

Peacebuilding in Africa: A Review of the African First Ladies Peace Mission

Bosede AWODOLA

Abstract

This paper is a review of the efforts of the African First Ladies Peace Mission, an organization of the wives of African Heads of State on peacebuilding activities in the continent. It relies on documents and reports from the Mission as well as observations made on the field activities. While the paper recognizes the bold initiatives of the First Ladies in advocating for gender equality in peacebuilding processes and in decision making, yet, it is discovered that the organization is being confronted with various challenges such as; internal dynamics of African states, lack of understanding of its purpose, problem of visibility, its legal status, and commitment among the First Ladies and professional staff to effectively deliver on its mandates. The paper concludes that the organization remains a model that can be replicated in other continents of the world.

Keywords: *First Ladies, Peacebuilding, Mainstreaming, Conflict Resolution, Gender Equality, Action Plan.*

Bosede AWODOLA
Institute for Peace and Conflict
Resolution, Abuja-Nigeria
boseawo2003@yahoo.com
awodola@ipcr.gov.ng

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Introduction

The discourse on the role and challenges that women face in conflict resolution and peacebuilding activities has continue to generate concerns in Africa and beyond. According to Ogege (2009), one of the fundamental issues in conflict resolution and peacebuilding has been the exclusion of women from this process in Africa due to various factors including socio-cultural beliefs. As a result, the involvement of women in decision making, conflict management

and post-conflict processes are limited in most societies in Africa. The continent is bedeviled with several violent conflicts with thousands of lives and valued properties lost and many people have become displaced from their dwellings, particularly, women and children. Menkiti (2009) described women's pains as both physical and psychological, and, as victims, often widowed; they form the largest number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

Regrettably, when such conflicts are finally brought to an end, the roles of women in post-conflict peacebuilding processes and activities are rarely considered, an absence that has become a major hindrance to peacebuilding activities in Africa. Also, at the negotiation table, women are considerably underrepresented in peace negotiations, operations, structures and governance institutions. Rather, men are mostly involved as members of delegations to negotiate peace, which suggests very clearly, that the role of women in peace and conflict resolution is neither recognized, nor appreciated. A likely pointer to the view, that peace and conflict resolution matters are seen as the sole prerogative of men (Oppong & Abu, 1987; Brown, Cervenak & Fairman, 1996; Donli, 2009; Asamoah-Hassan, 2002). This prejudice against women may have become an acceptable behavior in Africa and may have affected past peace efforts as well as worsen conflict situations currently in place.

Considering women have multiple roles as mothers in every society and they are worse-affected in the course of conflicts, the United Nations and other regional bodies are increasingly recognizing the position of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts (Abu, 2012). Consequently, a number of frameworks have emerged to deal with the negative consequences of women in and out of armed conflicts, especially as victims of sexual violence, slavery, exploitation and exclusion. Such responses are subsumed in the general humanitarian and human rights framework of the 1945 United Nations Charter, which seeks to protect the dignity of mankind, irrespective of gender, and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights that seeks to isolate and rescue women from arbitrary, dangerous and discriminatory cultural practices as well as deny them rights and opportunities through stereo-types (African First Ladies Peace Mission, 2012). Furthermore, the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), commonly referred to as Beijing Conference, also advances the goals of equality, development and peace for women in the interest of all humanity. The platform provided a holistic agenda for empowerment of women through the removal of obstacles against active participation of women in all spheres of public and private life, by advocating full and equal share in economic, social, cultural, political and decision-making.

These developments led to the establishment of the African First Ladies Peace Mission (AFLPM) in 1997 as an organization of the wives of African Heads of State. The First Ladies keyed into these frameworks and institutions that dealt with the plight of women in order to promote the inclusion of women in peacebuilding processes and

activities; particularly in preventive mechanisms, peace negotiations and peacebuilding in Africa (Agbalajobi, 2009). In recent years, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) also passed resolutions that added credence to active involvement of women in peacebuilding, negotiations, protection and active involvement in post conflict reconstruction. These resolutions include, United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in 2000, UNSCR 1820 in 2008, UNSCR 1888 in 2009, and UNSCR 1889 in October, 2009. These are important instruments for advancing the women, peace and security agenda.

While AFLPM has promoted the inclusion of women in peacebuilding activities by utilizing their vantage position as wives of Heads of State, yet, the activities of the mission is shrouded in controversies because of lack of clear understanding of its purpose and intention. Thus, this study rather than romanticize the performance of the organization, seeks to offer an objective appraisal of its activities. To this end, the paper reviews the roles of the AFLPM in promoting women participation in peacebuilding activities in Africa and the impact such roles have made on women participation in peacebuilding. How does AFLPM employ gender as a strategic tool in their various interventions? And how effective are such strategies in promoting peacebuilding and conflict resolution on the continent? A critical analysis of these concerns will provide an objective appraisal of the activities of the organization. The study covers the period 1995- May, 2015 using books, speeches, reports, and other materials from the mission, as well as close observation of the activities of the organization.

African First Ladies Peace Mission, Formation and Objectives

The history of the AFLPM cannot be properly understood except within the context of the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women which was held on 4th - 15th September, 1995 in Beijing, China. The conference, set out to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women; it also emphasized the critical link between the advancement of women and the progress of society (AFLPM, 2012).

Maryam Sani Abacha, then First Lady of Nigeria, led the Nigerian Delegation to the Conference and presented a speech in which she elucidated the harsh and discriminatory traditional practices in Africa that have contributed to the marginalization of women. She advocated the need to apply 'gender perspective' to national, regional and global issues in order to realize the capabilities of women, by emphasizing equal access to development opportunities as enjoyed by men and further urged women to come out with concrete measures and strategies for the realization of these objectives. She also stresses the need for peace, without which, no amount of effort would improve the quality of life of women, as she emphasized the devastating and unimaginable consequences of violent conflicts in Africa and identified women and children as the biggest casualties of such conditions, citing examples of Liberia, Rwanda

and Uganda in 1995.¹ Her presentation provoked positive reactions amongst African participants, it called for action to find solutions to challenges that women face in protracted conflicts in Africa.

On 11th September 1995, Six African First Ladies from Benin, Burundi, Gambia, Lesotho, Nigeria, and Uganda met to further appraise the protracted conflicts on the African continent. After extensive deliberation it was resolved that the First Ladies will undertake a peace mission to Africa to complement the efforts of their spouses, as well as regional organizations and their respective national governments, with a view to fostering peace as well as mitigating the adverse effects of wars, especially as they affect women and children (Bassey, Awodola, Chiotu, & Alozieuwa, 2015). Thus, came into being, the Africa First Ladies' Peace Mission.

The first summit of the mission took place in 1997 and it was then the First Lady of Nigeria was elected the first President of the Mission. In all, AFLPM has had eight presidents with a two-year mandate, as set out in the Internal Regulation of the Mission. The table below gives details of the elected presidents.

Table 1: Elected President from 1997-May 2015

S/N	Names	Country	Year
1.	Dr. (Mrs) Maryam Sani Abacha	Nigeria	1997-1998
2.	Justice Fati Lami Abubakar	Nigeria	1998-1999
3.	Madame Edith Lucie Bongo Ondimba	Gabon	1999-2001
4.	Mrs. Constanca Mangue Nsue De Obiang	Equatorial Guinea	2001-2003
5.	Mrs. Chantal Campaore	Burkina Faso	2003-2005
6.	Madame Antoinette Sassou Nguesso	Congo Brazzaville	2005-2007
7.	Hajja Turai Umar Musa Yar'Adua	Nigeria	2008-2010
8.	Dame (Dr.) Patience Goodluck Jonathan	Nigeria	2010 - 15 th May, 2015

The broad objective of AFLPM is the prevention and management of conflict in Africa as well as the need to evolve strategies that can enhance peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding through humanitarian and diplomatic actions. Other specific objectives include the need to promote the culture of peace through development initiatives as well as offer humanitarian support services to victims of conflicts especially women and children in armed conflict (AFLPM, 2012). To achieve this objective, a comprehensive

1 Mariam Sani Abacha was the First Lady of the Federal Republic of Nigeria from 17th November, 1993 to 8th June, 1998. She presented a speech as the Head of Nigeria Delegation to the Fourth World Conference on the Status of Women at Beijing, China, in 1995. A powerful and indeed, gripping speech which set in motion the idea of a Peace Mission by the African First Ladies present at the event to explore robust involvement of women in the search for peace and resolution of conflict in the continent.

Plan of Action was designed and adopted for 2012-2014 with appropriate organizational structure put in place for effective administrative purposes. The Executive Secretary is to oversee the administration of the mission.

Theoretical Perspective

This study is guided by the concept of gender equality and based on the need for “gender sensitivity” as a tool for promoting inclusiveness in developmental activities of the society. The concept, according to the Report of Activities of Specialists on Mainstreaming, Council of Europe (1998) advocates the need for equal visibility, empowerment and participation of both sexes in public and private life of citizens in order to promote their full participation in national development. Gender equality involves accepting and valuing equally the differences between women and men and the diverse roles they play in society. The 1998 report has emphasized the need to change structures in society in order to ensure and promote equal power relationships between men and women as well as constant review of societal values, in order to guarantee sufficient room for differences in gender as oppose to the notion of hierarchy which tends to place men higher than women (UNIFEM, 1995).

The concept placed emphasizes on mutual and genuine collaboration between men and women and discourages any disproportion in values allocation to both sexes; it emphasizes individual capacities, irrespective of sex, in solving societal problems with a view to making maximum use of all human resources. Important areas of gender equality that are focused upon include human rights, enhancement of representative democracy, and economic independence of individuals and shared responsibility (UNIFEM, 1995). These areas are seen as fundamental and must always be sought for in order to achieve the overall objectives for equality. As noted by the United Nations Population Fund, gender equality is a necessary precondition to achieving sustainable growth and reducing poverty in any society. It also confirmed the fact that empowered women tend to contribute more to the productivity of whole families and communities as well as improve the capacity and prospects of the next generation to contribute to development initiatives (UNFPA, nd.). As greater empowerment and more effective protection of women against the specific dangers they face in armed conflicts not only benefit women alone but the entire society at large.

It is important to stress that gender equality needs to complement the issues of mainstreaming gender in order to promote the inclusion of women in development activities. The African Union Commission’s Gender, Peace and Security Programme 2015-2020 also underlines the importance of gender mainstreaming in conflict prevention and peacebuilding strategies (Dock, 2015), in order to ensure the cause of women in all sphere of the society. Gender mainstreaming involves the reorganization, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so as to ensure equality of perspec-

tive in all policy initiatives at all levels and stages of policy implementation. The idea of gender mainstreaming approach to development originated at the 1995 United Nations World Conference in Beijing, China, where the inclusion of both women and men in every developmental project was endorsed as the only way to bring about sustainable economic growth and development in society. *The Action for equality, development and peace* sought to remove all obstacles to active participation of women in all spheres of public and private life by seeking full and equal share in decision making in economic, social, cultural, political spheres of the society (AFLPM, 2012).

Applying both theoretical perspectives, especially as they affect the processes of peace-making, peacebuilding in Africa, it is obvious that the inclusion of women as equal stakeholders in these processes have been lacking. Both theories are predicated on the incorporation of women into peacebuilding activities and policies, an agenda that the AFLPM has been championing in Africa. The concepts are of the view that bringing men and women as mutual partners for effective peacebuilding processes will increase participation at all levels of decision-making. Seabright (2015) argued that, while it may be the case that violence is a predominantly male trait, managing it requires influencing the behavior of both gender in ways that are far more subtle than merely replacing men with women in positions of power and policy making. In addition, peacebuilding activities constitute a major developmental project that promotes peace, indeed an essential and necessary ingredient of development. Hence, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325, 2000) specifically addressed the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women and recognized the under-valued and under-utilized contributions that women can make to reduce and prevent conflict as well as in enhancing the promotion of peacekeeping, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Given such capacities, therefore, the UNSCR 1325 has stressed the importance of equal and full participation of women as active agents in peace and security in the world (AFLPM, 2012).

Peacebuilding is a major concept in conflict resolution and management and an effective means of preventing reoccurrence or continuation of armed conflicts in a wide range of political, developmental, humanitarian and human right activities (Karamé, 2004). It is a process that requires a wide range of synergy, between men and women of differing cultural background, functioning together in order to fulfill the mandate of maintaining and promoting sustainable peace agenda in any community. Yet, the fact remains that most approaches to peacebuilding have either ignored or marginalized issues of gender, particularly of women: for women have consistently remain minority participants in peacebuilding projects; they receive less attention than men in peacebuilding policies while gender analysis rarely informs peacebuilding strategies. The contribution of AFLPM in promoting inclusiveness must therefore be seen as an activity in the right direction.

Activities and Strategies Implementation

The Proceedings of the 7th Summit of AFLPM (2012) has comprehensively and clearly spelt out its 'Plan of Action'. The plan is divided into seven parts and expected to be adopted and implemented at local, national, sub-regional and continental levels by the African First Ladies. One of the strategy is the building of peace-culture in African societies through a sensitization and awareness campaign in order to reduce poverty and the eradication of the activities of street children which, taken together, have become potential tools for violent conflict in the continent. The programme also includes institutional linkages between international and regional legal instruments or frameworks to enhance the role of women in peace efforts and to promote the education of women and children in domesticating and strengthening responsibility of women in the society. Similarly, capacity building in conflict resolution and peacebuilding for women through training workshops is also included in the Action Plan. Such trainings are to be held at local and national levels with a view to providing women with skills and capacities for conflict prevention, management and resolution in their communities.

Furthermore, protection of women and children in conflict zones are expected to be reinforced through advocacy visits by First Ladies and sensitization campaign against forced child marriage. Accordingly, construction of the AFLPM permanent secretariat as well as complementary humanitarian support for refugees/IDPs by national governments, and development partners are also proposed in order to reduce human suffering. Also, monitoring and evaluation of project activities are to be carried out by Statutory Committees and Task Forces to oversee projects embarked upon by the Mission (AFLPM, 2012).

A recent publication of a book, *Africa First Ladies Peace Mission: The Journey so Far*, documented the activities and achievement made by the AFLPM since its inception in 1997. The activities include: the provision of humanitarian assistance to the victims of conflicts across Africa, relief materials presented to refugees and IDPs in Burundi, Central African Republic, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, Sierra Leone and South Sudan, consultation workshops/summits held to sensitize stakeholders including the 1st Summit in 1997 and 1999 in Abuja, Nigeria 1997, 3rd Summit in Libreville, Gabon 2001, 4th Summit in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea 2003, 5th Summit in Ouagadougou Burkina Faso 2005, 6th Summit in Brazaville, Congo 2008, 7th Summit in Abuja, Nigeria 2012, as well as 8th Summit in Abuja, Nigeria 2015 (Bassey et al, 2015). Bureau meetings were also held to deliberate on the activities of the organization in Abuja and South Africa in 2014 and quarterly publication that documents the activities of the Mission were published.

At the national levels, not much was recorded across the continent, except Nigeria where the former First Lady and the President of the African First Ladies Peace Mission, Dame

Patience Jonathan took advocacy campaign to six geo-political zones of the country on peaceful co-existence of citizens. She also organized stakeholder's luncheon, one-million-women match and a youth concert on peace and collaborated with the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution to celebrate International Peace Day. The fact from the report submitted during the third meeting of the Bureau by the regional vice president indicated that most countries are still struggling to actualize the objectives of the Mission in the continent.

Discussion

This is not to deny the fact that the efforts of the First Ladies in Africa ought to be appreciated and perhaps, emulated in terms of its areas of concern. Awodola (2012) in assessing the organisation has described the initiative as instructive and that it portrayed African women as viable instruments for nation building. Even though, the achievements of the organization are not commensurate with its robust Plan of Action.

The provision of relief materials to refugees and IDPs is a laudable effort, and indeed a useful component of peacebuilding mechanism. However, it can be argued that such gestures, good as they may appear, do not necessarily transform into the much needed desire for peace as well as the need to reduce sufferings that are usually encountered in camps that tend to often increase tension and conflicts in such sites. It is true such support may provide immediate or temporary succor to the victims, but it does not address some fundamental problems that women and children usually experience in the camps. Such problems include, but not limited to, gender-based violence, the lack of educational support for children, the contextual and psychological needs of the disabled and the aged. Neither does it offer the much needed economic empowerment for the women. It is also falls short of the prospective needs for reintegration of these victims when and if they return to their communities. Nonetheless, IDPs remains an essential platform to create greater international awareness of the conditions of refugee's and the challenges faced in such camps in Africa.

For sustainable peace and development, countries in Africa should endeavor to entrench the culture of peace in their societies, a fundamental area of concern which the AFLPM wishes to embed in various communities in the continent. Unfortunately, the achievement of the organization so far speaks otherwise; none of their activities reflect this concern at both the continental and national levels. However, a few activities were recorded in Nigeria including a one-day event of advocacy visit to each of the six geo-political zones, a one million women match for peace and a youth concert organized by the First Lady of Nigeria under the platform of AFLPM in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory. Such one-day event brings to question the impact such events could have on the target groups. For example, it is doubtful if the assembly is sufficiently representative of all shades of women from all the states of the Federation in spite of the claim that they

were dressed up in uniform with AFLPM logo and marched past the podium in which the First Lady of Nigeria, Dame Patience Jonathan took the salute. A further investigation revealed that most women that attended the event have little or no knowledge of the goals and objectives behind the event; they were simply requested to be present. An overall assessment of the programme seems to indicate a mobilization for a political cause rather than a gathering of women for peace. Realistically, it is impracticable to inculcate a culture of peace in a day's event; in simple terms, the event was simply seen as a political jamboree.

Whereas, the programmes may have been borne out of good intentions, the methodology employed was questionable, problematic and ineffective to advance the cause of sustainable culture of peace. The programmes were short on peace content that can consciously motivate women and youths in peace, security and development matters. Building a culture of peace is a long term project and an agenda that demands continuous training in order to create and deepen awareness among the populace with a view to changing people's attitudes towards peace. It also requires a wide range of strategies such as production of TV/Radio documentary, drama, adverts in newspaper and leaflets, regular concerts, workshops, town hall meetings, conferences and even introduction of peace curriculum in educational institutions at the local and national levels.

Building the capacity of women groups in conflict resolution and peace building remains a major aspect of the Plan of Action of the AFLPM. It requires constant training, workshops and seminars as well as advocacy visits. So far, the activities of the peace mission since its inception has revealed that not much has been achieved in this regard. In fact, there is no evidence to show any training or workshop conducted for women at any level. The only workshop on record was the one that has no direct impact in building the capacity of women, that is, 1st ECOWAS First Ladies Workshop in Nigeria in 1996. The lack of focus on the objective of AFLPM on this matter is indeed a major setback to women in policy, mainstreaming gender and gender equality. One is of the view that strengthening women capacity, especially through promotion of knowledge and skill acquisition in the areas of conflict analysis, mediation, negotiation, conciliation and advocacy will serve as motivation for women to be more proactive as well as motivate them to be abreast with the matters affecting them especially at the local level.

Women and children's rights still remain a challenge as Musau (2015) observed, after 20 years of intense advocacy for women's rights especially in Africa, there is a palpable feeling of disenchantment with the slow pace of progress. According to her, some of the challenges women faced in 1995 are still prevalent, violence against women has reached alarming proportions, with one in every three women in Africa experiencing some form of violence in her lifetime, many girls still face the threat of female genital mutilation and early or forced marriages and unwanted pregnancies. The fact remains that violence continue to persist as one of the most heinous, systematic and prevalent

human rights abuses, particularly in Africa, it is a threat to all women and an obstacle to all efforts for development, gender equality and promotion of peace in all societies in the continent (Zhianpour, Arashpour, & Shekarchizadeh, 2015). Therefore, mere debate without action on these germane issues could make meaningful impact.

The Annual Report on the 2014 Millennium Development Goals, a United Nations publication that tracks progress towards achieving the MDGs, claimed that some 33 million children in sub-Saharan Africa were out of school in 2012. Nigeria has about 5.5 million girls out of school while Ethiopia had more than a million. The situation differs from one country to the other and between rural and urban areas in each country, the evidence revealed that 56% of the out of school children are girls (Kuwonu, 2015). Similarly, Musau (2015) stated that two-thirds of women in Africa have been classified as functionally illiterate. To enforce better access to education, she suggested that girls be retained in school and those who drop out be given a second chance to repeat classes. The statistical evidence should agitate the First Ladies to put more effort in the domestication and implementation of protocols that promote children and women's rights and focus attention on any form of abuses in the educational system as a strategy towards this goal. While official visits to conflict zones may suggest a sense of solidarity with victims of conflicts, such visits lack the essential elements that are meant to promote and protect children and women's rights, as envisaged in gender mainstreaming policies.

Ighobor (2015) resonating the work of Mari Tripp on the increasing number of women parliamentarians on the continent, noted that it was attributable to the Beijing Declaration on gender equality. Rwanda now leads other African countries with women making up 64% of parliamentarians, more than 40% of seats held by women in Senegal, Seychelles and South Africa, whereas Mozambique, Angola, Tanzania and Uganda women occupies 35% of the parliamentarians seat. In another twist, a survey conducted on participation in politics by women in 34 African countries by Afrobarometer, showed that some of the worst performers are also from the continent including Swaziland (6.2%), Nigeria (6.7%) and Benin 8.4% (Ighobor, 2015). Although, Nigeria has proclaimed the principle of affirmative action in all appointments; it is however not clear whether this could be attributed to the effort of the AFLPM. The fact remains that African First Ladies have not done enough to advocate for mainstreaming gender into the various sectors of the society. This issue is a cardinal aspect of the Action Plan and one that involves a range of activities under the purview of the Advocacy and Planning unit of AFLPM.

Similarly, the 2015 African Union Summit under the theme *Year of Women Empowerment and Development Towards Africa's Agenda 2063*, also assessed the progress made on gender equality in Africa since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and its Plan for Action. It noted that while Africa continues to make progress towards gender parity, yet

there are quite a large number of women and girls who continue to be discriminated against while violence against them has not reduced in any significant way. The most pertinent observation was the absence of the AFLPM at the 2015 AU Summit with an Agenda that is very much related to the theme of its mission. Whatever the reasons responsible for this lack of recognition by AU; the absence of First Ladies, will continue to generate critical gender debate. This fact notwithstanding, the lack of presence of AFLPM, as an institution at such a continental fora is a wakeup call to reposition and redefine its Mission within the continental body.

Challenges and a Way Forward

African First Ladies has made a giant stride by establishing the peace mission. The objectives are laudable and the context justifies the need for its existence either in promoting peace or reducing the incidences of violent conflicts and other humanitarian emergencies in the continent. Their efforts cannot be wished away, in spite of the challenges confronting the mission. The challenges are enormous, including the absence of genuine commitment among the First Ladies. For example, out of the 54 countries in Africa, only 33 countries are members of the organization and only about 10 are active participants - a situation that calls for worry given the consigned role of the AFLPM. One may in part attribute this to the internal dynamics of each country and partly to the assumed symbolic command of enormous respect, power and influence of the office in the cultural content of many countries in Africa. Despite the absence of a formal role in the constitution, observers tend to link such offices to the Office of the President/Chief Executive of the countries.

Consequently, the internal dynamics in each country often hinder the First Ladies to proactively engage on issues that are perceived to be men's sole formal responsibility to avoid conflict. This may explain why some of the member countries are unable to pay-up their annual fees as contained in Articles 23-25 of the Internal Regulation of the mission as well as the lack of support from national governments, especially the lack of funds to finance the activities of the peace Mission. In fact, the report of the 2nd Executive Bureau Meeting (2014) indicated that the financial situation of the mission remains a major challenge.

Lack of sufficient awareness of the intension and goals of the organization may also have generated negative public perception for the AFLPM. The strategies employed to disseminate information are not only faulty but very often they send negative impression about the motive behind the organization. For example, government budget for the office of the President may have been expended, without appropriation, for the activities of the AFLPM. A great deal of attention was often placed on both the paraphernalia of the person and the office rather than meeting the demands of the issues of Peace Initiatives. This has invariably presented the mission in bad light.

While the plan for the construction of the permanent secretariat is still ongoing, the mission has been functioning from an interim secretariat temporarily located within the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Abuja, Nigeria, with only four support-staff to provide technical assistance to the mission. Apart from the technical staffs that have been seconded from government agency, the temporary secretariat also employed twelve staff whose capacity to conduct peace work is highly in doubt. They neither possess any cognate experience nor professional background on peace related issues. The absence of a qualified Executive Secretary was also a major constraint, for that office has been vacant since the inception of the mission in 1997. The position of the Executive Secretary as well as directors still remained vacant by May 2015. The office of the Executive Secretary is expected to oversee the daily activities of the mission, the absence that may have hindered the organization from performing to an optimum standard.

Also, the inability of the mission to properly and strategically position itself within a specific narrative framework remains an issue. Troubling rhetoric's over the status of the mission remains questions such as: Is AFLPM a non-governmental organization or an agency of the national government? Does the African Union recognize its place and role as peace-makers? Some observers see the mission as a personal project of the First Ladies rather than a continental institution in pursuance of the most important human agenda in the continent, that is, the promotion and advocacy for peace. Yet, the necessary visibility needed to garner support is not easily available. In the same vein, while the African Union (AU) endorsed the importance of its mission, yet the AFLPM does not enjoy the needed attention and support to tactically succeed in its quest to promote peace in the continent. The absence of the mission at the just concluded African Union Summit in South Africa in 2015 with the theme "Women Empowerment and Development towards African's Agenda 2063" speaks volumes on the nature and supposed roles of the organization.

Furthermore, the Peace bulletin, a quarterly publication of the mission is not only limited in scope, its coverage of the wide range of peace activities in African is rather narrow. One would expect that such a publication should be an advocate of the prevalent issues of conflict in the continent and, in projecting the goals of the mission to be proactive in engaging the negative public perception of the mission. However, this has hardly been the case.

Consequently, refocusing the peace mission has become an urgent priority. There is a need to institutionalize the AFLPM by giving it a legal status. AFLPM can be registered either as a non-governmental organization to serve as a pressure group in the continent. In that position, it could seek for observer and advisory status both at AU and UN. Also, the mission can pursue international acceptance or seek to become an organ of the African Union in order to be accorded the necessary recognition and support at the

national and regional levels. This may be worth pursuing in order to generate goodwill as well as serve as links to issues of subtle peace diplomacy on behalf of the continent. Precisely, the institutionalization of the mission will increase the commitment of the First Ladies and garner the much needed support from the national government and other relevant stakeholders to help it survive the socio-political conditions presently challenging its goals in the continent.

Aside the annual contributions to the mission by each country, it is equally important to put in place a more vibrant strategy to fund the mission without government assistance. An idea of generating fund through private individuals and corporate bodies was indeed raised during the 3rd Bureau meeting in October, 2014 by the First Lady of South Africa. Such idea should be sustained in order to help the organization to execute projects and run its peace activities across the continent. Such funding activities could become a matter of urgency if the mission is to embark on serious sensitization campaign and advocacy as well as engage in capacity building for women at different levels of the society.

Its comprehensive projects will also include child and women's rights and conflict prevention mechanism through workshops, seminars and conferences, in order to ensure a buy-in of its advocacy project by policy makers. Needless to emphasize the importance of skilled staff in its secretariat, as we have noted, that the current employees lack the necessary professional background to discharge the goals of the Mission. It is essential to fill the position of the Executive Secretary and those of directors as a matter of priority in order to kick-start the reform process that will be necessary to activate the AFLPM. In the meantime, a research team should be put in place to examine, monitor and interrogate the fundamental issues of gender equality and mainstreaming with a view to promoting the culture of peace stability and sustainable economic growth in the continent.

The AFLPM secretariat should be able to come up with concrete programmes and activities that it could work with development partners, United Nations agencies, international local and regional non-governmental organisation on issues of women, peace and security into to promote its peacebuilding agenda in the nation states of Africa particularly in local communities across the continent.

Conclusion

Whichever way one looks at the initiative of the AFLPM, one must acknowledge the giant stride of the First Ladies in bringing peace issues to the public through their activities. The AFLPM has no doubt provided some level of succor to the victims of conflicts in the continent. While it is true that conflicts continue to rage with new dynamics and attendant negative consequences in the continent, it is also the case that the First Ladies have not relented in their commitment to reduce the incidence of conflicts and its toll

on women and children in Africa. The AFLPM remains a model that can be replicated in other continents of the world. The focus of such a body need not be strictly restricted to only issues of conflict, but on other matters that could deepen gender equality in order to enhance peace, stability and sustainable development of the African continent and others across the world.

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