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Engendering Peacebuilding in an Endangered Country: Strategic Interventions for Women Peace Activism in Nigeria

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"Women must be active participants during the peace process and its aftermath, and must take an equal role in shaping these decisions. But for too many in positions of power, there is still a lack of recognition of why women matter to peace and security".

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Abstract

The recognition of women's peacebuilding activities, arguments for why women should be involved in peacebuilding, and the development of strategies for their inclusion, has been a dominant focus in the literature and activism of women engaged in the arena of development, peace and security. Women's involvement in peace and security processes in Africa has gained momentum over the last two decades largely as a direct consequence of living and/or working in conflict zones. In most wars, gender roles are strictly deûned: women and children are seen as the victims, while men are viewed as both the perpetrators of violence and the peacemakers. Women take on many different roles in wartime and have diverse experiences. Nonetheless their experiences tend to be distinct from men's and also share a set of common vulnerabilities. In this paper, women's participation in peace building and conflict management is examined at both regional and national levels with specific reference to Nigeria. It argues that gender mainstreaming is particularly significant in its application to conflict transformation, as it is increasingly recognized at both the international and domestic levels that women and men do not experience conflict in the same way and have different needs and priorities in the aftermath. It submits that there is a need for peacebuilding to incorporate policies which address women's specific health and economic needs.

Key Words: Peacebuilding, Peace Activism, Strategic Intervention

Introduction

The importance of including women and women's voices in peace negotiations, transitional governments and long-term political processes is critical to the stability of emerging democracies. In each stage of a country's democratic transition, whether it is still entrenched in conflict or moving toward reconciliation, there are opportunities for women's inclusion that will have a profound effect on determining a successful outcome (NDI, 2010). Peace process support often focuses on formal negotiations and settlements, overlooking the significant contribution of broader, complementary peacebuilding efforts that are vital to sustainable peace. Important contributions by women, often at the household and community level, tend to go unrecognized *(Accord Insight*, 2013:7).

Ongoing armed conflicts on the continent, place women at even further risk of violence. Courageous women civil society activists carry out their work amidst attacks on their reputations, threats to their families and their own personal safety, as well as detention and severe gender-specific abuse and punishment. In countries faced with religious insurgency, the situation is one of heightened risk. Violent conflict fuelled by religious fundamentalism has fostered growing intolerance towards women perceived to be challenging religious norms (CIVICUS, 2011). Nigeria's internal security has been significantly undermined by violent activities of armed non-state actors, largely made up of radicalised youth groups as foot soldiers. Prominent among these groups are the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Odua People's Congress (OPC), the Arewa People's Congress (APC), Bakassi Boys, Egbesu Boys, the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), and more recently, Boko Haram, Ansaru, 'Kala-Kato', and Ombatse, among others (CLEEN Foundation, 2014:2).

The impact of wars on women both as victims and perpetrators has meant that the tactics of women as peace builders have also had to change, from holding less visible roles to assuming more strategic and influential roles. As West African states became militarized, women became less relevant in formal peacebuilding. Peacebuilding initiatives were designed by men, making the role of women in promoting peace unclear and uncertain (Ekiyor, 2008:31). The needs of women have not always been a focal point in conflict management and post-conflict reconstruction. It was not until 2000 that the UN passed Security Council resolution 1325 detailing specific risks women face in conflict and determined to tackle the issue. From this resolution, activists, academics, and policymakers began to address the specific "burden of war" women carry and how the international community could protect and empower them (Stone, 2014). Research has shown that the participation of women in decision-making and women groups' contributions to the substance of peace negotiations are drastically increasing the chances for sustainable peace (FES-West Africa, 2014).

Women activists promote a vision of peace that goes beyond the negotiating table. Women have contributed to stopping violence and alleviating its consequences in a range of ways: providing humanitarian relief, creating and facilitating the space for negotiations through advocacy, and exerting influence through cultural or social means. Recent events of conflicts, bombing of commercial and public places in Nigeria show that conflicts must be managed, not ignored and

there must be concrete efforts for peace building. Such processes must also be completely inclusive of all interests represented in the country. Without peace there can be no meaningful development. Thus, this essay subscribes to the fact that without women's involvement in the design and implementation of policies and programs on conflict resolution and peace-building, such activities will fail to achieve its purpose.

Peacebuilding Conceptualised

Peacebuilding was first conceived of by former United Nations Secretary-General, Boutros, Boutros-Ghali in his Agenda for Peace (1992) as part of a chronological conflict management cycle which included four sequential, even if overlapping activities including preventive diplomacy, peacekeeping, peacemaking and peacebuilding. The concept of peacebuilding evolved and has since been developed under various umbrellas including post-conflict reconstruction and state building. While it seemed logical to distinguish between these activities and prescribe neat application through specific phases of a conflict management cycle, the realities on the ground have required different dynamics (Olonisakin, 2011:17).

Peace-building can thus be defined as a process that facilitates the establishment of positive peace, and tries to prevent violence by addressing the causes of conflict through reconciliation, institution building and political and economic transformation. It includes measures to address deep legacies and structural causes of conflict (e.g. ethnic divisions), respond to the more direct drivers or triggers of conflict (e.g. youth unemployment), and build local and national capacity to manage conflict.

Peacebuilding also refers to activities that go beyond crisis intervention or conflict management, such as long-term development that focuses on developing social, governmental and nongovernmental (including religious) mechanisms that favour nonviolent, constructive means of resolving differences. Peacebuilding is an approach to (primarily) post-conflict settings that recognizes the need for reconciliation, developing a capacity for conflict resolution, and working towards a sustainable peace. It involves a full range of approaches, processes, and stages needed for transformation toward more manageable, peaceful relationships and governance structures. Peacebuilding is distinct from both peacemaking and peacekeeping as it is proactive in dealing with conflict, rather than reactive.

Peacebuilding can be seen to differ from conflict resolution in the sense that its focus is more on building a 'positive peace' grounded in just societal relationships. Characterising peacebuilding as the attempt to address the underlying structural, relational and cultural roots of conflict, Lederach (1994 cited in Parlevliet et al, 2005:21) argues that peacebuilding should 'be understood as a comprehensive term that encompasses the full array of approaches needed to transform conflict towards sustainable, peaceful relations and outcomes'. This understanding of peacebuilding points to the necessity of addressing both objective and subjective aspects of violent conflict.

In simple terms, peacebuilding is all activity aimed at improving the quality of life. Peacebuilding prevents, reduces, transforms, and helps people to recover from violence in all forms. Peacebuilding actively creates the capacity within communities to meet all forms of

human needs and rights. Peacebuilding is the responsibility of many different actors: governments, religious organizations, civil society, traditional leaders and structures, the media, and the business community. It takes place at all levels of society, in the towers of academia and government, in schools and businesses, and in community centres in every village and town. Peacebuilding is a set of values, relational skills, analytical frameworks, and social processes (Schirch, 2004:16).

Dynamics of Conflicts and Women Peacebuilding Initiatives: A Global Overview

At the global level, women have long been active in peace and disarmament issues. Individually and in groups, women have lobbied for the goal of disarmament. During the First World War, nearly 1,200 women from warring and neutral countries came together to protest against the conflict, and formed the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), an organization that continues to advocate internationally for disarmament and human rights. Since then, women around the world have continued to pursue the goal of disarmament, including the total elimination of weapons of mass destruction, strengthened controls over the production and sale of conventional arms, the control of missiles, the need to reduce military expenditures and arms exports. Involvement in peace processes can inspire or confirm in women an awareness of the political dimensions of conflicts and of their own political position.

Women have identified working for peace as a unique opportunity to become organized, an experience that has proved useful in other aspects of post-war reconstruction. Women's peace movements often focus on the shared social experiences of women, thus producing greater solidarity across lines of division and making it harder to cast the enemy as an ethnic and dehumanized other, which is often a tactic of wartime propaganda. Whether taking strategic advantage of prevailing stereotypes about themselves or becoming active in defiance of prevailing norms, women have proven to be creative and courageous participants in peace processes (UN, 2002:54-56).

Following a proposal made by UNESCO, the United Nations General Assembly in 1998 (Resolution A/52/13) defined the Culture of Peace as consisting of values, attitudes and behaviours that reject violence and endeavour to prevent conflicts by addressing their root causes with a view to solving problems through dialogue and negotiation among individuals, groups and nations. The 1999 United Nations Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace (Resolution A/53/243) called for everyone – governments, civil society, the media, parents, teachers, politicians, scientists, artists, NGOs and the entire United Nations system – to assume responsibility in this respect (UNESCO, 2002). Also, there is a growing consensus among nations that peace and democracies are preferred alternatives to wars and conflict. This has been as a result of a shift in consciousness and the yearning for peace, since military force no longer guarantees victory (Hagher, 2011).

Conflict is fuelled by deeply engrained divisions, mistrust and exclusionary politics. Women's peace efforts, like many civil society activities, often challenge these dynamics in both formal and informal spheres by advocating consensus building instead of recrimination and inclusion instead of elite-dominated politics. These efforts often aim to address the structural changes necessary for sustainable peace, and can attract wide support for women's groups and build

their legitimacy *(Accord Insight*, 2013:6). Cycles of violence are visible in many African countries, especially at times of elections. Women human rights defenders have been particularly vulnerable in such political situations, with rape having been used as a weapon for gaining political power. The absence of human rights commissions in many African countries has also left open doors for human rights violations to go unpunished (CIVICUS, 2011).

It is observable that women and children bear the brunt of conflict and wars. They are the majority of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and refugees, and they are also known to be participants in the waging of wars, yet they are often the unrecognized stakeholders in peace processes. Yet women's participation is both a moral imperative and a right which goes beyond them being considered the hapless victims of war. They are also important agents of change and partners in reshaping and rebuilding communities affected by conflict (Tamoka, 2012).

Women in West Africa have played significant roles in situations relating to peace and war for centuries, primarily as traditional peace-makers, as priestesses who confer with gods to determine whether it was right to go to war or not, as praise singers for men during battles as a boost to ensure their victory, or as custodians of culture. In each culture, there are stories of women who have played some leadership roles as peace envoys or harbingers of peace in their communities. For example, the 'Queen Mothers' in Ghana and the Yoruba land in Nigeria, and the 'bondo' women in Sierra Leone, etc. These women were highly revered and protected. However, as the trend of wars and armed conflicts in West Africa changed, women became the victims of unimaginable forms of violence as a tactic of war (Alaga, 2010:4).

In light of the harsh realities of wars and armed conflicts, women have undergone several transitions in terms of their roles as they struggle to find appropriate coping and survival mechanisms. Consequently women have become both victims and perpetrators of violence; and have played significant roles to either find lasting solutions to the war (for example as peace activists) or to sustain the war (for example as combatants (WIPSEN –Africa, 2007:12). Melanne Verveer, Head of the US State Department's Office for Global Women's Issues, noted at the 2010 Conference on the *Role of Women in Global Security* that thirty-one of the world's thirty-nine conflicts relapsed back into violent wars after peace agreements because women were excluded from the peace process (USIP 2011).

In Nigeria, there is presently a three-year initiative programme tagged: *Promoting Women's Engagement in Peace and Security in Northern Nigeria*. It is composed of three inter-locked components, each with their own specific objective: strengthen women's role in conflict prevention, peacemaking and peace building; mitigate the impact of conflict upon women and girls; and establish a conducive environment for effective implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and monitoring of gender equality commitments in Nigeria.

It is expected that interventions will be coordinated through a results-based strategy to raise the capacities of Nigerian institutions, women's groups, CSOs, media and Gender Equality Advocates, among others. The Programme, according to an online report (See http://eeas.europa.eu), aligns with the EU's comprehensive approach to the implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1888 on the adoption of a gender perspective that include the special needs of women and girls in conflict resolution and sustainable peace

building, the new local regular dialogue on peace, security and stability as agreed in the third Nigeria-EU ministerial meeting of 8th February 2012 and the EU Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Development (2010-2015).The formal launch of this project marks the beginning of the implementation of the agreement signed between European Union and the Federal Government of Nigeria on 24th March, 2014.

Collective opinion and action among regional groups serves as a valuable pressure point and reduces the exposure of local activists to danger at home. It is possible for network members based in Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal to freely articulate positions that their counterparts operating from Côte d'Ivoire or Togo cannot freely express. A genuinely acknowledged, empowered and competent civil society can therefore be a locus and catalyst for positive change. While this involvement may not alone result in far-reaching reforms, thoughtful, pragmatic advances can (Bryden, et al, 2008:335). It should be noted that building the constituency of women's participation in peace processes and conflict resolution is aimed at improving peace outcomes, including social cohesion and legitimacy; the sense of exclusion in these processes can extend to exclusion from planning and recovery and the implementation of peace agreements (O'Gorman, 2014:31).

Nature of Conflicts and Challenges for Women Peace Activists in Nigeria

Conflict refers to the contradictions inherent in power relations and which manifest themselves in individual and group interactions with one another and with nature in the pursuit of limited resources or opportunities. Conflict is the motor of transformation and is either positive or negative. It can be creatively transformed to ensure equity, progress and harmony; or destructively transformed to engender acute insecurity (ECOWAS, 2008:7). Conflicts in Nigeria are usually due to boundary issues and land resources. With the rise of ethnicism and ethnic nationalities as political identities and increasing youth militancy, various riots and violent confrontations deriving from ethnic, religious, economic and political motivations have become common in the nation.

The spate of violence and insurgencies occasioned by discontents in Nigeria provides detailed evidence of contemporary insecurity in the country (*Kwaja, 2013).* The country's internal security challenges have roots in its history, geopolitical structure, ethno-religious composition, and slow socio-economic development (Udounwa, 2013:4). Nigeria's borders, a colonial inheritance, contain at least 250 ethnic and linguistic groups (some put the number closer to 400), with rough parity among Muslims and Christians (Lewis, 2006:91). Also, social inequalities have a negative impact on the cohesion and stability of the country as they nourish the tensions between regions and ethnic groups (Toni and Elisa, 2014:5). Other armed groups have increased their use of violent tactics over the past year in the form of kidnappings, battles with security forces, and clashes with one another. Such groups are demonstrating increasingly sophisticated tactics and weaponry, raising concerns about future violence (Fisher-Thompson, 2007 cited in Hazen and Horner, 2007:18). Nigeria has witnessed brutal confrontation and massive assault from terrorist groups which are undoubtedly the most blood-thirsty and destructive, both in term of demonic brutality, mindless savagery and flagrant disobedience to the principles of peace and stability of the country (Babatunde, et al, 2014:59).

For Adigbuo (2014:29), Nigeria is a country where it is difficult to distinguish between politically motivated terrorism on the one hand, and armed criminality on the other. There is an inseparable bond between terrorism and criminality. Though the amnesty programme of the Federal Government has stemmed the pace of insecurity in the Niger Delta, cases of oil bunkering by hoodlums have intensified while other parts of the country are engulfed in one security challenge or the other.

The sectarian crises in Nigeria have cost thousands of lives and huge displacement from homes. The nature of these conflicts, expose civilian populations, particularly women and children, to violence with an impact that is more visible on women because of the social services they render (IDS-Nigeria, 2012). These conflicts and violence are presently fuelled by the following perceived inadequacies: lack of equity in the distribution of national resources; blatant show of gross misappropriation of resources by the political leaders, with a new trend that portrays them as seeing national resources as personal and to be disbursed at their whims and caprices with no monitoring and evaluation processes put in place; perceived injustice by the generality of the people; too many sophisticated and expensive guns are in the hands of unscrupulous and mostly highly qualified and unemployed youths (Oruwari, 2006:1).

In all this, however, female activism has helped bring Nigeria back from the brink of collapse by building local grassroots movements for democracy, human rights, and conflict resolution despite a precarious political environment (Mikell, 2005). Thus, Nigerian women's involvement in peace building processes has endured with increasing focus in spite of the challenges. This has culminated in the first summit of Africa's First Ladies on Peace and Humanitarian Issues held in Abuja in May 1997. Its major concern was the grave political situation in most African countries that is still being characterized by inter and intra-state conflicts and wars that only lead to an increasing number of refugees and internally displaced persons. These conflicts not only cause destruction of lives, property and infrastructure, but also bring about untold misery and suffering to women and children (Akpan et al, 2014:178).

The Niger Delta, the Jos crises and a few others of the same dimension, have created immense opportunities for the growing consciousness of the role of women in peace building. The International organizations' support in creating this awareness cannot be underestimated. Women are now making their voices heard and insisting that perpetrators of conflicts be brought to book. The government is now gradually responding to women cry for inclusion though it is still not adequate. With all the limitations and limited access to the negotiating table, women have not given up. In the areas of conflict management and peace building NGOs are becoming popular. Their strategies vary from prayer meetings, rallies, peace walks and advocacy for peace and education amongst others (Akpan et al, 2014:179).

The existence of strong social networks, trade unions and civic associations that cut across ethnic divisions has been associated in other contexts with conflict resolution. In Nigeria, Porter et al. 2010 (cited in Nwadinobi and Maguire, 2013) describe how market associations play this role. They involve women as well as men from different ethnic and religious groups in mediating and resolving disputes, and interact with ethnic organisations and state agencies in the process. Also, women's faith-based work reflects both the demography and politics of the country. In the

largely Christian Niger Delta region, for instance, women organise across denominations; in the religiously mixed 'Middle Belt', women may come together across religions and in the conflict-affected, largely Muslim Northern zones, women are more likely to organise in their own religious groups.

A number of factors, however, severely limit women's abilities to demonstrate the roles they can play in national development and peace building, both at the community and national levels. Fundamentally, the challenge for women's groups and organisations working for peace in Nigeria is how to make a connection between the kinds of violence against women during wars/armed conflicts and in 'peaceful' situations. This is particularly important because peacebuilding is a long term comprehensive process that spans the period before, during and after violent conflicts/wars. If this link is not made, the appropriate interventions to address issues affecting women's peace and security will most likely be overlooked during programme and project planning, as most peacebuilding organisations are themselves either gender unaware, patriarchal or merely pay lip service to the call for women's participation in peace and security (Alaga, 2010:3).

Similarly, women are not generally engaged in high level peace initiatives. However, when they are invited to such initiatives, they are often assigned auxiliary and subsidiary roles (Nwadinobi and Maguire, 2013). Women's conflict-resolution activities are confined to the informal sector, very often at the periphery of official peace negotiation. In addition, even if women contribute to the promotion of peace, they are not invited to participate in formal negotiation. It should be noted that without a political platform, women are on the margins of action and lack confidence in participating in the peacebuilding process (Agbalajobi, 2009:5).

In addition, the nature of the violent conflict itself can also constitute an obstacle to women's participation. For instance, in North eastern Nigeria, women's civil society organisations that have worked on sectoral development issues are finding it increasingly difficult to meet, let alone form strategies for peacebuilding (Nwadinobi and Maguire, 2013). The increase in violent actions over the last five years by the Islamist group *Jama'atul ahl al-sunnah li da'awati wal jihad* (JAS) has brought untold danger to the population of the North east, and this has been exacerbated by the heavy-handed responses of the security forces that have negatively impacted on civilians, including women and children (El-Bushra et al, 2013).

In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, where local conflict can rapidly escalate to violence, women are well-placed to act as agents of change and lead efforts to restore peace and security. In most cases, however, women lack the skills and the confidence to play such a role. As noted by El-Bushra et al (2013), conflicts in the region arise mostly from grievances relating to the perceived marginalization of local populations from the benefits of oil and gas extraction. There is a marked generation gap in the Delta, with most young people blaming violence on poverty, unemployment, lack of opportunities, and corruption. Older residents however, including older women and community elders, see this narrative of victimisation around resource control as merely a pretext for violence and criminality on the part of youth.

Women Activists and Peacebuilding: Dimensions and Strategies for Intervention

There is a vast amount of research that discusses the strong potential of civil society to contribute to peacebuilding processes. Civil society actors can play various roles at different stages of conflict, spanning a large range of activities. These activities include: monitoring and early warning analysis; conflict analysis; advocacy and education; protection; two-track mediation and facilitation; alternative media, war and peace reporting; service delivery and livelihood generation; youth work; initiatives to foster social cohesion and social capital; psycho-social support; documentation and initiatives for dealing with the past (Paffenholz, 2009). The recognition of women's peacebuilding activities, arguments for why women should be involved in peacebuilding, and the development of strategies for their inclusion, has been a dominant focus in the literature and activism of women engaged in the arena of development, peace and security.

Over the last few decades, women have employed diverse strategies in their efforts to promote peace and rebuild war-torn and conflict-ravaged communities. These have ranged from mobilization and the building of a common platform, capacity building, networking and partnership building, advocacy and lobbying, picketing, shuttle mediation and negotiation, and intermarriages. While significant gains have been made, these approaches have been used in an ad hoc and most often reactionary manner (WIPSEN –Africa, 2007:18). For government and institutions to institutionalize a gender perspective in early warning and response, concrete steps, as recommended by Conaway and Sen (2005:63) include the following:

(1) When conducting conflict analyses, recognize women as important actors and identify and utilize gender-based indicators for early warning. (2) Draw upon existing networks of women's organizations to gain information about conflict trends at the local level, their particular impact on women, and gender-sensitive priorities and action steps to mitigate violence. (3) Include gender experts and expertise in all international-level early response mechanisms including fact-finding missions, preventive site visits, "good offices," facilitator and mediator teams, and consensus-building exercises. (4) During the design of scenarios and the development of responses, address women's needs and concerns as part of the broader strategy to prevent violence.(5) When partnering with civil society for early response, ensure that women's organizations—those who are reaching the most vulnerable and the most susceptible to violence—are involved as key coordinators, decision makers, and program designers and implementers.

The most obvious way to support women's activity in peacebuilding is often identified as supporting women's organisations. There are many different types of women's organisations, with overlapping and changing agendas which have contributed (or have the potential to contribute) to peacebuilding. Some women's organisations have developed the capacity to work openly to protect and extend human rights. Other women's organisations have extended the work they took on during conflict to ensure that the social fabric did not collapse, through various forms of community organisation and welfare. Others more directly focus on the need to talk about, and take action on, strengthening peace in the name of women. Many of these organisations also attempt to build bridges between groups of women with very different experiences of conflict, who might otherwise be separated by their ethnic, regional or political identities (Pankhurst, 2000:16-17).

At the Institutional Level

First, deepening democracy is a prerequisite for good governance and political stability. It requires a renewed commitment by the political leadership to principles and standards of political accountability. It also requires a civil society strategy that relies more on building citizen capacity for permanent civic vigilance in order to achieve long term results, and less on knee-jerk reactions to crises. Citizens are less likely to embrace violence to seek redress or to amplify their voices when they know that processes and institutions of governance will be impartial. Therefore, effectively functioning governance structures are not only necessary for ensuring socio-political stability, but are in fact a critical prerequisite for long-term sustainable peace among communities

Second, for peace-building to be effective, the role of the security and justice sector must be focused on providing people with safety, security and access to justice. This is closely linked to their role in ensuring the survival of the state, reinforcing the political settlement and addressing underlying causes. The political settlement should include a process whereby the army, police and judiciary assume their ideal roles, including upholding the settlement itself, together with appropriate oversight mechanisms. Where security and justice institutions have caused grievances, these must also be addressed – e.g. through transitional justice processes (DFID, 2009:13).

Institutionalising gender equality by ensuring female participation in the implementation of a peace plan and establishing gender electoral quotas can significantly increase the likelihood of lasting peace. While quota policies requiring a certain number of women in peace processes can seemingly create stronger agreements, special attention needs to focus on the qualities of female participants that are truly pushing towards conflict resolution. At this point, female representation has often been regarded as a requirement to check off the long list of peace agreement measures. This focus on quantity rather than quality of representation has been criticised by women's groups, especially in policy development at the UN (Stone, 2014).

Conclusion

It is affirmed in this essay that peacebuilding is a key priority of development and governance organizations, and the role of women is particularly important in promoting more inclusive security in peace processes. Experience in Nigeria, in Africa, and throughout the world has shown that if provided the right opportunities, women are exceedingly effective peacemakers. Even when explicitly excluded from negotiations, African women still find ways to participate and promote their interests. It is imperative that women peace activists have better access to the legal tools and capacity-building resources they need to engender their security and promote their interests and demands in challenging the status quo. The Nigerian government and the international community should ensure that women participate fully in all national and international efforts to maintain and promote peace and security in Nigeria.

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