what it is now, the women will not be able to live to exercise their God-given potential in times of needs which have always been through several experiences of theirs within the region. The menace of such disparity goes far beyond what can be imagined.

Ololade (2009:7) captures the situation of women in the Niger Delta thus, "Niger Delta women perform certain economic responsibilities within the family as wives, mothers, farmers and breadwinners. They are the principal care giver of the children and the aged. Even though they are food producers, harvesters and cooks, they are also expected to function as wage earners. This is because the intra housing income distribution pattern and the rise of matriarchal household in the country, coupled with poverty, force them to take active financial role in their families. Since most of them are uneducated and therefore unemployed outside the home, their major source of livelihood is subsistence farming as they comprise 60 to 80% of the agricultural labour force and account for 90% of family food supply"

The exploitation of oil resources in the Niger Delta has resulted in particular economic and environmental conflicts, with the female folks bearing the brunt of the situation. Olusakin (2019:229) has shown that oil provides over 90% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings, yet the people of the Niger Delta, especially the women are among the poorest in Nigeria. This is because in the area where the men are known to always go in pursuit of contracts, the women are engaged in full time farming. Emmanuel (2011:6) opines that women in the Niger Delta are like their counterparts in the other parts of the world, despite their number and crucial functions. The division of roles between the male and female sexes, as prescribed by most cultures assign the subordinate position to women. As a consequence, these women have for long suffered various forms of brutality, discrimination, inequality, exclusion and violence.

5.1 The Role of Women in Sustaining Peace in the Niger Delta.

The role of women in peace efforts is important. This is underscored by the UN Secretary-General's report to the Security Council when he called women leadership and participation in peacebuilding a "prerequisite for the fulfillment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." According to him, "without women's participation, we will not achieve lasting peace; and without the stability of peace, we will not achieve sustainable development" (Department of Economics and Social Affairs).

In the Niger Delta, women play crucial roles in sustaining peace, often working at the grassroots level

and through informal networks. They are instrumental in prayer for peace, conflict resolution, rehabilitation, and promoting economic development, despite facing significant challenges. Omoruyi & Isibor (2020:35) note that women in the Niger Delta have sought to bring about peace in their environment in different ways. These include through peaceful protests, formation of women groups, organizations and by discouraging their husbands and sons from taking part in conflicts. There are basically 3 types of women groups that play crucial roles in the Niger Delta in relation to conflict. The first one relates directly to the multinational companies (MNCs) and the state in terms of complaints, petition, representation, protest and disruptions. The second relates to all the stakeholders including the state, MNCs, traditional rulers, elders and opinion leaders, political and appointees, youth and other groups. In this category, women's role is that of moderators giving advice and suggestions. The third relates to the excess, perversions and the socially disruptive consequences of agitations and protests indicated by violence, crime and insecurity (Omoruyi & Isibor, 2020 35-36).

The most active women groupings in the oil economy according to Omoruyi & Isibor (2020:36) are the local community traditional women associations. They include culture and social-politically inclined women groupings. They motivate, encourage and support women protest or promote peace. These include the Warri Women Consultative Assembly, Federation of Ogoni Women Association, the Niger Delta Women for Justice (NDWJ) Niger Delta Women's Movement for Peace and Development (NDWPD). The Federation of Ogoni Women Association (FOWA) for example, has been active for over 20 years. In 1990s, they supported the Movement of the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in its non-violent protest against the destruction of Ogoni farms and livelihoods. Also, in 1991, about 1000 women in Yenegoa, led by the president of Niger Delta Women for Justice protested peacefully to the visiting senate delegation following the confrontation between military and youth after the destruction of Odi community. According to Omoruyi & Isibor, they had already called for the immediate release of over 2000 women and children and 1000 Ijaw youth locked up in Ebele barracks and Bori camp in Port Harcourt (2020:36,).

According to Arnet (2015:2), the history and waves of women's resistance and revolts towards injustice in the Niger delta dated back to the 1980s when there were uprisings of women; firstly, in 1984 by Ogharefe women of Ethiope local government, and again in 1986 by Ekpan women in the Okpe council area against a United State oil corporation. In the Niger Delta conflict, women were involved not as onlookers, but mostly as active participants. Majority of women were involved in the conflict as victims, survivors, protectors, activists, demonstrators, campaigners,

combatants and peacemakers. Women as victims in conflict situation are mundane. In the Niger Delta Conflict, there have been cases of rape, torture and killings of women. On November 1993 in Ogoni land, due to MOSOP activities, the Nigerian government began a campaign of violence, murder, rape, burning, looting, beatings, torture etc. The Ogoni women publicly spoke about the rape they had suffered (Ekine, 2008:77).

Women also carried out protests against the oil companies and the government. The Itsekiri women in 2002 had embarked on a protest which involved taking over Chervon-Texaco airstrip at Escravos export terminal in Delta (Ekine, 2008). They had occupied the terminal for Ten Days. This occupation was different in the sense that the women protested naked (Ekine, 2008). As noted by Akpan (2014:171), in Africa, nudity was an extreme traditional and ritualistic way of protesting, it expressed the anger, the anguish, and the pain of the protesters and often times carries in itself a curse. In 2002, Ijaw women in Gbaramatu and Egbema Kingdom in Delta State also occupied the Chervron Abiteye flow station. Also in August 2002, women from Urhobo, Ijaw and Itsekiri in Delta State marched on SPDC and Chervron in Warri to demand improved socio-economic conditions and social services from the oil companies. Often times the protesting women were forcefully ejected from the oil companies' premises by the military, but that did not deter them, as there were several numbers of protests organized by the women in the Niger Delta region (Akubor, 2011:26).

The Warri Women Consultative Assembly, Federation of Ogoni Women Associations, the Niger Delta Women for Justice (NDWJ) Niger Delta Women's Movement for Peace and Development (NDWPD) amongst others have contributed significantly to promote peace in the region. For instance, the Federation of Ogoni Women Associations (FOWA) has been active for over 20 years. In the 1990s, they had stood with men and women of the Movement of the Survival of Ogoni people (MOSOP), taking part in non-violent actions to protest against the destruction of Ogoni farms and livelihoods (Ewubare,2015:87). Further, the Tere-Ama women's association a community-based organization, took direct action to persuade young men in the creeks in Okrika to stop them from participating in armed violence in the run up to 2007 general elections. The women resolved dispute over land ownership that threatened the main community market and livelihoods by calling the traditional leader to a meeting thereby avoiding bloodshed (Ekine, 2009:19).

Also, Women's associations such as Gbaramatu, Isoko, Itsekiri, Ugborodo and Ogbakiri Women's Peace Forum, the Academic Associates Peace Workers, the Kebetkache Women Development and

Resource Centre and Ekunuga women's association have participated in environmental activities, organizing prayers and peace initiatives in the Niger Delta (Badmus, 209:808). Also, Egwu (2013:1) records that the gender NGOs and women national associations such as the National Council for Women Societies (NCWS) were not left out in the peace building process. They have been active in peace building through the empowerment of women in the training and the articulation of women conditions and interest (Ikelegbe, 2005). In recognition of women role in peace building in the Niger Delta, the West Africa Network for Peace Building (WANEP) extended membership to different peace groups in the region such as the Kebetkache Women Development and Resource Centre. WANEP sought to promote women's empowerment, inclusion in communal and governmental decision making and peace building. WANEP has worked with different women groups in most of the Niger Delta states. The group (kebetkache) held mothers for peace marchers in towns like Emohua, Ogbakiri and Ogoni in 2007 The Ekunga Women Association convinced council of chiefs from Ekunuga and Okolomade communities to meet regularly to ensure peace in their communities" p36. The gender NGOs and women national associations like National Council for Women Societies (NCWS) have played active role in peace efforts through women empowerment and others (Omoruyi & Isibor, 2020:36-37).

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that Niger Delta women have played important roles in peace efforts through their various associations. They have played active roles through peaceful protest and other means to speak against injustice in the region that normally fuels conflict. However, it is believed that, with more encouragement and mobilization, they can play more active role than protest. They can participate more in every aspect of peace process, from pre-conflict period to post conflict period. They need more opportunities that can make them participate more at every stage of peace process. For example, to ensure their voice is heard in government, women in Niger Delta can join other women in the country to form political party or be actively involved in the already existing political party. If they win key positions in government, it will give them opportunity to stronger participate in peace efforts. This will give them voice among the elites who are always engaged in peace talks. For example, the formation of Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) by a combination of Catholic and Protestant women's group in Northern Ireland helped the women to win two seats out of the 20 seats in the election. This position gives opportunity to women to be part of peace talk or efforts at the national level. This women's party played active roles in working across sectarian line in the country to achieve peace (Krook, Anlar, Aissa, Corredor & Vojvodic, 2019:20). The party members

held regular meetings in which updates were provided on peace processes as well as the concern of both the Catholic and Protestant communities. The church can play active role in this direction by mobilizing them. In what follows, we will examine how the church can achieve this.

On the 20th anniversary of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325(2000) in 2020, the UN General Secretary, Antonio Guterres discusses actions that can enhance women's leadership and full participation in transforming peace and security. These actions are; Systemizing women's leadership to inform conflict prevention and resolution, mediation and protection; creating dynamic and innovative partnerships to enhance women's participation; prioritizing and investing in community-based local women's networks; harnessing data and gender analysis for accountable decision-making and accelerating and leveraging women's mobilization to transform peace and political processes (2020). To be able to achieve these actions, the church, being an important stakeholder in community peace and development has a role to play.

5.2 The Role of the Church in Mobilizing Women in Sustaining Peace in the Niger Delta

The church has pivotal role to play in encouraging women to participate in sustaining peace in the Niger Delta. The comparative advantages that the church has over other sectors in society, makes this responsibility important. The church reaches a large number of people both at the rural and urban area. She provides a long-lasting sustainable service to the people. Due to respect people give to their churches and church leaders, church has the capacity to shape people's attitude and behaviour. Also, she has the potential to influence the powerful. She provides both materials and spiritual support. Many churches have a greater number of women than men (Olusakin, 2020^a:12). As a prophetic organization, advocacy for peace in society is one of the key social works of the church. The church has involved in sustaining peace through mediation in the time of conflicts and through promotion of social justice. Her involvement is not a modern engagement; it has started from the period of the missionaries when foundation was laid for social cohesion and education through missionary activities. She also involves in advocacy for human right and social justice. Christian Association of Nigeria has been active in this direction. The church has through different forms advocated accountability and transparency in government. Through inter-faith dialogue, she has made crucial contribution to peace efforts. In many churches, women form over 60% of the members. Hence, mobilizing them by the church has a lot of benefits. If the church spare heads mobilization of women for sustainable peace in the Niger Delta, it can produce better result than other

sectors. There are many ways the church can mobilize women towards participation in sustainable peace efforts. Some of them are discussed below:

5.2.1 Rereading of Biblical Texts on Gender

The church needs a rereading of Biblical texts that purportedly push women to passive position in society. Given the needed encouragement, women can achieve whatever they decide to achieve and the influence they have over their husband and sons is undoubted. In truth, the Bible teaches that “God created man and woman in His image and likeness...” (Gen. 1:27), and both were called to cooperate with God in bearing and bringing forth children into the world. They were also jointly commanded to conquer and have dominion over all other creatures of the earth (Gen. 1:28). Nowhere did God suggest or intend discrimination based on social or gender distinctions. If God ever intended a hierarchy between man and woman, He would likely have created a separate birth channel for the man, so that the inequality would be visibly marked (Essien, 2020^b:30). The interpretation of Scripture, therefore, should be Christ centred. Jesus never intended women to be passive but to be agent peace, progress and development. Hence, some of these women followed him in his earthly ministry. The achievements of women like Okonjo Iweala, late Professor Dora Akunyili are testimonies to the fact that if the Bible is interpreted and applied in a way that makes Niger Delta women to understand their roles in sustainable peace, they can achieve much in the region.

For example, the August Meeting held by Igbo women annually has played pivotal role in ensuring “social-economic growth and policy implementations that will enhance peace”. Claimed to be a product of the Catholic Women Organization, the group holds meetings and deliberates on issues affecting the peace and development of the area. It provides relief materials, gift and support for those who are affected by conflict. The women hold marches through the street with placards calling for end of hostilities and war. For example, after the encounter before the indigenous people of Biafra and Nigerian Military in 2022, the group did not only provide relief materials to the affected, the members marched through the streets, carrying placards with the inscription “End the War! Let there be Peace” to ensure a peaceful, and healthy environment for socio-economic growth in Eastern region. The group also support peacebuilding and conflict resolution approaches in their local communities in the areas of land disputes, domestic violence among others (Eyike, 2023).

5.2.2 Faith-Based Peacebuilding

This include gathering women to prayer for peace in the community and pray for forgiveness and healing

in the hearts of those who have been hurt and offended through conflict. This can go a long way in initiating unity and peace between warring groups in the society. Mobilization can also be done through preaching and teaching on principles of peace, forgiveness, non-violence and reconciliation from the pulpit, challenging the parishioners most especially women to serve as agents of peace in their households, community and in the state.

5.2.3 Women Education and Healthcare System

At its inception, the Church was as interested in the spiritual needs of the people as it was in their educational, health, and economic needs, thereby giving holistic attention to the well-being of the entire community (Essien & Edem, 2024^a:204). In this light, the Church must revive its commitment to these critical areas, particularly by prioritizing women’s education and healthcare as strategic tools for peacebuilding and sustainable development. Proper training can be organized for women in the church in areas such as peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and leadership. This will help in enhancing their capacity to contribute to peacebuilding efforts. This can be done within the church through church’s women organizations through a community-based training, organized by the church through her women organization. Women can also be mobilized through health care and education. The church should encourage the education of women at all levels and in different professions. This includes funding for the education and healthcare of the girl child, women and funding of women organizations. In most cases, conflict is a direct product or aggravated by illiteracy, poverty and lack of access to basic services. Education allows for personal development and shared sense of community. Through its health care system, the church has played major roles in the treating of and care in conflict affected areas.

5.2.4 Encouraging the Involvement of Women Organizations in Peacebuilding.

Many church women organizations are respected in society. They include Catholic Women organization who are the conveners of August Meeting which has become a powerful force in the peace efforts. Adequate encouragement given to such women organizations in the church will make them to be more effective in peace efforts. Also, the church can offer support in the area of women economic empowerment through skills training, microfinance, and entrepreneurship development. When women are economically empowered, they tend to have formidable voice in peace efforts.

5.2.5 Sustainable Peace Programmes and Outreaches for Women

Further, the church can initiate and sponsor sustainable peace programme that involve women, such as community dialogues, mediation, and reconciliation efforts. She can engage in community outreach programmes that promote peace, understanding, and tolerance and train women to play active role in such outreaches. In such outreaches, she can feature various activities like marches, lectures among others that are patterned toward peace and unity and how to serve as agents of sustainable peace.

5.2.6 Advocacy for Women's Rights and Interest

Advocacy for women's rights and interests, particularly in areas affected by conflict is another area where the church can mobilize women for peace. In those areas, women can be trained and be appointed to lead in the advocacy. The church can advocate inclusive decision-making processes in government that involve women in sustainable peace efforts. This can be done through members of the church who belong to the political class. The church can speak out for women right and encourage them to device avenues to seek for stronger participation in governance.

5.2.7 Encouragement of Women's Active Participation in Politics

Over the years, there have been renewed efforts to improve the participation and the election of women into key positions in the politics both in Nigeria in general and the Niger Delta in particular. Although these efforts have been immense and very concerted, only minimal successes have been recorded (Essien & Edem, 2024^b:300). Therefore, the church in the Niger Delta can encourage women to participate fully in political parties in collaboration with women in other Faith Based Organizations in the region. Women group can lobby for women perspectives in peace talks and processes. Another way is formation of civil society organizations for peace that are faith based. The civil society organizations can draw members from diverse sectors: trade unions, academia, human rights group, students, ethnic groups and rural communities. This will give them a strong and loud voice in advocating peace in the area both before, during and after conflict. The church can play major roles in making sure cultural and religious norms are not used to exclude women. This is important because they are the most hit in every conflict situation.

5.2.8 Reintegration of Female Combatants and Victims of Conflicts into Society

The church needs to spearhead and encourage women and women organizations in and outside the church to ensure the reintegration of female combatants and victims of rape and those who lost their husbands in conflict hit back into the society. Discrimination

against such women must be discouraged and the church can play active role in this. Their needs like education, housing (Including provision of household goods like oven, furniture etc.), food and healthcare must be prioritized. For those who lost their husbands in the process of conflict, the church must play active role in making sure they are not subjected to traditional practices of having their husband's properties taken over by the husband's surviving relatives. These especially affects women with female children only. By doing these, many of the reintegrated women can become advocate of sustainable peace in the society.

5.2.9 Promotion of Gender Equality and Campaign against Root Causes of Conflict

The church should advocate for the promotion of gender equality in all sectors, church activities and government operations. The budgeting of the country can be gender-responsive. The church can also mobilize women in the aspect of addressing the root causes of conflict in the area. The church can lead and involve women in the campaign against environmental degradation and social injustice in the region. Mpigi and Egwuagu (2024:15) linked the contemporary challenges confronting the modern Church to contradictions within the Church system. They contended that many people in the Church are ravaged by poverty, unemployment, and ill health, whereas the Church's resources are used to fund affluent and flamboyant lifestyles of Church leaders in virtually every denomination.

6. Conclusion

The Niger Delta region crucial in Nigerian economy. Hence, sustainable peace in the area is a must. The place of women in sustainable peace has been identified. Though the Niger Delta has witnessed participation of women in various peace process, it has majorly manifested in protest. Women in the region can do more towards sustainable peace. The importance of the church in this cannot be over emphasized due to her position in the society. The church can do a lot in mobilizing women for sustainable peace through education, healthcare, skill acquisition, economic empowerment, peace education and encouragement to have voice in government and others. Women are always the victims of conflict, so involve them in the process of peace is not a misplaced priority. It will make the region to be a better place to live. The church is therefore encouraged to rise to this responsibility. The following recommendations are hereby given. One, government should provide resources and support for church-led peacebuilding initiatives by encouraging and supporting women's participation in peace processes and decision-making. Two, increase in women's participation in politics as well as ensuring

gender equality in the society and in all government appointments should be encouraged. Three, women should be given a forum to air their views on issues pertaining to them. Thus, there is the need to establish rapport and a working relationship between the various women groups across various Christian denominations in the Niger Delta region.

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