Umuada: A Sociopolitical Institution for Peacebuilding and Conflict Management in Nigeria

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Abstract

The Umuada is a traditional sociopolitical kin group in the south-eastern region of Nigeria, and is comprised of the first daughter of each family, called the *Ada*. It is given the utmost respect and granted 'male' privileges and responsibilities. Using postcolonial indigenous feminist methodologies, including interviews, observation, and dialogues with key informants across three communities in Enugu State, this chapter explores the Umuada as a local peacebuilding institution perduring from precolonial to modern times. It analyses the question, 'What role does the Umuada play in de-escalating conflict and upholding peace in south-eastern Nigerian communities?'

The Umuada has historically served as a forum for women to voice their concerns, needs and desires. It is a vital pillar of the community, acting as an arbitration and de-escalation force and performing cultural roles men cannot. Furthermore, working closely with patriarchal institutions and occupying key cultural functions have allowed the Umuada to adapt to changing times and maintain a strong level of agency and respect in the community. These findings recommend the Umuada as a model of peacebuilding to women across Nigeria and beyond.

1 Introduction

This chapter interrogates the peacebuilding activities of a subgroup of women in the south-eastern region of Nigeria (Igboland), called the Umuada, a traditional sociopolitical institution consisting of the daughters of a community. Highly respected, the Umuada hold various roles as agents of peacebuilding and reconciliation and collectively as the vanguard of sociopolitical development. An institution that dates back to precolonial times, it has reinvented itself and continues to have relevance in modern Nigeria. In a country rent by conflict, its members constitute a valuable resource for conflict management. Women's peacebuilding is often interpreted in a dichotomous way as the powerless having to gain access to power structures. But there is a need for a more

critical and nuanced assessment of how women's identities are constructed historically. Written from the perspective of Nigerian women peacebuilders, this chapter engages with past and present nuances to examine women's peacebuilding leadership roles in Igboland.

Peacebuilding is generically understood as external interventions that are intended to reduce the risk that a state will erupt into or return to war. But peacebuilding is also an ongoing practice in all societies that have institutionalised various forms of conflict management and community building. This includes the promotion of institutional and socio-economic measures, at the local or national level, to address the underlying causes of conflict (Goodhand and Hulme, 1999). It also includes traditional justice mechanisms. The goal of this chapter is to explore the role of the Umuada as a local peacebuilding institution that can expand the space for women's participation in decision-making, adjudication, and formal peacebuilding processes.

Women are often discursively associated with peace, and in such associations they are seen to operate outside politics and power. The Umuada, however, assume the role of peacebuilders from a position of strength, which they derive from their unique sociopolitical role and high status in Igbo society. Colonialism has weakened this role, but the Umuada has reinvented itself as a hybrid institution that capitalises on its own cultural capital to contribute to building peace in Igbo communities.

The chapter seeks to introduce the Umuada in their complexity and outline the potential of indigenous women's peacebuilding agency. Taking a feminist postcolonial approach, I first situate the institution historically in colonial and precolonial contexts. Subsequently, I show the hybrid character of the institution today, highlighting the extent to which the Umuada have retained political influence. In a final step, I illustrate how the Umuada are active as peacebuilders within contemporary Igbo societies. My feminist postcolonial approach leads me to read the history and current practices of the Umuada through the narrations of its members and those of Igbo leaders. Before presenting my interpretations, I further outline this methodology in the following section.

2 Methodology

My team and I collected the primary data for this chapter over a period of two years across three communities in Enugu State, Nigeria. We had an entry person who helped us gain access to the communities, and we used a snowball sampling approach to identify other women who were members of the Umuada

in the communities, including the *Isi Umuada* (leader of the Umuada). We were sure to explain how the data would be used and obtained interviewees' approval before we started recording. I refer to the women we interviewed as my co-researchers in acknowledgement of their role in contributing to the data collection and analysis.

Our fieldwork included interviews, observation, life-story focus group conversations, and dialogues with key informants. We conducted six focus group discussions (FGDs) (two per community, with the Umuada and the male group respectively), and seven key informant interviews (two per community and a Nsukka woman peacebuilder in Abor). I used a postcolonial indigenous feminist approach to design the interviews and FGDs. These consisted of focused life-story interviews that invoke relational ways of knowing to guide the discussion towards ways in which people are connected with one another and the environment (Chilisa, 2012). They speak to the local reality and take into cognisance the historical and cultural reality of the study area, as well as topics absent from standard academic disciplines (Oyewunmi, 1997). This method can encourage a reflective narrative style where the interviewee sets the pace and the interviewer listens, clarifies, probes and possibly brings up topics that need to be discussed in the interview but have not arisen spontaneously (Chilisa, 2012; Elabor-Idemudia, 2002).

The three communities studied are located in Enugu State. They are the Eziam-Nike community of the Enugu East Local Government Area (LGA); Abor, a town in the Udi LGA; and Ifueke-Amaeke, one of the ten villages that make up Ngwo town, also in the Udi LGA. They are all of the Igbo ethnicity and share marked similarities in traditional practices. Annual social ceremonies serve to reaffirm community bonds, and the Umuada have a strong presence in all communities. Ifueke-Amaeke has unique social inclusion practices that create community citizens through marriage and involve women in land and economic property sharing. All three communities are majority Christian, and although there are some traditional worshippers (indigenous ancestral worship), most community members practice Christianity. Socio-economic conditions differ somewhat across the communities, with Eziam-Nike and Abor dominated by farming (in addition to trading and public services) and Ifueke-Amaeke somewhat more urbanised, with coal mining present since colonial times.

These socio-economic realities influence the types of conflicts the communities encounter. In Eziam-Nike and Abor there are intrusions by sometimes heavily armed herders onto farmland, leading to clashes. In Eziam-Nike there is also a growing feeling among residents that they are economically excluded from government infrastructural developments and interventions, and there

are land disputes between neighbours. In Ifueke-Amaeke, meanwhile, the main source of conflict is the struggle over who has access to and controls the income from national and international companies operating in the community's area. Other sources of conflict include land disputes with neighbouring communities and high rates of unemployment among the youth, making them tools in the hands of elites. The presence of vigilantes makes weapons readily available.

The state security apparatus is weak and there is considerable distrust towards the police, who are perceived as siding with herdsmen. Thus, the various governance organs in the communities—such as the *Igwe*-in-Council, *Ndi Oha* (the assembly of community members), the Umuada, and other women's groups—and youths act as arbitration agencies. They use oath taking, dialogue, and the imposition of fines, and in serious land cases call on the police to de-escalate violence and settle conflicts. The Umuada also engage in prayer and use persuasion tactics such as crying and returning to their premarital homes in protest, in addition to the mediation and arbitration techniques outlined below.

3 Precolonial to Postcolonial: The Changing Role of Women in Igbo Society

In precolonial society Igbo women were highly respected and gender relations were based on equality and non-discrimination. According to Uchem, 'they were not inferiorized, nor powerless; neither were they marginalized in the traditional setting. This was because of the Igbo dual-sex socio-political system, which provided gender power checks and balances' (Uchem, 2001, 113). Agbasiere (2000, 39) describes this system, which is still operative today:

Apart from their general role as advisers, women have their council of female elders, parallel to the council of male elders. In critical situations both councils could meet together for deliberation and consultation. Women may demonstrate their political pressure through their meetings, which may be inter-or intra-lineage in structure and usually operative under the aegis of the most senior married women.

In the south-eastern communities under study, women's groups actively engage in structured lineage subgroups and religious subgroups. Members hold regular meetings. Historically, these segregated meetings have enabled women to articulate their issues and protect the group interest, and have provided an

avenue via which to discuss communal and economic issues, such as market rules, the prices of goods, and other market processes (Afigbo, 1972). Until the present day, any discrimination, especially against fellow women, has been frowned upon; even in spaces where it was pronounced, such as in the domestic or the community space, women would engage whether invited to or not.

In precolonial times, women played key roles in the sociopolitical structure of the region. My co-researchers recounted that there are records from the nineteenth century and into the colonial era of women collectively organising through non-violent means to resist acts of discrimination, oppression and violence. The Aba women's resistance to colonialism in 1929 is a testament to women's strong organisational skills and political constituency in traditional Igbo society (semi-structured interviews (SSIs), woman peacebuilder, Nsukka, 2017). The Aba women's protest was the first documented case of women's resistance to imperialism in colonial Nigeria. Sparked by the imposition of direct taxation and the introduction of new local courts and especially warrant chiefs, the protest attested to the power women wielded in protecting their interests and pressing for social justice. It was instrumental in the abolition of the warrant chief system in the Igbo region (Afigbo, 1972). The women agitated against the system because the powers given to warrant chiefs by the British were unprecedented in precolonial times, as among the Igbos decisions were made through indigenous structures where the female and male groups would deliberate on issues and come to a general consensus. Also, the colonial officials used the warrant chief system to create a patriarchal society as only men were appointed as warrant chiefs. Most of the warrant chiefs were corrupt, and were arrogant with regard to the powers invested in them by the colonial officials, and they were deeply resented.

The Umuada was one of the organised women's group active at the time. As a result of its collective strength, it wielded great political influence (Kolawole, Abubakar and Owonibi, 2012). It participated in conflict resolution and transformation within the family and community. It commanded respect from the male members and often represented the interests of women in decision-making processes (Obasi and Nnamani, 2015). One of my co-researchers, a woman peacebuilder in Nsukka Enugu State, carefully articulated her understanding of the relational being of the Igbo woman and her historical identity. She asserted that in indigenous Igbo culture, women as daughters had respected positions within the community; they were a force with regard to political, legal, and social issues. Among the many forums designed to represent and protect their interests, the Umuada was one of the most important.

During another FGD, my co-researchers explained that in traditional Igbo society, in the precolonial and extending through part of the colonial era,

women greatly influenced certain spheres of community life and headed traditional spiritual orders, as many Igbo subtribes were matrilineal. Women attained social status by successfully trading, farming, native painting (*Uli*) and weaving. One of the co-researchers narrated the life experience of her grandmother: 'Women were rich traders that travelled to sell goods. I remember my grandmother, who would usually travel for five weeks or more to trade. She also had decision-making powers within the family and communities. She would sit with men to make decisions'. (FGD, women, Ugwuanni Abor, 2018).

Women's socio-economic power also protected them from male violence, and the co-researcher continued the story of her grandmother by reflecting on how much this has changed.

Traditionally men do not beat their wives, because of the value attached to women. If any man was seen or reported to have beaten his wife, he would immediately be stripped of his title, and if he was not a man with title, he would be punished. This had the effect of putting a check on domestic violence or violence against women. However, with the destruction of our traditional systems by the colonial rule, the growing rate of civilisation or development, most of our cultural values have been eroded and we are now witnessing more violence by men on women.

FGD, women, Ugwuanni Abor, 2018

A woman peacebuilder interviewed in Ugwuanni Abor added that women's traditional roles were not restricted to homemaking and child nurturing. She was visibly upset that current narratives present women in precolonial Igbo society as vulnerable, powerless and subjugated. She cautioned that present-day customs are not all rooted in historic traditions. There has been an infusion of Western culture adulterating the essence of some practices, creating confusion, as some current local practices are contrary to the historic purposes of the community's forebears.

Thus, colonialism has impacted the identities of women and men in Nigeria, influencing gender relations and creating alternative lifestyles. Men usurped most of women's traditional social rights.

Igbo women became divested of their traditional institutional power by the colonial policies, which marginalised women, perpetuated by the Igbo male elite and reinforced by the inherited Christianity [...] since those traditional structures which formerly protected women have been undermined by colonialism and Western Christianity. Igbo women

no longer have a collective political bargaining power for defending themselves.

UCHEM, 2001, 133

Though colonialism negatively affected the role of African women in general, and Igbo women in particular, arguably Western education has enhanced the lives of women and empowered them to know and affirm their dignity and rights. For Igbo women, social justice raises powerful images of decision-making, creating equal opportunity, rectifying the wrong, and restitution. But my co-researcher maintained that Western education also has created harm. It has destroyed communal education and lifestyle and fostered the individualism now present in Nigeria, with different impacts for common women, Umuada, and men. One major crisis is the migration of community members, especially men, from rural areas to the cities in search of white-collar jobs and greener pastures. A co-researcher said that these developments have deepened inequality and created different classes of people no longer bonded by a communal lifestyle (SSI, woman peace leader, Enugu, 2017).

Although colonialism has wrought major changes in Igbo society, traditional institutions continue to exist, albeit in hybrid forms. They provide distinctive opportunities for women's political participation.

4 The Umuada: A Hybrid Sociopolitical Institution

The formal coordination and leadership of Igbo communities rests with the traditional indigenous cabinet that oversees the peacefulness of daily living. At the apex are the *Igwe* and the *Igwe-in-Council* (the king and his cabinet members.) In all three communities studied, cabinet membership is exclusively for men. As one of my co-researchers explained, 'It's the men that are doing their own. They are the leaders of this community; in terms of leadership they have the role. Women will not follow them'. (FGD, Umuada, Eziana). My co-researcher explained that there was a distinctive women's indigenous governance system and that women honoured women's leadership in the community.

Despite male predominance, the governance structure in the individual communities consists of men and women grouped by gender into various associations, trades, or age-grade systems. These subgroups, including the Umuada, are all sites where power and decision-making can be practiced. Every Igbo woman belongs to at least one of these village-based groups irrespective of creed or social status. Although men hold the more visible leadership

positions, major decisions, conflict resolution and intercommunity dialogue also include women and youth.

The Umuada is an example of such a subgroup. It is a formidable power system and decision-making body respected by the king, his cabinet and the entire community. The Umuada are given 'male' privileges, such as sitting in cabinet¹ and can convene community and kindred meetings and participate in decision-making within the family, even when married outside their birth community. Linguistically, Umuada is a compound noun formed from two Igbo words, '*Umu*' and '*Ada*'. *Umu* is a generic plural that conveys the sense of many. *Ada* is a name and means daughter. In general usage, every Igbo woman is '*Ada*' and is recognised as such in her matrimonial home. In its particular usage in the Umuada, *Ada* refers to the first female child born of a family. Umuada denotes, therefore, 'many first daughters in a social group of the same lineage'. These lineage ties can be a basis for claims to land and other kinds of property, to mutual assistance in the pursuit of common interests, to authority over others; they also entail obligations that complement these claims (Agbasiere, 2000, 90). The Umuada are different from the *Ndinyom*—or, the married wives—and are positioned above them in terms of status. Women who marry into the community from another community must respect the Umuada sometimes even more than they respect their husbands.

Hierarchically, the Umuada stand above all other women's groups in the community, including the dance group. Depending on the type of leadership employed, this may divide or unite the women. One of my co-researchers, a member of the Umuada in Abor, explains:

There are some times [when] our women will like to scatter. For me to unite them, I impose [levies on] them. We get canopies, we get seats, we even build a container ...; my husband gave us up to ten shops we rent out and the end of the year we collect money and share. When you remember those things, you will like to make peace with your fellow human being even if it's one naira [USD 0.0028] you are getting but I know that sometimes we get up to three thousand naira [USD 8.40] each when I know that my women strength is up to 200.

FGD, Umuada, Abor 2018

1 Sitting in traditional cabinet within Igbo communities is predominately a male privilege; however, because of the unique positioning of the Umuada, they are accorded that privilege when circumstances demand their presence, especially in decision-making processes.

The levies are imposed in two ways, on any woman who goes against the rules of the meeting. They take the form either of an agreed consensus on a fixed amount or the requirement to carry out a specific task that has a monetary value. The containers, seats, or canopies are rented out (at a discount to members or at full price to non-community members) during ceremonies, and the women make a profit from this and use the funds for community development or personal needs, depending on what has been agreed. By providing economic opportunities, the Umuada in Abor thus becomes a unifying force.

However, its dominant status also gives the Umuada the opportunity to persecute and take oppressive action against women in weaker positions—what Uchem (2001, 67) regards as internalised oppression. The Umuada at times align with the *Ndinyom*, especially at the funeral of one of their brothers. If it comes to light that the widow of the dead man had maltreated him when he was still alive, the Umuada will not make it easy for the widow. Some families force women to mourn their late husbands for up to a year instead of the normal six months. This happens especially when the wife is at loggerheads with the Umuada, and they use the period of the mourning to victimise the woman. In this regards the Umuada can also act as a conflict driver within the community. Women sometimes use the powers of their institution excessively.

The Umuada play several roles in sustaining their dominance and participation within their communities, ways that are integral to all social functions in Igbo society, from marital rights to burial ceremonies to title taking. They facilitate marriage ceremonies and burials and ensure compliance with community agreements. The Umuada and *Ndinyom* collectively make decisions concerning the economic aspects of the market, and cultural and religious necessities such as the cleanliness of village squares and shrines.

Participants in our FGD in Abor characterised the Umuada as a powerful sociopolitical setup and a functional forum for females (FGD, Umuada, Abor, 2018). The Umuada work towards conflict transformation and resolution within communities, and they carry out local peacebuilding initiatives that strengthen bonds within families and communities. They initiate family ceremonies, and homecomings (requesting that sons and daughters of the community come home), for instance for dance ceremonies or some other fun activity. The Umuada is among the most organised, peaceful and endowed of women's groups in Nigeria, garnering respect both within and outside the community. As individuals and in groups, its members occupy a vital community position, and their meetings provide women with access to power structures.

We create the Umuada hamlet by hamlet; we have meetings every Saturday. Afor [market day in Igboland], that is when we have meetings

and within the group we elect a secretary, who collects our monthly financial dues. From this money we get the Umuada uniform. The dues range from 200 or 300 naira [USD 0.56 to USD 0.84] each. The dues are also used to attend weddings of younger girls and any other needs that arise. During the meetings, we make plans of activities to carry out, discuss issues related to women and the general community.

FGD, Umuada, Abor 2018

Men also have subgroups, but not all subgroups have equal access to power. Through their interactions with leadership at the community level, the Umuada open doors for men and women alike. They are also a welcome implementing arm of the traditional structure and government as they use it to ensure that information is disseminated among groups, and that women and youths adhere to the decisions taken. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Umuada has become a structure used to engage women on the ground and to ensure compliance with COVID protocols within the communities.

In many Igbo areas, the Umuada make contributions to the development of their lineage by building town halls, maternity clinics or schools. Even those living in urban areas still make contributions, through their mothers-in-law or a neighbour's wife. In the past fifty years, 'home' and 'abroad' women's groups have emerged as important categories. This distinction exists in the Umuada and in other women's groups, such as professionals and market and cultural groups. The Umuada meet once a year at what is known today as the 'August Return', August general meeting, or 'Home and Abroad Meeting'. This is a general meeting via which different Igbo women's groups come together within their indigenous communities. Among the aims of the August Return are to resolve issues of conflict in the community, to address the welfare of women, and community development (Nwokafor, 2012, 33). The Igbo women raise lots of money in their August general meeting to uplift and empower underprivileged members of the group in their community. They offer scholarships to girls, build houses for widows and clothe the poorer members. They have undertaken the construction of churches, clinics, schools, town halls and markets, and the provision of water and electricity in towns and villages. Through these efforts, they empower their fellow women, enhancing their lives and creating social cohesion in the community (Carolyn, 2000, 158).

The Umuada's role has transformed significantly in modern times; this has not, however, taken away the sociopolitical powers of the institution. Rather, it has made the institution adapt internally to remain relevant in a changing society. The Umuada is still very important with regard to burials, marriages and conflict management. Members now often use a more conciliatory approach,

and to ensure their decisions concerning cases of conflict are respected they leverage the fact that their absence in major family or community ceremonies raises questions. The ability of the Umuada to raise funds and support community development also makes them relevant in modern times.

5 The Umuada as Peacebuilders

The Umuada is a powerful example of an indigenous institution of women peacebuilders. They derive their effectiveness from their traditional status and sociopolitical power, which provide them with the legitimacy to engage in mediation and arbitration. During FGDs in Eziana and Abor, it became clear that the women felt part of the decision-making system of the community and that their men listen to them. A women leader from Ifueke confirmed the same:

Yes, even when they [men] want to [take decisions, they involve us]; like the last two months, they are talking about changing their constitution, they wrote to me. They even give me one of their constitutions that we should go through and suggest our own input. Our husbands, they are doing well.

SSI with women leader, Ifueke, 2018

My co-researchers were happy that their husbands consulted them, sought their opinions, and involved them in decision-making.

Men's groups in power work closely with the Umuada, as do male leaders. Not only the king's cabinet but also the town union leadership works with women. An *Ada* in Ifueke affirmed:

I have worked with like seven male presidents [of the union] and they carry us along. I worked with the late Igwe of Ngwo J.O A. He treated us well. So far, they are treating us well; they are giving us every share that the woman is supposed to get, including all the presidents, all the chairmen.

SSI with Ifueke Woman Community Leader, 2018

During the FGD in Abor, I was also told that the traditional ruler of the community, who is typically a male, would always confer and consult with the Umuada before any important decision is made. For him, the Umuada provide a venue for influencing their fathers and thus for forestalling conflict in the community.

What is different between the men and the women is if there was any problem in the village, the Umuada will go and make peace with their fathers and when they make peace, they will all live in peace. But if the fathers are not happy, there will be no peace. The Umuada ensure that they have peace with their fathers. That is when there will be peace.

FGD, Umuada, Abor 2018

Thus, even though the men lead the traditional community system, the Umuada play an integral role in sustaining the leadership structure through the behind-the-scenes peacebuilding roles they perform.

But the Umuada also engage in more visible peacebuilding. Indeed, they are often called in to resolve conflicts among the men: 'Sometimes, if we notice that there is quarrel within them, we women will join up and go and meet them, talk to them so that the quarrel will be solved' (FGD, Umuada, Eziamana). More broadly, we found that the Umuada act as an arbitration and de-escalation mechanism in all the three communities studied. The communities look to them for the resolution of major conflicts, including domestic conflicts, inter-kindred conflict, and armed violence resulting from land boundary disputes. They mediate and help in resolving different types of conflicts between and within communities (Obasi and Nnamani, 2015).

The Umuada have two approaches to conflict management. The first is the conciliatory approach—they act as mediators. The parties in conflict are made to explore non-violent ways of resolving the issue and come to an agreement on the way forward. The Umuada ensure that the parties keep to that agreement through the second of their two approaches—that is, force and threats—by way of fines or other indigenous methods depending on the issue. It is important to note that before using the second approach the Umuada will have conducted exhaustive consultations and given several opportunities for a peaceful resolution of the conflict (Obasi and Nnamani, 2015).

The Umuada thus function as a traditional justice mechanism that not only mediates but also engages in fact finding and adjudication. Obasi and Nnamani (2015) advance that the Umuada will extract the facts, analyse them and decide appropriate measures of penalty to be apportioned on the guilty party. They *de facto* act as a 'court of arbitration' (though not with legal force). They can ask the guilty party to pay a fine, cook a certain part of a meal, or bring a cock, or ram, in addition to kola nuts, to facilitate reconciliation. Before this is done, guilt is apportioned, pardon obtained, and forgiveness accepted by the parties. The person offended is expected to grant forgiveness to the offender, and where there is recalcitrance from any of the parties the Umuada will sanction the most recent offender. The male members of the same lineage as the

disputing parties, along with the community, respect their roles as judges and enforcers, and their decisions are final.

All three communities considered women in the Umuada mediators and peacebuilders, and believed they had great influence in the domestic space. Participants in our men focus group in Eziamé confirmed that the Umuada could impact men's decision to escalate or de-escalate conflict. Their influence seems to be particularly strong with men of the same lineage or kin group:

The powers of Umuada [...] include the right of arbitration [...] within their natal lineage, settling of quarrels concerning political, economic and ritual matters that are beyond their male relative's power to settle. The task of disciplining disobedient relatives' wives also falls within their domain. The Umuada have the power to ostracise any proven incorrigible (male) lineage relative. In consequence, the funeral of such a person would be boycotted, which would initiate a ritual crisis, since the services of the Umuada in the funeral of a relative are regarded as indispensable.

AGBASIERE, 2000, 1–42

In conflicts concerning marital infidelity, mothers-in-law, or fathers-in-law, the Umuada intervene whether invited to or not. Their role is to bring lasting peace, eliminate subjugation and infuse in the conflicting parties the spirit of forgiveness and justice. In any such cases, the Umuada takes a neutral stand.

Regarding land issues, the Umuada can offer their opinions, but the final decision lies with the lineage male who are the custodians of the land. There are exceptions to this rule in parts of Igboland with matrilineal inheritance systems, such as Ohafia and some parts of Afikpo. In general, though men hold the most visible authority the community acknowledges that the Umuada wields enormous behind-the-scenes power, and it is often required to validate important decisions taken by the king and his cabinet (Amadiume, 1987).

6 Conclusion

The impacts of colonialism on the Umuada include the invisibilisation of women in the historic narrative, the transformation of the traditional governance system and the creation of a highly masculine system that excludes women

from the public space. But the Western perspective lacks an understanding of the gender reality in African societies when that perspective promotes a universalising narrative of women subjugated to men. This misconstrues the political power of women in Igboland and ignores their historical and ongoing contributions to peacebuilding.

One of my co-researchers highlighted the contradiction between current and traditional practices, saying that indigenous communities practice a fusion of cultures (SSI, woman peacebuilder, Abor, 2018). Similarly, the Umuada institution has had to reinvent itself, and its current structure is a fusion of past and present realities. Though it faces noteworthy challenges, it has remained relevant even in changing and uncertain times, drawing on its historical identity to expand women's participation in formal peacebuilding processes. In conversations with our co-researchers, one could feel their passion and commitment to the Umuada institution. Because its functions are intertwined with everyday life and cultural practices of marriage and burial, the institution has inbuilt sustainability. Currently, the Umuada is expanding while reserving certain powers, such as leadership and participation in high-level community delegations, for daughters of the community.

Even though women's participation in peace movements has increased in Nigeria, emerging tensions and conflicts and structural discrimination have been major obstacles to women's substantive participation in peace processes at different levels. The institutionalisation of rigid gender ideologies has created stereotypes of roles and gender-segregated professions, which also diminishes women's ability to participate in leadership and formal peacebuilding processes (Effah Attioe, 2002; Amadinwe, 1987).

Peacebuilding has become a global necessity that requires people of every race and all genders to join forces to bring about social development. There is therefore a need to include women and to mainstream gender in peacebuilding activities (Madu, 2015). The Umuada and other women's associations in south-east Nigeria should be given more attention and their roles further popularised, especially in communities where excessive patriarchal dominance and only minimal women's rights exist. The institution's formidable sociopolitical and socio-judicial advocacy status constitutes a powerful resource for effective peacebuilding and conflict resolution. The role the Umuada play in maintaining peace in Igbo communities could be a model of peacebuilding for communities around the country and beyond, empowering women to take up the role of working for peace among citizens.

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