THE NEGLECTED PLIGHT: VIOLENT CONFLICT AND THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITION OF WOMEN IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
The paper examines the plight of women in the midst of various violent conflict situations in Nigeria with specific focus on the socio-economic condition of women. It is an evaluative study which has its discourse located within the conflict and radical feminist theoretical perspectives. Data utilized for the paper were purely drawn from secondary sources, specifically from journals, textbooks, the internet, etc. The study found that the various waves of violent conflict in the country have not only impacted negatively on the staggery economy of the country but has also severely affected the socio-economic condition of women in Nigeria as shown by all socio-economic indicators. The study therefore recommends the engagement of women from conflict-prone areas in income-generating activities; setting aside every form of ethnic and religious hatred or intolerance and the embrace of peace as measures to address the unending challenge of violent conflict in Nigeria.

Keywords: Violent conflict, Socio-economic condition, Women and Poverty.

Introduction

The escalation of violent conflict perpetrated by various warring groups like: Boko Haram, Cattle-herders, Bandits, Kidnappers, among others has led to a volatile security situation in Nigeria. The country has continued to witness high levels of ethnic violent conflict; ever since independence from Britain in 1960 Nigeria has been torn apart by wars, violence and ethnic conflicts which have had a detrimental effect on the socio-economic condition of women who are often the worst-hit victims of such violent conflict in the country. From 29th May, 1999 after her return to civil rule, internal security crises in the country assumed a completely new dimension affecting the entire social system of Nigeria. In the last nineteen years of democratic rule, the level of poverty, unemployment and inequality as well as diverse killings has steadily increased. Parallel to this development is the corresponding explosion in crime, especially its urban and rural variants which includes: drug peddling, armed robbery, kidnappings, human trafficking, militia, thuggery, hooliganism, youth violence, and the worst of all – terrorism (Ucha, 2010).

As it stands today, large scale crises and ethnic / religious conflicts have indeed led to displacement and forced mass movement of people in Nigeria, exacerbating the problems of poverty, exclusion and growing mistrust among different groups in our society. According to Alemika (2001), over 80 major eruptions were recorded in various sections of the country in the first 55 months of civilian rule by December 2003. Ethnic and inter-communal conflicts have become so pervasive that there is hardly any part of the country that has not been affected.

More telling still, more than 600 people were killed in civil unrest since 1999. Again, more than 2000 people died in Kaduna clashes in 2000, and over 1500 died in Jos crisis, a city in the centre of Nigeria in 2001 (Imobighe, 2003 P. 14). The height of all this violence is the incessant onslaught of mayhem by Boko Haram members across the country which has resulted in the destruction of lives and properties as well as the displacement of millions of people from their original places of residence. Boko Haram attacks increased during the first two months of 2014, with almost daily killings, bombings, theft, and the destruction of schools, homes, and businesses in North-east Nigeria. These assaults have led to the death of thousands of people, the abduction of women and girls, and the mass displacement of families.

Today, it is very rare that, a day passes by without a report of violent conflict in one state or the other in Nigeria. Most of these conflicts are provoked by sundry factors such as: opposing value system, stiff political competitions, aggressive struggles for economic resources, identity question and many others. Suffice it to say that such conflict unleashes terror on a phenomenal scale. States like: Borno, Yobe, Zamfara, Katsina, Taraba, Bauchi, Plateau, Nassarawa, Kaduna, Benue, Kogi to mention but these few have all tasted, in a way, the venom of this dastardly orchestrated act of man's inhumanity to his fellow beings especially women (Enloe, 2001).

According to Cock, (2001) women are vulnerable to the implications of conflict in different ways. Conflict situations present women with variety of burdens, such

as: rape, loss of husbands or children, health challenges among others. They are often victims of multiple forms of violence, and bear the responsibility of ensuring the survival of the family.

Conflict situations have brought about extensive destruction of lives and properties. Most significantly, such situations have brought about gross human rights violations perpetrated against civilian populations, specifically on women and children who apparently make up the most vulnerable group (Cock, 2001). Considerable work has been done regarding effects of violent conflict on women. Much of this work has been carried out by institutions concerned with human rights violations, particularly violations against women. However much of this work has focused on sexual violence against women and has largely neglected or ignored other important aspects of violent conflict against women. The paper therefore examines the plight of women in the face of violent conflict with specific regard to the socio-economic condition of women in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Violent conflict is a universal concept that defies any precise or common acceptable meaning, and encompasses a great number of connotations that evoke much concern. It often implies, militancy, use of force, coercion, destruction, muscle flexing, all of which a given observer would fear or condemn. It could be physical, biological, psychological, spiritual pressure directly or indirectly exercised by a person on someone else or others. From a more scholarly perspective, violent conflict is an unlawful use or threat of force Tamuno (1991). In Domenach (1978) view, it is the use of force, whether overt or covert, in order

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to wrest from individuals or groups something that they are not disposed to give of their own free will. Domenach's definition is more elaborate than that of Tamuno in that, it includes the reason/rationale behind any violent act. But to Mackenzie (1975), violent conflict is the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on or cause damage to persons or property, action or conduct characterized this. Thus, treatment or usage tending to cause bodily injury or forcibly interfering with personal freedom; these depicts that violent conflict involves the use of force and abuse of another person's fundamental rights.

Extending our understanding of the concept to contemporary times, Echoes (2004), opined that it is a generic term that encompasses different numbers of connotations that depict an encounter which is life threatening generally involving the use of force, which often affect several numbers of people's lives in affected communities. Dokun (2005) is also of the view that violent conflict could be an exertion of physical force, so as to injure or abuse other people's rights. It is of a physical nature and also occurs in the use of either rape or wife battering. Also, intense or turbulent action of forces could be stated as types of violent conflict, such action includes: hurricanes, storms, earthquakes, fire outbreak, floods, typhoon, etc. Fundamentally, such violent conflict is the work of nature and human beings are only proximate to its causes, for instance, when our drainage system is blocked with refuse and channels of rivers are not free for easy flow of water, then flood can easily occur. Though, this latter understanding is not within the coverage of this paper, it is included to broaden our understanding of the concept under discourse.

Furthermore, violent conflict is a prevalent characteristic of social life which happens not only in times of decay and decline of society but also in times of blossoming and healthy growth. According to Nader cited in Otite & Albert (1998 P. 8) and Osaghae, (2011), most conflicts happen at three different structural stages which consist of intra family, intra community and inter community. The ethno-linguistic nature of Nigeria often provides a salient laboratory for the production of knowledge in the area of conflict studies due to diverse dimensions and frequency of occurrences of conflict situations in the country. Conflict occurs either due to struggle for access to diverse limited resources such as chieftaincy position, markets, power and status, water spots for animals, land, government policies, leadership of political parties and host of others. On the negative mobilization of such identities, Castells, (1997) and Tenuche, (2002) stressed that, ethnicity, religion, language and race in the pursuit of access to the limited resources further fuels conflicts. They further insisted that as source of meaning and experience, identity possesses attributes of mobilization as it becomes a rallying force and organizing principle for social action.

Socio-Economic Condition (SEC) on the other hand is the combination of both social and economic conditions. Economic deals with the production, distribution or management of wealth or pertaining to the financial matters of people, or in this context woman. It is an individual's social and economic ranking within society based on access to resources (such as material and social assets, including income, wealth, and educational credentials) and prestige (i.e. an individual's status in a social hierarchy, linked for instance to their occupation, income, or

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educational level). Commonly used proxy indicators for SEC include educational level; own or household income; and occupational status. The various violent conflict especially the activities of Boko Haram impede the basic economic source of thousands of women. The social aspect on the other hand deals with society in terms of its organization or public welfare. In this context, the health, social and the psychological characteristics of women make up the social aspect that has been severely hit or affected by occurrences of violent conflict in the country (Oche & Shola, 2019). Socioeconomic condition can therefore be assessed at the area level (as opposed to individual or household level), for example, using indicators based on the proportion of residents with particular socioeconomic characteristics residing within neighborhoods.

The concept of a woman is used to describe a female human being, usually reserved for an adult; a girl is the usual term for a female child or adolescent. The plural 'women' is also sometimes used for female human, regardless of age, as in phrases such as women's right. Throughout human history, traditional gender roles have often defined and limit women's activities and opportunities; many religious doctrines stipulate certain roles for women that are obligatory. With restrictions loosening during the 20th century in many societies, women have gained access to careers beyond the traditional homemaker, and the ability to pursue higher education. But cases of violence against women whether within families or in communities, has a long history and is primarily committed by men (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Jennifer, 2001; Elizabeth, 2004).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical approach applied to this study is conflict theory; sociologists employing conflict theory emphasize the importance of structures within society. They also advance a comprehensive 'model' to explain how society works. However, conflict theorists reject functionalism's emphasis on consensus. Instead, they highlight the importance of divisions in society. In doing so, they concentrate on issues of power, inequality and struggle. They tend to see society as composed of distinct groups pursuing their own interests. The existence of separate interests means that the potential for conflict is always present and that certain groups will benefit more than others. Conflict theorists examine the tensions between dominant and disadvantaged groups within society and seek to understand how relationships of control are established and perpetuated (Giddens, 2004; Schaefer, 2008).

Conflict theory is best illustrated by the work of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and social thinker. His thoughts are often referred to as Marxism which is both a worldview and philosophy (weltanschauung), as well as theory of society. As a philosophy, Marxism is a critique as well as an alternative to other worldviews. Marx cited in Schaefer, (2008) viewed the struggle between social classes as inevitable, given the exploitation of workers under capitalism. Expanding on Marx's work, sociologists and other social scientists have come to see conflict not merely as a class phenomenon but as a part of everyday life in all societies. In studying any culture, organization, or social group, sociologists want to know who benefits, who suffers, and who dominates at the expense of others.

They are concerned with the conflicts between women and men, parents and children, cities and suburbs, and white and Blacks, to mention but these few. Conflict theorists are interested in how society's institutions – including the family, government, religion, education, and the media – may help to maintain the privileges of some groups and keep others in a subservient position. Their emphasis on social change and the redistribution of resources makes conflict theorists more 'radical' and 'activist' than functionalists. But Max Weber, extends conflict to the area of power and status as well as economic class, and this multidimensional approach has become widespread since the 1950s (Dahrendorf, 1959).

The common threads which tie theorists in the school together include: a rejection of consensus as the basis for social order; instead of consensus, the school posits conflict as the bane for contention hence the name. The position that society is held together through the use of power, domination and coercion by the powerful group over the less powerful; there are two classes, the dominant and the dominated class and integration is based on how interests of the first class are imposed on the second. In society there are interests; more crucial is the power to translate these interests into reality and domination which such translation involves. The interests of the dominant and dominated classes are different, and in many cases divergent. What counts is the differential power to defend these interests. It is noted that none of the two classes is completely powerful or powerless. Both have some power but the interests of one group may be predominant in many situations (Leslie, 1996; Alubo, 2012).

Conflict theory has been criticized for overemphasizing the concept of conflict as the only tool for change in any known human society; ignoring or de-emphasizing the fact that certain changes that occur in human society are not orchestrated purely by conflict alone hence it is tagged a radical theory. Again, it has been criticized for being too deterministic and conflict-oriented for opposing the portrayal of consensus as the instrument for change. It is also seen as being too dogmatic and mostly a crude means to addressing contemporary issues of society. But in spite of these criticisms, the theory has been applied to a wide range of social issues including the phenomenon (effect of violent conflict) under discourse; which is triggered by the economic interest of all the warring groups perpetrating violent conflict to achieve their interest. The women folk constitute the lower or dominated class, in this context, without any form of power (political, military etc.) and protection. These women are often victims of violent conflict perpetrated by various groups championing the interest of the upper or dominant class to the detriment of the socio-economic condition of these women; hence the strength/relevance of this theory to this study despite its earlier mentioned shortfalls.

Effects of Conflict on Women Socio-economic Condition

According to Dercon (2004), most individuals and households in developing countries, especially in Africa, face severe socio-economic risks even in the absence of armed conflict. Such insecure socio-economic environment forces vulnerable people, women and children into deprivation and distress. The occurrence of violent armed conflicts is likely to increase fear, insecurity, and

suspicion in already unsecured environments. These are typically associated with the destruction of essential infrastructure and social amenities, breakdown of law and order, and reduction in economic activities, private and public investment. Most armed conflicts lead to killing and displacing of populations, often limiting the access of households to employment and earnings and increasing levels of instability and loss of trust (Fearon & Laitin, 2003).

As history has repeatedly shown, conflicts impose immeasurable human suffering and large economic and social costs. The loss of human life; destruction of infrastructure, human capital, and institutions; and greater uncertainty associated with conflicts can impede investment and economic growth—not only during conflict but also afterward, making it difficult for the victims which are mostly women to escape the "conflict trap." (Murdoch & Sandler, 2002).

In the event of armed conflict, the whole society is negatively affected because war is indiscriminate in its ability to wreak havoc on lives, properties and sources of livelihood. Loss of family members and social networks inflict suffering on women and men alike, however women are affected in many particular ways from men because of socio-cultural roles assigned to women by society. Women may lose husbands and sons on the battlefield; this would imply that they take up the responsibility of fending for their families. They may also lose their girls and young children as civilian casualties, or witness their suffering as victims of assault (Yahaya, 2007 cited in Yahaya & Tinab, 2015).

The socio-economic effects of conflict on women are severe; it compounds their general poverty and hardship. Most affected women lack access to the means of

production particularly land and funds. Women do not usually start wars, but they do suffer heavily from the consequences. Conflict spurs much higher rates of sexual violence. It renders women acutely vulnerable to poverty, loss of jobs and destruction of assets such as homes. Essential health services crumble, and this greatly affects maternal health care. Maternal mortality rate has been observed to be 2.5 times higher on the average, in conflict and post-conflict countries (Dayo, 2012).

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, (2017) report, women comprise 49 per cent of refugees' worldwide (based on available data) mostly as a result of conflict, and are often put at greater hardship than men in these situations based on their gender. Apart from the challenges faced by displaced persons in general, women face extra challenges arising from their vulnerability. War situations turn life into a "living hell" for millions of women in the sense that atrocious crimes are committed against their dignity and liberty. They are most often sexually exploited by the armed forces, government officials and even humanitarian aid-givers.

As part of Nigeria's Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) (2017), the findings of the protection sector working group revealed a full spectrum of protection concerns in North-east Nigeria, with 6.7 million people estimated to be in need of protection and assistance with women constituting over 60 per cent in Adamawa, Borno and Yobe States. Civilians in these regions face grave human rights violations and abuse including death, injuries, sexual and gender-based violence

(SGBV), arbitrary detention, disappearances, forced displacement, and forced recruitment. The psychological needs of the displaced population are particularly significant and remain largely unmet given the magnitude of the problem. Loss and fear among the displaced are aggravated by a sense of loss of dignity as many feel ashamed of their living conditions.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Since Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999, thousands of people have been killed in recurring inter-communal and politically motivated conflicts. Such violent conflicts have consistently led to large waves of internal displacement of persons. Underlying such violent conflict also, is a breakdown of trust between (or among) individuals and communities, where people are increasingly polarized along lines of ethnicity and religion. This gulf has also been widened by historical animosities which have a negative impact on the staggering economy of the nation as a whole and on the socio-economic condition of women shown by all socio-economic indicators. The task of rebuilding trust and peaceful co-existence among her citizens will require multiple measures at all levels, but most of all, such reforms and rebuilding will require strong and effective leadership to address the challenges of internal security crisis in the country and the plight of women particularly in conflict prone areas in Nigeria.

Flowing from above, there is an urgent need to engage women from these various conflict prone areas in income-generating activities. Because women's needs are hardly taken into account in post-conflict recovery processes, it is imperative to integrate a gender-sensitive perspective when formulating economic policies that will guide post-conflict recovery processes. Such policies should promote opportunities for women to access decent jobs to enable them to earn a living especially where such women have been rendered widows as a result of violent conflict. Skills training and acquisition programs should be set up to enable women learn practical business skills. Low-interest financial loans and grants should also be made available to women who intend to start businesses and/or grow their existing businesses so as to sustain their livelihoods.

Recreational activities when provided for women can serve as an important source of psychological relief at the individual, family and community levels. Survivors and victims of conflicts should be provided with counselling services to help them overcome psychological trauma and improve their overall emotional health and well-being. Partnerships between private sector and public sector as well as multilateral organizations are highly encouraged in this regard.

Again, for most people the solution is straight forward: if you commit a crime, you should be brought to book. We must hold people responsible for misconduct and prosecute them accordingly. As the Nobel Laureate, Soyinka cited in Oguamanam (2016) clearly stated, "for every crime, there is a punishment, for every violation, there must be restitution. In a country like Nigeria, where there is no easy fix, we must also examine the issue of accountability. Accountability

needs to be a strong component of our fight against any form of future eruption of violence.

Finally, we must set aside every form of ethnic and religious hatred and accept our differences and live together as one entity. It is crystal clear that we need to fight this new enemy with everything at our disposal. Most importantly, we need to identify leaders with the right kind of character, education, and background; leaders who understand what we have at stake – where Nigeria has been, and where she needs to go. For the second time in our short history, we have to face the disturbing fact that Nigeria – as Achebe (2012) puts it, needs to liberate herself anew, this time not from foreign powers but from ourselves and our inherited hatred for one another.

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