

Women Activists and Conflict Resolution in Precolonial Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigated the specific roles of women activists in conflict resolution and peace negotiations in precolonial Nigeria, with an emphasis on their contributions to diplomacy and social stability. While these concepts overlapped, the paper treated conflict resolution as the broader process of preventing and settling disputes and peace negotiation as one key strategy within it. The objective is to clarify how women functioned as active agents within indigenous governance systems. Drawing on secondary historical data and literature, the paper examined political structures across the various societies in precolonial Nigeria. It identified formal and informal institutions through which women mediated disputes, negotiated truces and sustained communal harmony. Using cases of Queen Amina of Zazzau, Moremi Ajasoro, Efunsetan Aniwura, Efunroye Tinubu, Omu Okwei of Osomari and prominent Tiv and Hausa women leaders. The analysis highlighted strategies women deployed: economic leverage, spiritual authority, market/queen institutions and direct diplomatic engagement. Feminist Peace Theory and Structural Functionalism frame the study. Feminist Peace Theory explained why women's peace work has been marginalised and how their methods centred care, relationships and non-violent negotiation. Structural Functionalism explains how women's roles operated as functional components of precolonial political systems, maintaining social order and stability. The theories complemented each other, revealing gendered exclusion and institutional function. Findings showed that women were not passive observers but core actors in conflict resolution. They used diplomacy and social institutions to prevent wars, settle disputes and restore stability long before colonial administration. The paper argued that indigenous women's peace negotiation models are not historical relics but functional mechanisms. Integrating them into contemporary conflict-resolution frameworks in Nigeria can strengthen sustainable peace and development.

Keywords: Conflict resolution, Conflict negotiation, Structural-Functionalism, Feminist Theory, Precolonial, Women activists

Introduction

Over the years, women's participation in the peace process has been widely discussed across various contexts. Beyond this, it has expanded and deployed through various frameworks at both the national and international levels, positioning women as agents of peace negotiation and conflict resolution in peacebuilding. Nevertheless, women were excluded from most societal peace processes. However, in 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 (UNSCR), which introduced formal inclusion and recognition of women in conflict prevention, negotiation, resolution and post-conflict reconstruction at the community, national and international levels (United Nations, 2000). Since then, scholars of peace and conflict have agreed that women's involvement in peace processes leads to lasting solutions to conflict, as their maternal nature ensures the durability and effectiveness of sustainable peace (Anderlini, 2007; Paffenholz et al., 2016). This global change now helps researchers understand the role women played in community peace in traditional African society, especially under the traditional system of governance dominated by men. Despite these significant milestones, contemporary scholars of peacebuilding still neglect the historical role women played in traditional African society. At the same time, most of the recent literature portray women involvement in peace process as a new development emerging from the modern feminist ideology activism and international frameworks

and advocacy forgetting the traditional historical root of women's authority, such illustration demonstrated have overlooked the Africa society before the invasion of the Colonia master, where women participated in institutionalised political governance and held important roles as a regulatory body and conflict resolution agent. Scholars such as Amadiume (2015) and Oyěwùní (1997) opine that in many African societies, men and women operated together for the advancement of the community, where women engaged in mediation and settlement of disputes, enforced communal norms, influenced political decisions among the chiefs and mobilised youth and market women and men for social peaceful action in the community.

However, this is evidence of historical reality in precolonial Nigeria, a society characterised by diverse political structures, ranging from centralised kingdoms to decentralised acephalous societies and segmentary lineage systems (Amadiume, 2015). In other words, across various clans, women held influential positions such as market authorities (*Iyalode*, *Iyalaje* and *Iyaloja*), queen mothers, priestesses, lineage heads and custodians of spiritual and moral values in the community. In this case, their roles extend beyond domestic family affairs to the heart of the community, including serving as mediators, leading collective peaceful protests, commanding military forces in battle, serving as warriors and traditional healers, advising the king and trading and crafting. However, many scholars of peace and conflict have attributed these roles and successes to men, creating male-dominated narratives, colonial involvement and modern-day frameworks (Oyewumi, 1997; Amadiume, 2015). Because of these developments, the historical contributions of precolonial women were neglected, inadequately documented and poorly theorised, creating a gap in the historical understanding of their roles in peacebuilding in Nigeria.

Colonial invasion reinforced patriarchal structures that remove women from formal institutional governance (Mba, 1982; Awe, 1992). Consequently, the perception of women's roles in Nigeria's political governance was shaped more by the colonial legacy rather than the traditional historical realities. Importantly, the recovery of Nigeria's women's role in peacebuilding in the precolonial era is significant not only as a historical contribution for accuracy, but also for contemporary society, laying the groundwork for a culture of sustainable peacebuilding. This study addresses the gap in women's roles in peace negotiation and conflict resolution in precolonial Nigeria. It explored the authority of the spiritual, political and economic strategies women used to ensure community stability. The case studies of women such as Queen Amina of Zaria, Moremi Ajasoro, Efunsetan Aniwura, Efunroye Tinubu, Omu Okwei of Osomari and notable Tiv and Hausa women leaders who have played significant roles were examined.

This paper argues that women are active agents of peace for sustainable harmony, rather than the passive figures society portrays them as. Their contributions reveal indigenous strategies used and challenge the contemporary assumption about gender and governance in African history. The paper investigated the specific roles Nigerian women played in conflict resolution and peace negotiation in precolonial Nigeria, with emphasis on their contributions to diplomacy and social stability. Drawing on secondary historical data and literature, the paper examined political structures across the various societies in Nigeria. It identified formal and informal institutions through which women mediated disputes, negotiated truces and sustained communal harmony.

Theoretical Framework

The study used Feminist Peace Theory and Structural-Functionalism to understand the critical role women played in precolonial society as traditional peace activists in negotiation and conflict resolution. Feminist Peace Theory was applied to interpret why women's peace work had

been marginalised in mainstream political history and to foreground their use of care, relationships and non-violent negotiation. Structural-Functionalism was applied to explain how those same roles functioned as integral components of precolonial political systems, maintaining social order and stability through institutions such as queen/market systems and spiritual authority. Together, these theories provided a critical lens of how gender, power and indigenous institutions influence women's contributions to peacebuilding across various regions in Nigeria.

Feminist Peace Theory

Feminist peace theory serves as a critique of peace and security studies, which states that men are the centred and primary actors in governance and conflict. Scholars such as Tickner (1992) and Enloe (2000) argued that women's roles in social life, rooted in community approaches and experiences in conflict, offer a perspective distinct from that of their male counterparts, as women's strategies for peace are long-lasting and sustainable. The theory critiques the patriarchal assumption that restricts women to the margins of political decision-making and instead emphasises the value of women in informal settings of diplomacy, community-based conflict resolution and moral authority. This theory is applied to the Nigerian precolonial era, in which women are seen as mediators, negotiators, warriors, traditional healers, spiritual custodians, advisors, guardians of community harmony and holders of various authorities within communities. In this traditional era, women hold positions as queen mothers, priestesses, lineage heads, spiritual custodians and traditional healers, which give them important information and moral legitimacy to settle disputes before they escalate. However, this authority was not only symbolic but also embedded in indigenous beliefs that invested women with the power to serve as stabilising forces capable of restoring sustainable peace in the community (Amadiume, 2015; Oyèwùmí, 1997). The theoretical lens highlights the important peacebuilding role that women play in the functioning of the political system in precolonial Nigeria.

Structural-Functionalism Theory

Structural-Functionalism theory views society as interconnected, in which social roles and institutions work together to stabilise order and peace. Classic theorists such as Radcliffe-Brown (1952) emphasise that every social institution must function and maintain stability for the survival of the whole. These instances are classified as precolonial Nigeria, where authority is distributed between men and women to develop political governance through complementary roles. Applying this theory to precolonial Nigeria, women in institutions such as *Iyalode*, *Iyalaje* and *Iyaloja* in Yorubaland, *Magajiya* in Hausaland and *Igboland* and the *Umuada* served significant roles in conflict prevention, negotiation, dispute mediation and societal regulation. However, these institutions were not mere hearsay; they were deeply embedded in the political governance of the institutions in which they operated, alongside their male counterparts. For example, in Yorubaland, *Iyalode*, *Iyaloja* and *Iyalaje* represent women's interests in the political council (Awe, 1992), in *Igboland*, *Umuada* acted as moral mediators in family and community rivalry (Amadiume, 2015). In Hausaland, the *Magajiya* of *Zazzau* was a formal institutional title within the Hausa emirate hierarchy. Her responsibilities included mediating women's disputes, representing female subjects to the emir and managing palace women's affairs, thereby functioning as a recognised node of governance and conflict resolution in precolonial Hausaland. The *Magajiya* exercised authority over women's affairs, though the specific scope of her power varied across emirates and historical periods (Callaway, 1987). Structural-Functionalism was applied in this paper to analyse women's roles as functional components of precolonial political systems. The theory clarified that

institutions such as the Magajiya, queen/market systems and spiritual authority were necessary for maintaining social order and stability, thereby institutionalising their authority within the societal system (Merton, 1968; Nadel, 2013).

Together, the theories reveal that women were not peripheral but central to negotiation and conflict resolution, embedding peacebuilding within both the cultural fabric and gendered dynamics of their societies (Yusuf & Agbonifo, 2025). Feminist and Structural-Functional perspectives offer complementary analytical lenses for understanding women's roles in precolonial Nigerian societies. Feminist analysis foregrounds how women exercised agency, negotiated power and shaped political outcomes despite patriarchal structures. Structural-Functional analysis, in contrast, examines how those same women's roles contributed to the stability and maintenance of the broader social system by performing essential social, economic and conflict-resolution functions. Taken together, the two frameworks explain both the systemic significance of their roles within precolonial polities.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach based on historical analysis. Historical analysis was selected because it enabled contextual interpretation of the past through indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, archival materials and cultural practices that quantitative methods could not capture. Data were drawn from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included archival records, storytelling and historical documents on precolonial Nigeria. Secondary sources included peer-reviewed journal articles and books on women's roles, conflict resolution and African political history. The combination of archival and academic literature ensured a balanced and credible reconstruction of women's roles in peace negotiation and conflict resolution in precolonial Nigeria. Historical analysis provided the empirical evidence of what women did. By connecting historical data with these two frameworks, the study moved beyond mere description. It both recovered women's agency and explained its institutional function. This methodological design, therefore, justified the triangulation: one theory revealed gendered exclusion, the other revealed systemic function and together they provided a fuller understanding of women's political agency as peacebuilders in precolonial Nigeria.

Literature Review

The Role of Women in Precolonial Political Structures in Nigeria

Nigeria was then a precolonial state characterised by a rich diversity of political systems shaped by cultural histories, socioeconomic factors and indigenous knowledge of governance. Through these various ways, women were duly informed in these formations, enabling them to influence governance, sustain communal peace and harmony and mediate peace through these institutionalised roles (Fagbadebo et al., 2026). Although women's roles and authority differ across regions, a common trend is their recognition as custodians of communal peace and harmony, social and community stability and political balance. This section examines the political structures in regions such as South-West, South-East, South-South, North and Central Nigeria, emphasising the institutional mechanisms women used to contribute to peace negotiations and conflict resolution.

South-West (Yorubaland)

In Yorubaland, the political organisation was embedded in the dual political roles of men and women, complementing each other in the governance of the traditional state (Awe, 1992). These structures ensured that both genders operated within a parallel institution, where women

were not excluded from political life and decision-making processes. Women in political authority held offices in which they express their concerns about economic and social life and the overall interests of women in the community, such as *Iyalode*, *Iyaloja* and *Iyalaje*, who represented women's interests in the king's council meetings.

Iyalode is a high-ranking title given to a woman leader who represents women in the community. She serves as an advisor to the kings (Oba) and plays a crucial role in the king's council's decision-making. She is involved in women's affairs, economic development and stability and social welfare of the women in the community (Mba, 1982). She also participated in judicial deliberation, mediated disputes among women and between quarters and mobilised women to enforce peace through protests during crises. *Iyaloja* (Mother of the Market) is a title given to a prominent woman leader responsible for market affairs. She is responsible for overseeing all market activities, as markets are important to Yoruba life in both rural and urban areas. Women who hold this position are known for mediating and resolving market disputes, settling commercial rivalries, negotiating truces and representing women's interests in the community.

Iyalaje is a title given to a community leader who oversees women's affairs and community development projects. *Erelu* is a high-ranking title given to a princess or a respected woman leader involved in governance and decision-making. *Erelu* also advised the king (Oba) on state matters, especially community security and peace, as well as palace politics (Johnson, 1966). Her counsel included mediating palace conflicts and negotiating settlements to prevent civil strife. *Are-Ona Kakanfo's* wife, being a high-ranking military leader, held significant roles and influence, often playing power politics and social affairs in the king's governance (Awe, 1992; Akintoye, 2010). She is involved in both diplomatic and ceremonial functions. Priestesses (lawos) are powerful traditional women who served as spiritual leaders and advisors to the kings and the councils (Idowu, 1982). She also played a crucial role in traditional Yoruba religion and governance. Priestesses, also called *Iyalorisha*, were consulted for their knowledge of matters concerning the king and community affairs, carried out rituals for cleanliness and practised traditional rites to ensure the community remained at peace and harmony. This ritual intervention was used to de-escalate tensions and sanction peace agreements.

Queens called *Omikun* or *Oba Obirin* exist as most Yoruba kingdoms have powerful queens who ruled or co-ruled alongside their husbands or as regents (Johnson, 1966). These queens are involved in significant power tussles and influence the community's governance and decision-making. Within her own circle, she has chiefs in council, both men and women, who support her and reinforce her power in the community. She directly mediated intra-palace disputes, negotiated peace agreements between factions and intervened to halt escalating conflicts in her husband's kingdom by empowering communities and fostering development. These women leaders work with the Oba (King) and the other traditional leaders in council to resolve disputes, ratify peace accords and promote social welfare and community cohesion. Through these institutional roles, Yoruba women leaders exercised their authority and influence that was both recognised and respectable in the then precolonial era governance structure (Ojiakor, Dona & Teshi, 2025)

South-East (Igboland)

The Igbo society operated a republican government under a non-centralised, acephalous political system. Authority was dispersed among the age grades, village assemblies and lineage heads. Despite the decentralised framework, women still work within it and have influenced substantive, well-established institutions such as *Umuada*, the offices of *Omu* and *Otu Odu*

(Amadiume, 2015). Umuada, known as the daughters of a particular lineage, play a significant role in decision-making processes for conflict resolution, resolving marital disputes among couples, settling inter-family tensions among the extended family and mediating in community crises (Chuku, 2009). Their authority comes from their impartiality and moral standing in the community. The Omu is a female leader, often the wife of the traditional ruler or an influential woman in some riverine communities. She oversees trade, makes decisions on women's affairs and social development and settles and mediates disputes among warring parties. At the same time, Otu Odu is a women's organisation or council often involved in decision-making on community development and social issues. They also sanction individuals who seek to threaten the community's peace (Achebe, 2011).

There are others, like the *Isi Ada*, the oldest daughter of a lineage, who play important roles in political settings and in judicial and religious institutions. Ezenwaji is also a woman from the Oru area, whose roles involve conflict resolution and community development (Chuku, 2009). Omu Nwagboka was the last female leader of Onisha to sign a Treaty of Friendship and Protection with the British in 1884 (Chuku, 2009). The Igbo political authority was fragmented across autonomous villages and towns; the specific titles and power of women varied by communities. However, in many Igbo polities, women use collective instruments such as boycotts, public demonstrations and strikes to enforce peace and discipline. This mechanism is intended to ensure adherence to communal norms and prevent disputes and the escalation of conflict within communities. Thus, in decentralised political structures, women's efforts in peace negotiation and resolution were central to maintaining social order.

South-South (Niger Delta)

Trade networks and riverine geography shaped the Niger Delta's fragmented, commerce-driven political formation. Control of waterways and markets gave women strategic leverage and they occupied institutional roles that fused economic authority with conflict management. As lineage heads, priestesses, trade regulators and divine healers, women mediated the intersection of spiritual, economic and social power. Priestesses served as direct intermediaries with deities and oracles during crises, adjudicating disputes, sanctioning peace oaths and performing ritual interventions to de-escalate communal violence and restore harmony after conflict (Alagoa, Anozie & Nzewunwa, 1988). In riverine trading communities, women who regulated trade routes monitored transactions, mediated disputes among traders from competing ethnic groups and brokered peace agreements to secure commercial corridors. This control over commerce gave them economic leverage to negotiate and mediate inter-ethnic diplomacy when trade wars threatened regional stability (Osah & Odedina, 2017). As heads of lineage, women presided over intra-lineage courts, settled marital and inheritance disputes and mediated conflicts between extended families, using their kinship authority to prevent disputes from escalating into communal clashes, thereby reinforcing social cohesion (Isike & Isike, 2016). In summary, the Niger Delta's dependence on trade and spiritual legitimacy positioned women as key actors in both preventing and resolving conflicts, making their institutional roles central rather than peripheral to regional peacebuilding.

North (Hausa/Fulani)

The political landscape of Hausaland shifted significantly from the pre-Jihad Sarauta system of the Hausa Bakwai city-states to the centralised Emirate system established after the 1804 Fulani Jihad and the emergence of the Sokoto Caliphate (Fika, 1973). Women's institutional positions differed between these two systems and were not uniform across all Hausa societies.

Under the pre-Jihad *Sarauta* system in states such as Kano, Zazzau/Zaria, Katsina and Daura, women held recognised titles within palace administration. The Magajiya was a senior palace official in the *Sarauta* hierarchy, typically the wife of the Magaji who administered the royal treasury (Callaway, 1987). While the Magaji served as treasurer and council official, the Magajiya oversaw the affairs of women within the palace, enforced discipline in the royal household, mediated disputes among palace women and managed welfare responsibilities. She was not a member of the male Emirate Council and did not hold the treasury portfolio, which was the preserve of the Maaji/Ajiya (Smith, 2018). After the Fulani Jihad, the Emirate system of the Sokoto Caliphate became dominant in most of Northern Nigeria. In this more centralised, Islamic-influenced structure, women's formal political roles were more restricted, but influential titles persisted in the domestic and social spheres. Inna Giwa, a senior woman of noble lineage found in Emirates such as Zazzau, remained a key figure in palace deliberations on matters affecting women and served as an advisor to the Emir on domestic affairs (Callaway, 1987). Beyond palace politics, Hausa women in both *Sarauta* and Emirate societies negotiated marriage contracts, mediated family and intra-household disputes and participated in community rituals that reinforced social cohesion. Though excluded from formal Emirate Council membership in the post-Jihad period, women exercised authority through cultural norms and palace institutions, mediating conflicts within the household and community domains where male officials had limited access. Their authority was thus rooted in complementary rather than direct administrative power.

Central Nigeria (Nupe, Tiv, Idoma)

The logic for organising this paper by region follows Nigeria's precolonial political diversity: centralised emirates in the North, dual-sex systems in the South-West and segmentary/acephalous systems in the Middle Belt. This regional structure allows comparison of how different political institutions created distinct pathways for women's participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Afigbo, 1981). In Central Nigeria, segmentary political structures distributed authority through age-grades, clans and lineage heads. This created institutional spaces where women, as lineage heads and ritual specialists, performed direct conflict-resolution functions. Among the Tiv, the *Mdzough*, the senior woman of a lineage, worked through the *kwav* age-grade system to settle disputes and restore social order. *Kwav* age-grades regulated behaviour, sanctioned offenders and mediated conflicts between compounds, with *Mdzough* women leading negotiations to prevent feuds from escalating into inter-clan warfare (Bohannon & Bohannon, 1953). Among the Nupe, *Soddy* women served as heads of women's institutions in the palace and in the town. Historical records show that Soddy mediated domestic disputes, supervised market peace and served as a negotiator when conflicts arose between Nupe wards and outsiders (Nadel, 2018). Among the Idoma, *Ogwor* women functioned as lineage heads and ritual specialists. *Ogwor* presided over women's courts, adjudicated cases involving marriage, inheritance and land and performed reconciliation rituals after disputes to restore dignity and prevent retaliation. In addition, the Ocheje and senior women of Ocheje-in-Council mediated inter-clan conflicts and managed peace rituals during farming disputes and marriage disputes, acting as custodians of community stability (Idoma Traditional Council, 1983; Ochai, 2007). Across these groups, marriage alliances were also strategic tools for peace. Women exchanged in marriage between clans served as negotiators during periods of tension, carrying messages and terms of settlement that reduced the likelihood of sustained conflict (Forde, Brown & Armstrong, 2017). Through these institutional roles, age-grade leadership, lineage headship and ritual authority, Central Nigerian women were not peripheral advisors. They were direct actors in mediation, adjudication

and reconciliation, forming the institutional foundation that produced activist women leaders who later engaged in broader peace negotiations and resistance against colonial rule.

Women in Precolonial Peace Processes: Case Studies

In precolonial Nigeria, women's roles extended beyond domestic reproduction to include formally recognised positions as educators, health practitioners, ritual specialists and political administrators within their communities (Yusuf & Fagbadebo, 2026a). Evidence from regional political systems shows that Yoruba *Iyalode* and *Iyaloja* regulated markets and mediated disputes, Tiv *Mdzough* leaders managed age-grade sanctions to prevent inter-clan conflicts and Nupe *Soddy* officials adjudicated domestic and commercial cases (Bohannon & Bohannon, 1953; Nadel, 1954; Awe, 1992). Through these institutional offices, women functioned as knowledge transmitters, conflict mediators and policy actors, making their contributions integral to social order and governance rather than peripheral to male authority. They play an existential role in preserving social cohesion, spiritual balance and economic survival; they influence decision-making processes and sustain family and community life through conflict prevention, peace negotiation, resolution, reconciliation and mediation (Mshelia & Emmanuel, 2025; Asubiaro-Dada, 2025). These acts alone are God-given talents women possess in society. These justify the assertion that the fear of women is the beginning of progress, peaceful co-existence and uprightness in society. However, across regions, women in precolonial society were deeply rooted in these practices, which were not incidental but institutionalised, legitimised and strategic in leadership (Olaleye, Gbadamosi & Adekoya, 2024; Kamlongera, 2025). The following case studies illustrate different ways in which women shaped peace processes, mediated, strategized, stabilised and demonstrated the breadth of women as agents of active peace in precolonial governance.

Queen Amina of Zaria

Queen Amina of Zazzau is one of the most prominent female leaders remembered in 16th-century Northern Nigeria and the Central Sudan. Oral traditions and chronicles date her reign to c. 1576–1610, during the period of Zazzau's expansion (Iweze & Amos, 2024). While the precise biographical details of Amina remain debated among historians due to reliance on oral sources, the "Amina tradition" is widely accepted as a historical memory of a female monarch who led Zazzau's territorial expansion and state consolidation (Last, 1967). Her significance for conflict resolution lies not only in military campaigns but in the administrative mechanisms she institutionalised to stabilise conquered territories. Amina's forces expanded Zazzau's influence on Nupe and Kwararafa, but conquest was followed by systems designed to prevent recurring conflict. She established a tribute-trade network that integrated defeated polities into Zazzau's economic system through mutual obligations, reducing incentives for rebellion and creating diplomatic ties with neighbouring states (Smith, 2018). To secure peace along trade corridors, Amina is credited with constructing fortified earthen walls, *ganuwar* Amina, around key towns. These *gidan gari* settlements enhanced regional security, protected trade routes from banditry and provided defensible administrative centres that reduced raiding and inter-communal violence (Callaway, 1987). Thus, military strength served as a precursor to diplomatic order: force was used to defeat opponents, then treaties, tribute and fortifications were used to consolidate peace and administrative control. As Callaway (1987) argues, Amina's leadership demonstrates how Hausa women in precolonial states could exercise both coercive and diplomatic authority. Her governance model exemplifies conflict resolution through deterrence, negotiation and institutionalisation, transforming Zazzau from a raided frontier into a politically cohesive trading state. This case

shows that in centralised Hausa polities, women leaders were remembered as actors who used state power to terminate cycles of conflict rather than perpetuate them.

Moremi Ajasoro

Moremi Ajasoro is a legendary figure in the Yoruba oral tradition, celebrated for her role in ending the protracted conflict between Ile-Ife and neighbouring raiders, often identified as *Ugbo* in different versions (Ogunyemi, 1996). According to oral accounts, Moremi's conflict-resolution strategy combined espionage, diplomacy and ritual sacrifice. She voluntarily entered the raiders' camp, gathered intelligence on their tactics and weaknesses and transmitted it to the Ooni and the Ife war chiefs (Ogunyemi, 1996; Biobaku, 1973). This intelligence enabled Ile-Ife to develop countermeasures that ended the raids and restored security to the kingdom. While Moremi's story is mytho-historical rather than strictly documented, her legacy functions as cultural evidence of how Yoruba society institutionalised women's roles in intelligence-gathering and sacrificial diplomacy as legitimate mechanisms for conflict resolution (Apter, 1992). The title *Ajasoro* is still used to refer to Yoruba women who intervene decisively in communal crises, reflecting the philosophical principle that women can safeguard community stability through nonviolent, strategic action rather than escalating violence.

Efunsetan Aniwura

Efunsetan Aniwura, *Iyalode* of 19th-century Ibadan, exercised conflict-resolution authority through her formal institutional office in the Yoruba dual-sex political system. As *Iyalode*, she was a member of the Ibadan Council of Chiefs with jurisdiction over women's economic and domestic affairs (Mba, 1982). Historical records show *Efunsetan* used this office to mediate disputes before they escalated. She adjudicated conflicts between traders in *Ogunpa* Market, imposed sanctions on warriors who disrupted commercial activity and enforced market regulations that reduced violent competition during Ibadan's period of constant warfare (Awe, 1992; Eades, 1980). Her strict policies on debt, trade fraud and disorder functioned as pre-emptive conflict management: by regulating economic behaviour, she minimised grievances that could trigger community unrest (Mba, 1982). Though her authoritarian style eventually led to conflict with the Balogun, *Efunsetan's* tenure demonstrates how women in formal council positions used administrative power and judicial authority to maintain internal peace and democratic order within urban Yoruba centres.

Efunroye Tinubu

Efunroye Tinubu was a 19th-century Egba-Yoruba merchant and political actor who institutionalised economic power as a tool for diplomatic mediation and conflict resolution between c. 1830 and 1874. As *Iyalaja* of Abeokuta and later a dominant trader in Lagos, she controlled trans-regional networks for kola, firearms and cash crops, positioning her as a key intermediary between Egba polities and British colonial officials (Byfield, 2021; Awe, 1992). Tinubu's conflict-resolution role is documented in two specific contexts of political crisis. First, during the 1850s–1866 period of tension between the Egba of Abeokuta and British consular officials over trade access and sovereignty, Tinubu functioned as a formal mediator. She opened her Isale-Eko compound as a negotiation venue where Egba chiefs and British representatives met to discuss terms of trade and political authority (Denzler, 1987). In intra-Egba disputes, particularly succession conflicts among chiefs, she extended credit and material patronage to rival factions to

prevent escalation into armed confrontation, using economic leverage to enforce temporary truces and maintain Egba cohesion against external pressure (Mann, 2007).

Second, following the British annexation of Lagos in 1861, Tinubu deployed economic sanctions as a diplomatic bargaining tool. She coordinated market women to boycott British merchants who violated local commercial customs and withdrew credit from European traders until negotiated terms were reached (Byfield, 2021). This action reduced the likelihood of military retaliation by imposing financial costs on the colonial administration, thereby compelling officials to negotiate continued market access for Egba traders (Denzer, 1987). Through these mechanisms, Tinubu exemplifies the activist dimension of women's conflict resolution in precolonial Nigeria. Her authority was rooted in the Yoruba dual-sex political system, which recognised *Iyaloja* as head of market women with regulatory and judicial jurisdiction over commerce (Awe, 1992). Lacking a formal military office, she translated control of credit, supply chains and market access into mediation, truce enforcement and negotiated settlement. Tinubu's strategies demonstrate how women activists used economic diplomacy to de-escalate conflicts, broker peace agreements and shape political outcomes during the transition from precolonial autonomy to colonial encroachment.

Omu Okwei of Osomari Clan

Omu Okwei was a 19th-century Igbo female titleholder and merchant from Osomari in present-day Anambra State, recognised as Omu, the head of women and co-ruler with the male Obi in the Igbo dual-sex political system (Uchendu, 1965). As a dominant trader in salt, fish, textiles and European goods along the Niger River, she controlled trade routes linking Igboland to the Niger Delta and Atlantic coast (Orji, 2011). This economic position gave her institutional authority to intervene in conflicts that threatened commercial stability. Okwei's specific conflict-resolution roles are documented in trade and community disputes. When disputes arose between Osomari traders and European merchants over prices, debt and trading terms in the mid-19th century, Okwei acted as mediator by convening market assemblies and negotiating terms acceptable to both Igbo traders and foreign partners (Orji, 2011). She used her office to enforce fair trade practices and sanction traders who engaged in fraud or violence, thereby preventing commercial disputes from escalating into inter-communal conflict (Uchendu, 1965). In intra-Igbo matters, Okwei represented women's interests in the council of elders and intervened in domestic and lineage disputes before they disrupted social cohesion, using the Omu court to adjudicate cases involving women's property and marriage rights (Amadiume, 2015). Through these actions, Okwei exemplifies how Igbo women used economic and institutional authority to prevent. Without formal military command, she converted control of trade networks and the Omu judicial office into mediation and regulation. Her leadership demonstrates that in decentralised Igbo polities, women maintained peaceful coexistence by resolving economic and social disputes at the communal level, preventing escalation into ethnic or colonial conflicts.

Synthesis: Patterns and Significance of Women's Conflict Resolution Roles in Precolonial Nigeria

The case studies of Queen Amina of Zazzau, Moremi Ajasoro of Ile-Ife, Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan, Efunroye Tinubu of Abeokuta/Lagos and Omu Okwei of Osomari reveal consistent patterns in how women contributed to peace negotiations and conflict resolution in precolonial Nigeria despite regional variation in political structures. Three shared mechanisms emerge across centralised states, Yoruba kingdoms and decentralised Igbo polities: shaping political outcomes,

mediating disputes and maintaining social cohesion. First, women shaped political outcomes by converting institutional or economic authority into decision-making power. In centralised Hausa and Yoruba states, Amina used post-conquest administrative consolidation and tribute treaties to redefine Zazzau's borders and secure trade routes, directly determining territorial peace (Smith, 2018). Efunsetan Aniwole adjudicated disputes as Iyalode in the Ibadan Council of Chiefs, giving women formal access to judicial decisions on war and peace (Awe, 1992). In decentralised Igboland, Omu Okwei represented women's interests in council negotiations with colonial officials over taxation and market access, inserting women's concerns into political agreements (Amadiume, 2015).

Second, women mediated conflicts using tools that aligned with regional institutions. Amina practised treaty diplomacy after military victory; Moremi used intelligence-gathering and sacrificial diplomacy to end Ife's war with the Ugbò; Efunsetan applied market regulations and judicial mediation to pre-empt trader-warrior clashes; Tinubu hosted negotiation venues and deployed economic boycotts to broker terms between Egba chiefs and British consuls; Okwei convened market assemblies to settle debt and pricing disputes between Osomari merchants and European traders (Uchendu, 1965; Orji, 2011). Thus, mediation was not uniformly consistent in function.

Third, all five women maintained social cohesion by de-escalating violence. Amina's *ganuwar* walls and trade networks reduced raiding; Moremi's intelligence ended protracted raids on Ile-Ife; Efunsetan's market rules pre-empted trader-warrior conflict; Tinubu's credit and boycotts reduced Egba-British military tension; Okwei sanctioned fraudulent traders to prevent commercial disputes from becoming inter-communal violence (Denzer, 1987; Byfield, 2021). Their authority was rooted in spiritual, economic and institutional power. Amina, through military/administrative office; Moremi, through ritual authority; Efunsetan and Tinubu, through market leadership; Okwei, through the Omu court and trade networks.

Contemporary Relevance

These historical roles remain relevant for contemporary peacebuilding in Nigeria. Modern conflict in the Middle Belt, Niger Delta and North-East often involves disputes over land, trade and community identity, the same issues these women managed. First, the institutional model of the *Iyalode* and *Omu* demonstrates that formal inclusion of women in local governance structures increases access to early-warning and mediation channels. Current policies, such as Nigeria's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325, can draw on this precedent by establishing recognised female leadership offices at the LGA and community levels (Yusuf & Fagbadebo, 2020b). Second, the economic diplomacy used by Tinubu and Okwei shows that women's control of trade networks and market associations remains a practical tool for conflict prevention. Women market leaders today still mediate disputes between farmers, herders and traders in markets across Kano, Ibadan and Onitsha. Third, Moremi's intelligence and community mobilisation model aligns with contemporary "women, peace and security" approaches that emphasise grassroots information networks and non-violent protest over militarised response. Thus, precolonial practices provide indigenous templates for gendered peacebuilding that complement, rather than replace, modern institutions. Recognising this continuity adds value beyond documentation by informing policy on women's inclusion in conflict resolution today.

Conclusion

This study on Women Activists and Conflict Resolution in Precolonial Nigeria demonstrates that women were not marginal figures but central actors in political, economic and social spheres of peacebuilding. Evidence from five regional cases shows how women shaped political outcomes and mediated social tensions through institutionally embedded roles rather than incidental influence. In centralised states, Queen Amina of Zazzau shaped political outcomes through post-conquest administrative consolidation and tribute treaties that redefined territorial borders and secured trade routes, thereby reducing cycles of raiding (Smith, 2018). Efunsetan Aniwura mediated social tensions as *Iyalode* in the Ibadan Council of Chiefs, where her judicial authority allowed her to adjudicate disputes between traders and warriors before they escalated into war (Awe, 1992). In decentralised Igboland, *Omu Okwei* of *Osomari* mediated commercial and social conflicts by convening market assemblies to settle debt disputes between *Osomari* merchants and European/Aro traders and by adjudicating women's property cases through the *Omu* court, preventing intra-lineage feuds from disrupting trade networks (Orji, 2011; Amadiume, 2015). Efunroye Tinubu shaped political outcomes in Abeokuta and Lagos by hosting negotiation venues and deploying economic boycotts to broker terms between Egba chiefs and British consuls during trade disputes (Denzer, 1987). *Moremi Ajasoro* mediated the protracted conflict between Ile-Ife and the Igbo-Ugbò through intelligence gathering and sacrificial diplomacy, thereby directly determining Ife's military and diplomatic responses (Akintoye, 2010). Across these cases, women exercised authority through economic control of trade routes, spiritual/ritual authority, judicial office and collective kinship institutions such as *Umuada* and age-grades. Their roles were formalised and recognised within indigenous political structures, challenging the contention that African women were excluded from precolonial governance. This evidence confirms that peacebuilding in precolonial Nigeria was a gendered process of responsibility-sharing.

Implications for Contemporary Peacebuilding

Recognising these indigenous models has value beyond historical documentation. Contemporary Nigerian conflict resolution remains challenged by disputes over land, trade and community identity, the same issues managed by Amina, Efunsetan, Tinubu and Okwei. Drawing on these historical precedents, policymakers can: 1. Formalise women's inclusion in local governance through offices modelled on *Iyalode* and *Omu*, as encouraged by Nigeria's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325. 2. Leverage women's economic networks and market associations for early-warning and mediation, following the economic diplomacy of Tinubu and *Okwei*. 3. Support grassroots intelligence and non-violent mobilisation, modelled on Moremi's community action. Restoring the historical visibility of women's peacebuilding roles, therefore, enriches historiography and provides culturally grounded strategies for sustainable, gender-inclusive conflict resolution in present-day Nigeria.

Recommendations

Building on the evidence presented, this study recommends four actionable strategies to integrate indigenous women's peace institutions into contemporary mechanisms. First, state governments and LGAs should institutionalise female leadership offices modelled on *Iyalode/Iyaloja*, *Omu* and *Magajiya* by creating statutory advisory roles in traditional councils and local security committees, as provided for under Nigeria's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325. This will ensure women's early-warning and mediation roles are formally recognised, as they were in Ibadan and Osomari. Second, the National Archives and university history departments should

fund documentation projects to record biographies and oral histories of women peace actors, following the model of documented cases like *Amina* and *Moremi*. Digitising these records will provide evidence for gender-inclusive governance and curricula. Third, peace and conflict studies curricula in Nigerian universities should incorporate modules on precolonial mediation by *Umuada*, age-grades and market regulators, using case-based teaching. This will reshape perceptions of women's agency and train future mediators. Fourth, TETFUND and research councils should fund comparative studies across African societies on women's culturally informed peace roles to expand policy-relevant models beyond Nigeria. For instance, reviving the institution of *Iyalode* in Yorubaland, where female chiefs historically mediated market disputes and advised on war and peace decisions.

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