

**Market Women in a Post Conflict Environment:
Agency and Empowerment for Women in Jos,
Nigeria.**

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Abstract

Violent conflicts always pose serious threats to livelihoods of people, especially women. Interestingly, conflicts also open up economic opportunities in the informal sector, and it can subsequently lead to the empowerment of people in the society especially women, which is against the idea that conflict always affects economic activity. This study explored how violence has opened up opportunities and empowered women in conflict. This study relied on personal interviews with 15 market women in two vegetables markets in Jos. The findings of the study show that market women are able to remake their stories from that of victimhood to empowerment. They did this by employing strategies such as reliance on social networks and diversifying income generating activities. Opportunities were opened up for more women to gain access and improve their livelihood, which in turn

changed gender relations and opened up a better position for them in market relations. They also highlighted some challenges, such as limited access to credit and markets. This study recommended that government should support women's economic empowerment to easily access soft loans and build market infrastructure.

Key words: Market Women, Post conflict, Agency, Empowerment

Introduction

Communal conflict along overlapping ethnic and religious group boundaries has killed more than 7,000 people in the city of Jos and rural areas of Plateau State in central Nigeria since fighting first broke out in 2001 (Krause, 2019, p. 3). This conflict lasted for over 10 years with dire consequences. Some of the effects of the conflicts include loss of lives and properties, destruction of source of livelihoods as businesses and trade was altered. Especially, that of women whose source of livelihood depends on their everyday sales. Despite these effects on women, they have not remained in the position of victimhood, but have used their agency to pull through difficult times and make a living. This demonstrates that women are not always helpless and solely victims of war. As Fuest aptly formulated, there is the possibility of 'female gains' as opposed to the often

cited ‘female losses’ and women’s victimization during wars and in postwar situations. By focusing on women’s opportunities I do not want to downplay the extreme exploitation and hardships (physical and psychological) that the majority of girls and women have endured and are still enduring in conflict times (Fuest, 2008, p. 2). This study therefore, sets out to explore the lives of market women in post conflict Jos and what they are doing to cope with the effects of conflict on their lives and livelihoods.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design, which includes a desk review of existing literature and personal interviews with market women. Simple but detailed questions were drafted and 15 personal interviews were conducted with market women using snowball sampling technique. This technique helped in selecting women based on recommendations because of their unique experiences during the conflict. The interviews also gave the women an opportunity to share their experiences of the conflict and how it has empowered them. The analysis is descriptive and it is based on three months of field research in Jos in the year 2017. Their names were not published to protect their identity.

Review of Related Literature

Quite a number of studies have been carried out on the conflicts (ethno/religious and farmers/herders) in Jos by focusing on issues relating to the dynamics, causes, nature and impacts of the conflicts in general. Other studies (including (Blench, 2003; Porter, Lyon, Adamu, Obafemi, & Blench, 2005; Higazi, 2011; Best & Hoomlong, 2011; Fwatshak, 2011) have discussed markets in the Plateau State and the northern parts of Nigeria during conflict situations but only in passing (Bonkat, 2015). For example, Mang in his study “Can we meet at the Market Tomorrow? Commerce, Authority, and Economic Power Relations after Violent Conflicts in Jos, Nigeria” (Mang, 2012), focused on power relations in markets after violent conflicts in Jos. Bonkat (2014) in her work she examined the various strategies and initiatives women employed to survive and make a living in conflict situations. The paper showed that women were affected by conflict however, they employed strategies that ensured their source of livelihoods are secured. The paper concluded that the strategies and initiatives employed by small-scale women entrepreneurs in Jos during violence has kept them safe and ensured their livelihoods needs are met especially for women who have assumed new roles of household heads (Bonkat, 2014). Bonkat (2015) examined the impact of conflict on social relations, its

effects on women's lives, and how they coped with conflict. It argued that even though they were affected, they did not remain passive; instead they showed resilience by finding ways of coping, creating a niche for themselves and drawing on their social networks, such as family ties and associations, to continue making a living. She further argued that the coping strategies employed by market women became advantageous to them because they brought in a new social order by changing the gendered division of roles (Bonkat, 2015). Krause examined gender relations and dimensions of violence, non-violence and post violence prevention in Jos. She argued that civilian agency is gendered. Simply put, gender relations and the notions of masculinity can facilitate or constrain people's mobilization for fighting. From her findings she concludes that there is a need for an increase space for women's public influence and community leadership, and respected forms of non-violent masculinity (Krause, 2019). These are just a few studies that have attempted to study economies in conflict and the lives of people especially women. Also there are very few literature on the post conflict lives of women in Jos, like that of Krause but focusing on how gender relations can help prevent conflict. This is one of the gap this paper sets out to fill.

Conceptual framework

Empowerment

Empowerment means different things in different context for each individual or group. Definitions vary according to disciplines like Psychology, Political science, Education, Law or Economics, among others. With regard to women's empowerment, there is also a similar problem. There is no consensus definition regarding the concept of women's empowerment and it also depends on the culture and the context. Kabeer defines empowerment as 'the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.' (Kabeer, 2001, p. 19). Rowlands, 1997, defines empowerment as a process by which people become aware of their own interests and how those relate to the interests of others, for both to participate from a position of greater strength in decision-making and to actually influence such decisions. Three dimensions of empowerment were considered as: personal, relational and collective. They all have to do with people working through their choices to achieve and make impact in society (Rowland, 1997, p 13-14). Stromquist, sees empowerment as "a process to change the distribution of power both in interpersonal relations and in institutions throughout society" (Stromquist, 1993). Lazo also describes empowerment as "a process of

acquiring, providing, bestowing the resources and the means or enabling the access to a control over such means and resources and it could be a self-propelled and self-propelling process” (Lazo, 1993, p. 25). This study defines women empowerment as the conscious life choices women make by releasing their potentials and making use of them to change their situation.

Agency

Agency can be defined as the ability of an individual to take an action, independent of another, for the purpose of achieving a goal. Sen sees agency to be of high value as it has to do with “acting freely and being able to choose in the view that is, directly conducive to well-being” (Sen, 1992, p. 51). “Agency, is a kind of process freedom” concerned with processes” (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007, p. 9). Kabeer sees agency in relations to the ability of individuals to have goals and act upon them. The process involves bargaining and negotiating, as well as resistance and manipulation (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438 cited in Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007, p. 10). Agency according to Kabeer “represents the processes by which choices are made and put into effect (Kabeer, 2005, p. 14) and use. It is people’s ability to make and act on their own life choices, even in the face of other’s opposition. (Kabeer, 2005, P. 14). Agency as it relates to women in a post conflict environment means a situation where they make

choices that will enable them survive and make a living despite the effects of conflict. Market women's strategies to cope in post conflict situations is their form of agency which has led to their empowerment. Human beings, therefore, have the ability to initiate and make changes that can lead to their transformation, which in this study is the empowerment of women through their initiatives to find solutions to their problems caused by conflict.

Background to the conflict in Jos

Jos, the capital of Plateau State, also known as the home of peace and tourism, is an old mining town. The city has experienced the eruption of violent communal conflict for about a period of over 10 years, between 2001 to date (2021). Several scholars like Sha 2005, Best, 2007, Fwatshak, 2007 amongst others have pointed to many causes ranging from issues of political power, identity, leadership and ownership amongst others. These issues have resulted to contestations between the different groups on the Plateau, thereby resulting in violence and increasing eruption of conflicts in Jos. For example, since 1994 to 2021, Jos has become one of the conflicts states in the North-central Region, with the occurrences of conflicts simultaneously every year and of recent at intervals of months and sometimes no day passes by without reports of violent attacks in one community or the other (Sha, 2007; Bonkat,

2014). Arguing in line with Bonkat 2014, violent conflicts have had devastating effects on men, women and children over the past ten years in Jos, Plateau state. But with the return of relative peace, and post conflict situation there are no documented studies yet to understand the lives of people especially, women in post conflict Jos, which is the gap this studies has set out fill.

Women's Role in conflict

Women are often perceived not to play any role in conflict situations or they are always victims, as such little attention is given to what happens to them during and after conflict as such not much (<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/D946B37BBFD5E431C1256D56002EB960-NetherlandsWomenRole.pdf>). However, of recent studies have shown that women play different roles in conflict and post conflict situations. They play active roles such as perpetrators, agents of change, and as combatants (Bonkat, 2014, Wright 2005). Women have actively participated in conflict and served as support to men during conflict. For example during the 2004 conflict in Wase and Yelwa in Plateau State women were seen carrying bows and arrows to fight, as well as carrying water and food for the men (Bonkat, 2014, p. 287).

Women also serve as peace Activist: during conflict they at times organize so as to call the attention of government and security agencies to protect their sons and husbands. Women marched to Government house in Jos, protesting for the killing of their husbands and sons during the conflict (Bonkat, 2014). Similar examples were recorded in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Northern Ireland and Liberia among others, where women played significant roles in the mobilization for peace (Cruz, 2016, p. 23).

Facilitators of resolution processes: Conflict opens windows of opportunities for women to actually participate in formal peace negotiations. Their contribution to conflict resolution and peace building is regarded as positive, because they bring their diverse experiences to help in the peace process. This gives them the opportunity to enter the public and political arena, through their associations such as women groups and organizations (Bonkat, 2014).

Head of households: Women are forced to take over the traditional roles of men because they are either killed or incapacitated from carrying out their roles as household heads or breadwinners. In Plateau state for example, many women lost their husbands as such they are have taken the responsibility of providing for their families

and thus they face extreme financial pressures which makes them vulnerable and they become easy preys to abuse (Taft, Blyth, and Murphy, 2016) . Also it was stated in another research that, during and after the conflict women had to pick up new roles and responsibilities like being the bread-winner and provider for their families, caring for the victims of the conflict and also trauma healing for the victims (Bulus, Bhatti & Beysoylu, 2020, p. 193). The negative effects of the conflict on women have forced them to take up the traditional role head of household to enable them cater for their families and ensure livelihood needs are met. Organisations were therefore formed to build the vocational skills of women in order for them to acquire skills by organising training programs in their respective communities. A good example, is an association called Anis'au Women for Peace and Development in Bukuru community where opportunity was created for women to develop some of their skills to enable them create sustainable livelihood through which they can sustain their families (Bulus, Bhatti & Beysoylu, 2020).

Praying role: Women always pray for their family members for divine protection. Because of believe that our safety and security is in God (Bonkat, 2014).

Protection role: Women protect themselves in times of conflict. For example, in Jos some Hausa/Muslim women played positive roles during the violent conflict, shielding and protecting their Christian neighbors and vice versa (Bonkat, 2014). In sum, arguing in line with Cruz, Haeri & Puechguirbal, "...women are far more resilient and less vulnerable to the impacts of armed conflict than is suggested in much of the current humanitarian aid literature and given the active roles they often adopt, the perspective of women is invaluable not only in the midst of the conflict, but also with regard to conflict resolution and reconstruction in the wake of the hostilities (Cruz, 2016, p. 24).

Resilient Women and Empowerment in Post-conflict situation in Jos

Violent conflicts have many impacts on the lives of people, especially women, as they pick up new roles especially in patriarchal societies. The changes that occur are brought onto them by conflict and in some cases it opens up opportunities for them to be empowered (Cruz, 2016). These changes can lead to the empowering of women initially believed to be victims of war socially, politically, economically, and individually. This is the case of some women in markets in Jos referred to as "**resilient women**". A concept borrowed from Krause (2018) "resilient communities". The

analysis here focuses on the strategies market women employed to cope with livelihood challenges caused by the conflict, which opened up opportunities for them to be empowered. This therefore, changes the narrative from the story of victimhood to that of empowerment and agency. In the absence of men during conflict, women are challenged to take on roles in public sphere which forces them to redefine the cultural and social perceptions of themselves (Cruz, 2016, p. 24). Women's choices and actions therefore led to their empowerment which is categorized at different levels. These levels are; Domestic empowerment, Political empowerment, Self-empowerment and Economic empowerment discussed below;

Domestic empowerment

During conflict women in the domestic sphere are forced to take up the roles of household heads in decision making and providing for the family, while the men are out trying to ensure calmness or some get killed or maimed. Therefore, there is a redefinition of the roles of women within the family. In an interview with a market woman where she pointed out that "I became responsible for meeting the needs of bringing food and paying schools fees, instead of taking care of the children". This was supported by the study of Bonkat (2014), where she puts that the dead of husbands or caught up in fighting

forced women to become household heads instead of carrying out their traditional role of care giving. Some women were also left with the responsibility of taking decisions since the men are no longer there. The situation has not been easy on them because decision-making is not something they are used to doing (Bonkat, 2015, p.198). Many women acquired new confidence, new skills, and a new vision for the future, increasing their participation in public affairs (Cruz, 2016, p. 24). Also supported by Cruz women became income earners and main decision makers demonstrating their capabilities and capacities. They redefine their roles and self-perception within the family unit (Cruz, 2016, p. 25). The absence of men due to fighting led to increased responsibility for women to carry on as heads of household, breadwinners and decision making in the community (Wright, 2005, p. 38). These new roles as decision makers and main income earners taken up by women will enhance their capacity to get involved in the public and social spheres in decision making at the domestic level.

Political Empowerment

Most research in Nigeria have shown that the empowerment of women politically during conflicts is very low. For example, studies by Garba, 2016, Olaitan 2018, Bulus, Bhatti & Beysoylu (2020) and Oluremi,

2021 have argued that women's participation in peace processes in Nigeria is very low and unbalanced, instead the stage is still dominated by men. However, from observation and discussions I discovered that women are getting more involved on decision making tables as it relates to peace building and other issues relating to conflict. In an interview with a Fulani woman she pointed out that "before these conflicts we are not allowed to talk when our men are talking. But with conflicts and its effects on us, our opinion is now soughton what should done to reduce these violence and the effects on us". There are efforts to include more women in the process of peace building. However, I will say women are becoming more active in decision making process particularly in peace building. The reason is to ensure the involvement of all people (genders) in decision making processes as, they are the most affected in conflicts times. Many women-led associations were formed since 2010 aimed at building peace in Plateau State (Chima & Alokpa, 2015). This opened up opportunities for women to be involved in peacebuilding activities. A good example is the Plateau Women Peace Initiative (PWPI) a voluntary association for women, which promoted dialogue between Muslim and Christian women. The association created space for women across religious divides where they contributed to peacebuilding and the healing of the state. It was also

a platform that enabled women participate in peacebuilding as well building their skills (Bulus, Bhatti & Beysoylu, 2020). These associations gave women a voice in the peacebuilding process in Plateau state, as such empowering them politically to some extent. However, there is a need to empower more women politically in the peacebuilding process in Nigeria.

Self-Empowerment

Women through their efforts collectively or individually became empowered, by understanding their potential and ability to make changes in the face of difficulty caused by conflict. They were displaced by conflict, as such, instead becoming victims of war they moved away from potential areas that were unsafe, and created new markets to enable them continue trading to sustain and meet their livelihood needs. A woman interviewed noted that, “before the conflict and subsequent displacement, we traded in our village markets. But since we got displaced a new market was created in the neighbourhood to trade, while others traded in a nearby village market. This I will say has helped us greatly”. The women above have shown how grateful they are, because of the opportunity granted them to start livelihood and support their families through their new acquired trade. Thereby, making them self-reliant and empowered. In another interview a woman said "new

markets have been established in neighbourhoods where people feel more secure to sell and buy. In Gyel for example, there is a market composed mainly of Christians, and another is made up of only Muslims”. This is supported by studies of Mang, 2012, Bonkat, 2014, Best & Hoomlong, 2012, and Bonkat 2017 of how traders created new markets (Tomato and Bukuru markets etc.) during times of conflict to ensure livelihood needs are met. Also makeshift markets sprang up in Jos as part of coping strategies adopted by petty traders (Best & Hoomlong, 2011, p. 176). As Fuest showed in the case of Liberia that in the course of the years of violent conflict, the war seems to have effected an increase in the scope of economic activities performed by women. Another strategy was the reliance of women on their social networks to find ways of sustaining their families and ensure their source of livelihood. This is because it was difficult to raise capital because of losses incurred during the conflict. Therefore, to cope they organized themselves and formed what is called “adashe” or saving groups along ethnic, religious and trade lines. They contributed money and foodstuff amongst themselves to support one another. This was buttressed by interviews below:

“I was not serious with contributing money before the conflict, but now I am more committed. This is because the daily contribution I make has been very

useful. For example, I had to collect money from the contribution scheme to enable me to pay my grandson's school fees".

Another woman said "sometimes you lack the funds with which to purchase more goods for sales, as a result, I will collect some of the money I contributed to purchase more goods". This resonates with Wrights arguments of how women's participation in collective action is empowering in that it allows them to play a more active role in public life, increases their skills, and turns them from victims to agents actively looking for solutions to their community problems" (Wright, 2005, p. 34). The collective efforts of women shows how women here have used their abilities and initiatives to be self-sustaining and self-reliant thereby empowering them collectively and individually. They have also shown their agency by sustaining themselves by creating new markets. Market women have created solidarity among themselves through their ethnic and religious networks to enable them access resources that provide support to its members materially and monetarily (Bonkat, 2015).

Economic empowerment

The creation of new markets empowered women who previously had no means of generating income to gain a source of livelihood by entering into the market to trade. A woman said, "I am new here. I started this business

because of the new market created in my neighbourhood. I am happy because I can support my family with the little income I earn from here”. Another woman in particular revealed that “she was not interested in trading but because the market had moved closer to her residence, she used the opportunity to trade because my husband would not allow me to go anywhere to sell” (Bonkat, 2015, p. 239). There is an increase of women participating in economic activities in Jos thereby, leading to empowerment of more women economically to support their families and communities. Also, there was an increased visibility and status of market women in power relations in vegetable marketing. Their actions have helped women carve an economic niche for themselves in the market. It has also helped them solve the problem of meeting their daily needs, and increased their resources to sustain them and keep them in business (Bonkat, 2015, p. 223). They were able to achieve this by pooling resources together. Arguing in line with Bonkat & Akume, (2017) many women have been empowered because of the creative actions of some women by creating new markets to ensure livelihood needs are met, and which has opened up opportunities for other women to earn a living or obtain alternative sources of livelihood.

Another way women got economically empowered was through the diversification of income generation sources.

Selling at home is another strategy employed by market women that has empowered them economically. A woman interviewed stated that “many women have confirmed that in addition to selling in the market, selling at home also has its benefits. The strategy market women have employed here have further empowered them economically, as they are getting more income to support their families. Market women’s agency here shows a departure from the traditional Nigerian society where women and a motivation for women to join the business. Economic empowerment has its challenges for women. For example, the burden on them increased thereby, affecting their traditional role of tending their families. While many women gained because of the conflict many other women were affected by the conflict. For example, many women were displaced or some loss their businesses because of the conflict. In some of the interviews conducted some traders pointed out that the conflict displaced them or their markets were destroyed, as a result they lost their source of livelihood. A trader had this to say: The market I used to sell my goods was destroyed, because of this I had to start from the scratch. Another woman in an interview told me of how the Main market got burnt and she lost her source of livelihood. We can see here that, market women found themselves in situations where all their goods and source of

livelihoods were destroyed thereby affecting their lives and that of their families negatively.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has analysed the lives of market women in post conflict Jos and what they are doing to cope with the effects of conflict on their lives and livelihoods. Using personal interviews of women in Farin gada and Bukuru markets, the findings shows that generally, the conflict in Jos has affected women negatively, however, they have not remained passive and accepted the position of victimhood. Instead they employed some strategies that empowered, enhanced their lives and livelihoods as such they are tagged '**resilient women**' who have coped and adapted well despite the new conditions they have found themselves in. These strategies have led to their empowerment in different aspects such as domestic empowerment, political empowerment, self-empowerment and economic empowerment. Due to the severe hardships and impacts that armed conflicts generate upon women's lives, women were forced to find ways of coping and adapting to their new conditions and environment which have empowered them at all levels, especially, self-empowerment (Cruz, 2016). This is what the women have done in Jos to get cope with severe difficulties yet, many challenges remain. Women are hardly included in peace building processes and

decision making tables. Apart from this there is a need to support the women by government or international organizations to reduce the burden of conflicts on them. As pointed out by Cruz despite the numerous international conventions and resolutions established in favour of women during a conflict phase, women remain at a disadvantaged position because they continue to live in patriarchal societies. In Jos for example, few women were included/visible on the negotiating tables, as such their voices are gradually been heard when it comes peacebuilding initiatives. This simply means that women are gradually gaining access and voice in the peacebuilding process. Especially because of their involvement through their associations. This is supported by the study of Bulus, Bhatti and Beysoylu where they pointed out that the voices of women are being heard through women-led associations, which in has opened up space for them to contribute and build new bonds and inter-relationships among themselves (Bulus, Bhatti & Beysoylu, 2020). Also the inclusion of women in commissions of inquiries shows a gradual involvement in the peacebuilding process in Plateau state and Nigeria in general. This is changing the narrative of exclusion, instead it is making women more visible in the peace building processes. This study recommends that government should support women's economic empowerment to easily access soft loans and

build market infrastructure. Also, opportunities should be accorded women through building their capacity and skills to get involved in peacebuilding processes.

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