Grassroots Resilience: Women's Informal Peacebuilding in the Rumuekpe Crisis, Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract
This article examines women's informal peacebuilding in Rumuekpe, Rivers State, Nigeria, during and after the 2006-2008 crisis. The objective of this study is to trace how women's engagement in Rumuekpe developed over time and what it reveals about their access to formal recognition within Rivers State's wider peace architecture. The study is anchored in feminist peace and security theory, which holds that women are frequently active and effective participants in community-level peacebuilding even where they remain structurally and institutionally excluded from the formal negotiations that follow. Adopting a single, instrumental case study design, the study draws on documentary material, gathered directly from the Rumuekpe Women Accord as part of a wider mixed-methods study of women's participation in peace negotiations across Rivers State. Findings show that women in Rumuekpe organized as the prayer warriors, sustaining prayer-based mobilization and outreach to armed youths, drew on kinship and trust, rather than institutional standing, to influence combatants. Despite being sustained and at points, strikingly effective, none of this engagement converted into recognized seat at any formal negotiating table. The study concludes that informal engagement in Rivers State is a durable, effective, and consistently under-credited feature of how peace is actually built and sustained at the community-level, rather than evidence that formal participation alone produces sustainable peace. It recommends that women's informal mediation work be formally documented and attributed, that grassroots structures such as the Rumuekpe Women Accord be deliberately integrated into the community's formal peace architecture, and that future research and policy attend as closely to how women describe their own contribution as to how that contribution is described on their behalf.

Key words: *case study, grassroots peacebuilding, Rumuekpe, informal engagement, Rivers State.*

Introduction

Most of the empirical work on women and peace and security leans on cross-national or cross-case comparison. A common approach is to test whether women's presence in a peace process correlates with how long the resulting agreement lasts (Krause, Krause, & Bränfors, 2018). That kind of study is good at showing that a relationship exists, and much less good at explaining how it works. The actual mechanisms, the ways informal engagement by women either turns into recognized influence or simply fails to, tend to disappear once the data is aggregated across many cases. A single case study, followed closely and in enough details, can recover what gets lost in translation. It lets us ask not just whether women were involved, but how that involvement were organized and sustained, and whether it was ever folded into, or shut out of, the formal machinery of peacebuilding around it. Grounded by the feminist peace and security theory, which core claim is that men and women live through conflict and its aftermath differently, because they sit differently within existing social hierarchies (Sjoberg, 2013; True, 2013). A related claim follows from that: women are often genuinely active and effective in peacebuilding at the community level, even in places where they are shut out structurally and institutionally from the formal negotiations that come after (Tickner, 2004; Ní Aoláin, 2016). Rivers state and the wider Niger Delta, is a place where this has shown up many times in different communities. A patriarchal social order limits what public role women are allowed to play (Ekhator, 2018), and yet, it is exactly the communities hit hardest by resource conflicts that women's informal mediation, organizing, and advocacy have the longest history. Rumuekpe is probably the most thoroughly documented example of this pattern anywhere in Rivers State. From 2006 to 2008, a fight over who controlled community leadership, and with it, the royalties and development funds oil companies were paying out, spiraled into sustained armed violence. Roughly eighteen thousand indigenes fled their residence and around a hundred killed, much of the community's housing, its schools, civic buildings were destroyed (SDN, 2025). In a study by Ehizulem (2021), she focused on the role women played in managing this conflict, how they organized and the impact that was reached. The study found that women contributed meaningfully to ending the violence, however, they were largely locked out of formal roles in local government, politics, and business once the worst of the crisis had passed. This article works from both of those documentary sources, but triangulates them against original focus group data collected directly from Rumuekpe Women Accord, as part of a larger mixed-methods study of women's participation in peace negotiations across Rivers State. Three independent bodies of evidence,

This article works from both of those documentary sources, but triangulates them against original focus group data collected directly from the Rumuekpe Women Accord, as part of a larger mixed-methods study of women's participation in peace negotiations across Rivers State. Three independent bodies of evidence, an NGO's field documentation, a separate academic case study, and this study's own primary data, some of it gathered roughly a decade after the SDN material, converge on the same community. That kind of corroboration is unusual, and it gives an unusually solid account of how women's peacebuilding in Rumuekpe actually unfolded over time. Anderlini (2007) and Aggestam and Svensson (2018) have both made the point that women's contribution to peace processes shows up most clearly, and gets documented most easily, at the informal and mediatory level rather than at the formal table. Rumuekpe stands as proof of this. From mobilization through prayer meetings, mothers directly appealing to their combatant 'sons', and advocacy through peaceful campaigns which eventually produced

development outcomes that were real and attributable to the efforts of women within the community.

What follows traces that arc in detail, asking what it reveals about the relationship between women's informal engagement and their access to formal recognition within Rivers State's broader peace architecture. Simply stating that women were involved and active in Rumuekpe's recovery is not enough, as they evidently were, however, to what extent their influence morphed into a recognizable and attributable process, while remaining informal, undocumented and invisible to the institutions that surrounded it, is the more useful question that should be unraveled. The case of Rumuekpe here is not treated in isolation, it fits a wider pattern visible elsewhere in Rivers State's peace history, as evident in the ongoing gas seepage crisis in Bille Community, where a token female representative is selected by the government in place of the women who had established an informal structure. It was also evident in the mediation that preceded the 2009 Presidential Amnesty Programme, where a single woman is chosen as a token representation of women on the Presidential Committee on the Modalities for the Involvement of Host Communities in the Ownership of Petroleum Assets. Rumuekpe is distinctive mainly in how well it has been documented, not in the underlying pattern it displays. Reading it closely, therefore, is a way of reading the broader pattern closely too.

Statement of The Problem

Existing accounts of women's peacebuilding in the Niger Delta tend either to combine the efforts of women across several communities, thus, sacrificing depth of the research, or specific cases are only mentioned briefly, in passing, as illustrative anecdotes within a larger argument. Similarly, only few studies follow a single community's experience of women's peacebuilding closely enough, and for long enough, to trace how informal engagement is sustained over years and what becomes of it post conflict. Rumuekpe is a unique case in that it has been documented twice, independently, by an NGO field study and a separate academic case study and can now be triangulated against primary data collected for this study. This article addresses the subsequent gap by offering a sustained, single-case account of how women's informal peacebuilding in Rumuekpe developed, what mechanisms sustained it, and what its ultimate relationship to formal recognition and institutional change has been.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Feminist Peace and Security Theory, which offers a critical lens for examining the dynamics of women's participation in peacebuilding and their contributions to sustainable peace. The theory emerges from feminist critiques of traditional security paradigms, which have historically been dominated by male perspectives and have largely excluded women's experiences and contributions (Tickner, 2014; Sjoberg, 2013). Feminist scholars argue that conventional approaches to peace and security are inherently limited because they overlook the gendered nature of conflict and peacebuilding processes (True, 2016; Shepherd, 2010).

True (2013) extends this into the political economy of conflict specifically, showing how the burdens of war, displacement, loss of livelihood, caregiving for the wounded and the orphaned, fall disproportionately on women even where women had no part in starting the violence. Tickner (2004) draws out the security-studies implication of this: that conventional accounts of security, built around the state and the battlefield, miss most of what conflict actually does to the people who live through it, and miss, in particular, the informal security work that women perform inside households and communities throughout a crisis.

The exclusion of women in the formal peacebuilding processes is not by its account, a matter of women lacking capacity or willingness, it is a matter of institutional design: the categories through which peace processes recognize and reward participation were not built with women's actual peacebuilding practice in mind. This distinction, between a capacity problem and a design problem, is central to how this article reads the Rumuekpe case. If the barrier were capacity, the appropriate response would be training and encouragement. If the barrier is design, as the theory suggests and as the evidence below supports, the appropriate response is institutional reform, changing what formal processes recognize as participation in the first place.

Methodology

The article uses a single, instrumental case study design. This fits the aim here, which is to use one well-documented case to illuminate a broader theoretical pattern rather than to generalize statistically (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Two categories of data inform the analysis. The first is documentary: The Stakeholder Democracy Network's (2015) field report on the Rumuekpe crisis, compiled from interviews with community members, women's group leaders, and local officials. The second is primary and original to this study, is a focus group discussion conducted with the Rumuekpe Women Accord as part of a wider mixed-methods investigation of women's participation in peace negotiations across Emohua, Tai, and Degema Local Government Areas in Rivers State, itself combining structured questionnaires administered to 100 respondents with 12 key informant interviews and two focus group discussions. The documentary and primary sources were read against one another thematically, with particular attention to points of convergence between the SDN material and the Rumuekpe Women Accord's own account of their activities, since convergence across independently collected data strengthens confidence in the pattern being described.

Findings

Background: The Rumuekpe Crisis and Its Human Toll

In the period from 2006 to 2008, a struggle occurred over community leadership and the right to receive and manage the revenue generated from oil development projects where been paid directly to whichever party was controlling the community at the time. According to SDN (2015) report, Shell Petroleum Development Company, similar to all of its competitors in the region, had historically provided funding and paid money to whichever individual who was leading the community at that time. Subsequently, funding meant for various forms of community development ended up in the hands of the individual who held the office of community leader. This created significant amounts of unaccounted-for income in a single household. As such, when community leader Solomon Obio was perceived to be using these monies to fund his family instead of disbursing them to other members of the community, a youth leader named Friday Edu organized a second group to oppose him. As such, what began as a political disagreement quickly became violent and eventually deadly. Obio was murdered and his home as well as a large portion of the surrounding area was destroyed. Similarly, once Edu gained the position of community liaison officer for Shell, he replicated this cycle of power concentration in miniature form and an additional leadership struggle ensued, again led by a different youth leader, S. K. Agala. This subsequent conflict, fought between two warring factions fighting for control of money generated by oil company funded projects, provided the immediate environment for the Rumuekpe Women Accord to develop and conduct their peace-building efforts. The loss of human life, as reported by SDN (2015) in detail was extremely high. It was

estimated that approximately one-hundred individuals lost their lives during this time. In addition, roughly 18-thousand residents were displaced for some amount of time. The houses, churches, schools and community center were destroyed or vacated; at one point Rumuekpe was described as being essentially a "ghost town" with armed groups patrolling the streets rather than families living there. Therefore, it is reasonable to place the women's account of how they responded to their community's devastation against this backdrop of almost total disintegration of normal community activity.

Sustained informal mobilization through prayer and outreach

The women describe this type of sustained informal mobilization through continued prayers and outreach efforts. They would meet regularly for prayer sessions bringing together women from both sides of the conflict in terms of family affiliation and factional ties, while also conducting occasional outreach to individuals, often young people or families, they viewed as being at risk of becoming entangled in violence. In describing the rationale for these types of interactions, one participant said simply:

"We do not wait until there are problems before we come together to pray and go see the young men. By the time there are problems, we have already been to each other's homes and they have met us."

This type of interaction is not reactive; it is pro-active and preventive. This type of interaction does not occur when violence erupts. Instead, it occurs throughout periods of relative calm, which can be interrupted by violent episodes. As such, it is characterized by continuous effort rather than a switch on response to violence. The SDN (2015) report corroborates similar patterns of informal mobilization among Rumuekpe women.

However, over time the prayer outreach activities expanded beyond fasting and prayer for peace to include broader forms of mobilization. Participants interviewed discussed how the prayer activities began with the women themselves prior to extending to the larger community, stating that *"women played active roles in talking to the aggrieved youth about the issues."* Similarly, a participant in the SDN (2015) report explained saying *"we called upon each other to discuss what needed to be done to promote peace and reconciliation in Rumuekpe… we organized ourselves and prayed for peace."* (SDN, 2015).

That two independent reports conducted by two separate researchers over two different times and for two different reasons, produced similar descriptions of organizational processes suggest that this form of informal organization is a stable community feature and not just a product of any particular research design.

Credibility and trust as the basis for influence over armed actors

Participants were also asked a harder question: why would young men caught up in the violence listen to them at all, given that the women held no formal position in either the community's leadership or the factions themselves? The answers kept coming back to kinship and long-standing trust rather than to any institutional authority:

"Those boys are our sons and our brothers. When their mothers talk to them, it is not the same as when a stranger talk to them. We are not asking them for anything, so they know we mean well."

The fact that this difference - influence based on relations vs. influence based on authority - can make an important difference when trying to understand how much women's peace-building efforts in Rumuekpe would go toward creating some sort of formal status, is illustrated here. The

armed youth groups didn't think of the women as parties interested in protecting their own self-interests like the opposing leaders and factions were doing while competing for the money from the oil company. In part, it was because they had positioned themselves outside of that conflict that made their intervention credible in the first place, thus, were perceived as impartial and transparent during the post-violence negotiations.

This finding substantiates, with a concrete mechanism, the barrier identified in feminist peace and security theory's account of institutional exclusion: that women's absence from formal negotiation reflects not a deficit in their capacity to influence conflict behaviour but a structural position, outside the resource competition driving the conflict, that formal institutions never developed a category for recognizing. The very feature that made the Rumuekpe Women Accord's intervention effective, their distance from the factions' material stakes, is the same feature that gave formal institutions no obvious slot into which to fit them once negotiations over those stakes began.

The economic toll and women's role in recovery

A theme that received less attention in prior documentation of Rumuekpe, but which the Rumuekpe Women Accord raised without prompting, concerned the specifically economic dimension of the crisis and of women's response to it. Rumuekpe's pre-crisis economy rested heavily on farming, cassava, yam, vegetables, and fruit, sold at markets in neighbouring communities, and it was women who carried out most of this agricultural labour. Displacement severed that livelihood for the better part of three years. Asked what recovery had actually involved, beyond the more visible work of mediation and advocacy, participants described a slower, less dramatic process:

"Before anybody talks about peace, somebody has to plant something. We were the ones who first went back to the farms, even before it was fully safe, because the children had to eat."

The above narrative, when read together with the SDN (2015) report on the immediate post-conflict economic impact of the violence in the region, demonstrates how former inhabitants returned to their communities to discover them abandoned and their traditional ways of earning an income either seriously disrupted or completely destroyed. Participants discussed losing their homes and many family members during the conflict. The women of Rumuekpe engaged in several peace-building activities including mediation and prayer. However, they also took part in a large amount of unrecognized "un-peaceful" labor in attempting to establish a new self-sustaining agricultural economy. They helped make the communities' actual return to their homes physically possible. Like their mediation efforts, however, these economic efforts were never formally recognized as a necessary component of reconstructing Rumuekpe.

Furthermore, the existence of this economic dimension provides additional insight into why the Rumuekpe Women Accord reported such widespread support among returning residents. In addition to encouraging displaced families to return to their homes, one of the other main objectives of the Rumuekpe Women Accord was to provide a foundation upon which returning families could believe that their return would be financially sustainable. Women began growing crops again in areas where they had previously grown crops before fleeing the area, this provided financial sustainability for those families who believed that a return was survivable. Therefore, unlike many peace-building efforts around the world, where peacebuilding occurs sequentially after the cessation of hostilities and rebuilding begins subsequent to establishing peace, both peace-building and rebuilding occurred simultaneously and mutually reinforced each other within Rumuekpe.

Recognition, or the lack of it, once the crisis subsided

This was arguably the most striking theme to come out of the discussion. When asked directly whether their contribution had been formally acknowledged, by the government, oil companies or even the community leaders, the women did not budge:

"Nobody writes down what the women did. So when it is time to say who solved the problem, it is the chiefs and the youth leaders that are mentioned, not us, even though we were there before them."

This, in the women's own words, is the central disconnect this article set out to examine. The peacebuilding work is sustained, effective, recognized within the community, and yet it leaves no institutional trace and earns no formal credit once a dispute is over. It backs up, with direct testimony this time, the theoretical claim developed earlier: that women's exclusion from formal recognition in Rivers State comes down to missing institutional channels for capturing their contribution, not any shortfall in the contribution itself. It is worth noting that this pattern of erasure is not confined to Rumuekpe. In the wider study from which this article draws, a comparable dynamic was documented in the 2025-2026 gas seepage crisis in Bille community, where government and oil-company delegations engaged a single, government-selected female representative rather than the informal women's network that had actually generated the pressure behind the intervention. The Rumuekpe pattern and the Bille pattern, separated by roughly two decades and by very different immediate triggers, oil-royalty conflict in one case, environmental crisis in the other, are structurally the same: formal recognition, when it comes at all, attaches to an individual selected from outside, rather than to the network that did the underlying work.

Participants were also asked whether they had sought recognition, or whether its absence simply reflected disinterest on their part. The answer was unambiguous: recognition mattered to them, not primarily for its own sake but because its absence had practical consequences, principally an inability to access the funding, training, and institutional standing that recognized community organisations in Rivers State can draw on. The Rumuekpe Women Accord's exclusion from formal credit, in other words, is not simply a matter of pride overlooked; it has a material cost that compounds over time, since organisations that are never formally recognized also struggle to accumulate the institutional resources that would make future recognition more likely.

Advocacy and its limits

Participants also talked about pushing for concrete improvements once the worst of the violence had ended, describing sustained, non-violent engagement with oil-company representatives over the state of schools and other basic infrastructure. One participant summed up both the approach and what came of it:

"We went to them peacefully, again and again, until they agreed to build. We did not carry weapons; we carried our complaints, and eventually they listened."

This lines up closely with SDN's (2015) record of the episode. According to that report, women from all eight of Rumuekpe's constituent villages organized a peaceful protest at the offices of Total, one of the oil companies operating in the area, after the community's schools had been destroyed in the fighting and displaced families found, on returning, that there was nowhere for their children to be educated. The campaign succeeded: Total agreed to construct a secondary school, work on a primary school building began, and in February 2013 the community signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the company valued at approximately ₦33 million, funds earmarked for community development and reconstruction. The women described the outcome in terms that echo the Rumuekpe Women Accord's own framing: *"I thank God our protest to*

Total has made them start the construction of classroom blocks" (SDN, 2015).

What matters more for the analysis here, though, is how the women themselves frame the episode: as sustained, peaceful persistence, not formal negotiation. Their advocacy produced a real, attributable outcome, but it happened by organizing outside formal negotiating structures, not through them, and the women did not describe what they did as participation in a peace process in the sense this wider study examines elsewhere. No representative of the Rumuekpe Women Accord sat on any negotiating panel with Total; the Memorandum of Understanding was signed, so far as the available documentation shows, between the company and community leadership structures that did not include the women whose sustained protest had produced the concession in the first place. The advocacy campaign, in other words, demonstrates women's capacity to produce formal, documented outcomes while simultaneously demonstrating the limits of what that capacity buys them: a result, but not a seat.

Religious institutions and the legitimacy of informal peacebuilding

A further theme, implicit throughout the discussion but worth drawing out explicitly, concerns the institutional form the Rumuekpe Women Accord's work actually took. Both the group's own account and the SDN (2015) documentation of the Prayer Warriors describe an organization built on religious, specifically Christian, practice: prayer, fasting, and an interdenominational structure that brought women together across the community's various church affiliations. Rumuekpe women described their activity in terms that blur any sharp line between religious devotion and political action: *"Our women's group organized prayers and went to Rumuekpe at a time where people were afraid to return to pray for peace to reign"*. This is worth noting because it complicates any account of Rumuekpe's women's peacebuilding that treats it as a straightforwardly secular, civic activity comparable to a community mediation committee. It was not. The Prayer group network's authority rested substantially on religious standing, on being recognized as women of prayer, and this form of legitimacy, real and locally powerful as it clearly was, is precisely the kind of authority that formal peace architecture, built around negotiating delegations and government-recognized committees, has no ready category for absorbing. A woman's standing as a spiritual leader within her church network does not translate, within the institutions this study examines elsewhere, into any recognized negotiating credential, even where, as in Rumuekpe, that standing appears to have done more sustained peacebuilding work than any formally constituted body in the community.

Generational continuity and the question of succession

One further theme, raised by participants toward the end of the discussion without direct prompting, concerned whether the Rumuekpe Women Accord's work was likely to continue once its current membership, many of whom were already adults with grown children at the time of the 2005-2008 crisis, was no longer active. Asked whether younger women in the community were being drawn into the organisation's activities, participants were candid about the uncertainty involved:

"Some of the younger ones help us now, but it is not the same as when everybody remembered the war. We tell them what happened, but telling is not the same as living through it."

This concern has a direct bearing on the argument developed throughout this article. If the Rumuekpe Women Accord's authority rests substantially on lived memory of the crisis and on relationships of trust built during it, kinship with the specific young men who once carried weapons, credibility earned through visible sacrifice during the worst years of the conflict, then

that authority may not transfer automatically to a successor generation who did not live through the same events. The absence of any formal institutional structure through which the group's role could be documented and handed down compounds this risk: where a formally recognized body can, at least in principle, induct new members into an established institutional position, an informal network built on personal memory has no equivalent mechanism. This generational question therefore sharpens rather than diminishes the case for the kind of documentation and formal integration this article recommends. Without it, the very effectiveness this study has traced risks being a feature of one generation's experience rather than a durable community institution.

Reading Rumuekpe against the wider pattern in Rivers State

Table 1 summarizes the four central themes from the Rumuekpe Women Accord's own testimony alongside the specific finding, from the wider study of women's participation in peace negotiations across Rivers State, that each corroborates.

Table 1: Themes from the Rumuekpe Women Accord Focus Group Discussion

Theme	Summary of Participant Account	Corroborated Finding
Prayer and outreach	Sustained, preventive engagement across calm periods, not only after violence erupts	Informal engagement is continuous and community-sustained
Trust-based influence	Kinship and lack of self-interest, not office, explain women's credibility with armed youths	Exclusion reflects missing institutional channels, not a deficit of influence
Economic recovery	Resumption of farming and livelihoods made physical return to the community possible	Women's informal contribution extends beyond mediation into unrecognized material labour
Recognition	Contribution goes undocumented; credit accrues to chiefs and youth leaders instead	Formal recognition does not follow automatically from informal effectiveness
Advocacy	Sustained peaceful engagement with an oil company produced concrete outcomes	Informal organizing can produce documented outcomes without formal negotiating status

Read together, these five themes, drawn from the women's own account rather than anyone else's description of it, add up to a single pattern. The engagement is sustained, not episodic. It is grounded in relationship, not office. It extends into economic labour as well as mediation. It goes unrecognized once a crisis has passed, more or less every time. And it produces real outcomes only when it operates outside the structures that formally define a peace process. Nowhere in the Rumuekpe Women Accord's account of their own work did that work turn into a recognized seat at any formal negotiating table. The same pattern recurs, in outline if not in every detail, across the other cases examined in the wider study this article draws on. The community mediation that preceded the 2009 Presidential Amnesty Programme followed a comparable arc: sustained, informal, women-led engagement that enabled a formal process without securing formal representation within it. The Presidential Committee on the Modalities for the Involvement of Host Communities in the Ownership of Petroleum Assets shows the token-representative dynamic in especially sharp relief, since its formal membership can be documented directly.

Bille's 2025-2026 gas seepage crisis shows the same dynamic operating in the present, not merely as historical residue from an earlier, less institutionally developed period. Rumuekpe's distinctive contribution to this wider picture is not that its pattern differs from the others, but that it can be traced with unusual clarity and over an unusually long span of time, from the outbreak of violence in 2005 through to a documented development outcome secured in 2013 and a focus group discussion conducted more than a decade after that. Few cases in Rivers State's recent peace history offer this much longitudinal evidence for a single, sustained argument.

Implications for Theory and Policy

For feminist peace and security theory, the Rumuekpe case offers a concrete illustration of a claim that is often made at a more abstract level: that women's exclusion from formal peace processes is a design problem rather than a capacity problem. Every mechanism identified in this article, the neutrality that came from standing outside the resource conflict, the credibility that came from kinship rather than office, the material labour of economic recovery, the religious legitimacy of the Prayer Warriors' structure, was a source of real effectiveness in Rumuekpe and, simultaneously, a poor fit for the categories through which formal negotiation recognizes and rewards participation. This suggests that closing the participation gap in Rivers State is not primarily a matter of building women's capacity, since the case shows that capacity was never the missing ingredient, but of redesigning what formal processes count as a legitimate basis for a seat at the table. For policy, three implications follow reasonably directly from the findings. First, informal mediation and economic recovery work of the kind the Rumuekpe Women Accord describe needs some mechanism of documentation and attribution if it is ever to be drawn on when formal negotiation panels are constituted; without a record, as the women themselves point out, there is nothing for such panels to draw on even where the institutional will to include women exists. Second, the token-representative pattern identified here and in the Bille case needs to be recognized and named as a specific mechanism of exclusion, distinct from more general claims about patriarchal culture, precisely because it is more directly addressable through policy: government and industry actors can be required, as a matter of procedure, to engage established networks rather than selecting individual representatives after the fact. Third, religious and civil-society structures through which women's peacebuilding actually operates, prayer groups, market associations, church networks, deserve to be treated as legitimate peacebuilding infrastructure in their own right, rather than as informal, and therefore lesser, alternatives to it. A further implication follows from the generational finding discussed above. Institutional reform aimed at capturing women's informal peacebuilding contribution cannot be a one-time act of documentation; it needs to be an ongoing process capable of accommodating turnover in who actually performs the work, since the authority the Rumuekpe Women Accord currently holds is bound up with a specific generation's lived experience of the 2005-2008 crisis in a way that will not automatically extend to the women who succeed them. Any formal mechanism for recognizing informal peacebuilding in Rivers State should therefore be designed with succession in mind from the outset, rather than treating the current cohort of recognized women leaders as a fixed population to be consulted once and then set aside.

Limitations of The Study

As a single case study, this article's findings are not intended to generalize statistically beyond Rumuekpe, though the theoretical framework and the convergence with other cases discussed above suggest the pattern identified is not unique to this community. The focus group discussion

on which the analysis primarily draws captured the perspective of women still active in, or connected to, the Rumuekpe Women Accord at the time of data collection; women who were involved in the crisis-era peacebuilding but have since left the community, or ceased involvement with the organization, are not represented in this account. The considerable time elapsed between the crisis itself and the focus group discussion, close to two decades in the case of the earliest events described, raises the ordinary possibility of recall imperfection, though the consistency of the women's account with SDN's (2015) contemporaneous documentation offers some reassurance on this point. Finally, translation between Ikwerre and English in the course of the focus group discussion introduces an additional interpretive step between the women's original words and the quotations reproduced here, one this article has sought to minimize through careful transcription but cannot claim to have eliminated entirely.

Conclusion

The article has provided a detailed description of how women in Rumuekpe have created, supported and eventually employed a role in informal peacebuilding as their community collapsed and then began to recover. In addition, all three sources referenced here, provide considerable support for a pattern of action among these women. Women were engaged in their efforts toward peacebuilding; they worked consistently over time to create positive change; and on several occasions during this period, their work had a profoundly positive impact: preventing violence through continued relational interventions; creating an economic base that allowed people to physically return to their community and resume basic survival activities; and using peaceful advocacy as a means to bring about a sustainable development outcome. However, with the exception of one limited capacity building effort sponsored by an outside NGO focused primarily on providing training to local stakeholders, these women were never formally included into the typical forms of recognition or credit given to individuals who engage in recognized formal peace processes. Their most concrete, documented achievement, a school built and a Memorandum of Understanding signed with an oil company, came about through organizing outside formal negotiating channels, not through them. So, the Rumuekpe case, looked at closely and over time, does not show that formal participation produces sustainable peace. What it shows, with unusual clarity and unusually good corroboration, is that women's informal engagement in Rivers State is a durable, effective, and consistently under-credited part of how peace actually gets built and held together at the community level, and that the mechanisms sustaining both that effectiveness and that invisibility, neutrality born of exclusion from resource conflict, credibility born of kinship rather than office, legitimacy born of religious rather than institutional standing, are specific, identifiable, and, in principle, addressable through deliberate institutional reform.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are advanced:

First, local government authorities and oil company community-relations offices in Rivers State should establish a formal mechanism for documenting and attributing informal peacebuilding activity, of the kind the Rumuekpe Women Accord and the Prayer Warriors before them undertook, so that such work can be drawn upon rather than overlooked when formal negotiation panels are subsequently constituted. Second, government and industry actors engaging communities in crisis or post-crisis conditions should be required, as a matter of standard procedure, to identify and engage the established informal networks already active in a

community rather than selecting a single token representative after the fact, a practice this article has shown to recur across widely separated cases and time periods in Rivers State.

Third, religious and civil-society structures through which women's peacebuilding operates should be recognized, formally and materially, as legitimate peacebuilding infrastructure, with access to the training, funding, and institutional standing currently available only to formally constituted community bodies. Fourth, future case-study research on women's peacebuilding in the Niger Delta should, where possible, organize itself around the direct testimony of the women concerned rather than around external description of their activities, both as a matter of methodological rigour and as a partial corrective to the pattern of externally authored narration this article has identified as part of the wider problem of unrecognized contribution.

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