



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



## Exploring the centrality of women in indigenous peacemaking among the Mende of Sierra Leone

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### Abstract

This paper examines, among others, the central role women play in traditional peacemaking and conflict management among the Mende of Sierra Leone. The study argues that Mende women have a historically proven record, an enduring courage and a demonstrated pedigree to intercede to end hostility and restore normalcy to communities embroiled in disputes/conflicts. It further explores the key role these women play in simmering down highly volatile situations and preventing conflicts from occurring. While the study concedes that male chauvinism and some core cultural traditions continue to disempower women and relegate them to playing a subordinate role in some traditional societies, there is also evidence that women play a central role in influencing decisions that help build the culture of community and the architecture of peace. Women continue to hold strategic decision-making positions (as Mammy Queens, Soweis, Chiefs, heads of women groups etc.) that animate social reordering, political transformation and peacemaking in local communities. The paper concludes that women, by their nature as mothers, educators, counsellors, mentors, leaders etc., have the history of reconciling conflicting parties and in helping bring about amiability to communities encumbered by conflicts.

**Keywords:** Women; Peacemaking; Conflict; Traditional; Local Communities

### 1. Introduction

Peacemaking consists of a positive move from the past dominated by hatred, direct violence cultural or structural violence, and desire to revenge to a future that is expected to be dominated by love, understanding, sympathy and genuine concern for the feeling of those that were previously regarded as enemies (Anweting and Ogar, 2018). The ultimate objective of peacemaking is to challenge and address previous negative perceptions about others and to restore pre-conflict relationship. It is about engaging antagonists or conflictual situations with the *status quo ante*. It is also about entreating parties to the conflict to recognize the exigency of surmounting their differences with the view to live in harmony. Expectantly, peacemakers need to engage, mediate, negotiate and or reconcile conflicting parties with the avowed goal of restoring peace and harmony.

Many scholars have used the concepts of peacemaking, peace-building and peace keeping interchangeably. While this author concedes that the three concepts aim at achieving the ultimate outcome, which is peace, yet they vary in meaning. Peace-keeping consists of actions directed at controlling the actors (conflicting parties) so that they stop destruction and causing psychological trauma (Anweting and Orga 2018). The concept of peacebuilding portends to resolve/investigate and interrogate the issues that birthed the conflict. That is, dismantling the underlying root causes of conflict and rebuilding the institutions and infrastructures of nations torn apart by conflict and building bonds of peaceful mutual benefit among the warring factions and nations formerly at war (Ghali 1992). Conversely, peacemaking is about a deliberate search for amicable settlement to disputes that will bring about sustainable, progressive and

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positive outcome. The envisaged positive outcome is borne out of the fact that everyone in society, particularly the generally excluded and marginalized groups (women, people with disabilities and youths), have a role to play in ending hostilities and mayhem. The fact that conflicts affect not only the individuals involved but entire communities lend credence to the importance of mass participation and inclusivity in bringing belligerent groups together to reconcile their differences. African societies are generally male dominated and conservatively patriarchal too and, therefore, regard women as basic occupiers of the kitchen. It is, however, germane and critical to explore the unsaid role women play in ensuring social order and peaceful co-existence in communities.

It is indisputable that women occupy a central position in managing conflicts and making peace at all levels (macro, meso and micro) of society. Women perform different roles ranging from biological and social activities (child-bearing, care-giving, bringing up children, and contributing to decision-making processes etc.) to participating in activities that pertain to bringing acrimonious situations to normalcy. They normally serve as beacons of peace and as pacifists, they have the potential to calm down and pacify highly volatile disputes from escalating into all out conflicts (Iyer, 1985). In the case of Sierra Leone, for instance, women served as peacemakers, peace envoys between the rebels and the government of Sierra Leone during the civil conflict (1991-2002) and were very active in most of the peace talks that were held in Abidjan-Ivory Coast and Lome, Togo (TRC Report of 2002). As such, they became the stabilizing force during those turbulent periods in the country's dark history.

As a social entity, women are suitably identified as pro-peace and non-violent (Anweting and Orga 2018). They are found at the forefront of peace movements, non-violent demonstrations and peace talks. Women are reputed for ensuring peace prevails in the family, in the community and in the country. Their unity and determination to make peace may come from their everyday experiences and concerns: protecting their children, finding food, fetching clean water or shelter, protecting themselves from the violence and particularly sexual and gender-based violence associated with conflict (Anweting and Orga 2018).

Long before the recognition of the role of women in peacebuilding processes, they had already been very much involved in such activity. They have been highly visible in the forefront of movements for non-violence and peace worldwide...women usually assume the roles of peacemakers in families, in communities and in society even though they have often been victims (Galtung 1999). They have been at the forefront of efforts to build peace in countries all over the world. In many instances women have come to the peace negotiations united across party, class and ethnic differences (Adeyemi 2006).

While men take up arms to fight on either side of the conflict or escape to conflict-free zones in search of jobs, women become the primary victims of the violence created by the men. Even when men are available to the household, gender ideologies put a disproportionate burden of reproductive work on women (See "Gender and Conflict in Sierra Leone," Report by the Conciliation Resources, 1999). During virulent conflicts, women fill the void left behind by men by playing a dual role as feeding for the family and providing protection and security to the household. The situation is further fueled by the breakdown of the traditional support systems that occur in conflict zones. Osaghae (2005) argues that conflict-ridden zones are beset by the wanton destruction of certain traditional infrastructures and basic facilities that, in normal times, cushion the lives of ordinary people. The absence of some traditional facilities like leadership, education, health care centers and other societal infrastructures undermine women's ability to cope with the sustenance of their families (Osaghae 2005). As a consequence, women's ability to endure the burden left behind by men is fundamentally circumscribed.

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## 2. Literature Review

Conflicts can be classified based on the character of the parties involved in the conflict. Such include ethnic, religious, racial, regional etc. Ethnic conflicts can be either intra or inter-ethnic in nature. Intra ethnic conflicts are the types occurring within the same ethnic group while inter- ethnic types involve two or more ethnic groups. Religious conflicts also can be intra or inter. There is the preponderance of shreds of evidence to support the fact that ethnic and religious conflicts are more prevalent in Africa as out of 47 nations in conflict listed by Osaghae (2005), 27 were ethno-communal related conflicts while nearly all the conflicts often manifest ethno-religious nature. This is based on the fact that ethnicity and religion are group-based driven by strong loyalties and identities. Peace becomes illusive when these strong loyalties and identities manifest themselves.

Conflict management practices are considered traditional if they have been in existence and practiced for an extended period and have evolved within African societies rather than being the product of external importation (Zartman, 2000 and Akpuru-Aja, 2007). It suffices, therefore, to observe that tradition is never static, it undergoes periods of transition to fit partly into the modern setting without significant erosion of its basic tenets. Akpuru-Aja (2007), therefore, defines

'traditional' as the legacy of the past including the changes and transformations that this past may have gone through as this definition is considered suitable for this study.

Some scholars postulate that women are socially, and to some extent biologically, more peaceful and less prone to violence than men (Beilstein 1995). This conclusion is based on certain basic assumptions: men have the propensity to be more aggressive and belligerent; men, historically, have a monopoly over power and resources, and, therefore, over the means of both production and destruction; and men, in most cases, are biologically stronger than women. In societies dominated by men, women's subservience is understood within the purview of their auxiliary and at times rudimentary roles in society. For instance, women in traditional societies are exempted from carrying out physically challenging responsibilities such as cleaning farmlands, felling trees, brushing, climbing palm trees etc. Instead, they are consigned to weeding and harvesting, which are considered to be physically less demanding.

On the pacifist role of women, Mahatma Ghandi once remarked, "...due to a different socialization process, women have tended to grow up more peaceful than men and more capable of resolving conflicts in a non-violent manner...Peace often starts in the minds of women..." (Iyer 1985, p. 58). Women are mothers with little or no control over policies that engineer violence and tension. Yet, they mediate issues that pertain to the disruption of the household and sometimes the community. They perform the behind-the-scene role as advisers and contributors to salient community concerns. When called upon to make decisions at the top-tier of the society, they are far-sighted; and most often, they weigh decisions in terms of benefits and human consequence (Beilstein 1995). "Women decision makers contribute to the decision-making process in terms of "content, priorities, management style, organizational culture and group dynamics" (Beilstein 1985, p. 59). As a result, women are perceived as possessing non-violent techniques to building relationships and structures, and cultivating values and attitudes that culminate in the overall construction of the 'culture of peace' much advocated by peace builders and conflict 'resolvers' (Beilstein 1985).

Generally, women's conflict management and peacemaking roles had been relegated to the role of counseling other women affected by war or engaging in humanitarian activities. Notwithstanding the significance of these roles, consigning women to play peripheral roles in issues that affect society is tantamount to perpetuating patriarchal domination. The emphasis here is that women and other vulnerable groups have significant contributions to make to the overall process of reconstructing peace from mapping the road to peace to sustaining peaceful co-existence among members in post-war societies. This argument is predicated on the fact that women are most of the time soft spoken and possess strong negotiating skills, which can be employed and extended into peacemaking processes at both national and local levels. Viewed this way, women's inputs, perspectives and ideas can be essential in providing the broader institutional framework for restoring peaceful relationships and creating a peace constituency.

In traditional Mendeland, a woman's position remains a paradox. On the one hand, there is obvious reason to believe that women, in certain situations, are subjugated to the whims and caprices of men. Generally, women are looked upon as minors under the eyes of the 'law'. In pre-modern societies and in most remote settings today, women are not allowed to defend themselves in court, nor are they held directly responsible for their actions. A woman is conceived to be under the direct authority of a man who could be her husband or any other male relative. On the other hand, the role of women is complementary rather than subordinate to that of men; and in performing it, they obtain political as well as social compensations which are substantial enough to offset most of the nominal disadvantages (Beilstein 1985). This is seen in many practical ways in the political order where Mende women in Sierra Leone are in the mainstream of politics and are accorded equal recognition in some arenas. Unlike the Temne of the north, (Among the Temne of the north, the institution of the 'Kantha' (a ceremony in which a period of seclusion is observed prior to the installation of a new PC) does not permit women to become PCs because women are seen as the weaker sex, incapable of keeping secrets and withstanding the test of manhood administered in the secret bush.) the Mende have a very open and flexible political structure that permits women to contest and occupy political and social positions in the society. For instance, paramount chieftaincy is not a preserve for men in Mendeland. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Women PCs have been elected in most parts of Mendeland in the East and South of the country (Madam Yoko was a renowned Paramount Chief of the Kpa Mende Kingdom from Moyamba district in the South of Sierra Leone)

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### 3. Discussions from Findings

#### 3.1. Intermarriages and Maternal Uncles

Women are mothers, mentors, educators and teachers in the home and in both rural and urban communities. They are the first care-takers of children regardless of biological connection, and they serve as mothers and wives to combatants during conflicts. As such they come across as a source of peace among warring factions. Such roles played by women remain critical to their commitment to peace and tranquility in communities on the one hand and restoring the *status*

*quo ante* on the other. This is particularly true in traditional communities in Africa where marriages and inter-marriages result in culturally connecting families, building bridges and dismantling barriers where they exist.

At the micro level of the state in Sierra Leone, sustained (tangible and/or intangible) mechanisms and structures exist to avoid, prevent and manage conflicts. One such mode of conflict management and prevention is intermarriage. Intermarriage is as old as humankind. It exists in any given human interaction...intermarriage is a major role of women in conflict (Elmi 2000). When women go into marriage, they connect, link and bring together two families, clans, ethnicities, regions and communities so that they see themselves no longer as a unit but as a component of the two. Among the Mendes, this process has served as an important element in fostering mutual relationships and cementing linkages between lineages, clans and ethnic groups. The woman in marriage belongs not only to her original family but also to the family in the patrilineal society of her husband. She serves as a bridge between the two families and seeks to ensure that peaceful co-existence, cooperation, interaction and maintenance of goodwill dominate the relationship. This bolsters positive inter-community, inter-ethnic and/or inter-personal relationships and thus prevents conflicts from arising. Women retain their ethnic orientation following marriage and thus sustain dual ethnic identities and alliances (Elmi 2000).

In conflicts between communities or ethnic groups, women are the most steadfast and loyal voices that advocate their resolution. Two reasons explain this. First, women are the most vulnerable and, therefore, stand to suffer the most during conflicts. Second, they are always caught between two loyalties: loyalty to their father's group and those of their husband's and children. To negotiate this dilemma, women become the sole conduits for disseminating information flowing between the two groups. They carry messages of peace and at the same time prevail on the two sides to negotiate and reconcile differences when they exist...and they best serve this role because of their traditional inter-group linkages and because they are hardly harmed during warfare (Elmi 2000). Because women have become prime targets of human right abuses and other related violence in contemporary conflicts, it is safe to conclude that modern warfare is not covered by the above assumption.

At the family and extended-family levels, a woman prevents or resolves conflicts by maintaining good relationships between herself and her husband, and forging unanimity between her children and their spouses. Under normal circumstances, the woman is the first person to be consulted by her children and their spouses when disputes arise. For instance, in a typical traditional setting, if a wife has a complaint against her husband, she first discusses it with her husband's mother rather than develop a confrontational posture with the husband on the issue. If the mother agrees with her daughter-in-law's determination of her husband's behavior, she immediately intervenes and reproaches the husband on the wife's behalf. The husband may also approach his mother-in-law in the same way. If the mothers are deceased or unavailable, sisters and aunts or older women are called upon to perform this function aimed at restoring harmony within the marriage.

The maternal uncle occupies a strategic position in the extended family system. The maternal uncle, *nkenya* in Mende, is highly placed in the eyes of his nephews and nieces. He is known as the "mother without breast." The Mendes believe that no one can fight his/her maternal uncle because he/she is the most genuine representative of his/her sister's offsprings. The nephews and nieces are seen as "slaves" to their uncles, and tradition has it that uncles had the right to sell their nephews and nieces into slavery. Of course, this practice no longer exists. But there are instances where the uncle is instrumental in the up-bringing of his nephews and nieces. For instance, if a nephew is growing too tall, the uncle is requested by the mother "to step on his head" to stop the increase in his/her height. In times of hardship or ill-luck, nephews and nieces consult uncles for special prayers. In like manner, uncles can curse their sister's children if they act against tradition such as neglecting parents. The most important aspect of this relationship is that uncles are links between their own families, clan or ethnic groups and those of their sister's children. This familial relationship minimizes the possibility of hostility, and even when it occurs, it has the capacity to contain it.

### **3.2. Elderly Women as Peacemakers**

Elderly women can be classified as elderly wives of chiefs, heads of secret societies, heads of community-based groups, women leaders: Mammy Queens etc. They portend to have experience in community history, tradition and culture and carry respect in society not to mention the influencing role they play in social reordering. They have the historical pedigree of bringing peace and harmony in communities. A respected woman is one who exhibits wisdom, who has knowledge of and relates to pertinent issues that affect society. She is one who is broadminded, who is God-fearing, and who is generally seen as concerned about the welfare of community members, regardless of background or blood relation. She is independent in taking initiatives in solving problems and mobilizes others to work with her on the solution (Gluckman 1965). In much the same way as men, these women are leaders in their own right and possess extraordinary qualities to qualify them as responsible, honest peace brokers and dispute 'resolvers'.

In Sierra Leone, women that play this kind of role are chiefs, queen mothers, mammy queens, wives of chiefs, community elders, and leaders of secret societies. Other women with personalities and characteristics other than their social status earn the respect to intervene in disputes. According to Little, “The Mendes acknowledge that there are ‘sensible’ women, and it is clear that social status depends, in this respect, more upon age than upon sex” (Little 1970, p. 85). Holding certain positions of trust in communities, women engage in preventing or resolving inter-personal, inter-lineage and sometimes local level issues that affect the social order such as secret society regulations. More specifically, women are involved in negotiating and mediating disputes between and among women in the market place, in business and small-scale organizations, in matters arising from the *bondo/sande* bush and in self-help organizations. They are often able to mitigate these disputes while they are still manageable, and skillfully keep them from escalating into community or national problem.

For instance, the current chieftom arrangement in which women play a pivotal role is worth mentioning here. In all chiefdoms in the Mendeland that are ruled by men, Mammy-Queens are elected to serve as the mouthpiece to articulate the aspirations and needs of women and other vulnerable groups in general. They occupy the senior-most position on chiefdom committees, which is the highest legislative and executive body in the chiefdom that deals with chiefdom affairs ranging from development issues to secret society matters. Current chiefdom committees have women representatives; women are also allowed to become chiefdom councilors on the condition that they pay local tax. (See the Local Government Act of Sierra Leone of 2000) The entry of women into the male-dominated political structures like the chiefdom council is a positive step towards integrating women’s potentials into the overall development and peacemaking processes at the grassroots level, especially when it translates into empowering them to function as viable partners. These positions empower women to play consultative roles in situations such as bush disputes. Together with the men, they legislate and execute laws as partners and engage contemporary challenges that face society.

Women exercise certain powers over men, or at the least, are at liberty to control their social behavior. Men are obliged by tradition and custom to observe, respect and accede to *Sande* (*Sande* is the traditional secret society that serves as a transition from childhood to womanhood among the Mendes of Sierra Leone...) laws, especially those that deal with sexual behavior (Little 1970). Women independently hold hereditary positions and are the principal leaders of other secret societies like *humui* and *njaye* whose laws are binding on men. The *humui* regulates and control sexual conduct or behavior in general. Breach of this law, referred to as *simongamei* (having sex with a female or male who is consanguineous, including an aunt’s daughter) is reproachable and followed by a heavy fine inflicted on the offending party. *Njaye*, on the other hand, deals with mental complaints when someone breaches the rule of the society. For example, a non-member seeing the dead body of an important *njaye* member before it is ritually purified carries a punishment that leads to insanity, which is only curable by initiation.

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#### 4. Conclusion

Traditional women in Sierra Leone have served as mothers, educators, care-givers, mentors, peace-brokers, mediators and moderate extremists and as such, they are harbingers of peace. These roles have earned women a special place in children’s lives because they help inculcate social values and norms on children through the process of socialization, which invariably transforms these children to grow and become responsible citizens on the one hand and adopt the spirit of communalism as against individualism. This socio-cultural transformation, reawakening and rebirth clearly helps improve social relations and promotes cohesion in society. Peace is only sustainable when its foundation is built from the home right up. The home is a reflection and microcosm of the greater society and sustainable peace is enjoyed when children are mentored, trained and educated by their mothers.

Marriages and intermarriages in indigenous communities have served as bridge between and among families, clans, ethnicities, regions and as such, women’s role in simmering down tension and conflict have been recognized and documented. They serve as a source of information and can, therefore, intercede, mediate and talk between belligerent parties to the conflict. Women’s natural inclination and premonition to be patient has earned them the reputation as mothers of peace-making and peace-building missions. Their patience to listen to all sides of the conflict allows them to dig deep into the root causes of the conflict/dispute and which, invariably, will provide them the opportunity to uproot the open and hidden causes of conflict/dispute. Even the wives of chiefs, heads of secret societies and queen mothers play a god-mother role in bringing sanity to communities troubled by conflicts/disputes.

#### *Priorities for the Future*

- Going forward, policy makers and government bureaucrats need to design and promote strategies that target women at all levels of society and increase their voice and participation in decisions that foster peace and unity in the country.

- Uphold and strengthen the traditional infrastructures and mechanisms of peacemaking with the view to ensuring that they are not appropriated and rendered dysfunctional by the ruling elite.
- Ensure that women's priorities are quintessentially critical to peace, security and development by identifying and uprooting the socio-cultural and political barriers that hold and relegate women to the state of unrecognition
- Design a gender inclusive strategy for peacemaking by involving women and other vulnerable groups in peace negotiations, mediation and reconciliation
- Prioritize women's inclusion in peacemaking particularly when they are in a position to influence decision-making, promote dialogue and build trust. When this happens, it benefits wider society.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

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The author whose name is listed on this article certify that he has NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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