Religious syncretism and the inclusion or exclusion of women in peacebuilding in northeast Nigeria

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Abstract

This article examines the role of religious practices in limiting women's participation in peacebuilding processes in northeast Nigeria. A human rights-based approach is adopted to examine how Nigerian laws seek to balance religious beliefs and practices with women's inclusion in state rebuilding processes. The study finds a correlation between religious practices and patriarchy. It connects the inadequate inclusion of women in peacebuilding and rebuilding processes primarily to religious beliefs and perceptions that have been embedded in cultural values. The article concludes that the exclusion of women in peacebuilding and reconstruction processes threatens sustainable peace and may lead to the recurrence of conflict.

Keywords inclusion, exclusion, religion, peacebuilding, reconstruction, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Nigeria is a country of about 140 million people with a diverse culture in which different religious sects coexist and mix freely in their daily business (Yin 2007). Christianity and Islam are the two leading religions in Nigeria, with 53.5 percent of the population following Islam, 45.9 percent identifying as Christians, and 0.6 percent adhering to other faiths, including African traditional religion. The northwest and northeast areas of Nigeria are dominated by Islam, while the southsouth and southeast regions are dominated by Christianity, with a diverse mix of Christianity and Islam in the southwest and north central regions (Adelakun 2021). However, many Nigerians practice their religion in a way that cannot be completely detached from their traditional and cultural norms, to the extent that it can be difficult for an observer to distinguish between religious and cultural norms. Cultural practices have gained so much acceptance within Nigerian religious practices that cultural values are often

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projected as religious norms in ways that infringe on the rights of other members of the community.

Nigeria has seen a succession of violent conflicts in the previous several decades, including the Niger Delta war, the Boko Haram insurgency, communal disputes, conflicts involving Fulani herdsmen, and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) separatist agitation, to name a few. Hundreds of lives have been lost, thousands of children have been orphaned, women and young girls have been sexually molested, millions of Nigerians have been uprooted, and numerous private and public facilities have been damaged as a result of armed conflicts. Since the Boko Haram insurgency started in 2009, the northeast region has witnessed a series of violent attacks which have led to the loss of lives, mass displacement and property damage. The Nigerian states most directly affected are Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (sometimes referred to as the BAY states) in northeast Nigeria. Because of the strife, several initiatives and interventions have been undertaken to restore and maintain peace as well as to rebuild the affected region.

In theory, the integration of vulnerable victims into society is a common goal of peacebuilding and reconstruction procedures. Many reasons have been asserted in favour of achieving gender balance and representation in peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts. However, gender balance has been widely misinterpreted to mean simply the quantity of women engaging in peacebuilding processes, rather than considering broader implications of their participation. Women are invaluable actors in peacebuilding and development because of the complex social responsibilities and burdens placed on them during and after violent conflicts, and this role can be fulfilled only if concrete planning and programming activities take place to facilitate women's participation in these processes. Gender inequality and exclusion in education, work and financial support have been proven to contribute to such factors as intimate partner violence and adolescent fertility, which in turn drive and refuel violent conflicts (Davis 2020). Beyond the well-known gender-specific effects of violent conflicts on women, such as trauma, sexual violence, inadequate reproductive healthcare, lack of educational opportunity, displacement and exploitation, among other heinous human rights violations, this article examines the impact of religious practices on the inclusion or exclusion of women in peacebuilding and reconstruction processes in northeast Nigeria.

2. The legal framework for right to religion and protection of women in Nigeria

Nigeria is a signatory to several international and regional instruments that guarantee the fundamental rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on

the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Specifically, section 38 of the Nigerian Constitution provides as follows:

1. Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.
2. No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction, ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his own, or a religion not approved by his parent or guardian.
3. No religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination.
4. Nothing in this section shall entitle any person to form, take part in the activity or be a member of a secret society.

The freedom of religion provided by the Constitution is a composite right encompassing other freedoms that characterize religion as involving cognitive processes and as a social reality that flourishes in interpersonal dynamics and concrete civil presence, rather than simply the right to maintain one's faith privately (Jude et al. 2016). That is, religious liberty entails not only the freedom to maintain one's beliefs and faith, but also the freedom to express and share them with others. The right to change one's faith or to have no religion at all is also recognized globally and in Nigeria as part of religious freedom.

Along with religious freedom itself, the Constitution further grants a number of rights that support religious liberty, such as freedom of association, the right to private and family life, and the right to freedom of movement. Section 42 of the Nigerian Constitution states that no one shall be discriminated against because of their religious beliefs. This right not only protects people's ability to practice whichever religion they like but also ensures that all religions are treated equally. As a result, the right to religious liberty must be exercised in an environment where no specific faith is preferred. This principle is reinforced by section 10 of the Nigerian Constitution, which provides that "the government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as state religion." Thus, constitutionally, Nigeria is a secular state.

However, the right to freedom of religion is not absolute or inviolable. Individual and collective considerations are allowed under section 45(1) of the Constitution. Thus, in the interests of defence, public safety, order, morality or health, as well as to protect the rights and freedoms of others, the right to freedom of religion can be

limited. Constraints on religious freedom can be enforced to maintain national security, including economic, political, and other forms of security that may endanger a nation's territory (Jude et al. 2016).

In many African societies, cultural and religious practices conflict with human rights concepts, primarily where they seek to maintain patriarchy at the expense of women's rights. Female genital mutilation, domestic abuse, child marriage, restricting attire, preference for male child education, witch hunts, and seclusion of women as housewives are only a few of these discriminatory traditions. In a bid to protect women's rights in Africa, the Assembly of the African Union, on 11 July 2013 at Maputo, Mozambique, adopted the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), which had originally come into force on 25 November 2005 (Adelakun 2019). Nigeria was among the first 15 states to ratify the Maputo Protocol. Article 17 of the Maputo Protocol states that women have the right to live in a favourable cultural milieu and to participate in the formulation of cultural policies at all levels. While cultural rights ensure that people of a community have access to the culture of their choosing, the culture must be in a good context for community members to benefit from the protection and promotion provided by the law. This provision can be extended to call for participation by women in every aspect of societal development, including peacebuilding and reconstruction processes.

Also, Nigeria ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1985, which is aimed at preventing and eliminating all forms of discrimination against women and girls, without reservation. Although the CEDAW and Maputo Protocol have not been expressly domesticated in Nigeria in line with the requirements of section 12 of the Nigerian Constitution, section 42 of the Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, religion, origin or political opinion. The Federal legislature also enacted the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPPA) in 2015, which seeks to protect every person, not just women, in Nigeria against all forms of violence. Unfortunately, the VAPPA focuses only on acts of violence and does not address core issues that affect the realization of women's rights in Nigeria, such as religious and cultural practices modelled after patriarchy, which promotes oppression and marginalisation of women. One example of legislation that promotes violence against women under religious and cultural guise can be found in section 55(1) of the Penal Code, which is applicable in northern Nigeria and which permits a husband to "reasonably" correct his wife provided that it does not lead to "grievous harm". Also, section 353 of the Criminal Code, which is applicable in Southern Nigeria, criminalizes assault as a felony if committed against a man, but only as a misdemeanour if committed against a girl or woman. It further proscribes adultery for a married or divorced

person, with a death sentence as penalty for conviction, but says that such proof can consist of pregnancy in a woman's case but can be achieved only with four independent witnesses in the case of a man. Similarly, both the Penal Code and the Criminal Code recognize unlawful carnal knowledge of a woman or girl as rape if committed outside wedlock, but they reduce the same offence to assault if committed within a marriage.

Religion and culture have often been cited as reference points for the justification of the various double standards contained in provisions of the Penal Code (Ekhator 2015). These provisions originated largely from the Sudanese Penal Code of 1899, which was in turn based on the Indian Penal Code of 1833 and 1837. However, whereas religion has been defined as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim 1995:47), Nigeria exhibits a more syncretistic context, which has affected the religious norms and values in the country.

One may argue that since the VAPPA was enacted in 2015, it should take priority over both the Penal Code and the Criminal Code. However, the VAPPA is a product of the residuary legislative authority of the Constitution whereas both the Penal Code and the Criminal Code are federal laws that apply uniformly to the various regions of Nigeria (Adelakun 2019). In essence, each state of the Nigerian Federation is required to domesticate its own version of the VAPPA before it can take effect in the state. Not surprisingly, some northern states have resisted domesticating this law, despite civic advocacy in favour of its acceptance. It is therefore imperative to have gender-balanced and gender-sensitive laws and policies that will not discriminate against women on religious or cultural grounds.

3. Religion, peacebuilding and women in Nigeria

Islamic religion has a strong religious influence in Nigerian society, influencing its socio-political and socio-ethnic environment. This could be due to the manner by which Islamic religion was introduced into Nigeria. It first reached northern Nigeria in the 11th century (Honarvar 1988). The region was formerly composed of Hausa kingdoms. Usman Dan Fodio, an Islamic scholar, conducted a victorious Fulani war against the Hausa kingdoms in Nigeria from 1804 to 1808. The kingdoms were transformed into Islamic communities as a result of this jihad. The caliphate established by Fodio was based on pre-existing political and socio-economic foundations. It did, however, provide new legal and political institutions in the shape of a federation between a caliphate located in Sokoto, Fodio's homeland, and new emirates, which helped to change the traditional Hausa political and social structures. Northern Nigeria has had the most robust and most prominent Islamic tradition

in sub-Saharan Africa since the formation of this Hausa-Fulani Muslim political regime in the 19th century (Vaughan and Banu, 2014). The foundations for the development of peace and order, enhancing the position of women, and the subject of fair inheritance and succession are all covered by Islamic laws, which are recognized as one of the world's greatest legal systems (Udoh et al. 2020).

Christianity, the majority faith in Nigeria's southern areas but a minority in the north, first reached the country in the 15th century through the activity of European missionaries, and it has since expanded throughout the nation, having a significant impact on the country's behavioural patterns and constitutional legislation (Kolapo 2019). Christianity is purportedly governed by religious regulations found in the Bible, which contains clear commands and instructions from God, received via prophets, on how followers should act, as well as doctrines from Jesus Christ and his apostles (Udoh et al. 2020). Again, the principle of equality of all human beings is emphasized in the Bible, but women's rights have been subjected to diverse interpretations by theologians, scholars and local traditions (Radford 2000). For instance, some mission-oriented denomination churches in Nigeria such as the Anglican, Methodist, Catholic and Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) exclude women from church leadership completely while some denominations such as the Baptist include women at the lower level of church leadership (Ademiluka 2017). On the other hand, most Pentecostal denominations such as Christ Embassy, Christ Apostolic Church, and Redeemed Christian Church of God, include women at every level of church leadership (Ademiluka 2007). The diversity in the interpretation of biblical laws has been influenced by the prevalent sociocultural legal systems of the time. This diversity continues today in the context of Nigerian society.

Since the focus of this article is on northeast Nigeria, which is predominantly Muslim, we will pay closer attention to the impact of Islamic practices, with some reference to Christian practices where appropriate. Both traditions will be examined in the light of syncretism, which as noted above is quite prevalent in Nigeria. The interpretation and application of Sharia law in northern Nigeria seems to be in the hands of a few male scholars and traditional leaders, as well as judges and lawyers who may not be fully aware of the complicated laws and processes that constitute Sharia norms and principles. This has led to interpretations designed to suit the interpreter's purposes. For instance, religious leaders and scholars often cite religion as a justification for limiting women's participation in private and public life based on the doctrine of submission, which is often emphasized by both religious and traditional leaders (Bawa 2017).

Religion is used to defend patriarchal society and the class system. As such, it is a strong force influencing the practice of human rights in Nigeria. Historically, both the Muslim and Christian communities in northeast Nigeria have been highly

patriarchal. To date, patriarchal norms and values continue to manifest themselves in religious practices, not only in the northeast but across Nigeria. Despite women's considerable engagement in farm work, religious practices and cultural traditions in the northeast have defined women's role substantially in terms of procreation and have generally limited them to a domestic life as caregivers while men are the breadwinners (Imam et al. 2020).

Due to the obviously theocratic nature of the northern Nigerian government prior to colonization, Islam has become institutionalized as a culture for the vast majority of the region's people. Islam, like most religious ideologies, offers members the possibility of a beautiful paradise (Makama 2013) but many believe that this can be achieved to the detriment of women based on misconceptions and misinterpretations of the scriptures. The infiltration of cultural norms and beliefs into the practice of Islam in some northern states of Nigeria has gained legislative acceptance in such states, even leading some states to adopt Sharia law, which apparently challenges the country's secular foundation and greatly restricts the realization of women's rights. It is therefore a welcome development that several religious groups such as the Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN) are standing up to fight oppression of women in the name of religion. These groups are embracing "reinterpretation" activism to campaign against the exclusion and oppression of women in the northern region by "adopting sophisticated interpretations of complicated religious texts from which *Shari'a* is derived to successfully defend their clients" (Vaughan and Banu 2014:5).

The Boko Haram insurgency has thrived for over a decade in Nigeria, deeply affecting women and children in the northeast. While the insurgency has changed the societal roles of women from mere domestic functions to include informal roles in defence, reconciliation, advocacy and as heads of households, women are still largely excluded from political decision-making processes (Imam et al. 2020). Perhaps, the misconceived notion that females are not the main perpetrators of violence contributes to their exclusion from peacebuilding processes. Despite evidence that women have played active roles in the Boko Haram insurgency, as suicide bombers or in covering up the identities of the insurgents (Bloom and Matfess 2016; Matfess 2017), women's contributions to peacemaking are frequently limited to minor, aesthetic or logistical efforts, reinforcing their status as wives and mothers rather than as active participants in society. In the same way, many have claimed that the Boko Haram insurgency has provided an avenue for women to actively fight oppression by relying on religion to advance their human rights (Zena 2019; Bloom and Matfess 2016; Imam et al. 2020). It has therefore been argued that women's exclusion from formal peacebuilding programs and processes reflects their absence from public life in general (Kolawole, 2021). The conflict with Boko Haram

has revealed the relegated lifestyle of women, which is maintained in the name of cultural and religious practices. For this same reason, women in the northern states have started a coalition to advance their rights (Imam et al. 2020).

Women make up nearly half (about 49 percent) of Nigeria's population, with about 45.5 percent of the labour force in Nigeria being female (World Bank Group 2019), yet their important responsibilities as mothers, workers and executives, among others, are not taken into consideration in peacebuilding processes so as to ensure inclusion. Due to their dual responsibilities in the productive and reproductive domains, females' contribution to society's economic and social growth is only about half of that of males; nevertheless, their involvement in official and informal institutions and procedures, where choices about the use of society's resources created by both men and women are decided, is minimal (Makama 2013). Thus, beyond their economic and political marginalization, women in northeast Nigeria are further marginalized in social, religious and cultural life, thereby leading to high rates of female illiteracy and child marriage (Adelakun-Odewale 2018). Early marriage of girls, which is closely connected to religious beliefs, and the age disparity between spouses in the conflict-prone areas of the northeast contribute to the perception that women lack the ability to contribute significantly towards sustainable formal peacebuilding processes (Garba 2016). These factors have impacted the inclusion of women in peacebuilding in the northeast.

Recently, there have been calls from the international community regarding the need for women's participation in the peacebuilding process in Nigeria (UN WOMEN 2012). While this call is being embraced gradually, the involvement of women is still largely limited to activism through non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Women are becoming more involved in registering and leading NGOs that speak out on behalf of women and advocate for their inclusion in peacebuilding and development processes; many women are playing significant mediator roles at the community level and recently, with the intervention of the United Nations, some men are also beginning to stand up for women's inclusion in peacebuilding processes (Nwadinobi 2017).

However, gross underrepresentation of women persists in formal peacebuilding and reconstruction processes, creating a wide gender disparity. For instance, the membership of the Presidential Committee on the North East Initiative (PCNI), which was set up to promote peace and development in the northeast, had fewer than two percent female representation at the time of its formation in 2016. Similarly, the membership of the North East Development Commission (NEDC), which was statutorily established to reconstruct and develop the region, includes only one female. Politically, to sustain peace and achieve adequate reconstruction in any conflict situation, effective laws and policies are needed that take the true nature

and causes of the conflicts into consideration. In the current 9th parliamentary assembly in Nigeria, there is only one woman among the 13 legislators representing Borno state, one of 11 in Adamawa state and one of nine from Yobe state. As these are the states most directly affected by the insurgency in the northeast, the rate of women's inclusion in this region's political life remains low. As a result, it is not surprising that gender-related concerns, such as gender-based violence and marginalization, keep cropping up in several peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts.

4. The inclusion and exclusion of women in peacebuilding

Inclusion in the context of peacebuilding and reconstruction connotes the principle of equal as well as fair representation of women in key positions in peacebuilding and reconstruction processes. A starting point for this inclusion is the recognition that peacebuilding and reconstruction initiatives often provide opportunities to introduce new laws and policies into political and social processes, allowing for the inclusion of gender equality goals (Domingo and Holmes, 2013). Women must be actively included from the beginning of such processes, which include peace agreements, legal reforms, political participation, social reconstruction and cultural rehabilitation through creating significant quotas for women, access to justice, service provision, and economic recovery. Even though it has been shown that inclusion of women is vital for decision-making and good governance, their participation has generally been viewed as optional and not necessarily required for democratic, inclusive and accountable governance. Thus, the peacebuilding and reconstruction processes in the northeast continue to exclude women from formal participation.

In recognition of the need for greater inclusion of women in peacebuilding processes, the United Nations unanimously adopted UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security on 31 October 2000. It reaffirmed the importance of equal participation and a stronger voice in decision-making for women. Furthermore, the African Union Gender Policy was adopted in 2009. The Nigerian government demonstrated commitment towards the UN Resolution and the AU Gender Policy by launching the National Action Plan of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2013. Although these steps are commendable, their implementation is not very encouraging because since the launch of the National Action Plan in 2013, very little has been achieved in terms of women's inclusion. Beyond a formal declaration of the government's commitment, the actual participation level remains rudimentary and basically only in non-formal spheres at community levels, usually promoted by civil society organizations.

While emphasis has been placed on cultural, economic and gender-stereotype barriers to women's inclusion (Garba 2016; Nwadinobi 2017), little attention has been paid to barriers created by religious practices, possibly because of the sensitivity

around discussing religious issues in Nigeria. An increasing number of studies have revealed that religious practice has a significant impact on women's poor political engagement. Though the two major religions promote various values, have different organizations, and rely on diverse cultural and historical roots, they still have significant commonalities (Sarumi et al. 2019). Thus, while the cultural factors driving women's exclusion from peacebuilding processes cannot be completely detached from religious factors, it appears that religious factors, especially Islam, are more dominant in reinforcing patriarchy in northern Nigeria, because religious norms and beliefs have been codified in several laws of the region, reflecting the decision by some states to adopt Sharia law. Some of these laws place stiff restrictions on women's rights (International Crisis Group 2016) which could constrain their empowerment and economic liberation after conflict situations. It has been argued that religion and culture have been misrepresented in Nigeria, especially in northern Nigeria to limit women's potential by oppressing and repressing them, as can be seen in such provisions as the imposed dress culture and exclusion from development process (Ajeluorou 2017).

Religion therefore has a role to play in both the inclusion and exclusion of women in peacebuilding processes in the northeast and across Nigeria. Religious leaders wield enormous power and influence in their communities, and they have utilized their moral authority to steer debates in diverse directions. Appleby observes that "religious actors build peace when they act religiously, that is when they draw on the deep wells of their traditions and extract the depths of the spiritual instincts and moral imperatives for recognizing and embracing humanity" (Appleby 2000:9). It therefore follows that religion can be used to promote human flourishing and inclusion, just as it can also be used to promote doctrinal differences and exclusion, depending on how religious leaders choose to interpret their faith's various Scriptures and doctrines. Thus, while peacebuilding and reconstruction processes in the northeast have succeeded in fostering religious tolerance by bringing diverse religious leaders together to foster a common good, the same cannot be said with regard to religion's role in fostering women's inclusion in the peacebuilding and reconstruction processes.

5. Rethinking sustainable peace

The continual exclusion of women in aspects of public life such as education and cultural and political decision-making processes in northern Nigeria has affected their capacity to meaningfully and effectively engage in peacebuilding processes. Young girls are not encouraged to attend school or develop any occupational skills but are instead left at home to perform domestic tasks such as farming, cooking, caring for younger siblings, washing, cleaning the house, and so on, or are forced into early marriage. As a result, they develop a mentality that keeps them bound

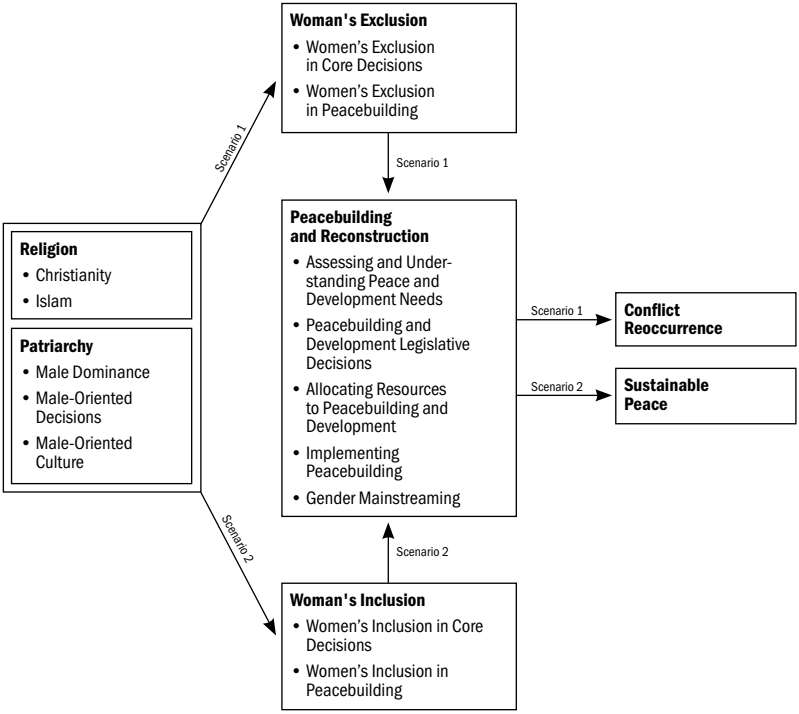

Figure 1: A model of women's inclusion or exclusion in peacebuilding and reconstruction

to this outdated way of life. They grow into women who are trapped in a life of poverty, permanent reliance, and an inferiority complex as a result of prejudice (Adelakun-Odewale 2018). Should their husbands become accidentally injured or be killed in a conflict, the women must care for themselves and other members of their families, but without suitable economic empowerment, they find their plight very difficult to manage. Thus, to engage productively in the peacebuilding process, girls must be trained on an equal footing with boys.

The model in Figure 1 summarizes the discussion and the findings of this study based on two scenarios. The study draws on the correlation between religious practices, particularly Islam and Christianity which are the two leading religions in Nigeria, and patriarchy. The correlation in both religion and patriarchy is deeply rooted in the traditions of the people of northeast Nigeria, firmly establishing male dominance which influences male-oriented decisions and cultural norms.

Also, the peacebuilding and reconstruction processes in the northeast entail assessing and understanding the peace and development needs of the people, taking religious and

cultural norms into consideration. To achieve this goal, we realize the need for gender-sensitive and gender-responsive legislation that aims to promote peacebuilding and reconstruction in the northeast. This has been achieved somewhat by the enactment of the North-East Development Commission Act of 2017 (NEDCA) and the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons Act of 2019, but the gender language and inclusion of the legislation remains a question of practicality because the language of the NEDCA is not gender inclusive and adopts the male pronoun in most of its representations. We also identified the need to allocate resources to peacebuilding and reconstruction projects and programs as well as ensure effective implementation of these projects and programs. Lastly and most importantly, to achieve inclusion of women in these processes, there is a need for gender mainstreaming in every initiative and process related to peacebuilding and reconstruction. Gender mainstreaming in this context is "a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated" (Heidi 2010:298).

Scenario 1 in the figure therefore illustrates a situation in which religion and patriarchy are allowed to permeate the peacebuilding and reconstruction process, to the extent that the religious and cultural roles of women prevent them from having a say in key decisions. This situation, which may bring about temporary peace, is nevertheless likely to lead to recurring conflict situations fuelled by the consequences of disempowerment of women, such as poverty, gender-based violence, poor reproductive health, illiteracy and gross human rights violations. On the other hand, scenario 2 shows a situation in which peacebuilding and reconstruction processes take advantage of the conflicts that have made peacebuilding necessary to change some deeply rooted religious and cultural perceptions by adopting a gender mainstreaming approach and including women in the process. In such a situation, women and men play equal roles, especially in core decision-making processes. In the adoption and implementation of decisions, gender mainstreaming would involve interpreting religious scriptures in the most appropriate way that truly reflects the rights of women, without any form of manipulative influence. Where this occurs, the end result will be a higher level of peace because some of the factors contributing to violent conflicts would have been eradicated in the process of educating and empowering women.

6. Conclusion

The patriarchal framework in Nigeria, which has found its ways into religious practices, restricts women's mobility and plays on conservative notions of gender. This makes peacebuilding, reconstruction and particularly women's full participation in these processes more difficult. It is clear that women's participation in informal peacebuilding

reflects their organizing and advocacy for a better future, despite the fact that they are usually perceived as victims in need of protection. If women are given the platform to apply their skills in formal peacebuilding and reconstruction processes, an entirely different result, bringing about a sustainable peace and notable development, could ensue.

It is therefore imperative that in all activities aimed at reconstructing the northeast, a paradigm shift from an exclusionary approach to a gender-responsive, sensitive, inclusive approach is required. Gender mainstreaming should be used to make all policy and programmatic interventions in the northeast meaningfully gender-inclusive. To establish lasting peace and prevent a reoccurrence of violent conflicts in Nigeria, it is crucial to pursue complete inclusion of women in all peace and reconstruction processes, including in religious spaces and, more critically, to eliminate impediments to Nigerian women's full inclusion and engagement in peacebuilding by strengthening their capacities.

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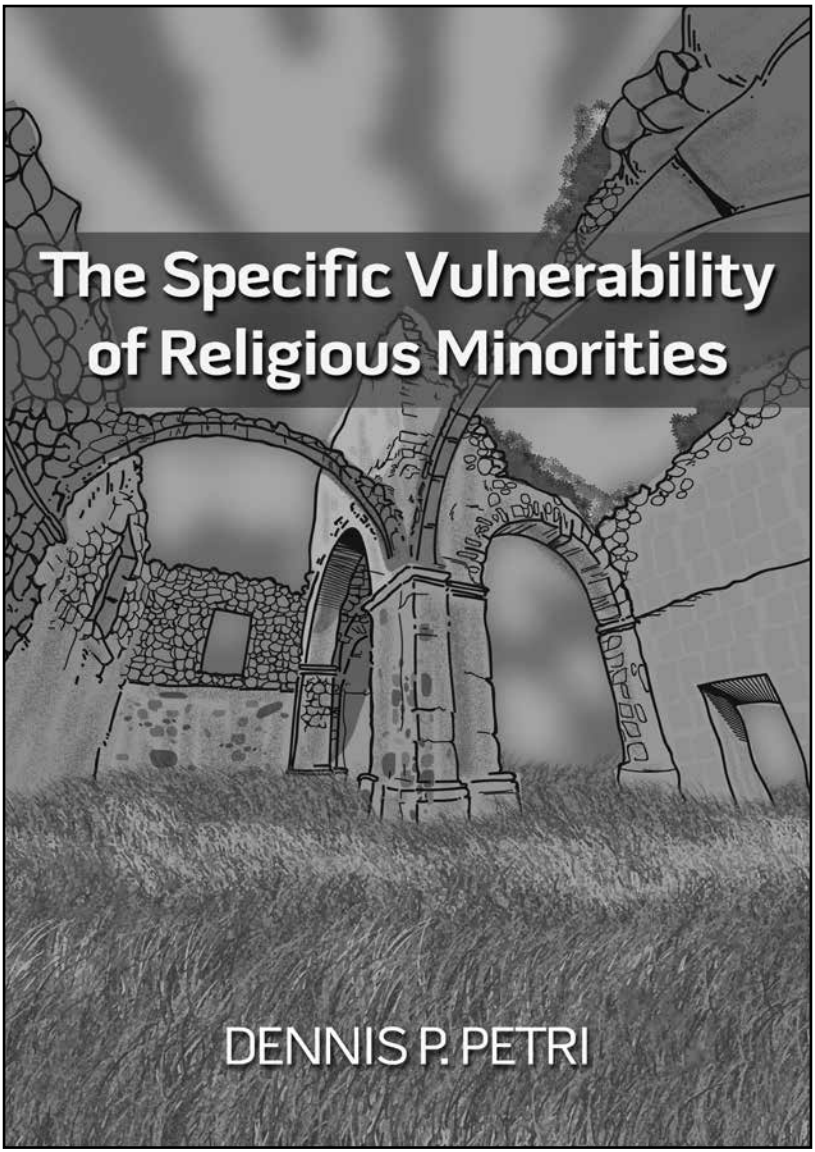

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