

Gender, Peace and Security: Women as Agents of Conflict Transformation and Sustainable Peacebuilding in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria's persistent insecurity, manifested in insurgency, communal violence, farmer-herder conflicts, banditry, political violence and displacement, has significant gendered consequences. Women are often disproportionately affected through displacement, loss of livelihoods, gender-based violence, poverty and increased household responsibilities. However, portraying women primarily as victims overlooks their agency and contributions to conflict prevention, mediation, reconciliation and peacebuilding. This paper theoretically examines gender, peace and security, with particular emphasis on women as agents of conflict transformation and sustainable peacebuilding in Nigeria. The paper draws on Conflict Transformation Theory, Feminist Peace Theory and Social Capital Theory to explain women's roles, capacities and constraints within peace and security processes. Conflict Transformation Theory highlights the need to address relationships, structures and inequalities that reproduce conflict. At the same time, Feminist Peace Theory draws attention to gendered power relations, patriarchy and women's exclusion from security decision-making. Social Capital Theory complements these perspectives by explaining how women's networks, trust and community relationships can facilitate mediation, dialogue and collective peacebuilding. The paper argues that women's meaningful participation should move beyond symbolic representation towards genuine influence and decision-making. It identifies patriarchal norms, limited political representation, inadequate resources, insecurity, tokenistic participation and socio-economic inequalities as major barriers to women's agency. The paper concludes that sustainable peace in Nigeria requires a shift from viewing women as victims to recognising them as agents, leaders and partners in conflict transformation. It recommends strengthening the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, increasing women's meaningful participation in peace and security institutions, supporting women-led peacebuilding organisations, integrating women into early warning mechanisms, addressing structural gender inequalities, and formally recognising women's contributions to community-based peacebuilding.

Keywords: Gender, Women, Peace and Security, Women's Agency, Conflict Transformation, Feminist Peace, Social Capital, Peacebuilding

Introduction

Nigeria continues to face complex peace and security challenges, including insurgency, terrorism, communal violence, farmer-herder conflicts, banditry, political violence and displacement. These conflicts have consequences that extend beyond the loss of life and the destruction of property to include poverty, disruption of livelihoods, social fragmentation, and the weakening of community relationships. However, the effects of insecurity are not experienced equally by women and men. Women and girls often face displacement, gender-based violence, loss of livelihoods, increased care responsibilities and limited access to decision-making and recovery opportunities. This makes gender an important dimension of understanding peace and security in Nigeria (UN Women, 2025).

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, particularly United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), provides an important framework for recognising women's participation in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery. Nigeria has responded to this agenda through National Action Plans developed in 2013 and 2017 and subsequent efforts to localise the WPS agenda through State Action Plans. However, the existence of these policies has not necessarily translated into adequate representation and influence for women in formal peace and security processes (UN Women, 2025). Recent evidence demonstrates that women's participation in Nigeria's peace and security structures remains limited. UN Women reports that women continue to be underrepresented in decision-making institutions, while women mediators, negotiators and signatories constitute only a small proportion of participants in major peace processes. At the same time, women have demonstrated significant capacities at community level through mediation, dialogue, reconciliation, early warning, humanitarian assistance and social mobilisation. Initiatives in states such as Borno, Adamawa, Yobe, Plateau and Kaduna demonstrate the potential of women to contribute to conflict prevention and peacebuilding (UN Women, 2025).

The central issue, therefore, is not simply the absence of women from peace processes but the inadequate recognition and institutionalisation of their agency. Women should not be conceptualised exclusively as victims of conflict requiring protection. They are also survivors, community leaders, mediators, advocates and peacebuilders capable of transforming relationships and addressing conditions that sustain conflict. Their networks within families, communities, religious organisations and civil society provide important social resources for dialogue, reconciliation and community resilience. Consequently, women's participation should be understood not merely as a question of gender equality but as a strategic requirement for effective and sustainable peacebuilding. Against this background, this paper argues that meaningful women's participation is an essential component of conflict transformation and sustainable peacebuilding in Nigeria. Moving from a victim-centred approach towards an agency-centred approach requires more than increasing the number of women in peace structures. It requires ensuring that women have genuine voice, influence, resources and decision-making power. Such a shift can contribute to more inclusive peace processes, stronger community resilience and more sustainable responses to Nigeria's complex security challenges.

Conceptual Clarification

Gender

Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, expectations, relationships and power structures that shape the experiences and opportunities of women and men in society. Gender is therefore not simply about biological differences but about how societies organise responsibilities, resources and authority. In peace and security studies, a gender perspective is important because conflict affects women and men differently and because women often have unequal access to decision-making structures. The Women, Peace and Security agenda consequently

emphasises the importance of addressing gender inequalities while promoting women's participation in peace and security processes (United Nations, 2000; UN Women, 2025).

Peace and Security

Peace goes beyond the absence of armed conflict to include justice, equality, social cohesion and the ability of individuals and communities to manage differences without violence. Security, similarly, has moved beyond the traditional protection of the state to include the protection of individuals and communities from violence, displacement, poverty, discrimination and other threats to human wellbeing. From this perspective, sustainable peace and security require addressing both direct violence and the structural conditions that reproduce insecurity (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022; UN Women, 2025).

Women, Peace and Security

Women, Peace and Security (WPS) refers to the international framework established principally through United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), which recognises women's important role in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The framework emphasises four broad areas: participation, prevention, protection, and relief and recovery. In Nigeria, the WPS agenda has been supported through National Action Plans and efforts to develop State Action Plans aimed at increasing women's participation in peace and security processes (United Nations, 2000; UN Women, 2025).

Conflict Transformation

Conflict transformation refers to an approach that seeks to address the deeper relationships, structures, inequalities and social conditions that generate and sustain conflict. Unlike approaches concerned only with ending immediate violence, conflict transformation seeks to change the underlying conditions that reproduce conflict (Lederach, 1997). From this perspective, women's participation is important because women can contribute to dialogue, reconciliation, mediation, and the transformation of relationships within families and communities.

Women's Agency

Women's agency refers to women's capacity to make choices, exercise influence and take purposeful action in shaping their families, communities and institutions. Within peacebuilding, agency means recognising women not merely as victims of conflict but as active actors, mediators, leaders, advocates and peacebuilders. Recent evidence from Nigeria demonstrates women's involvement in mediation, community security, conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives, particularly in conflict-affected states (UN Women, 2025).

Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding refers to processes aimed at preventing the recurrence of violence and creating the conditions necessary for lasting peace. It includes reconciliation, dialogue, social cohesion, institutional development, justice, recovery and strengthening relationships among divided communities (United Nations, 2000; Lederach, 1997). Women contribute to peacebuilding through community mobilisation, mediation, humanitarian assistance, advocacy and reconciliation.

Gender, Peace and Security

Gender, peace and security are closely interconnected concepts because gender relations influence how individuals experience conflict, violence, protection and opportunities for

participation in peace processes. Conflict does not affect women and men in exactly the same way; rather, existing social, economic and political inequalities can shape their vulnerability, access to resources and capacity to respond to insecurity. The Women, Peace and Security agenda therefore recognises that women's experiences and perspectives are essential to understanding and addressing contemporary security challenges (United Nations, 2000; UN Women, 2025). Traditionally, security has been understood mainly in terms of protecting the state, its territory and institutions from external or internal threats. Contemporary approaches have broadened this understanding to include the protection of individuals and communities from violence, displacement, poverty, discrimination and other threats to human wellbeing (UNDP, 2022). A gender-sensitive approach consequently asks not only what is being protected, but also whose security is being prioritised, who defines security, who participates in decision-making and whose experiences are reflected in security policies.

In Nigeria, these questions are particularly important because women are significantly affected by insurgency, communal conflicts, banditry, displacement and other forms of insecurity, while their participation in formal peace and security structures remains limited. Recent evidence indicates that women continue to be underrepresented in decision-making and formal peace processes despite national commitments to the Women, Peace and Security agenda (UN Women, 2025; Rustad et al., 2025). This creates a significant gap between women's experiences of insecurity and their ability to influence the policies and decisions designed to address it.

Gender, peace and security should therefore be understood not simply as an issue of including more women in existing institutions, but as a question of power, participation and transformation. Women's meaningful participation can bring community-based knowledge, alternative perspectives and social networks into conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding. Consequently, sustainable peace in Nigeria requires moving beyond the protection of women as victims of conflict towards recognising women as active agents, leaders and decision-makers in the production of peace and security (United Nations, 2000; UN Women, 2025).

Women as Agents of Conflict Transformation

Women should not be viewed merely as victims or passive beneficiaries of conflict interventions. They are also important agents of conflict transformation, capable of influencing the processes through which violence is prevented, relationships are rebuilt and peaceful societies are sustained. Conflict transformation goes beyond the immediate termination of violence to address the underlying relationships, structures and inequalities that reproduce conflict (Lederach, 1997). In this regard, women's agency is particularly important because women are embedded in families, communities, religious networks, civil society organisations and other social structures through which conflicts can either escalate or be transformed.

Women contribute to conflict prevention by identifying emerging tensions, sharing information and participating in early-warning and early-response mechanisms. Their close engagement with community life can provide access to local knowledge that may not be captured by formal security institutions. Recent scholarship on women's local peacebuilding in Nigeria and Mali shows that women often use informal relationships and community networks to identify problems, prevent escalation and promote peaceful coexistence (Tripp, Maiga, & Yahi, 2025). Women also play important roles in mediation and dialogue. Through their positions in families, communities, religious groups and civil society, women can facilitate communication between conflicting parties and create spaces for negotiation and understanding. Studies of women's peacebuilding in Nigeria demonstrate that women have contributed to mediation, reconciliation and community-level conflict management despite their limited representation in formal peace processes (Bulus, Bhatti, & Beysoylu, 2020; Gbadeyan & Osadola, 2023).

Another important contribution is reconciliation and social cohesion. Conflict often damages trust and relationships between communities. Women can help rebuild these relationships through dialogue, community associations, interfaith activities and other forms of grassroots engagement. Tripp et al. (2025) found that women involved in local peacebuilding in Nigeria and Mali frequently build relationships across religious, ethnic and other social divisions, thereby creating bridges between groups separated by conflict.

Women further contribute through community mobilisation and advocacy. Women-led organisations have been involved in promoting peace, human rights, gender equality, humanitarian assistance and community development. In Nigeria, women's peace activism has increasingly connected local concerns with broader peace and security initiatives (Omilusi, 2015; Emordi & Ikedinma, 2022). Recent Nigerian scholarship similarly identifies women as mediators, mobilisers and advocates who contribute to conflict transformation and sustainable peace (Adepoju & Audu, 2025). Women also make significant contributions to humanitarian assistance, livelihood recovery and peace education. In conflict-affected communities, women frequently support displaced persons, vulnerable households and survivors while promoting education, dialogue and peaceful coexistence. Recent research on grassroots peacebuilding in northeastern Nigeria shows that women's activities include youth engagement, income-generating initiatives, peace advocacy, educational programmes, interfaith dialogue and assistance to people affected by insurgency (Tripp et al., 2025).

However, women's peacebuilding agency is constrained by patriarchal norms, inadequate resources, insecurity, political exclusion and limited access to formal decision-making structures. Recent Nigerian studies continue to identify women's underrepresentation and the barriers limiting their meaningful participation in peacebuilding (Adelabu & Duyile, 2025; Ozoani-Ene, Ijuye-Dagogo, & Uchegbu, 2026). The challenge is therefore not simply to increase the number of women participating in peace processes, but to ensure that they possess voice, influence, resources and decision-making power.

Theoretical Approach

The paper is anchored on three theories which are: Conflict Transformation Theory by John Paul Lederach (1997), Feminist Peace Theory by Betty Reardon (1985) and Social Capital Theory by Pierre Bourdieu (1986)

Conflict Transformation Theory

Conflict Transformation Theory, principally associated with John Paul Lederach (1997), argues that sustainable peace requires more than simply ending direct violence. It requires transforming the underlying relationships, structures, inequalities and social conditions that generate and reproduce conflict. The theory emphasises long-term reconciliation and the involvement of actors at different levels, including individuals, communities and institutions. The theory is relevant to this paper because it provides a framework for understanding women as active agents of conflict transformation in Nigeria. Women contribute to mediation, reconciliation, community mobilisation, peace education and the rebuilding of relationships in conflict-affected communities. Their activities occur at family, community and institutional levels, making them important actors in transforming both interpersonal relationships and wider social conditions that sustain conflict.

However, the limitation of Conflict Transformation Theory for this paper is that, despite its emphasis on transforming structures and relationships, it does not sufficiently foreground gender relations, patriarchy and women's specific experiences of power and exclusion. It may recognise women as participants without adequately explaining why women are systematically marginalised from peace and security decision-making. This limitation necessitates the use of Feminist Peace Theory, which places gender, power, patriarchy and women's lived experiences

at the centre of the analysis. Thus, while Conflict Transformation Theory explains how conflict and social relationships can be transformed, Feminist Peace Theory helps explain how gender inequalities and power relations shape women's participation in that transformation.

Feminist Peace Theory

Feminist Peace Theory emerged from feminist scholarship that critically questioned traditional approaches to peace and security. Scholars such as Betty Reardon (1985) and Cynthia Cockburn (2007) have been influential in developing feminist perspectives on peace. The theory argues that conventional approaches to security often focus excessively on military threats and state security while overlooking gender inequality, patriarchy, structural violence and women's everyday experiences of insecurity. It therefore emphasises that genuine and sustainable peace requires addressing the unequal power relations and forms of exclusion that affect women and other marginalised groups. The theory is relevant to this paper because it provides a framework for understanding women not only as victims of conflict but as active agents of peace and security. It helps explain why women's participation in conflict transformation and peacebuilding in Nigeria is important and why their exclusion from formal decision-making structures represents a significant peace and security problem. The theory also draws attention to the need to address the patriarchal structures, political exclusion and gender inequalities that can limit women's capacity to contribute meaningfully to peacebuilding. However, Feminist Peace Theory has a limitation in that its strong emphasis on gender, power and structural inequality may not fully explain how women use their everyday relationships, networks, trust and community connections to actively build peace. Understanding women's agency requires attention not only to the structures that constrain them but also to the social resources through which they exercise their agency. This provides the justification for incorporating Social Capital Theory into the paper.

Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory, particularly associated with Pierre Bourdieu (1986), James Coleman (1988) and Robert Putnam (2000), focuses on the value of social networks, relationships, trust, shared norms and cooperation in facilitating collective action. The theory is relevant because women are often deeply connected to families, community associations, religious organisations, civil society groups and informal networks. These relationships can provide channels for information sharing, mediation, dialogue, reconciliation and mobilisation for peace. Social Capital Theory therefore complements Feminist Peace Theory by explaining how women exercise their agency through social relationships and networks. While Feminist Peace Theory explains the gendered structures and power relations that shape women's participation in peace and security, Social Capital Theory explains how women's networks and relationships can be transformed into resources for conflict prevention, reconciliation and peacebuilding. Together, the theories provide a stronger framework for understanding women's agency in conflict transformation and sustainable peacebuilding in Nigeria.

Major Challenges to Women's Participation

Despite the important contribution's women make to conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding, their participation in Nigeria's peace and security processes remains constrained by several structural, institutional and socio-economic factors. Patriarchal norms constitute one of the major barriers, as leadership, political authority and security decision-making are often perceived as male domains. These norms can restrict women's access to public decision-making and reinforce gendered divisions of power (Cockburn, 2007; UN Women, 2025).

A second challenge is limited political representation. Women remain inadequately represented in political institutions and formal peace and security structures, reducing their capacity to influence policies and decisions concerning conflict prevention and resolution. This is particularly significant because meaningful participation requires more than physical presence; women need opportunities to influence decisions and exercise leadership (United Nations, 2000; UN Women, 2025). Inadequate funding and institutional support also limit women's peacebuilding activities. Many women-led organisations operate with insufficient financial and technical resources, making it difficult to sustain community-based mediation, advocacy, peace education and reconciliation programmes. Without adequate resources, women's existing capacities and social networks cannot be fully translated into sustained peacebuilding outcomes. Another major challenge is insecurity and threats against women peacebuilders. Women operating in conflict-affected communities may themselves face intimidation, violence and other security risks. This can discourage participation and limit women's ability to engage openly in peace and security processes. Protection must therefore be considered alongside participation within the Women, Peace and Security framework (United Nations, 2000).

Tokenistic participation is also problematic. Women may be included in committees, consultations or peace structures simply to satisfy gender requirements without being given genuine authority or influence. Such participation creates the appearance of inclusion without changing existing power relations. Meaningful participation should therefore involve voice, influence, leadership and decision-making power, rather than simply numerical representation. Women also face limited access to formal peace negotiations and security institutions. Although women often undertake significant peacebuilding activities at community level, their participation in high-level negotiations and formal security structures remains relatively low. This creates a gap between women's contributions at the grassroots level and their representation in institutions where major peace and security decisions are made.

Finally, economic and social inequalities constrain women's ability to participate effectively. Poverty, limited access to education, livelihood insecurity and unequal access to resources can reduce women's independence and capacity to engage in peacebuilding. Consequently, strengthening women's participation requires not only political inclusion but also addressing the broader socio-economic conditions that shape women's agency.

Key Issues for Nigeria

The analysis identifies five interconnected issues that are central to strengthening women's contribution to peace and security in Nigeria:

1. **Victims to Agents:** The need to move beyond viewing women primarily as victims of conflict. Although women experience serious consequences of violence, they also possess knowledge, skills, networks and leadership capacities that enable them to contribute to conflict prevention, mediation, reconciliation and peacebuilding. Recognising women as agents means acknowledging their capacity to influence the causes, processes and outcomes of conflict rather than treating them merely as recipients of protection and humanitarian assistance (Lederach, 1997; UN Women, 2025).

2. **Representation to Meaningful Participation:** The difference between representation and meaningful participation. The presence of women in peace committees or decision-making structures does not automatically guarantee influence. Women need genuine opportunities to express their views, shape decisions and exercise leadership. The Women, Peace and Security agenda emphasises women's participation in conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding, but the challenge for Nigeria is to translate formal commitments into substantive decision-making power (United Nations, 2000; UN Women, 2025).

3. Protection to Empowerment: The need to complement the protection of women with their empowerment. Protecting women from sexual and gender-based violence, displacement and other conflict-related threats remains essential. However, protection alone can reinforce the perception of women as vulnerable and dependent. Women's empowerment through education, economic opportunities, leadership development and political participation enables them to become active contributors to peace and security. Feminist Peace Theory particularly emphasises the importance of addressing the structural inequalities that limit women's agency (Reardon, 1985; Cockburn, 2007).

4. Formal to Community-Based Peacebuilding: The need to recognise the importance of community-based and informal peacebuilding. Women frequently contribute to peace through family networks, community associations, religious organisations, civil society groups and informal mediation. These activities may not always be recognised within formal peace processes, despite their importance in preventing escalation and rebuilding trust. Social Capital Theory helps explain the significance of these networks, as relationships, trust and cooperation can provide resources for collective action and conflict resolution (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000).

5. Short-Term Peace to Sustainable Peace: The need to move from approaches that focus primarily on ending immediate violence to building sustainable peace. Sustainable peace requires addressing the structural inequalities, exclusion, poverty, injustice and damaged relationships that contribute to conflict. Conflict Transformation Theory emphasises that durable peace depends on transforming the structures and relationships that reproduce violence (Lederach, 1997). In Nigeria, this means ensuring that women participate not only in emergency responses but also in reconciliation, institutional reform, reconstruction and long-term peacebuilding.

Conclusion

Women occupy a dual position in conflict situations: although they are often disproportionately affected by violence, displacement, poverty and insecurity, they are also important agents of conflict prevention, mediation, reconciliation, community mobilisation and peacebuilding. In Nigeria, women's existing contributions demonstrate that they possess valuable knowledge, networks and capacities for transforming conflict and rebuilding peaceful communities. The major challenge, therefore, is not whether women can contribute to peace, but whether institutions and policy frameworks are prepared to recognise, support and institutionalise their contributions. Sustainable peace in Nigeria requires a fundamental shift from viewing women primarily as victims to recognising them as agents, from symbolic representation to meaningful participation, and from participation to genuine decision-making power.

Recommendations

Based on the theoretical arguments presented in this paper, it is evident that strengthening women's agency is essential to achieving effective conflict transformation and sustainable peacebuilding in Nigeria. Women's contributions at community, institutional and national levels need to be recognised, supported and integrated into formal peace and security processes. Accordingly, the paper recommends the following:

- 1. Strengthen the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda:** The Nigerian government should ensure that existing WPS policies and action plans are effectively implemented at national, state and community levels.

2. **Promote meaningful women's participation:** Women should be given genuine representation and decision-making roles in peace negotiations, security institutions and conflict-resolution structures, rather than being included merely for symbolic purposes.
3. **Support women-led peacebuilding organisations:** Government and development partners should provide adequate financial, technical and institutional support to organisations led by women and involved in peacebuilding activities.
4. **Integrate women into early-warning mechanisms:** Women should be actively incorporated into community-based early-warning and early-response systems because of their knowledge of local conflicts and community relationships.
5. **Strengthen participation in traditional and community institutions:** Traditional, religious and community leaders should create inclusive platforms that enable women to participate meaningfully in local conflict prevention, mediation and reconciliation.
6. **Address structural inequalities:** Peacebuilding programmes should address patriarchal, political, economic and social inequalities that restrict women's agency and limit their participation in peace and security processes.
7. **Recognise women's informal peacebuilding contributions:** Women's contributions to mediation, reconciliation, community mobilisation, humanitarian assistance and peace education should be formally recognised and incorporated into Nigeria's broader peace and security architecture.

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