

Peacemaking as a Woman's Issue
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Introduction

Women are the threads that hold together the social fabric of society. The issues that women are concerned about center around caring for the family and the wellbeing of those around them. Specifically, women tend to be concerned about the following issues:

- **Care-giving.** Children, husbands, and others in the household need much care that women provide, such as preparing food, providing clothing, and keeping a clean and safe environment.
- **Healing.** When children, husbands, or brothers are sick or injured, women are the ones who provide the care that is necessary for healing. Women also heal emotional injuries. When people are feeling upset or hurt, it is typically the woman who listens and provides counseling that is necessary to overcome emotional pain.
- **Education.** Women ensure that those in their household have the proper education. They ensure that school fees are paid, encourage children to read outside of school, and provide a good environment so children can concentrate on their studies. Women are also more directly involved in education as the majority of school teachers tend to be women.
- **Moral guidance.** Children need proper guidance to become good people with good hearts and strong values, responsible members of the society. Women typically provide most of the moral guidance for children and youths through discipline, counseling, and other support.
- **Harmony.** When there is conflict within the family, it is oftentimes the woman who negotiates a solution between the conflicting parties. She listens to the concerns of both sides, and she brings both parties together to discuss what is necessary to bring a solution to the problem.

By examining these issues that are important to women, it is clear that the woman is instrumental in keeping the *shalom* of the family. *Shalom* is the word used in the Old Testament for peace. The word was used in various ways throughout the Old Testament, emphasizing that there are at least three dimensions to *shalom* (Widjaja, 2007). First, *shalom* meant physical well-being, including the absence of war, disease, or famine (e.g., Gen. 37:14). Second, *shalom* included fair relationships between peoples and nations (e.g., Isa. 54:13-14). Specifically, *shalom* in this context meant that there were no economic inequalities, no injustice, and no oppression or exclusion of any other human beings. In other words, peaceful individuals do not pursue one's own interest but cares for others, regardless of who they are. Finally, *shalom* had a personal dimension that included moral integrity (e.g., Psalm 34:13-14). To have *shalom*, an individual must be full of honesty and integrity as well as be free from fault or blame.

Thus, the woman's role is to keep *shalom* in all three of its dimensions. The woman cares for the physical well-being of her household, ensuring there is food and clothes for all. The

woman ensures that there are fair relationships between the members of the family, making peace when there is conflict or inequality. Finally, the woman also labors to ensure that the members of the household have moral integrity.

The traditional African concept of peace is similar to that of biblical *shalom*. “In almost all the cultures of Cameroon, peace was equated with ‘freshness,’ health, well-being, harmony, calm and tranquility...When there was enough food for everyone, peace would reign in homes and families, clans and tribes. As nobody had any reason to be envious of anybody else, neighboring communities could live in peace, visit one another during the off-seasons and attend weddings and funerals” (Ngongo-Mbede, 2003, p. 28). This quote describes two of the three elements of *shalom*: physical well-being and relationships that are characterized by justice and equity.

More recently, a Liberian woman gave this definition of peace that contains all three elements of *shalom*: “On the personal level, peace for me is...a positive frame of mind – psychological wellbeing that allows me to be able to live from day to day as a rational, thinking, caring, responsible person. Peace on the national level for me means...that there are no insurrections, there are no military outbreaks. That law and law enforcement will be respected...Peace on the social level means that we realize, all of us, the importance of individuals as human beings, and we respect their rights to live and operate as independent human beings. That people realize our interdependence and the necessity to work together as a people in various groups but having a thread of unity running throughout” (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004, p. 35).

If something threatens the *shalom* of the family, then that problem becomes the woman’s issue. In Jos and other areas of Nigeria, that *shalom* is being threatened.

- **Care-giving.** Children are in physical danger due to violence.
- **Healing.** In addition to the physical injuries that many have sustained from crises, we all suffer emotional injuries from the fear, insecurity, and malice in our hearts.
- **Education.** The chaotic environment is disrupting education. Children are missing school due to violence, and oftentimes fear prevents children from focusing on their studies.
- **Moral guidance.** Children and youths in our communities are growing up with moral values that are contrary to what we want them to learn. Instead of the positive values of honesty, uprightness, respect for others, and the ability to compromise; children are growing up with anger, disrespect, dishonesty, greed, deceit, malice, impurity, hatred, discord, and violence.
- **Harmony.** The environment of Jos is not one of peace.

Since the violent crises in Jos and other parts of Nigeria threaten *shalom*, the crises are a woman’s issue. But what can women do? The men are the ones who brought about the crisis, so they shouldn’t they be the ones to solve the crises?

The international community has recently recognized that violence has the strongest effect on women and children. However, women can make a great impact building peace and security,

a fact that was highlighted by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 adopted in October 2000 (United Nations Security Council, 2000). Therefore, women can and should become involved in peacebuilding.

Reasons for Women's Involvement in Peacebuilding

There are at least four key reasons why women should become involved in peacebuilding.

First, in traditional Africa, women played a strategic role in conflict resolution. For example, in Central African Republic, elderly women would intervene in violent conflicts to urge both parties to come together in negotiation (Mathey, Dejean, Deballe, Sopio, Koulaninga, & Moga, 2003). In Tanzania, women were the key educators who trained the youth in the moral teachings of the community, especially those moral teachings about cooperation and peace, through songs, dances, stories, and proverbs (Lihamba, 2003). In Cameroon, women played the key roles of mediators in community conflicts (Ngongo-Mbede, 2003). In her review of the role of African women in traditional peacebuilding and conflict resolution roles, Nwoye (n.d.) states "In view of the innate qualities of women and thanks to the position they have occupied and the part they have played in the traditional society, African women can and must be actively involved in conflict prevention and resolution."

Second, the key peacebuilder within the family is the woman. In the home, women mediate, intercede, negotiate, make fair rules, and heal wounds. According to the African Women and Peace Support Group (2004), these are exactly the skills that help women to be effective peacebuilders in the larger society. Women simply need to transfer the skills that they have developed as wives, as mothers, as caregivers, and as friends to the larger conflicts in the society.

Women also tend to have a clearer view of the impacts of violent conflict on the economic, social, and emotional lives of the community (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004). Women understand that violent conflict does not create new jobs and income, but loss of jobs and income. Women understand that violent conflict does not promote emotional wellbeing, but fear, anxiety, and despair. Women understand that violent conflict does not develop strong relationships, but destroys them. For example, one Liberian woman said, "What actually got me involved [in peacebuilding] was when I saw my childhood friend shy away from me because I was living in Monrovia and they were living in Gbarnga 'behind the lines.' We've known each other since we were in diapers. We were not enemies yet we could not communicate because we lived on opposite sides of the divide. That made me realize how foolish we all were. We all were bleeding for our country yet we felt we were at such odds, and it was not true. There was nothing dividing us other than this imaginary line of support for one person or the other" (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004, p. 32)

Finally, women and children are disproportionately affected by violent conflicts. "It is women and children, the weaker vessels of the human race, that are most affected during and after civil conflicts. Women and children die from a combination of factors: bullets, hunger, childbirth, rape" (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004, p. 47). If women are the victims of violence, then they should become involved in ending their suffering.

Women's Roles in Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding activities include a wide range of actions and activities (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004). In an effort to end the Liberian civil war, the Liberian women engaged in many different actions:

- **Provision of food and shelter for individuals who were affected by the violence.** Ruth Caesar said, “Even giving someone a cup of water is peace...If you sat down with a group of women to discuss their problems, that is peace...If you shared your meal with another family who came into the displaced camp you were in, that’s peace. If you talked to a young girl who was raped, that’s peace. So we had to get involved in all those things” (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004, p. 37).
- **Psychological healing, particularly through trauma counseling.** When all individuals, but particularly children, experience traumatic events, they need support to be able to overcome the anxiety, fear, and hurt that they experienced. Women can promote psychological healing by providing a listening ear as the traumatized share their traumatic experiences and their feelings. Women can also provide the support that is necessary for them to heal from the traumatic event (McGee, 2005).
- **Awareness for the need for peace.** Evelyn Kandakai said, “One of our strategies was awareness building. We had what we called a Peace Education Extravaganza and a Children’s Peace Festival...We took a peace theatre...We were able to organize a peace education and resource center...We were one of the groups that brought about the environment for people to want to sing about peace, to talk about peace, to get involved in peace education and peacemaking” (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004, p. 11-12).
- **Organized prayer and fasting sessions.** In 1994, Liberian Women’s Initiative called for all members to hold nightly prayer services in their homes at 10 pm for the restoration of peace.
- **Shared their stories of injury to provide awareness for the need for peaceful interventions.** Women shared their stories by issuing statements to key national and international leaders. Women also attended international conferences and highlighted the plight of women in Liberia.
- **Met with the leaders of violent groups to convince them to stop the fighting.** The women used their positions as mothers and sisters to encourage the fighters to stop. “Somebody came to me and said that the [violent group] was committing a lot of atrocities in the Greenville area. I don’t know what made me think that I could talk them out of anything, but I tried. So I met these men, I asked them for an audience. They agreed, they came, we sat there and we talked and talked. I tried to convince them that if they decided to come into Monrovia – can they imagine the atrocities? Finally, [their leader] said okay they were not going to come to Monrovia” (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004, p. 12-13).
- **Worked for all warring factions to disarm.** Ruth Sando Perry, a former head of the Liberian Council of State, said, “We all know that African countries do not make guns. We don’t make warlike materials – they’re given to us. We take over rich resources – gold, diamonds – we sell them and...instead of getting things to build our country...[we get things] to destroy our country” (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004, p. 19).

In Somalia, women have **written songs and poems that encourage peace** (Mohamed, 2003). They have even organized contests calling for poems that discourage violence and promote peace. Faduma Qasim Hilwle and Zeinab Hagi Ali wrote the following song about peace on behalf of Somali women:

*We the women
Have a complaint against men
In the name of marriage, love and friendship
We the women
Demand peace in the country
We demand security and prosperity
The boys that we bring up
We want them to grow up in peace* (Mohamed, 2003, p. 100).

Somali women in also engage in **informal peacebuilding within their own homes**. As they raise their children, the women try to teach tolerance and explain the futility of violence. They try everything to prevent their sons from being lured into violence. Somali women also try to get their husbands to renounce violence, threatening to leave them if they do not stop playing an active role in violence. Sisters try to convince their brothers that violence only leads to death and destruction.

Likewise, in Indonesia, women are concerned that one of the worst outcomes of the ongoing conflict is that children will be destroyed by harboring feelings of revenge against the other religion's community. To curtail these feelings of revenge, women are starting at the family level where values are taught and socialized. Since the family unit is the place where either a peaceful spirit is planted or negative attitudes are developed, women are coming together to try to socialize their children towards peace (Agustiana & Pakpahan, 2004).

Here in Nigeria, some Muslim women **share about peace with other women at naming ceremonies, weddings, and other social gatherings**. "So we said any time we find ourselves in such occasions, we should maybe have five to 10 minutes to share this peace...Surprisingly, women saw it maybe a good, maybe a new dimension of things. So anytime there is naming ceremony or wedding or any social gathering, women will invite us and they will tell us that when we go there, please they want us to share this with other women" (Korb, 2011).

This is not an exhaustive list of the ways that women can become involved in peace. Again, there are many activities that women can do to foster peace in hearts, peace in society, and physical peace. Strategic peacebuilding requires many activities from many different actors in many different ways.

Reflections on Peacebuilding

The first thing to consider in peacebuilding is that peace is not simply the absence of violence; it is the wholesomeness of *shalom*. Before there can be *shalom* in the society, there must be *shalom* in our hearts. If we lament the values of anger, disrespect, dishonesty, greed, deceit, and hatred that our children are adopting, then we must examine ourselves to see if these values have taken root in our hearts. The holistic peace of *shalom* first starts from within.

Second, peacebuilding is not easy, it is not quick, and it has disappointments. The women of Liberia knew this well. “It was not always a success story, but I think lives have been touched” (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004, p. 32). Therefore, we must be willing to persevere in peacebuilding efforts despite failures, criticisms, and disappointments. Just as it takes years of effort to raise a child, it also takes years of effort to raise up a culture of peace.

Peacebuilders also must make an effort to be perceived by all parties as being unbiased. “The thing is...not to be biased. You accept everybody on the same level and don’t start your guilt trip on anybody. When they find out you’re objective, they will open up to you, and that was our experience – they did open up to us all the time. We were able to go where many people dared not go because they had a lot of confidence [in us]. We built confidence before we started talking to them. And so they believed us when we talked” (African Women and Peace Support Group, 2004, p. 28). Therefore, peacebuilders must be open to listening to all sides of the conflict.

It is impossible to pursue peace with only one side of the conflict. Peace between two fighting children cannot be achieved by only talking to one child. Peace between two neighbors cannot be achieved if the peace meeting only includes one household. Therefore, for peacebuilding efforts to be effective, we must engage with those on the other side of the conflict. Muslim women are faced with the same sufferings as a result of the crises: their families are being affected physically and emotionally, their children’s education is being disrupted, they are watching as their children are adopting negative values. There are moderate Muslim women in Jos and all of Nigeria who want peace and are willing to work with Christians to achieve peace. Pursing peace without the Muslims is like walking with only one leg. In order to be successful, we must unite with those moderate Muslim women who also want peace.

Finally, any woman can be a peacemaker regardless of her age, tribe, marital status, occupation, or educational level. Every woman has influence in some area of society, whether it is our family, our church, our friends, our colleagues, our students, our workers, and so on. We can be peacebuilders within those roles both by the words we speak and the words we allow spoken in our presence. By letting our speech be salted with peace and by confronting stereotypes, prejudice, and dehumanization that are spoken to us, we can foster attitudes of peace amongst those we love and interact with on a regular basis.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The violence in Plateau State and other parts of Nigeria is having a negative impact on women and hindering women from effectively fulfilling their roles as the keepers of *shalom* in their family. As women across Africa have demonstrated, women in Plateau State have the potential of making a significant contribution to the transformation of society that is necessary for a culture of peace. Therefore, the following recommendations are made.

- A systematic study should be made of the roles that local women have played in peacebuilding traditionally. These roles can be adapted and applied to the current conflicts that are being experienced.
- Women should learn from the activities and advice of other women peacebuilders from Nigeria, Africa, and the world.

- We should examine ourselves to identify aspects of our thoughts and attitudes that do not conform to *shalom*.
- Peacebuilding activities can begin in our homes and the circles of those we influence by sharing messages of peace and the danger of violence both in our actions and our hearts.
- Cooperation with other women – including Muslim women – is absolutely necessary to bringing peace.

Indeed, it is difficult to be a peacebuilder. However, God promised that “I can do everything through Him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13). We can also use the power of the Holy Spirit in peacebuilding activities, because Paul said, “The mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace” (Romans 8:6). If we can trust the Holy Spirit for power in our lives, we can trust the Holy Spirit for the life and peace that is necessary to bring about *shalom* in our society.

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