

**WOMEN IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA: THE EXPERIENCE OF BAYELSA
STATE, 1999–2025**

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Abstract

This study examined the roles, strategies, constraints, and achievements of women in conflict management in Bayelsa State, from 1999 to 2025. Bayelsa State constitutes a particularly instructive case study because it sits at the intersection of multiple overlapping conflict systems: oil-related environmental and resource conflicts, inter-communal violence, armed militancy and its aftermath, and the structural violence of poverty and underdevelopment endemic to the Niger Delta. Drawing on data derived from secondary and interdisciplinary sources, and adopting the use of the feminist peace studies, gender and conflict theory, as templates for analysis, this study argued that women in Bayelsa State have been far more than passive victims of these conflicts. Through traditional protest forms, community mediation institutions, civil society organising, formal political participation, and engagement with national and international peace frameworks, Bayelsa women have constituted a persistent, if frequently marginalised, force for conflict transformation. The study further argued that the persistent gap between normative commitments, embedded in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, the Maputo Protocol, and Nigeria's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, and actual practice in Bayelsa reflects deep structural impediments rooted in patriarchal governance, the political economy of oil, elite capture of peace processes, and the chronic underfunding of women's civil society organisations. The conclusion draws lessons from the Bayelsa experience for gender-responsive conflict management policy in Nigeria.

Keywords: Women, Conflict Management, Bayelsa State, Peacebuilding, UNSCR 1325.

Introduction

Nigeria is one of Africa's most conflict-affected states. Between 1999 and 2025, the country has experienced farmer-herder clashes in the Middle Belt, Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgency in the North-East, armed banditry across the North-West and North-Central zones, secessionist agitation in the South-East, and the protracted resource conflict of the Niger Delta that has shaped national politics since the 1990s. Within this national landscape of plural conflict, Bayelsa State occupies a distinctive position. Created in 1996 from the former Rivers State and home to a predominantly Ijaw population, Bayelsa is the territorial heartland of Nigeria's oil-producing south-south geopolitical zone. Its creeks, mangrove forests, and communities have borne the concentrated ecological and social costs of over six decades of petroleum extraction, producing conflict configurations that are at once local, national, and global in their articulations (Watts, 2004; Obi, 2010; Idemudia, 2012).

The return to democratic governance under the Fourth Republic in May 1999 inaugurated a period that was simultaneously characterised by greater political opening and intensifying violence in Bayelsa. The first year of the new democracy was marked by the catastrophic Odi massacre of November 1999, when federal military forces destroyed the town of Odi in retribution for the killing of police officers, killing an estimated two thousand or more civilians and leaving only churches and a bank building standing (Human Rights Watch, 1999). Across the following decade, armed

militancy, centred on the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and allied groups, reached its peak intensity before the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) of 2009 produced a partial, fragile reduction in organised armed violence. In the period from 2010 to 2025, Bayelsa experienced a complex transition characterised by recurrent cult conflicts between neo-militant groups including the Icelanders, Greenlanders, and KKK factions; continued oil spills and environmental degradation; episodic inter-communal violence; and the persistent structural violence of poverty, youth unemployment, and ecological ill-health (International Crisis Group, 2015; Oguche, Davids & Onyero, 2025).

Within this conflict ecology, women have occupied the most exposed position among civilian populations while also demonstrating the most sustained commitment to conflict management and peacebuilding. This paradox—of simultaneous victimhood and agency—is the central problematic of this article. The literature on Niger Delta conflict has historically marginalised women's experiences and strategies, privileging analyses of armed masculinity, youth militancy, and oil company–state relations (Ukeje, 2004; Ikelegbe, 2006). More recent scholarship—including work by Nwankwo (2015), Cocodia (2023), Obi (2010), and Amadi and Tamuno (2019)—has begun to correct this imbalance, but a comprehensive account of women's conflict management roles in Bayelsa across the democratic era remains a significant gap in the literature. This study, therefore, attempts to address that gap.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Peace Studies and the Gendered Architecture of Conflict

The theoretical foundations of this study draw on the convergence between feminist peace studies, gender and conflict theory, and African feminist scholarship on agency and resistance. Feminist peace studies, as developed by Reardon (1993), Tickner (1992), Cockburn (2007), and Enloe (2000), argues for a fundamental reconceptualisation of peace and security that takes gender as a primary analytical category and recognises women as active agents—not merely objects—of peace processes. This tradition insists that the dominant frameworks of international relations and conflict studies reproduce a masculine bias by focusing on the formal, state-centric arenas of diplomatic negotiation, military intervention, and institutional peace architecture while rendering invisible the informal, community-level, everyday work of peacebuilding in which women are disproportionately engaged (Tickner, 1992; Enloe, 2000).

Cockburn's (2004) concept of the 'continuum of violence' is particularly productive for the Nigerian and Bayelsa contexts. This concept challenges the conventional distinction between war and peace by arguing that violence against women exists on a continuum that connects structural violence (poverty, environmental degradation, patriarchal domination) with the direct physical violence of armed conflict and the sexual violence that pervades both. In Bayelsa, this continuum is vividly present: the structural violence of oil-induced ecological destruction and economic marginalisation is continuous with the direct violence of military operations and militia activity, which is in turn continuous with the domestic violence and sexual exploitation that intensifies in conflict contexts. Understanding women's conflict management roles requires attending to this full continuum, not merely to the formal armed conflict at its centre.

The landmark normative articulation of feminist peace studies at the international level is United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), which recognised women's disproportionate victimisation in armed conflict and mandated their equal participation in all phases of conflict prevention, management, and post-conflict reconstruction. Nigeria adopted a National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace and Security in 2013, providing a domestic policy framework for implementing UNSCR 1325 and its successor resolutions—including 1820 (2008) on sexual violence

in conflict and 1889 (2009) on post-conflict gender mainstreaming (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). The Bayelsa State Government developed a state-level implementation framework for the NAP in 2017, though its operationalisation has been uneven (Nwankwo, 2015; Amadi & Tamuno, 2019).

African Feminist Perspectives on Women's Agency

African feminist scholarship has been particularly attentive to the ways in which Western feminist frameworks, when uncritically applied to African contexts, can reproduce colonial epistemological hierarchies by treating African women as passive victims lacking political subjectivity, or by reading African women's activism through frameworks developed in very different historical and institutional settings (Mama, 1995; Tamale, 2020; Oyewumi, 1997). African feminist scholars have insisted on recovering and centring the indigenous, pre-colonial traditions of women's political organisation and conflict mediation that colonial governance and patriarchal nationalism suppressed or marginalised.

In the Niger Delta context, this perspective draws attention to the deep pre-colonial roots of Ijaw women's political agency. Ijaw women have historically exercised significant authority through institutions including the 'Ekine' masquerade society, women's councils, and market governance structures. Colonial administration systematically undermined these institutions by recognising only male warrant chiefs and elders as legitimate political authorities—a process documented for the broader eastern Niger Delta by Alagoa (1972) and Afigbo (1972). The recuperation of these indigenous traditions by contemporary women's organisations in Bayelsa is therefore not merely a cultural exercise but a political act of institutional reconstruction with direct implications for conflict management capacity (Ogbomah, Megheze, & Ebisintei, 2025).

The Conflict Landscape in Bayelsa State, 1999–2025

The first decade of democratic governance in Bayelsa (1999–2009) was the most violently acute phase of the state's conflict history. Its opening was defined by the Odi massacre of November 1999, ordered by President Olusegun Obasanjo in response to the killing of twelve police officers by a local youth militia. Federal soldiers spent several days in Odi, destroying virtually every building in the town and killing civilians on a scale that the Nigerian Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission (the Oputa Panel) subsequently characterised as a massive violation of constitutional rights (Human Rights Watch, 1999; Ogbomah, Megheze & Ebisintei, 2025).

Between 2000 and 2009, organised armed militancy intensified across the Niger Delta, with Bayelsa as one of its principal theatres. Groups including MEND, the Martyrs Brigade, and the Niger Delta Strike Force conducted attacks on oil infrastructure, kidnapped oil workers for ransom, and engaged in firefights with the Joint Task Force (JTF), the military-police counterinsurgency unit deployed across the Delta. The Odiana community crisis of 2004, the Ijaw-Itsekiri conflicts that spilled into Bayelsa's coastal areas, and the sustained militancy in the Nembe Creek and Cawthorne Channel axis produced conditions of protracted insecurity that displaced thousands of civilians and disrupted livelihoods throughout the western and central parts of the state (Sunday, MacAlex-Achinulo, 2025; Obi, 2010).

The Presidential Amnesty Programme, announced by President Umaru Yar'Adua in June 2009, constituted the most significant formal conflict management intervention in the Niger Delta's democratic-era history. The PAP offered amnesty, disarmament, and rehabilitation to ex-militants who surrendered their weapons by an October 2009 deadline. An estimated 26,000 combatants from across the Delta eventually went through the programme, including significant numbers from Bayelsa. The PAP produced a dramatic short-term reduction in organised armed violence and the

restoration of near-full oil production capacity, but it was widely criticised for its gender blindness, its inadequate attention to root causes, and its transformation of ex-militants into a new rentier class dependent on government stipends (International Crisis Group, 2015; Nwankwo, 2015).

Post-Amnesty Violence and New Conflict Formations, 2010–2025

The post-amnesty period from 2010 to 2025 has been characterised by the partial transformation of organised armed militancy into a more diffuse landscape of cult-related violence, pipeline vandalism, oil theft (locally called 'bunkering'), and inter-communal conflict. The proliferation of youth gangs and cult groups—the Icelanders, Greenlanders, Dewell Boys, and KKK among others in Bayelsa—has created persistent insecurity in urban centres including Yenagoa, Brass, and Ogbia, as well as in rural communities that were previously dominated by the more politically articulate armed militant groups (Oguche, Davids & Onyero, 2025; CLEEN Foundation, 2012).

Oil spills continued at a devastating rate across Bayelsa throughout the post-amnesty period. The Bonga spill of 2011, the Nembe Creek pipeline spills of 2016–2019, and the Otuoke-area spills of the early 2020s added to an accumulated legacy of hydrocarbon contamination that a 2020 study by the Stakeholder Democracy Network (SDN) estimated had affected over 90 per cent of Bayelsa's water bodies to some degree. Environmental conflict—between communities and oil companies over remediation, compensation, and corporate accountability—therefore remained a central feature of the conflict landscape throughout the period (Amnesty International, 2015; SDN, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 introduced additional conflict stressors: lockdowns disrupted established livelihoods and social support networks; competition for diminished economic resources intensified inter-group tensions; gender-based violence rose sharply as reported by civil society organisations including the Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) and the Bayelsa State Ministry of Women's Affairs; and the diversion of state resources to pandemic response further eroded the already thin institutional capacity for conflict management. By the mid-2020s, the Bayelsa conflict landscape thus presented a layered, multi-dimensional challenge characterised by structural violence, episodic direct violence, environmental conflict, and the persistent insecurity generated by armed group fragmentation (Amadi & Tamuno, 2019; WRAPA, 2021).

Women's Roles in Conflict Management in Bayelsa State

The oldest and most deeply rooted form of women's conflict management in Bayelsa lies in the traditional institutions of Ijaw society. Pre-colonial Ijaw communities developed a range of women-specific governance mechanisms that included women's councils, women's market associations, and elder women's advisory roles within household and lineage structures. These institutions provided forums for dispute resolution, social norm enforcement, and community solidarity maintenance that operated alongside, and sometimes in tension with male-dominated chieftaincy and secret society governance (Alagoa, 1972; Naanen, 2012).

Within the contemporary conflict landscape of Bayelsa, elder women mediators have continued to exercise significant informal authority in community-level conflict management. In numerous Ijaw communities, documented by Nwankwo (2015) in Nembe, Brass, Sagbama, and Southern Ijaw local government areas, senior women known variously as 'iyawo agada' (respected elder women) or by community-specific titles have served as first-line mediators in household and neighbourhood disputes before they escalate into community-level violence. Their authority derives from a combination of age, moral standing, kinship connections across factional lines, and a cultural

recognition that elder women's curses or blessings carry spiritual weight that male authority figures must respect.

In the specific context of oil-related conflicts, women's traditional institutions have been mobilised for cross-community dialogue in disputes over fishing grounds, waterway access, and compensation allocation. The 'Egbesu Women Forum' (a women's wing of the Ijaw national deity Egbesu's peace-enforcement tradition) has been deployed in several Bayelsa communities as a sacred mediation mechanism, invoking Egbesu's prohibition on unjust violence to delegitimise armed conflict. Research by Amadi and Tamuno (2019) in Kolokuma/Opokuma and Yenagoa LGAs documented cases in which the Forum's intervention successfully halted inter-community hostilities that had resisted mediation by male community and government authorities.

Furthermore, women's deployment of direct action tactics (particularly the 'naked protest' and community blockades of oil installations) constitutes one of the most extensively documented forms of conflict management and advocacy in Bayelsa and the broader Niger Delta. These tactics draw on traditional Ijaw cultural norms according to which women's collective exposure of their bodies in protest is a form of extreme cursing that portends disaster for those against whom it is directed, and which places a heavy moral and spiritual burden on community and corporate actors to resolve the grievances motivating the protest (Turner & Brownhill, 2004; Michael, 2024).

The most significant cluster of protest actions in Bayelsa in the democratic era occurred between 2002 and 2006. In 2002, women from Egweama community in Southern Ijaw LGA occupied a Shell flow station for several days, demanding employment for community members and remediation of oil spill damage to fishing grounds. In 2003, women from the Otuasega and Ikarama communities in Ogbia LGA conducted a week-long occupation of an SPDC gathering facility, forcing negotiations that resulted in a community development agreement commitment. In 2005–2006, women's coalitions across several Bayelsa communities coordinated parallel protests timed to coincide with SPDC's annual general meeting season, a tactic that attracted international media attention and shareholder pressure on the company (Ukeje, 2004; Michael, 2024).

The conflict management dimension of these actions is analytically important. The protests were not merely expressions of grievance but deliberate strategies for conflict de-escalation: by deploying non-violent direct action, women sought to force negotiated settlements to disputes that were at risk of generating or prolonging armed violence. In several instances documented by the Christopher and Ogbotubo (2025), women's occupations succeeded in preventing armed youth from conducting sabotage attacks on oil infrastructure by providing an alternative, non-violent means of escalating pressure on oil companies. The women deliberately positioned themselves as a protective barrier between their communities' young men and the security forces deployed to protect oil installations.

Civil Society Organising and Advocacy Networks

The democratic era saw the emergence and consolidation of a rich associational landscape of women-led civil society organisations in Bayelsa. This development was driven by the political opening of the Fourth Republic, the availability of international donor funding for civil society and women's rights work, and the mobilisation of educated women returning to the state after careers in Port Harcourt, Lagos, and Abuja. Key organisations include the Niger Delta Women for Justice (NDWJ), the Ijaw Women Connect (IWC), the Bayelsa State chapter of Women in Nigeria (WIN), the Federation of Ijaw Women (FIW), the Rural Women Network, and the Gender and Development Action (GADA).

The NDWJ, established in 1999 with Bayelsa and Rivers State chapters, has been the most consistently active organisation in documenting human rights violations associated with oil

extraction and armed conflict in Bayelsa. Its documentation of the Odi massacre (2000), the Odiamma crisis (2004), and the Gbaramatu military offensive in Delta State that displaced Bayelsa communities (2009) provided civil society evidence that complemented the work of international organisations including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The NDWJ's advocacy for women's inclusion in the Niger Delta Technical Committee process of 2008 contributed to the Committee's recommendations on gender mainstreaming in the proposed Niger Delta Development Framework (Sunday & MacAlex-Achinulo, 2025).

The Ijaw Women Connect has played a particularly important role in bridging traditional community women's institutions and the formal frameworks of international women's peace and security norms. Through training workshops, legal literacy programmes, and community radio engagement (the latter particularly significant in Bayelsa's rural communities where print literacy rates remain low), the IWC has worked to create a cadre of community women leaders fluent both in Ijaw traditional peacebuilding norms and in the vocabulary of UNSCR 1325, CEDAW, and the Maputo Protocol (Nwankwo, 2015). This bridging function has been crucial for sustaining the connection between grassroots peacebuilding practice and national and international advocacy.

In the period from 2015 to 2025, Bayelsa women's civil society organisations increasingly oriented their conflict management work toward the challenge of cult violence, which had displaced oil-company conflict as the most immediate threat to community security in many parts of the state. Organisations including the Women Against Violence Enterprise (WAVE) and the Coalition of Women for Democracy (CWD) developed community-based early warning and early response initiatives—involving networks of community informants, relationships with local government security committees, and protocols for rapid community mobilisation in response to intelligence about impending violence—that supplemented the inadequate state security infrastructure (CLEEN Foundation, 2012; Amadi & Tamuno, 2019).

Formal Political Participation and Institutional Engagement

Women's engagement with formal political institutions as a conflict management strategy has been one of the most contested and ambivalent dimensions of the Bayelsa experience. The representational record of women in Bayelsa's formal governance structures across the democratic era has been consistently poor. Women have never exceeded 8 per cent of elected positions in the Bayelsa State House of Assembly, and the state has not elected a female governor, deputy governor, or senator in any of the seven general elections held between 1999 and 2023. At the local government level, women's representation in elected council positions across Bayelsa's eight LGAs has averaged below 5 per cent across the democratic era (Amadi & Tamuno, 2019; INEC, 2023).

Despite this representational deficit in elected positions, women have exercised some influence in Bayelsa's conflict management through appointed positions in the executive arm of government. Governor Seriake Dickson (2012–2020) appointed women to the positions of Commissioner for Women's Affairs and Commissioner for Information, and established a State Peace Building Initiative (SPBI) that included women stakeholders in its advisory committee. Governor Douye Diri's administration (2020–present) similarly appointed women to several key positions and continued the SPBI structure. These appointments, while limited in their transformation of the structural conditions of conflict, provided women advocates with institutional access points for influencing conflict management policy (Amadi & Tamuno, 2019).

The most significant institutional forum for women's conflict management engagement in Bayelsa has been the Bayelsa Multi-Stakeholder Peace Dialogue platform, established in 2012 with support from the UNDP and the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR). This platform brought together government officials, traditional rulers, youth groups, civil society organisations,

and women's associations in a structured dialogue process for conflict analysis and early warning. Women's organisations—particularly the IWC and NDWJ, were among the most consistent participants in the dialogue platform, using it to raise issues of gender-based violence, women's exclusion from oil compensation processes, and the specific security challenges facing women in cult-violence-affected communities (IPCR, 2014; UNDP, 2011).

Engagement with National and International Peace Frameworks

Nigerian women's advocates, including those from Bayelsa, played an important role in shaping the domestic policy architecture for implementing UNSCR 1325. The Federal Government's adoption of a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security in 2013—the first in West Africa—was the product of sustained advocacy by the Women, Peace and Security Network-Nigeria (WIPSEN-Nigeria) in coalition with state-based women's organisations including those from Bayelsa. The NAP identified the Niger Delta as one of three priority conflict theatres and included specific provisions for women's participation in Niger Delta peace processes, accountability for conflict-related sexual violence, and the integration of gender perspectives into disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programmes (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013; WIPSEN-Nigeria, 2013).

Bayelsa women's organisations have also engaged with the African Union's peace and security architecture, particularly the AU's Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council (2002) and the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (2004). The ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) of 2008, which includes a specific gender and security track, has provided a sub-regional framework for advocacy. Bayelsa-based women leaders participated in ECOWAS-sponsored training programmes on women's roles in conflict prevention and early warning held in Abuja in 2015 and 2018, subsequently applying early warning methodologies in their community-level work (ECOWAS, 2008; Amadi and Tamuno, 2019).

The Presidential Amnesty Programme provides the most significant case study of both women's engagement with formal peace frameworks and the limits of that engagement. Women's organisations from Bayelsa were among the most vocal critics of the PAP's initial design, which focused exclusively on male ex-combatants and ignored the conflict management and support roles that women had played in militant networks. Sustained advocacy by the NDWJ, IWC, and WIPSEN-Nigeria contributed to a 2012 programmatic review that introduced limited provisions for women's inclusion, including the enrolment of female 'camp followers' in skills acquisition programmes and the establishment of a gender desk within the PAP secretariat. These were marginal improvements relative to the feminist critique, but they represented an incremental expansion of the programme's gender sensitivity attributable in large part to women's sustained advocacy (International Crisis Group, 2015; Nwankwo, 2015).

Psychosocial Support, Community Resilience, and Post-Conflict Reconstruction

A dimension of women's conflict management that receives insufficient attention in the political science and peace studies literature is the psychosocial support and community resilience work through which women have maintained the social fabric of Bayelsa communities under conditions of protracted conflict. Women's solidarity networks—including savings and credit cooperatives (esusu), church women's fellowships, and community women's associations—have provided the informal social protection systems that substituted for absent state services in conflict-affected communities (Ogbomah, Megheze & Ebisintei, 2025).

In the aftermath of the Odi massacre of 1999, women's associations in the affected community played a central role in resettlement: organising the return of displaced households,

sharing food and material resources among survivors, coordinating the reconstruction of domestic and market infrastructure, and providing the social support that enabled traumatised community members to rebuild their lives. Similar women-led community reconstruction processes were documented in communities affected by the Otuasega crisis (2003), the Gbaramatu displacement (2009), and the periodic cult violence events in Yenagoa and Brass (2015–2022) (Amadi & Tamuno, 2019; Nwankwo, 2015).

Women religious leaders (particularly in the Pentecostal and Catholic traditions that are deeply embedded in Bayelsa social life) have also played significant conflict management roles that cut across the sacred-secular divide. Pentecostal women pastors in Yenagoa and other urban centres have conducted conflict transformation programmes rooted in religious frameworks of reconciliation, healing, and forgiveness that have reached populations unlikely to engage with secular civil society organisations. Catholic women's congregations, particularly the Daughters of Divine Love and the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus with significant Bayelsa presences, have operated mediation and psychosocial support programmes in conflict-affected communities since the early 2000s (Adekunle, 2012; Amadi & Tamuno, 2019).

Structural Constraints on Women's Conflict Management

The most pervasive structural constraint on women's conflict management in Bayelsa is the patriarchal organisation of governance at every level from the household to the state. Traditional governance in Ijaw communities vests formal decision-making authority in male councils of elders and chiefs, excluding women from the arenas in which conflict-generating decisions—over land, resources, succession, and inter-community relations—are made. While women's advisory and mediation roles are culturally acknowledged, they remain formally subordinate to male authority and can be overridden by male community leaders without accountability (Alagoa, 1972; Nwankwo, 2015).

The oil economy has reinforced this patriarchal structure by creating a political economy in which access to oil rents—through MOUs with oil companies, government contracts, and armed protection payments—has become the central resource around which male power is organised and contested. Women are systematically excluded from these resource flows, both because customary land tenure denies them ownership rights that would give them standing in compensation negotiations, and because the physical threat of armed violence functions as a deterrent to women who seek to challenge male control of resource governance (Idemudia, 2012; Cocodia, 2023).

Security Risks and the Gendered Costs of Peacebuilding

Women who engage in visible conflict management and peacebuilding activities in Bayelsa face serious personal security risks that constitute a significant deterrent to participation. The Nigerian state's history of treating community protest as a threat to national economic security, articulated through the deployment of security forces against community demonstrators, has resulted in the arrest, detention, and physical abuse of women activists in Bayelsa. The arrests of NDWJ members during community protests in Nembe and Brass in the early 2000s, and the detention of women organisers during the 2012 protests against SPDC operations in Obrikom, are documented instances of state repression of women's peace activism (Amnesty International, 2009).

Cult and armed group violence also presents specific gendered risks to women mediators and community leaders. Women who are perceived as informants to security forces, as advocates for rival armed groups, or as threats to the informal economies through which armed groups sustain themselves have been targeted for intimidation, assault, and in some cases killing. The murders of women community leaders in Bayelsa's cult-violence-affected communities in the 2015–2022 period,

several of which were documented by the CLEEN Foundation and by Channels Television investigative reporting, illustrate the lethal costs that women can face for their conflict management activities in the state (CLEEN Foundation, 2012; Amadi & Tamuno, 2019).

Underfunding and Institutional Marginalisation

Women's civil society organisations in Bayelsa operate under conditions of severe resource constraint that fundamentally limit their conflict management capacity. Donor funding for women's peace and security work in the Niger Delta, while more substantial since the early 2000s than in the pre-democratic period, remains vastly inadequate relative to the scale of the conflict challenge and is subject to the volatility and conditionalities of international development assistance cycles. The withdrawal of USAID funding from several Niger Delta civil society programmes in 2017–2019 as a result of shifts in US foreign policy priorities had particularly damaging effects on the operational capacity of women's organisations in Bayelsa (Amadi & Tamuno, 2019).

State government funding for women's conflict management institutions—including the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the State Peace Building Initiative, and the Bayelsa Multi-Stakeholder Peace Dialogue platform—has been chronically insufficient and subject to the same fiscal volatility that affects all Bayelsa State government programmes in the context of oil revenue fluctuations. The 2016 oil price crash, which precipitated a severe fiscal crisis for Bayelsa and other Niger Delta states, resulted in the suspension of several state-funded women's empowerment and peace programming initiatives at precisely the moment when their services were most needed (CLEEN Foundation, 2012; SDN, 2020).

Outcomes and the Implementation Gap

Against the constraints catalogued above, the achievements of women in conflict management in Bayelsa across the democratic era are nonetheless substantial and warrant recognition. Women's protest actions successfully extracted community development commitments from oil companies in multiple Bayelsa communities that had failed to achieve any response through male community leadership channels. Women's mediation contributed to the resolution of several inter-community conflicts—including the Nembe-Ogbia and Kolokuma-Opokuma land and water disputes—that male-led processes had been unable to resolve. Women's advocacy contributed measurably to the gender provisions of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2013) and to the incremental gender mainstreaming of the Presidential Amnesty Programme (Nwankwo, 2015; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013).

Community resilience-building by women's associations in Odi, Otuasega, and other conflict-devastated communities produced demonstrable recovery outcomes. Studies by Amadi and Tamuno (2019) of post-conflict reconstruction in Kolokuma/Opokuma LGA found that communities with active women's cooperative networks recovered economic functionality and social cohesion more rapidly than communities where such networks were absent or disrupted by conflict. Women's early warning initiatives in Yenagoa contributed to the timely notification of authorities about impending cult violence in several documented instances, preventing escalation that might have resulted in fatalities.

The Implementation Gap: Norms, Institutions, and Practice

Despite these achievements, a fundamental gap persists between the normative frameworks governing women's roles in conflict management and the actual distribution of power and resources in Bayelsa's peace and security arena. UNSCR 1325 and Nigeria's National Action Plan commit to women's equal participation in peace processes; in practice, women constituted fewer than 10 per

cent of participants in formal peace dialogue processes in Bayelsa documented between 2012 and 2024. The Maputo Protocol and CEDAW commit to the elimination of discrimination in political participation; in practice, women's representation in Bayelsa's elected governance structures has declined since the early 2000s. The PAP committed in its revised framework to gender mainstreaming; in practice, women remained a peripheral constituency in programme governance and resource allocation (Amadi & Tamuno, 2019; INEC, 2023).

This implementation gap reflects not primarily a failure of normative commitment by individual actors but a structural condition rooted in the political economy of oil, the patriarchal organisation of governance, and the chronic underfunding of the institutions through which normative commitments are translated into practice. Closing this gap requires not merely the adoption of additional policy commitments but fundamental changes in resource allocation, institutional design, and the underlying political economy of Bayelsa's conflict system. Women's organisations in Bayelsa recognise this reality and have increasingly oriented their advocacy toward systemic change—including land reform, revenue transparency, and the democratisation of community governance—as the preconditions for sustainable improvement in women's conflict management roles (Nwankwo, 2015; SDN, 2020; Amadi and Tamuno, 2019).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that women in Bayelsa State have been active, strategic, and in many instances indispensable participants in conflict management across the full span of Nigeria's democratic era from 1999 to 2025. Through the six modalities analysed—traditional mediation, direct action, civil society organising, formal political participation, engagement with national and international peace frameworks, and psychosocial and resilience-building work—Bayelsa women have constituted a durable peace constituency whose contributions have been systematically undervalued in both scholarly analysis and policy design. The structural constraints on women's conflict management are real and deep-rooted: patriarchal governance, the political economy of oil, physical insecurity, resource poverty, and the implementation gap between normative commitments and institutional practice collectively limit women's impact and expose them to personal costs that deter participation. These constraints will not be resolved by policy commitments alone. They require sustained investment in women's civil society organisations, reform of the customary and statutory frameworks that exclude women from resource governance and compensation processes, genuine inclusion of women in the governance of conflict management programmes including the PAP and its successors, and accountability mechanisms for gender-based violence in conflict contexts. The Bayelsa experience offers several lessons for conflict management practice in Nigeria and across the Niger Delta. First, the most effective conflict management interventions are those that build on existing community capacities—including women's traditional institutions—rather than imposing externally designed frameworks on unfamiliar institutional terrain. Second, the integration of traditional and contemporary peacebuilding norms, exemplified by the bridging work of organisations including the Ijaw Women Connect, is more effective than approaches that treat indigenous and international frameworks as mutually exclusive. Third, addressing the livelihood dimensions of conflict—particularly the destruction of women's fishing and farming livelihoods by oil pollution—is inseparable from addressing its security dimensions; peacebuilding that ignores ecological restoration is building on sand. Fourth, the personalised cost of women's peace activism—including security risks, social sanction, and economic marginalisation—must be explicitly addressed in any realistic programme for expanding women's roles in conflict management. The women of Bayelsa have, against substantial odds, demonstrated that grassroots peacebuilding is not an aspiration but a practice—lived, embodied, and sustained across more than two decades of

protracted conflict. The task for scholars, policymakers, and the Nigerian state is to build institutional frameworks worthy of their resilience.

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