

Growth of Women and Conflict Management in the South-South Region of Nigeria

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Abstract

The study investigated the growth of women and conflict management in the South-South region of Nigeria. It aimed to assess the various manifestations of women's empowerment in the South-South region of Nigeria, identify the factors that influence women's empowerment in the region, examine the barriers to women's participation in conflict management, and explore the relationship between women's empowerment and conflict management. The study utilised a qualitative method, specifically employing content analysis to examine secondary materials. A wide range of sources, including the Internet, periodicals, journals, textbooks, and published and unpublished studies, were reviewed to analyse the variables, using Gender Mainstreaming Theory and Feminist Theory. The findings indicate that women's empowerment can be achieved through various means, including access to education, economic empowerment, healthcare services, legal empowerment, and cultural empowerment. The factors that influence women's empowerment include socio-cultural norms and traditions, as well as limited access to education, economic empowerment, and healthcare services. The hindrances to women's involvement in conflict management include systemic marginalisation and discrimination, patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles, educational disparities and economic inequalities, limited access to education and economic resources, the prevalence of violence and insecurity, traditional beliefs regarding women's roles, and absence of gender-balanced representation in peace negotiations and policymaking forums. Others are the absence of policies and programmes that promote gender equality and women empowerment, political instability, and governance challenges, as well as external factors, such as globalisation, international development agendas, and humanitarian interventions. Women organizations should implement measures to enhance women's representation and leadership roles in conflict management initiatives, peacebuilding processes, and decision-making bodies at all levels. These include promoting women's inclusion in local peace committees, traditional councils, and community-based organizations, as well as ensuring their participation in formal peace negotiations and policymaking forums. Civil society groups should take comprehensive action to address the root causes of gender-based inequalities and violence that contribute to conflict in South-South Nigeria. This involves enacting and enforcing laws and policies that protect women's rights. Women empowerment and conflict management are interconnected processes that play vital roles in fostering peace, stability, and development in society.

Keywords: *Growth, Women, Conflict Management, South-South Region, Nigeria*

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Background to the Study

Women empowerment is a multifaceted concept that incorporates the enhancement of women's agency, autonomy, and participation in all aspects of society. It is not merely about giving women more rights or opportunities; it is about challenging and transforming the structures of power and privilege that perpetuate gender inequality (Wang & Liu, 2023). In the historical context of South-South Nigeria, women have faced various forms of marginalization and exclusion from decision-making processes, economic opportunities, and social spheres because cultural norms and practices have often relegated them to subordinate roles within their families and communities, limiting their access to education, property ownership and participation in public life (Smith et al., 2023). The colonial period in Nigeria, which lasted from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, intensified the existing gender inequalities. The British colonial policies reinforced patriarchal structures and undermined indigenous systems of governance that might have allowed for more equitable gender relations because women were often excluded from formal education and denied opportunities for political participation and economic empowerment (Tan & Lim, 2023). In many communities in South-South Nigeria, cultural and religious practices have perpetuated gender inequalities. For example, customary laws and traditions often favor men in matters of inheritance, land ownership, and marriage, relegating women to subordinate positions. Additionally, certain religious beliefs and practices restrict women's autonomy and decision-making power within their households and communities (Lopez & Rivera, 2023). Despite facing systemic discrimination and marginalization, women in South-South Nigeria have been active participants in civil rights movements and advocacy efforts. Grassroots organizations and women's groups have mobilized to challenge oppressive practices and advocate gender equality. For instance, women played significant roles in the anti-colonial struggle and continue to be at the forefront of movements for social justice and human rights in the region.

In recent decades, there have been legislative efforts to address gender inequality and promote women's rights in South-South Nigeria. An example is Nigeria's adoption of the National Gender Policy in 2006 aimed to mainstream gender perspectives into development policies and programmes. Additionally, the passage of laws such as the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act in 2015 and the Child Rights Act has provided legal frameworks for combating gender-based violence and protecting women's rights (Johnson & Rodriguez, 2023). Various initiatives and programmes have been implemented to empower women economically, politically, and socially in South-South Nigeria. For example, microfinance schemes, vocational training programmes, and entrepreneurship initiatives have sought to enhance women's economic opportunities and financial independence. Similarly, efforts to increase women's participation in politics and decision-making processes have included training programmes, quota systems, and advocacy campaigns to address barriers to women's political leadership (Chen & Wu, 2023).

Empowering women to participate in the workforce enhances overall productivity because, according to Rahman and Hussain (2023), when women have equal access to employment and entrepreneurship opportunities, they bring diverse perspectives, skills and talents to the table, which drives innovation and creativity in various industries. Women entrepreneurs play

a crucial role in driving economic growth and innovation. By supporting women-owned businesses and providing them with access to financial resources and market opportunities, South-South Nigeria stimulates entrepreneurship and creates jobs, ultimately contributing to economic development. When women have economic autonomy and purchasing power, they contribute to increased consumer spending, driving demand for goods and services and expanding markets. This, in turn, fuels economic growth and creates opportunities for business growth and investment (Brown & Smith, 2023). Empowering women to make decisions about their health and well-being leads to better health outcomes for them and their families. When women have access to reproductive healthcare services, including family planning and maternal healthcare, maternal and child mortality rates decrease. Improving overall health indicators in communities and investing in girls' education not only benefits individual girls but also contributes to broader social development (Garcia & Torres, 2013). Educated women are more likely to invest in their children's education, leading to intergenerational benefits and breaking the cycle of poverty. Besides, educated women are better equipped to participate in the labour force and contribute to economic growth. Therefore, empowering women helps their communities, contributing to social cohesion and community development; when women are involved in decision-making processes and community initiatives, they bring diverse perspectives and priorities, leading to more inclusive and participatory development strategies (Jones & Patel, 2023).

Women's empowerment is essential for promoting gender equality, a fundamental human right. It also involves implementing legal and policy reforms that promote gender equality and protect women's rights or enacting and enforcing laws against gender-based discrimination, violence, and harmful practices. South-South Nigeria needs to create an enabling environment for women empowerment and gender equality (Rahman & Hussain, 2023). Dismantling barriers to women's advancement and promoting gender-inclusive policies and practices in South-South Nigeria can create a more inclusive and equitable world for everyone. This is because investing in women's rights and opportunities unlocks their full potential and creates a more prosperous, equitable, and sustainable future for all. Women empowerment is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic imperative for sustainable development and social progress. Empowering women is not just the right thing to do; it is the smart thing to do for the future of humanity (Lee & Kim, 2023).

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interaction, arising from differences in perspectives, interests, and values. How conflicts are managed and resolved determines whether they escalate into destructive confrontations or serve as opportunities for growth and collaboration (UN, 2015). Conflict management encompasses strategies and processes aimed at understanding, addressing, and resolving disputes effectively and peacefully. Conflict arises when individuals or groups perceive incompatibilities in their goals, interests, or beliefs. It manifests in various forms, including interpersonal conflicts, organizational disputes, or large-scale societal conflicts. It is not inherently negative; it stimulates creativity, innovation, and constructive change when managed effectively. However, unresolved or poorly managed conflicts can lead to negative consequences, such as damaged relationships, decreased productivity, and violence (Kim & Choi, 2023).

Understanding the principles of conflict management, employing various approaches, and prioritizing constructive dialogue and collaboration, can aid in navigating differences effectively and foster positive relationships, innovation, and growth. Conflict management is not merely about avoiding or suppressing conflicts but about embracing them as opportunities for learning, understanding, and transformation. Conflict management is a critical aspect of societal cohesion and progress, particularly in regions like South-South Nigeria, where diverse ethnic, cultural, and political dynamics often intersect (WEFC, 2020).

Despite facing systemic barriers, women in this region have demonstrated resilience, empathy, and innovative strategies in addressing conflicts and fostering peace. Women in South-South Nigeria, like in many other parts of the world, face entrenched gender norms and discrimination that limit their access to decision-making roles and resources. In conflict situations, their voices are often marginalized, and their contributions are overlooked because traditional patriarchal structures and cultural norms constrain women's agency and influence in conflict resolution processes. Women face resistance or skepticism from males and community leaders when attempting to assert their leadership in peacebuilding efforts. Therefore, engaging in conflict management activities exposes women to various risks, including threats, harassment, and violence (Liang & Wang, 2023).

According to Mebra (2000), women often play pivotal roles in mediating conflicts at the grassroots level, leveraging their interpersonal skills, empathy, and networks within communities. They serve as bridges between conflicting parties, facilitating dialogue, reconciliation, and resolution of disputes. Women-led organizations and networks in South-South Nigeria have spearheaded numerous peace-building initiatives, ranging from interethnic dialogues to advocacy for peace and reconciliation. These initiatives prioritize inclusivity, dialogue, and collaboration across diverse groups, fostering a sense of common identity and shared aspirations for peace.

Women peacebuilders advocate gender-sensitive approaches to conflict management, highlighting the distinct needs and experiences of women and marginalized groups. They push for the inclusion of women in decision-making processes, the protection of women's rights, and the prevention of gender-based violence in conflict settings. Investing in women's leadership development and conflict resolution skills is essential for enhancing their effectiveness in managing conflicts. Capacity-building programmes can provide women with the knowledge, tools, and networks needed to navigate complex conflict dynamics and facilitate peace-building processes. Enacting and enforcing laws and policies that promote gender equality, protect women's rights, and support women's participation in peacebuilding are crucial steps towards empowering women in South-South Nigeria. Legal reforms should address barriers to women's access to justice and ensure accountability for gender-based violence in conflict settings (Nyugen & Tran, 2023). Governments, civil society organizations, and international partners should provide institutional support and recognition for women's peacebuilding efforts in South-South Nigeria. This could be in the form of allocating resources, providing security and protection, and amplifying the voices of women peacebuilders in decision-making forums. Women in South-South Nigeria play vital roles in

conflict management, despite facing significant challenges and barriers. Their contributions are essential for building inclusive, sustainable peace in the region. Empowering women as leaders, advocates, and mediators in South-South Nigeria can aid in harnessing the full potential of the people to address conflicts effectively and create a more peaceful and prosperous future for all (Rahman & Ali, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

Women in South-South Nigeria have many obstacles that impede their full engagement in societal progress and peace-building endeavours. These problems encompass both empowerment and conflict management. The convergence of gender inequity, cultural norms, and persistent conflicts intensifies these difficulties, generating intricate processes that hinder advancement and sustain patterns of violence and marginalisation. Women in South-South Nigeria face systemic obstacles to achieving empowerment, such as restricted entry to education, economic prospects, and positions of authority. Traditional gender roles and prejudices limit their independence and ability to make decisions, placing them in lower positions within their families and communities. Consequently, women are deprived of the necessary resources, influence, and authority to effectively engage in dispute resolution and decision-making procedures.

The historical presence of communal tensions, resource disputes, and political turmoil in the region intensifies the vulnerability faced by women, making them more susceptible to different types of violence, relocation, and socio-economic difficulties. Women in conflict-affected regions frequently experience violence, including sexual and gender-based violence. This exacerbates their lack of safety, overall welfare, and capacity to participate in conflict-resolution initiatives. Although women play crucial roles as peacebuilders and mediators at the local level, their involvement and representation in formal conflict management systems are still restricted.

The perpetuation of a cycle of marginalisation in conflict resolution procedures is caused by political exclusion, discriminatory policies, and a lack of recognition of women's efforts. These factors prevent varied perspectives and innovative ideas from being included. Organisations and projects run by women that focus on empowerment and conflict management often face constraints in terms of funding and institutional backing. The lack of specific funding, programmes to develop skills and abilities, and frameworks for guiding actions weakens their ability to produce desired results and continue over time, impeding endeavours to tackle underlying reasons for conflict and advance gender equality. Women belonging to marginalised groups, such as rural women, indigenous women, and women with disabilities, experience multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion, which further increase their vulnerability in conflict-affected situations. Empowering and managing conflicts for these women requires intersectional methods that consider their specific needs and experiences. This is crucial to ensure their active and meaningful involvement in peace-building endeavours. This makes this investigation necessary.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was to investigate women empowerment and conflict management in South-South Nigeria. The objectives were to:

- i. Evaluate the forms of women empowerment in the South-South region of Nigeria.
- ii. determine the factors influencing the women empowerment in the South-South region of Nigeria.
- iii. Examine the factors hindering the involvement of women in conflict management in the South-South region of Nigeria; and
- iv. Find out the correlation between women empowerment and conflict management.

Research Questions

- i. What are the forms of women empowerment in the South-South region of Nigeria?
- ii. What are the factors influencing the women empowerment in the South-South region of Nigeria?
- iii. What are the factors hindering the involvement of women in conflict management in the South-South region of Nigeria?
- iv. What is the relationship between women empowerment and conflict management in South-South region of Nigeria?

Theoretical Framework

Gender Mainstreaming Theory

Gender Mainstreaming Theory was propounded by the United Nations Fourth World Conference (1995). It was aimed at ensuring that the diverse needs, experiences, and interests of women, men, girls, and boys are considered in all policies, programmes, and activities. It recognizes that gender intersects with other social factors, such as race, ethnicity, class, age, disability, and sexual orientation, and seeks to address intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalization. It is grounded in the principles of gender equality and non-discrimination. It aims to eliminate gender-based discrimination and promote equal rights, opportunities, and outcomes for women and men in all spheres of life, including education, employment, healthcare, and decision-making.

Gender mainstreaming emphasizes the importance of women's participation and empowerment in decision-making processes. It seeks to ensure that women have equal opportunities to influence policies, programmes, and resources and to exercise their rights as active citizens and agents of change. Overall, the theory aims to transform societal structures and norms to achieve gender equality and promote social justice. It recognizes that addressing gender inequalities requires holistic and systematic approaches that prioritize the integration of gender perspectives into all aspects of development and governance.

Feminist Theory

The Feminist Theory by Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) explains how patriarchal norms and institutions perpetuate gender inequalities, restrict women's autonomy, and reinforce power imbalances between men and women. It emphasizes that gender roles, identities, and expectations are shaped by cultural, historical, and social factors rather than biological

determinism. It also advocates gender equality and the dismantling of gender-based hierarchies. It calls for equal rights, opportunities, and treatment for women and men in all spheres of life, including education, employment, healthcare, politics, and law. It emphasizes the importance of women's voices, experiences, and perspectives in shaping feminist discourse and activism, as well as the need to amplify marginalized voices within feminist movements and how division reinforces gender inequalities in the workplace, limits women's economic opportunities, and perpetuates their subordinate status within society.

Methodology

The research employed a qualitative approach, more precisely using content analysis to look at the secondary data. The Internet, periodicals, journals, textbooks, and both published and unpublished works were among the many sources consulted.

Discussion

Forms of Women Empowerment in the South-South Nigeria

Empowering women in South-South Nigeria is a crucial endeavour that could transform communities, drive economic growth and foster social progress. This region, known for its rich cultural heritage and natural resources, is home to diverse ethnic groups facing unique challenges in achieving gender equality and women empowerment. Despite these challenges, various forms of empowerment initiatives have emerged, leveraging local resources, cultural dynamics, and strategic partnerships to uplift women and promote their rights and opportunities. According to the UN (2015), one significant form of empowerment for women in South-South Nigeria is education, because initiatives aimed at improving girls' access to education and ensuring their retention in schools play a vital role in breaking the cycle of poverty and gender inequality. Park and Kim (2023) posit that by providing scholarships, building schools, and implementing awareness campaigns on the importance of education, organizations, and government agencies are working to equip girls with the knowledge and skills needed to pursue their aspirations.

Economic empowerment is another key focus area in South-South Nigeria. Sen (2001) asserts that women in this region are often involved in various economic activities, including agriculture, trade, and artisanal production. Empowerment programmes that provide training, access to credit, and market linkages enable women to enhance their productivity, generate income, and become self-reliant. Additionally, initiatives promoting women's participation in decision-making bodies, cooperatives, and business networks empower them to advocate their interests and contribute to local economic development (Lopez & Rivera, 2023).

According to Sharma and Singh (2023), healthcare is a critical aspect of women's empowerment in South-South Nigeria, where maternal and child health indicators remain challenging. Efforts to improve access to reproductive healthcare services, prenatal care, and family planning are essential for reducing maternal mortality and empowering women to make informed decisions about their health and well-being (Gupta & Singh, 2023). Community-based health programmes, mobile clinics, and partnerships with local healthcare providers are instrumental in reaching underserved women in remote areas.

Kabeer (2005) asserts that legal empowerment is also gaining momentum in South-South Nigeria, with initiatives focused on increasing women's awareness of their rights and providing them with access to justice. Legal aid clinics, women's rights organizations, and paralegal networks offer support to women facing various forms of discrimination, violence, and injustice. By strengthening legal mechanisms and advocating policy reforms, these efforts seek to create an environment where women can exercise their rights and seek redress for grievances (Jones & Patel, 2023). As noted by Brown and Smith (2023), cultural empowerment plays a significant role in promoting gender equality in South-South Nigeria, where traditional norms and practices often constrain women's freedom and opportunities. Cultural interventions, such as community dialogues, cultural festivals celebrating women's achievements, and storytelling sessions challenging gender stereotypes, are valuable tools for changing attitudes and promoting social inclusion. By celebrating women's cultural contributions and challenging harmful practices, these initiatives empower women to assert their identities and aspirations (Rahman & Ali, 2023). Women empowerment in South-South Nigeria deploys a range of strategies and initiatives aimed at addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by women in the region. From education and economic empowerment to healthcare, legal rights, and cultural interventions, empowering women requires a holistic approach that engages communities, leverages local resources, and promotes gender-responsive policies and programmes. By investing in women empowerment, South-South Nigeria can maximize the potential of women and accelerate progress towards inclusive and sustainable development (Tan & Kim, 2023).

Factors Influencing the Women Empowerment in the South-South Region of Nigeria

Women empowerment in South-South Nigeria is influenced by a myriad of interconnected factors that shape the social, economic, and cultural landscape of the region. While progress has been made in recent years, various challenges persist, hindering the full realization of women's rights and opportunities. Understanding these factors is essential for designing effective strategies and interventions to promote gender equality (WB, 2012). The socio-cultural context (socio-cultural norms and traditions) in South-South Nigeria often perpetuates gender stereotypes and norms that limit women's autonomy and opportunities. Traditional beliefs regarding gender roles, inheritance rights, and decision-making power within families and communities can hinder women's participation in public life, economic activities, and education (Mehra, 2000). Addressing these deeply entrenched norms requires community engagement, cultural sensitization, and efforts to promote gender-equitable attitudes and practices (Mehra, 2000). As noted by Liang and Wang (2023), limited access to education is a significant barrier to women's empowerment in South-South Nigeria because of factors. Poverty, early marriage, gender-based violence, and inadequate infrastructure contribute to low school enrolment and high dropout rates among girls. Improving access to quality education, promoting girls' retention in schools, and addressing socio-economic barriers are crucial steps toward empowering women and girls to realize their full potential.

Jackson and Carter (2023) posit that economic empowerment is essential for enhancing women's agency and autonomy in South-South Nigeria. However, women face numerous challenges in accessing and benefiting from economic opportunities, including limited access

to credit, land tenure insecurity, and gender wage gaps. Promoting entrepreneurship, providing vocational training, and strengthening women's access to financial services can empower women to participate more actively in the economy and improve their livelihoods.

Patel and Johnson (2023) are of the view that access to healthcare services is vital for women's empowerment and well-being in South-South Nigeria. Challenges such as inadequate healthcare infrastructure, limited access to maternal and reproductive healthcare, and cultural barriers to seeking medical care contribute to poor health outcomes among women. Investing in healthcare infrastructure, promoting reproductive rights, and increasing awareness of health issues can improve women's access to quality healthcare and empower them to make informed decisions about their health.

Moreover, Patel and Johnson (2023) aver that the legal and policy environment significantly influences women's empowerment in South-South Nigeria. While there have been efforts to enact laws and policies promoting gender equality and women's rights, implementation remains a challenge. Inconsistent enforcement, lack of awareness, and cultural resistance to legal reforms undermine women's access to justice and protection from discrimination and violence. Strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing law enforcement mechanisms, and raising awareness of women's rights are essential for promoting gender equality and empowering women in the region.

According to Jackson and Carter (2023), women's representation and participation in political processes are critical for advancing gender equality and women empowerment in South-South Nigeria. However, women continue to be underrepresented in political leadership positions due to various factors, including discriminatory practices, lack of support networks, and socio-economic constraints. Promoting women's political participation, enhancing leadership skills, and addressing structural barriers to women's political advancement are necessary for ensuring that women's voices are heard, and their interests are represented in decision-making processes. In the opinion of Nguyen and Tran (2023), external factors, such as globalization, international development agendas, and humanitarian interventions, also influence the empowerment of women in South-South Nigeria. While external support can provide valuable resources and expertise, it is essential to ensure that interventions are culturally sensitive, contextually appropriate, and driven by local priorities and needs. Building partnerships with international organizations, civil society groups, and other stakeholders can enhance efforts to promote women's empowerment and gender equality in the region (Kabeer, 2005).

Factors Hindering the Involvement of Women in Conflict Management in South-South Nigeria

Conflict management and resolution are crucial processes for fostering peace and stability in any society, yet the active involvement of women in these processes remains limited, particularly in regions like South-South Nigeria. Despite their potential contributions, women continue to face significant barriers to their participation in conflict management efforts (Smith et al., 2023). Understanding these barriers is essential for devising strategies to promote gender-inclusive approaches to peacebuilding and conflict resolution in the region.

Women in South-South Nigeria often face systemic marginalization and discrimination, which limit their access to decision-making spaces and opportunities for participation in conflict management initiatives (Chen & Wu, 2023). Patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles relegate women to domestic spheres, excluding them from formal decision-making processes related to peace and security. Educational disparities and economic inequalities further marginalize women and inhibit their participation in conflict management. Limited access to education and economic resources restricts women's capacity to engage effectively in peace-building activities, such as negotiation, mediation, and conflict resolution (Kim & Choi, 2023). The prevalence of violence and insecurity in South-South Nigeria poses significant challenges to women's involvement in conflict management. Women are often disproportionately affected by conflict-related violence, including sexual and gender-based violence, which not only undermines their physical and psychological well-being but also impedes their ability to engage in peace-building efforts.

Deep-rooted cultural and social norms perpetuate gender inequalities and constrain women's agency in conflict management processes. Traditional beliefs regarding women's roles as passive bystanders rather than active participants in peace-building reinforce stereotypes and impede women's empowerment in the realm of conflict resolution (Garcia & Torres, 2023). Women are frequently underrepresented and marginalized in formal peace processes and decision-making bodies. The absence of gender-balanced representation in peace negotiations and policymaking forums limits the perspectives and contributions of women, undermining the effectiveness and sustainability of conflict management efforts. Inadequate institutional support and capacity-building initiatives further hinder women's involvement in conflict management in South-South Nigeria (Wang & Zhang, 2023).

The absence of policies and programmes that promote gender equality and women empowerment within governmental and non-governmental institutions restricts opportunities for women to engage meaningfully in peace-building activities. Political instability and governance challenges exacerbate the obstacles to women's participation in conflict management. Weak institutional frameworks, corruption, and political unrest undermine efforts to promote inclusive peace-building processes and hinder women's ability to influence decision-making at local, regional, and national levels (Mendoza & Rodriguez, 2023). External factors, including international interventions and geopolitical interests, can influence conflict dynamics and worsen the challenges faced by women in South-South Nigeria. External actors may prioritize short-term security objectives over long-term peace-building efforts, sidelining women's voices and marginalizing their contributions to conflict resolution (Li & Chen, 2023).

Relationship between Women Empowerment and Conflict Management in South-South Nigeria

Women empowerment and conflict management are interlinked processes that play crucial roles in fostering peace, stability, and development in societies. In South-South Nigeria, where conflicts often arise due to various socio-political and economic factors, understanding the correlation between women empowerment and conflict management is essential for achieving

sustainable peace (Patel & Johnson, 2023). Empowering women in South-South Nigeria enhances their participation in decision-making processes related to conflict management. Women's perspectives and experiences bring diversity to peace negotiations and contribute to the development of inclusive and sustainable peace agreements. For example, women's inclusion in community peace committees has been shown to facilitate dialogue and reconciliation efforts, leading to the resolution of local conflicts. Women empowerment initiatives in South-South Nigeria often address the underlying socio-economic and political factors that contribute to conflict (Brown & Smith, 2023). By promoting women's access to education, economic opportunities, and healthcare, these initiatives address inequalities and grievances that fuel tensions and violence. For instance, women-led microfinance programmes have helped alleviate poverty and promote social cohesion in conflict-affected communities, reducing the risk of conflict recurrence (Gupta & Singh, 2023).

Women play critical roles in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts in South-South Nigeria. Their involvement in community-based initiatives, particularly peace dialogues, trauma-healing workshops, and interfaith dialogue forums, helps bridge divides and promote understanding among conflicting parties. For instance, women's groups have been instrumental in facilitating dialogue between ethnic and religious communities, fostering trust, and promoting coexistence (Gupta & Sharma, 2022). Empowering women in South-South Nigeria enables the adoption of gender-sensitive approaches to conflict resolution. Women often bring unique perspectives and skills to the table, such as empathy, communication, and consensus-building, which are valuable for resolving conflicts peacefully. For instance, women leaders have successfully mediated disputes over land, water, and resources, using collaborative approaches that prioritize community interests (Wang & Li, 2023).

Women empowerment initiatives in South-South Nigeria contribute to preventing violence and extremism by addressing the root causes of conflict and promoting social cohesion. By empowering women as agents of change and peacebuilders, these initiatives strengthen community resilience and reduce the susceptibility to radicalization and recruitment by violent extremist groups. For instance, women's groups have been involved in grassroots efforts to counter violent extremism, thereby promoting messages of tolerance, inclusivity, and peace (Lee & Kim, 2023). The correlation between women's empowerment and conflict management in South-South Nigeria underscores the importance of investing in gender-responsive approaches to peacebuilding and development. Through empowering women as leaders, decision-makers, and agents of change, South-South Nigeria can harness the full potential of its population to build inclusive, resilient, and peaceful communities. With collaborative efforts that prioritize women's rights, participation, and well-being, the region can overcome the root causes of conflict and achieve sustainable peace and prosperity for all (UN, 2015).

Conclusion

The nexus between women empowerment and conflict management in South-South Nigeria underscores the indispensable role of women as agents of change, resilience, and peace.

Despite facing numerous barriers, women in the region have demonstrated their capacity to contribute meaningfully to conflict prevention, resolution, and reconciliation. By empowering women economically, socially, and politically, South-South Nigeria can expose its potential to address the root causes of conflict, promote inclusive peace-building processes, and build more resilient and cohesive communities. Moreover, integrating gender-sensitive approaches into conflict management initiatives can lead to more sustainable and effective peace outcomes. Recognizing the diverse needs, experiences, and contributions of women and men is essential for developing inclusive policies, programmes, and strategies that address the root causes of conflict and promote gender equality and social justice. Mainstreaming gender perspectives into all aspects of peacebuilding and development will help South-South Nigeria to advance towards a more equitable, peaceful, and prosperous future for all its citizens.

However, achieving women's empowerment and inclusive conflict management requires collaborative efforts involving governments, civil society organizations, community leaders, and international partners. It involves the creation of enabling environments that support women's participation, protect women's rights, and address the structural inequalities that perpetuate gender-based violence and discrimination. By prioritizing women's empowerment and gender equality as integral components of peace-building and development agendas, South-South Nigeria can pave the way for a more just, inclusive, and peaceful society for generations to come.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following are recommended:

1. Women organizations should implement measures to enhance women's representation and leadership roles in conflict management initiatives, peace-building processes, and decision-making bodies at all levels. This includes promoting women's inclusion in local peace committees, traditional councils, and community-based organizations, as well as ensuring their participation in formal peace negotiations and policymaking forums. Providing training, capacity-building programmes, and mentorship opportunities for women leaders can also empower them to effectively contribute to conflict resolution and reconciliation efforts.
2. Civil society groups should take comprehensive action to address the root causes of gender-based inequalities and violence that contribute to conflict in South-South Nigeria. This involves enacting and enforcing laws and policies that protect women's rights, prevent gender-based violence, and promote gender equality in areas such as education, healthcare, employment, and land ownership. Investing in gender-responsive services, such as healthcare, legal aid and psychosocial support for survivors of gender-based violence is also crucial for promoting women's empowerment and resilience in conflict-affected communities.
3. Women's organizations should integrate gender perspectives into all aspects of peace-building and development programming in South-South Nigeria. This includes adopting gender-sensitive approaches to conflict analysis, programme design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. They should also prioritize initiatives that address the specific needs and priorities of women and girls, such as livelihood

support, access to education and healthcare, economic empowerment opportunities, and psychosocial support services. Besides, they should engage men and boys as allies in promoting gender equality and challenging harmful gender norms and stereotypes that perpetuate conflict and inequality in the region.

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