

## The Challenges of Women Religious Leaders in Peacebuilding and Reconciliation in Nigeria

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### Abstract

*This study explores the pivotal role of women religious leaders in peacebuilding and reconciliation in Nigeria, focusing on conflict-prone regions of Kaduna, Jos, and Borno. Despite male-dominated religious structures, these leaders employ spiritual authority, grassroots networks, and gender-sensitive strategies to promote social cohesion. Through qualitative methods, including 25 interviews and four focus group discussions, the research reveals their effectiveness in interfaith dialogue (e.g., resolving 94% of household disputes via Women Peacebuilding Councils) and trauma healing. Challenges such as patriarchal norms, security threats, and funding constraints limit their impact. The study advocates for institutional support, gender-inclusive policies, and interfaith forums to amplify their contributions, offering insights for Nigeria's peacebuilding framework and global gender-focused peace initiatives.*

**Keywords:** *women religious leaders, peacebuilding, reconciliation, Nigeria, gender, interfaith dialogue*

### Introduction

Nigeria's socio-political landscape, marked by ethno-religious diversity, has fueled conflicts in the Middle Belt (e.g., Plateau and Kaduna) and Northeast (e.g., Borno). Notable historical conflicts include the Kafanchan crisis (1987), Zango-Kataf-Hausa conflict (1992), and the Boko Haram insurgency since 2009, resulting in over 37,000 deaths and displacing more than 2.5 million people as of recent reports (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024; UNHCR, 2023). These conflicts, driven by ethnic, religious, economic, and political factors, disproportionately impact women and children, who constitute approximately 80% of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in northern Nigeria (UNHCR, 2024). Despite state and international interventions, sustainable peace is elusive, underscoring the need for grassroots efforts (Porter, 2019).

Women religious leaders have become essential, though underrecognized, in Nigeria's peacebuilding. They use spiritual authority, community trust, and gender-sensitive methods to enable interfaith dialogue, conflict mediation, and trauma healing (Kabeer, 2021; Olowu, 2017). While literature highlights women's peace roles (Hendricks, 2021; UN Women, 2017), research on women religious leaders in Nigeria remains sparse, despite their unique faith-gender-community intersection (Nnaemeka, 2023).

This study fills this gap by analyzing their contributions, strategies, challenges, and potential in Kaduna, Jos, and Borno. Objectives include: (1) documenting roles and initiatives; (2) examining barriers like patriarchal norms and security risks; and (3) recommending policies for integration into Nigeria's peace framework (Afolabi & Olasupo, 2024). Grounded in feminist and social capital theories, the paper proceeds with methodology, frameworks, historical context, case studies, challenges, recommendations, and conclusion.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the roles of women religious leaders in peacebuilding and reconciliation in Nigeria. Data were collected between January 2024 and June 2024 in Kaduna, Jos (Plateau State), and Borno, using semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 women religious leaders, including Christian leaders from the Women Wing of Christian Association of Nigeria (WOWICAN), Muslim leaders from the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN), and representatives from interfaith organizations like the Women of Faith Peacebuilding Network. Participants were purposively selected for their active peacebuilding roles, ensuring saturation across diverse contexts. Interviews explored strategies, challenges, and impacts, with questions designed to capture contextual nuances (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Four FGDs were held, two in Jos, one in Kaduna, and one in Borno, involving 40 participants, including community members, youth, and stakeholders. FGDs provided insights into community perceptions of these leaders' effectiveness (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Secondary data were sourced from reports by UN Women, Mercy Corps, LEAH Foundation and academic studies on Nigerian conflicts (e.g., Afolabi & Olasupo, 2024). For the participants, purposive sampling ensured diversity in religious affiliations (Christian and Muslim), regions, and engagement levels. The sample included 15 Christian women leaders (e.g., Catholic Sisters, WOWICAN members), 10 Muslim women leaders (e.g., FOMWAN members), and 20 community stakeholders. This size allowed for thematic saturation.

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach for the data analysis, through familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting. Transcripts were coded manually to identify themes like interfaith dialogue, trauma healing, and patriarchal barriers, enabling nuanced interpretation of cultural and religious elements. Triangulation across methods ensured validity and reliability (Yin, 2016). Informed consent was secured for ethical considerations, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Participants could withdraw at any time, and safety measures were implemented in high-risk areas like Borno. Transcripts were stored on encrypted devices to protect data (Babbie, 2020).

## **Historical Context of Conflict in Nigeria**

Nigeria's conflicts stem from ethnic, religious, economic, and political grievances, severely affecting the Middle Belt and Northeast. Key events include the Kafanchan crisis (1987), Zango-Kataf-Hausa conflict (1992), and Boko Haram insurgency since 2009, causing over 37,000 deaths and displacing over 2.5 million (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024; UNHCR, 2023). Farmer-herder clashes in North Central Nigeria led to over 2,500 deaths from 2016–2020 (ReliefWeb, 2023), with 3,100 Christians killed and 2,000 kidnapped in 2024 (International Crisis Group, 2020; Open Doors, 2024). Fulani militia violence killed ~55,910 and abducted ~21,000 from 2020–2023 (Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa, 2023). Religious tensions, such as the 2001 Jos crisis (over 1,000 deaths), persist (Human Rights Watch, 2001). By mid-2023, Nigeria had ~3.5 million IDPs, with women and children ~80% in northern camps (Osadola & Ojo, 2023; UNHCR, 2024).

Women, via religious platforms, lead peace efforts. The Women of Faith Peacebuilding Network (founded 2008) has engaged over 10,000 Muslim and Christian women in seminars, mediation, and vocational training (Global Sisters Report, 2018). Mercy Corps (2024) reports Women's Critical Discussion Groups (WCDGs) and Women Peacebuilding Councils (WPCs) noted women playing a role in resolving 94% of household disputes and engaging youth against extremism, bridging peace gaps.

**Table 1**

***Key Conflicts in Nigeria and Their Impact***

<b>Conflict Type</b>	<b>Affected Regions</b>	<b>Key Statistics</b>	<b>Role of Women</b>
Boko Haram Insurgency	Northeast (Borno, Yobe, Adamawa)	>37,000 deaths, >2.5 million displaced (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024; UNHCR, 2023)	Trauma healing, peace advocacy, IDP support
Fulani Militia Attacks	Middle Belt (Plateau, Benue)	~55,910 killed, ~21,000 abducted (2020–2023) (Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa, 2023)	Dispute mediation, coexistence dialogue
Christian-Muslim Tensions	Kaduna, Plateau	>1,000 deaths in 2001 Jos crisis (Human Rights Watch, 2001)	Interfaith dialogue, peace forums

**Contributions of Women Religious Leaders**

Women religious leaders in Nigeria play a multifaceted and transformative role in peacebuilding and reconciliation, particularly in conflict-affected regions like Kaduna, Jos, and Borno. Drawing on 25 interviews, four FGDs, and secondary sources, this section expands on their contributions,

highlighting empirical examples, strategies, and impacts. These leaders leverage their spiritual authority, community networks, and gender-sensitive approaches to foster social cohesion, often in ways that complement or surpass formal state efforts. Their work is rooted in faith-based values of compassion, forgiveness, and unity, enabling them to address both immediate conflict resolution and long-term societal healing (Chitando & Nkomo, 2014; Yusuf & McGarvey, 2019). Despite operating within patriarchal constraints, their grassroots initiatives have demonstrated measurable success, such as resolving 94% of household disputes through structured councils (Mercy Corps, 2024). Variations exist across regions and religions: in the Northeast (e.g., Borno), efforts focus on countering extremism, while in the Middle Belt (e.g., Jos and Kaduna), interfaith collaboration is prominent. Muslim and Christian leaders often collaborate through organizations like FOMWAN and WOWICAN, amplifying their reach.

### **1. Community Mediation**

Women religious leaders excel in facilitating grassroots mediation, using their trusted positions to resolve disputes at household, community, and intergroup levels. In Kaduna and Plateau States, Women Peacebuilding Councils (WPCs) under programs like Mercy Corps' Community Initiatives to Promote Peace (CIPP) have mediated farmer-herder conflicts and domestic issues. For instance, in Kogi State (adjacent to study regions), WPC members organized intercommunity dialogues between Ologba and Egba communities, preventing escalation of resource-based tensions (Mercy Corps, 2024). A WPC member in Katsina (reflective of northern dynamics) noted, “We usually resolve conflicts within the homes, mostly husband and wife. We also mediate [between] neighbors and other community members.” In Jos, FGD participants highlighted how WOWICAN leaders mediated ethnic clashes by drawing on biblical teachings of reconciliation, achieving resolutions in 80% of reported cases (Fieldwork, 2024). In Borno, informal women's groups have mediated between survivors of Boko Haram violence and returning community members, promoting forgiveness and reintegration (Adeniyi, 2020). These efforts reduce tensions and build social capital, with 88.6% of surveyed community members in Kaduna believing such groups improve peacebuilding (Mercy Corps, 2024). Muslim women, through FOMWAN, often focus on Sharia-informed mediation in women-only spaces, while Christian leaders extend to mixed settings, illustrating religious variations.

### **2. Trauma Healing**

Leading counseling and psychosocial support initiatives, women religious leaders address the emotional scars of conflict, particularly among IDPs and survivors. Catholic Sisters in Borno have established trauma healing centers, incorporating prayer and group therapy to support over 5,000 women affected by Boko Haram (Olowu, 2017). A WOWICAN member in Borno shared, “I received threats for counseling IDPs; I pray daily for safety, but seeing women regain hope keeps me going” (Fieldwork, 2024). FOMWAN leaders in Kaduna run Quran-based healing sessions, helping Muslim women process grief and rebuild resilience. The Parenting for Peace initiative,

supported by Mercy Corps, engages religious leaders to prevent youth radicalization through family counseling, with one Plateau participant reporting, “My son was into drug abuse... after lectures on its effects, he stopped” (Mercy Corps, 2024). In Jos, interfaith trauma workshops by the Women of Faith Peacebuilding Network have reached over 10,000 women, combining Christian and Islamic teachings for holistic healing (Global Sisters Report, 2018). These efforts are more intensive in Borno due to insurgency trauma, where women leaders report higher success in women-led groups (94% participant satisfaction) compared to mixed ones (Afolabi & Olasupo, 2024). Their faith-based approach fosters trust, enabling deeper emotional recovery than secular programs.

### **3. Advocacy and Education**

Through workshops, sermons, and campaigns, these leaders promote tolerance, gender equality, and non-violence. In Kaduna, the LEAH Foundation has advocated for women's inclusion in peace processes, organizing rallies that influenced local policies. WOWICAN and FOMWAN conduct joint education sessions on conflict resolution, with a Jos FGD noting, “We teach youth about peace through sermons, reducing extremism” (Fieldwork, 2024). Mercy Corps' WCDGs in Plateau integrate education on gender norms, with teachers using classroom time to impart skills: “We take advantage and use our lesson period to teach conflict management to students” (Mercy Corps, 2024). In Borno, advocacy focuses on countering Boko Haram narratives, with women's groups combining religious teachings to support IDP education and vocational training (UN Women, 2017). Christian leaders often access church networks for broader outreach, while Muslim women emphasize community madrasas, leading to 47.4% of WCDG participants reporting improved community awareness (Mercy Corps, 2024). These initiatives empower youth and women, fostering long-term cultural shifts.

### **4. Interfaith Dialogue**

Platforms like the Women of Faith Peacebuilding Network and LEAH Foundation enable cross-faith collaboration, reducing mistrust. In Kaduna, diverse WCDGs (Christian and Muslim members) hold joint meetings: “There is no segregation... we meet like sisters” (Mercy Corps, 2024). A religious leader noted improved interactions post-intervention: “Christian and Muslim women are seen together in meetings and rallies” (Mercy Corps, 2024). In Jos, the network's seminars have built bridges amid violence, engaging over 10,000 women (Global Sisters Report, 2018). In Borno, informal dialogues counter extremism, with FOMWAN and WOWICAN co-hosting forums (UNDP, 2015). These efforts are vital in mixed regions like Kaduna, where 82.9% of participants credit them for enhanced cohesion, though less formalized in conservative Borno (Mercy Corps, 2024).

These contributions demonstrate women religious leaders' resilience and innovation, yet their full potential is curtailed by the challenges discussed below (Hendricks, 2021).

## Challenges Faced by Women Religious Leaders

Women religious leaders in Nigeria face complex challenges that hinder their peacebuilding efforts, rooted in structural, cultural, and contextual dynamics. Drawing on 25 interviews, four FGDs, and secondary sources, this section unpacks each challenge, provides empirical illustrations, analyzes implications for participation and influence, and explores variations across regions, religions, and conflict contexts.

### 1. Patriarchal Norms

Patriarchal norms exclude women from formal leadership in religious institutions like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), where men dominate decision-making councils (Salihu, 2022). Culturally, stereotypes portray women's public roles as inappropriate, pressuring them to defer to male authority (Adelakun & Adelakun, 2022). In Islam, women leaders are often restricted to women-only spaces, limiting mediation scope, while in Christianity, they are confined to auxiliary roles like women's wings (Nnaemeka, 2023).

A FOMWAN member in Kaduna shared, "As a Muslim woman, I am not allowed in mixed-gender meetings; my voice is silenced before it reaches the table." In Jos, 80% of FGD participants noted male resistance, with a WOWICAN leader describing "double discrimination" due to societal and denominational norms: "They say women should not lead prayers or mediate in public" (Fieldwork, 2024). While in the conservative North of Borno, under Islamic norms, women are often seen as victims, not agents, intensifying restrictions (Afolabi & Olasupo, 2024). In southern Nigeria, patriarchal barriers persist but are less tied to armed conflict, focusing on issues like land disputes (Salihu, 2022). Muslim women face stricter gender segregation than Christian women, who encounter suspicion in interfaith settings (Nnaemeka, 2023).

These norms reduce women's agency, limiting their influence in peace processes. Nigeria's 5.45% female parliamentary representation reflects this systemic exclusion, constraining women's ability to shape broader conflict resolution (Salihu, 2022).

### 2. Security Risks

In conflict zones, women face intimidation, kidnapping, and attacks due to inadequate state protection and their visibility as peace actors (Olowu, 2017). Culturally, their public roles make them targets, as insurgents view them as defying traditional norms.

Three Borno interviewees reported death threats. One, a WOWICAN member, recounted, "I received threats for counseling IDPs; I pray daily for safety" (Fieldwork, 2024). Another, Ramatu, survived a 2022 abduction, stating, "While in captivity, I committed my life to God" (Afolabi & Olasupo, 2024). FGDs in Borno highlighted pervasive fear, with participants noting restricted mobility after dusk. The same risks in Northeast insurgency and the Middle Belt Fulani Militia



attacks. Muslim women in Christian-majority areas like Jos face additional bias, accused of disloyalty (Olowu, 2017). Security threats deter participation, confining efforts to safer domestic disputes (94% resolution rate) rather than broader conflicts, reducing their influence on systemic peace processes (Mercy Corps, 2024).

### **3. Funding Constraints**

Limited access to resources forces reliance on personal funds or short-term grants, reflecting gender disparities in funding allocation (Porter, 2019). Culturally, women's peace work is undervalued, receiving less donor priority. 70% of interviewees cited funding issues. A Borno participant noted, "We lack an office where people can always come; we use our homes, which isn't sustainable" (Fieldwork, 2024). The Women of Faith Peacebuilding Network depended on a one-time Swiss Embassy grant (Global Sisters Report, 2018).

Constraints are more acute in the resource-scarce North than the South, where NGOs provide some support (Mercy Corps, 2024). Christian groups like WOWICAN access church funds more readily than FOMWAN, which relies on member contributions (Nnaemeka, 2023). Funding limits scalability, restricting outreach and long-term impact, particularly in high-conflict areas requiring sustained intervention (Porter, 2019).

### **4. Exclusion from Formal Peace Processes**

Women constitute only 16% of global peace negotiators, and in Nigeria, male-dominated traditional councils exclude them from state-level peace processes (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). Culturally, stereotypes dismiss women's input as emotional rather than strategic (Kabeer, 2021). Kaduna FGDs highlighted exclusion stating, "Women need to be members of the Traditional Council, not just observers" (Fieldwork, 2024). A Jos interviewee noted, "Our recommendations are ignored in state peace committees" (Salihu, 2022).

Exclusion is more pronounced in patriarchal Northern states (e.g., Borno) than in Kaduna/Plateau, where interfaith platforms offer some inclusion. Christian-Muslim divides exacerbate marginalization in mixed settings (Afolabi & Olasupo, 2024). Exclusion sidelines women's perspectives, perpetuating gendered conflict impacts and limiting their influence on policy-driven peace solutions (Kabeer, 2021).

### **5. Cultural and Religious Barriers**

Cultural norms reinforce patriarchy, while religious biases hinder cross-faith trust (Adelakun & Adelakun, 2022). Digital platforms offer potential but face gender-based access disparities (Oloba & Blankenship, 2025). Jos interviewees reported elder resistance, with one stating, "Elders say women leading peace talks is against tradition" (Fieldwork, 2024). A Borno FGD noted intergenerational gaps, with younger women reluctant to adopt digital tools due to distrust (Nnaemeka, 2023).

Barriers are stronger in the Islamic North, with sociocultural stereotypes than in diverse Kaduna/Plateau. Muslim women face stricter scrutiny in interfaith roles than Christians (Salihu, 2022). These barriers undermine resilience, requiring reforms to enhance cross-faith collaboration and digital access to amplify impact (Oloba & Blankenship, 2025).

These challenges reflect systemic marginalization, but resilience in groups like WOWICAN and FOMWAN suggests potential for change through targeted support (Nnaemeka, 2023).

### **Policy Recommendations**

To enhance impact:

1. Inclusion in Peace Councils: Integrate into structures, per Nigeria's NAP-WPS; aim for 30% representation (UN Women, 2017).
2. Funding and Training: Allocate 20% of peace funds to women-led initiatives; replicate UN Women's Plateau programs nationwide.
3. Interfaith Forums: Establish state-level women's forums with digital integration.
4. Media Coverage: Publicize stories to build support.
5. Gender Reforms: Promote leadership in religious institutions via training.

### **Conclusion**

Women religious leaders are vital to Nigeria's peacebuilding, leveraging faith networks for mediation and reconciliation. Their work is essential for sustainable peace, with global relevance. Policymakers must prioritize them through inclusion and resources. Future research should quantify impacts to inform policy.

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