

Women Faith-Based Mediators in Nigeria

Challenges and Opportunities
Within Peace Mediation


Berghof Foundation

The Network
for Religious
& Traditional
Peacemakers



WOMEN FOR
POSITIVE PEACE
BUILDING INITIATIVE
(WOPPI)

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Author: Lantana Bako Abdullahi, National Co-Coordinator, Nigerian Women Mediators Network and Carla Schraml, Advisor for Negotiation and Mediation Support, Berghof Foundation

Editors: Jessica Roland, Senior Specialist on Inclusive Peace and Sarah Tyler, Communications Consultant, The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers

Design: Triss Yap, Graphic and Visual Designer, The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers

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1. INTRODUCTION

Women faith-based mediators (WFBMs) in Nigeria play a crucial role in addressing religiously motivated conflicts and promoting peace. WFBMs are motivated by their spiritual beliefs and use of faith-based approaches to engage in mediation and negotiation processes. They leverage their shared faith and identity as women to build trust, connect with communities, and bridge religious divides. The inclusion of faith in mediation allows for a deeper understanding of the context and facilitates the resolution of disputes based on religious teachings and values.

This case study draws on observations from interviews conducted in 2023 with WFBMs across Nigeria. It is against this background that this study explores firsthand the challenges, entry points, risks, and strategies that WFBMs face and utilize, as well as identifies specific support that WFBMs in Nigeria require. The study is focused predominantly on experiences of WFBMs from Northern Nigeria¹ due to the high-level of armed conflict occurring throughout the region.

¹ The study interviewed WFBM and male faith-based mediators (MBFM) drawn mainly from northern Nigeria states of Plateau, Kaduna and Borno and a few others from the southern states of Lagos and Ibadan. The outcome indicates that these mediators get their inspiration, tools, and methods from faith, and in collaboration with other organizations and networks.

2. UNDERSTANDING RELIGION, CUSTOMS, AND CONFLICT IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is the most populous country in Sub-Saharan Africa, with an estimated population of about 200 million people, in which women represent about 48% of the population.² For decades, armed conflict has been recurring in many parts of Nigeria with negative impacts, including murder and physical destruction. The most affected States by violence in Northern Nigeria include Plateau, Kaduna, Kano, Sokoto, Bauchi, Yobe, Adamawa, and Borno. Although the causes of the violence vary, ethnic or religious (Muslim/Christian) dichotomies are commonly viewed as underlying factors.³

The actions or inactions of political leaders, lack of access to employment, healthcare and lack of freedom of religion or belief are some of the factors that are detrimental to the cooperative existence of faith-based communities in Nigeria.⁴ The US Commission on International Religious Freedom notes, 'Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remain poor, with both state and societally perpetrated violations.'⁵ The basic example of such truncated freedom is the situation in Zamfara State, where Christian minority groups are denied land to build religious centers or even conduct worship.⁶ Similar cases also avail in Anambra State where Muslim minorities are denied the same rights.

² Nigerian Bulletin, 2011.

³ Several WFBM suggested that the causes of the violence are deeply rooted in historical, social, economic and structural or political factors. These include perceived legacies of colonial administration favoring one group over the other, failure of government to address the material condition of a vast majority, the natives and settlers' controversy etc.

⁴ USCIRF. Nigeria. <https://www.uscirf.gov/countries/nigeria>, accessed 23 June 2023.

⁵ US Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom. 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/>. May 15, 2023.

⁶ Sahara Reporters. "Bandits Write Christians In Zamfara To Shut Down Churches Or Risk Attacks". <https://saharareporters.com/2021/11/29/exclusive-bandits-write-christians-zamfara-shut-down-churches-or-risk-attacks>, November 29, 2021.

Patriarchal cultures and traditions embedded within Nigeria's social constructs have led to the discrimination and oppression of women. Thus, women remain underrepresented in decision-making and leadership roles at all levels in the religious strata. For example, neither the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), nor the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) have given recognition to women as leaders and decision-makers and accepted them as equal to men. In turn, this denies women any leadership positions. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union Women in Politics Report 2022, Nigeria ranks 184 out of 192 for women's representation in national parliaments and is the lowest in Africa's 54 countries with only 5.45% female representation.⁷ These under-representations have orchestrated the exclusion of women in many activities in the country, including peace processes due to the heavy use of highly militarized and security-oriented approaches dominated and led by men. However, with women being the primary victims within conflict across Nigeria, WFBMs⁸ are becoming more relevant and needed in advancing peace processes.

⁷ Inter-Parliamentary Union. 'Women in parliament: 2022.' <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2023-03/women-in-parliament-2022>. 2023.

⁸ WFBMs and negotiators in Nigeria are working on various tracks of agreements for ceasing violence. They convene stakeholder, liaise, and negotiate with armed groups and relevant decision makers for ensuring humanitarian access, save lives and release hostages. In doing this work, their tools and methods are inspired by faith, and are cooperating within or with faith-based structures and actors.

3. WOMEN, RELIGION AND MEDIATION

The term ‘woman faith-based mediator’ is increasingly dominating the conflict mediation space across Nigeria because of the increasing religiously framed and motivated violence. Moreso, the engagement of religion in the Nigerian conflict space has forced mediation practices to utilize faith-based approaches as foundational apparatuses. For example, faith-based conflicts such as violence perpetuated by Boko Haram, the farmer-pastoralist in Northern Nigeria are becoming more prevalent and needing of faith-based approaches and solutions.

WFBM Amina Hassan Ahmed, a resident of the State, who has contributed to different mediation initiatives in track 2 and track 3, invigorated the relevance of faith-based mediation and the term ‘WFBM’ in the religiously polarized crisis in Jos, stating that, ‘For me, the term WFBM has come to stay particularly for us in Jos following the 2001 religious crisis’, since ‘people have given religious identity so much relevance.’⁹

I am always guided by my values and my faith is a special part of who I am.

Uduak Udofia

The term WFBM is a relatively new concept. Renowned male faith-based mediator Rev. James Movel Wuye, frames the concept as “a new field”¹⁰ that is gaining prominence. Women across Nigeria hold many different positions as it relates to mediation and negotiation as well as broader work across civil society. However, increasing religiously framed and motivated violence in Nigeria in the last years has compelled women to venture into the mediation and negotiation space with little regard to the formalized skills and risks associated with the work. The latter part are often women who live in violence affected communities. Due to their community-based leadership roles, and/or their existing networks, naturally get drawn into negotiations with violence prone extremist groups, such as Boko Haram.¹¹

To many WFBMs, their belief system is foremost a constitutive part of their identity, which guides their values and decision-making. For Uduak Udofia, she states, ‘I am always guided by my values and my faith is a special part of who I am.’¹² WFBMs sometimes use principles of their faith to motivate their actions to become involved within peace mediation efforts, as well as to guide their approaches or tactics. WFBMs can also become involved or interested in peace mediation efforts through their social standing in a community, such as a wife of a religious leader or an accepted member of a faith-based group.

¹⁰ James Movel Wuye: MFBM, above 35, Christianity, Head of NGO/Religious Leader, Kaduna State-Northwest Nigeria, February 26, 2023, Jos.

¹¹ USIP. ‘Preventing Extremism in Fragile States: A New Approach. Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/preventing-extremism-in-fragile-states-a-new-approach.pdf>. February, 2019.

¹² Uduak Udofia: WFBM, above 35, Christianity, Head of NGO, Lagos State-Southwest Nigeria, February 25, 2023, Lagos.

⁹ Amina Hassan Ahmed: WFBM, 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Plateau State-North Central Nigeria, January 26, 2023. Jos,

My faith defines who I am and that is what gives direction to whatever I do privately or publicly.

Ijeoma Stephanie Ladele

Ijeoma Stephanie Ladele, an environmental conflict mediator, shares the influence of her faith-based identity by asserting that, ‘My faith defines who I am and that is what gives direction to whatever I do privately or publicly.’¹³ Ijeoma shares that she chose to work in the field of mediation because she is convinced that God is pleased with seeing people living in peace, which is predicated on resolving dispute and fostering a stable and peaceful society is in line with biblical injunction. Quoting a biblical statement, she reiterates, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God’.¹⁴

Faith as a structure also provides a network and a platform for WFBMs to pursue their mission, especially when engaged in positions, or have connections with, pastors, church leaders, preachers and teachers, to name a few. For instance, Lucy Dlama, a WFBM, is married to a pastor and uses the platform of the church to address challenges for her congregation, especially as it relates to violence against women, accountability from abusers as well as inclusion for women in decision-making within the church. Every Sunday, she takes the pulpit to stimulate discussion on these issues.¹⁵



Photo: WFBM Lucy Dlama and Lantana Abdullahi conducting an interview in Maiduguri.

In other cases, faith-based structures are crucial to sustain strategic engagements or advocacy of WFBMs in efforts to address frequently changing and dangerous narratives and erroneous misconceptions about other’s religious beliefs. Amina Hassan Ahmed worked on restoring broken community fabrics by bringing together women from segregated Christian and Muslim communities in Jos Plateau State through the facilitation of interfaith interventions. She relied on the collaboration with other WFBMs, including Justina Ngwobia and Lantana Bako Abdullahi, to successfully support the dialogue.

¹³ Ijeoma Stephanie Ladele, WFBM, above 35, Christianity, Head of NGO, Oyo State-Southwest Nigeria, January 27, 2023, Ibadan.

¹⁴ Ijeoma Stephanie Ladele, WFBM, above 35, Christianity, Head of NGO, Oyo State-Southwest Nigeria, January 27, 2023, Ibadan.

¹⁵ Lucy Dlama Women in the New Nigeria (WINN).

My faith is the basic principle that guides the work I do, even in the face of adversity, I don't give up.

Ramatu Abarshi

In collaboration with other WFBMs, Amina engaged Biblical and Quranic injunctions on harmonious coexistence through pairing Christians and Muslims together within a predetermined seating arrangement during dialogues to promote bonding and communication among conflict parties.¹⁶ Through Amina's efforts, mutual suspicion between the two communities was significantly doused, and the broken social relationships was resolved. This was evident through the restoration of economic activities and sustained series of strategic intragroup and intergroup dialogues, multi-layered mediation and confidence building measures, including exchange visitations.

Justina Ngwobia, a trained mediator with the Women Mediators Across the Commonwealth and church leader who has worked extensively in religiously segregated communities in North-Central Nigeria, sees a very crucial role for faith-based mediation practices. She asserts that WFBMs, 'helps us to really get to understand each other more and it creates advantage towards building trust and understanding.'¹⁷ In her mediation practice as a woman of faith, Justina always lays strong emphasis on the shared humanity that binds adherents of all religious groups. She begins each mediation session by having participants read from their various books of faith (Bible and Quran) to identify areas of similarities with regards to love, peaceful living and respect for the sanctity of human lives.¹⁸

Ramatu Abarshi, a development advocate and mediator from the pastoralist community asserts that, 'My faith is the basic principle that guides the work I do, even in the face of adversity, I don't give up.'¹⁹ Lantana Bako Abdullahi, a mediator, trainer and facilitator on farmer-pastoralist conflicts and violent extremism in Nigeria, recalls how she mediated a long-term fracas over land in the Congo-Russia area in Jos in 2013-2014. Even though the mediated agreement faced challenges between the parties during the agreement signing phase, it ended with a favorable result as both parties came to a shared agreement one year after negotiations began. Similarly, Lantana attributes the success of the concluded agreement and cessation of violence being a WFBM and how religious teachings helped her to adopt a non-judgmental, empathetic, and collaborative approach.²⁰

In its totality, the impacts of WFBMs have been positive in resolving ethnic and religious tensions and mutual suspicion. Their impact is also felt in terms of dousing tension and restoring broken interfaith relations between Christians and Muslims in the Nigerian states of Plateau, Borno, Adamawa, Gombe, and Kaduna.²¹ Many WFBMs attribute their successes to their faith, which gives them resilience and persistence.

¹⁶ Amina Hassan Ahmed: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Plateau State-North Central Nigeria. January 26, 2023, Jos.

¹⁷ Justina Ngwobia: WFBM, above 35, Christianity, Religious Leader, Plateau State-North Central Nigeria, January 27, 2023, Jos.

¹⁸ Justina Ngwobia: WFBM, above 35, Christianity, Religious Leader, Plateau State-North Central Nigeria, January 27, 2023, Jos.

¹⁹ Dr. Ramatu Abarshi: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Kaduna State-Northwest Nigeria, February 18, 2023, Kaduna.

²⁰ Lantana Abdullahi Bako: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Abuja-Nigeria, March 9, 2023, Abuja.

²¹ The Law Library of Congress. 'Nigeria: Boko Haram'. <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2014/07/28/2014-010945%20NG%20RPT.pdf>. July, 2014.

4. ENTRY POINTS FOR WFBMs

WFBMs possess a distinct level of trust with local communities and actors, which helps to facilitate their entry into mediation and peacebuilding interventions. Additionally, their shared faith and identities as women, allow them to connect with other women, especially those in conservative religious and cultural communities. WFBMs also play active roles in negotiating with extremist groups and communities, using their faith to de-radicalize extremists and facilitate peaceful reintegration. Their collaborative approaches and ability to build networks across religious divides helps to address violence and conflict.

WFBMs, compared to male faith-based mediators, enjoy a specific level of trust because they are seen to be more sincere, compassionate, and diplomatic in their approach. As part of the mediation team in the Yelwa-Shendam crisis of 2002, Amina Hassan Ahmed faced a lot of resistance from her male negotiators. However, there was a point during the mediation process where male mediators understood that they would not obtain the needed insights from women affected by violence without a WFBM and thus, the team succumbed to utilize the expertise of Amina in the process.

The strong integrity of processes led WFBMs also establishes entry points for interventions focused on peacebuilding.²² Holding the roles as both a WFBM and negotiator unlocks opportunities for connecting with other women, primarily through the commonality of a shared faith. The connection of faith and trust enables women's access into traditionally conservative religious and cultural communities.²³ Uduak Udofia emphasizes the effectiveness of the 'women to women' approach, asserting that being a woman within a religious context creates significant influence, effectively opening doors for fellow women within the realms of mediation and peacebuilding, allowing the sharing of opportunities and unifying values.²⁴

Similarly, based on their unique abilities to build networks and friendships across religious divides, WFBMs engage and work collaboratively to address violence and conflicts. The collaborative working methods by WFBMs can be showcased in Jos, where religiously motivated violence has polarized the once peaceful city since 2001. This has pushed the trio of Amina Hassan Ahmed (Muslim), Justina Ngwobia (Christian) and Lantana Bako Abdullahi (Muslim) to come together as an interreligious WFBMs team, providing them with access to Muslim and Christian communities simultaneously. Through this approach, the team was able to negotiate agreements for the mitigation of violence in communities of Bassa, Kanam, and Wase LGAs, amongst others.²⁵

²² Grace Gora: WFBM, above 35, Christianity, Head of NGO/Women Leader, Plateau State-North Central Nigeria, January 24, 2023, Jos.

²³ Lantana Abdullahi Bako: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Abuja-Nigeria, March 9, 2023, Abuja.

²⁴ Uduak Udofia: WFBM, above 35, Christianity, Head of NGO, Lagos State-Southwest Nigeria, January 25, 2023, Lagos.

²⁵ Amina Hassan Ahmed: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Plateau State-North Central Nigeria, January 26, 2023, Jos.

Faith and faith-based knowledge and authority have particular importance when poisonous religious teachings and erroneous misconceptions about Christianity and Islam have perpetuated throughout Nigeria. Such juxtaposition incites and legitimize organized violence.”²⁶ Peer reviewing of religious text and references can correct these misconceptions; areas where there is shared understanding of the text can serve as common ground.



Photo: Lantana Abdullahi and Hamsatu Allamin holding Boko Haram Halal book.

WFBMs are also playing active roles to use their faith background and teachings to de-radicalize male and female extremists as well as to mediate with extremists to release abductees and ensure their peaceful reintegration. These practices have recorded successes because of the trust the extremists, victims and communities have in the objective and transparency of WFBMs.

Hamsatu Allamin, who is actively engaged in de-radicalizing and rehabilitating extremist women since 2012, indicates that these people call her ‘mama,’ a Hausa word indicting motherly respectful status.²⁷ At the height of the Boko Haram crisis, Hamsatu was able to build a trustful relationship with Boko Haram insurgents based on cultural ethics and her local networks, especially as some of the fighters came from her village. Her religious beliefs, sustained humanitarian work, and identity as a woman, which all can be perceived as non-threatening, facilitated access to the group and helped consolidate negotiations and peaceful transition.²⁸ Further, Boko Haram leadership agreed to negotiate with Hamsatu, which is extremely rare for Boko Haram to allow an external person internal access to their group.

²⁷ Hamsatu Allamin: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Borno State-Northeast Nigeria, February 7, 2023, Maiduguri.

²⁸ Hamsatu Allamin: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Borno State-Northeast Nigeria, February 7, 2023, Maiduguri.

²⁶ Amina Hassan Ahmed: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Plateau State-North Central Nigeria, January 26, 2023, Jos.

5. NAVIGATING RISKS AND CHALLENGES

Patriarchal systems impact the mediation space

Like every field of human endeavor, WFBMs are equally encumbered by several challenges and risks. One significant obstacle is the patriarchal structures within society, where discrimination based on traditional norms, gender stereotypes and religious and cultural practices hinders the participation of women in community activities and leadership roles. Religious leadership also poses a significant challenge, leading to discrimination within male-dominated religious leadership structures, especially as the acceptability of women in religious leadership structures is limited.



Photo: Lagos, Nigeria.

Sharing her experience from the Yelwa-Shendam crisis of 2002, Amina Hassan Ahmed recounts how she challenged these impediments while serving in a mediation team as a faith-based woman. It is against the background of this experience she says, ‘the patriarchal nature of our society is one of the main obstacles to WFBMs excelling in the mediation space.’²⁹ Ijeoma Stephanie Ladele shares a similar and very painful experience of planning a mediation process in a community in Ibadan, southern Nigeria in 2021 as the lead mediator in a community dispute of land. Unfortunately, she was asked to recuse from the process as the norms do not accept women participating in such discussions. As such, the gender discrimination left her no choice but to ask her male assistant to facilitate the process.³⁰ Patriarchal practices and cultures are also perpetuated by women’s socialization into societal and religious structures, which prompts them to keep mute and affirm whatever men say.³¹

The patriarchal nature of our society is one of the main obstacles to WFBMs excelling in the mediation space.

Amina Hassan Ahmed

²⁹ Amina Hassan Ahmed: WFBM, 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Plateau State-North Central Nigeria, January 26, 2023, Jos.

³⁰ Ijeoma Stephanie Ladele, WFBM, above 35, Christianity, Head of NGO, Oyo State-Southwest Nigeria, January 27, 2023, Ibadan.

³¹ Lantana Abdullahi Bako: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Abuja-Nigeria, 32 March 9, 23, Abuja.

Religious structures are also male dominated and prove challenging for WFBM to navigate. Rev. James Wuye, a supporter of the work of WFBM shares in this respect, ‘...the challenge is the African context is yet to receive women as religious leaders.’³² WFBMs are faced with acceptability issues even within their respective religious organizations.³³ Grace Gora a WFBM, community leader and grassroots mediator in Mangu LGA, North-Central Nigeria observed a ‘double discrimination’ of ‘WFBMs [...] as regards inclusion into political and religious mediation processes,’ meaning that she is discriminated by society as well as faith-based structures, norms and culture.³⁴ Her religion quickly became a barrier to freely access a Muslim community due to perceived bias and suspicion.³⁵ While faith can facilitate entry into one’s own community, it can also hinder access to societies of different faith traditions.

While in captivity with my abductors, I was always praying and committed my life to God that if he so desired that I should be killed in the cause of trying to reach out to the vulnerable, then so be it.

Ramatu Abarshi

Physical and psychological risks

There are a series of risks associated with being a WFBM, including heightened security risks, intimidation, harassment, potential of arrest, kidnapping and violent attacks. Against the background of her longstanding engagement in deradicalization, Hamsatu Allamin argues, ‘...when you venture into this kind of work you stand the risk of being misunderstood. People can misconstrue whatever you do.’³⁶ Her efforts to assist victims of Boko Haram insurgency through her close and trustful ties with the group were initially misconstrued by security actors, local leaders and some members from her community. They suspected her being either a sympathizer or member of Boko Haram. One other woman who participated state-sponsored team negotiations with Boko Haram was eventually labeled and jailed as a terrorist enabler due to her alleged close relationship with the leader of Boko Haram prior to the crisis.³⁷

Ramatu Abarshi was abducted together with her daughter in 2022. Her faith was vital to her survival while she was in the hands of kidnappers. She explained, ‘While in captivity with my abductors, I was always praying and committed my life to God that if he so desire that I should be killed in the cause of trying to reach out to the vulnerable, then so be it.’³⁸ Ramatu’s survival instinct is anchored in the love for humanity that Islam teaches.

32 James Movel Wuye: MFBM, above 35, Christianity, Head of NGO/Religious Leader, Kaduna State-Northwest Nigeria, February 6, 2023, Jos.

33 Grace Gora: WFBM, above 35, Christianity, Head of NGO/Women Leader, Plateau State-North Central Nigeria, January 24, 2023, Jos.

34 Grace Gora: WFBM, above 35, Christianity, Head of NGO/Women Leader, Plateau State-North Central Nigeria, January 24, 2023, Jos.

35 Grace Gora: WFBM, above 35, Christianity, Head of NGO/Women Leader, Plateau State-North Central Nigeria, January 24, 2023, Jos.

36 Hamsatu Allamin: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Borno State-Northeast Nigeria, February 7, 2023, Maiduguri.

37 Hamsatu Allamin: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Borno State-Northeast Nigeria, February 7, 2023, Maiduguri.

38 Dr. Ramatu Abarshi: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Kaduna State-Northwest Nigeria, 2 February 7, 2023, Kaduna.

I always start with understanding whatever the issue is and secondly, I always try to use principles of reflexivity on myself so as to appreciate issues from divergent dimensions.

Amina Hassan Ahmed

6. TACTICS USED BY WFBMS TO MITIGATE RISKS

A strong contextualized faith-based understanding and developing and implementing contextualized analyses is a strategy adopted by many WFBMs to achieve positive outcomes in mediation processes. In the words of Amina Hassan Ahmed, ‘...I always start with understanding whatever the issue is and secondly, I always try to use the principles of reflexivity on myself so as to appreciate issues from divergent dimensions.’³⁹ This is crucial due to differences that exist in culture, norms and traditions. Being sensitive in these regards aid WFBMs to avoid undermining long held customs and traditions.

Utilizing the tactic of engaging gatekeepers generally guarantees a comprehensive approach to facilitating the entry and outreach of WFBM. Community gatekeepers include figures such as leaders of religious and traditional institutions, youth representatives, and members of ethnic and religious associations. These individuals hold substantial influence or authority within specific communities and can leverage their positions to promote active participation and interaction between their communities and WFBMs.

Compassion, determination and integrity can play an important mitigating role for countering security risks. Attributes of WFBMs such as compassion and integrity can equally advance the trust and acceptance of WFBMs to mediate conflicts among local leaders and security forces. For instance, Christian and Muslims WFBMs working together as interfaith teams enhances a sense of transparency, trust-building and representation in mediation processes.

According to Hamsatu Allamin, through advocacy and networking, WFBM have been able to obtain office positions for the military and police officers to serve as liaison to support mediation practices as a whole.⁴⁰ She reiterated that in almost every military and police formations, there are gender conscious, peace and security desk officers or units to support information flow, report issues or seek collaboration whenever such need arises.⁴¹ These resources have proven useful for the provision of protection mechanism for WFBMs in volatile locations.

⁴⁰ Hamsatu Allamin: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Borno State-Northeast Nigeria, February 7, 2023, Maiduguri.

⁴¹ Hamsatu Allamin: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Borno State-Northeast Nigeria, February 7, 2023, Maiduguri.

³⁹ Amina Hassan Ahmed: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Plateau State-North Central Nigeria, January 26, 2023, Jos.

7. OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT WITH WFBM

WFBMs in Nigeria have identified specific support needs that when addressed, could enhance their effectiveness in addressing religiously motivated conflicts. This includes strengthening policy frameworks, increasing financial and capacity-building resources, establishment of networks and recognition from male counterparts. Security remains a significant concern, as WFBMs face increased risks and vulnerabilities when mediating in the field.

Develop robust policy frameworks to increase WFBM recognition and legitimacy

WFBMs in Nigeria have emphasized the need for robust policy frameworks at all levels. These frameworks can help legitimize and promote the work of WFBMs at subnational, national, regional and global levels.⁴²

In addition, government support is needed to ensure the participation of WFBMs within mediation processes. Against the extensive background of successful negotiations with Boko Haram, Hamsatu Allamin laments the lack of government support and recognition of women-led mediation processes. Therefore, the Nigerian government should sustain and recognize WFBMs in these effort by ensuring more effective implementation of negotiated agreements.⁴³

⁴² Lantana Abdullahi Bako: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Abuja-Nigeria, March 9, 2023, Abuja.

⁴³ Hamsatu Allamin: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Borno State-Northeast Nigeria, February 7, 2023, Maiduguri.

Increase access to resources

Many WFBMs have inadequate capacity to navigate the application process for external funding. However, financial expenditures from planning to implementation are needed in order to support mediation efforts. One of the leaders from the pioneer Women Interfaith Council in Kaduna, Veronica O. Ifeyinwa, has worked in this hotbed of religious conflicts in Nigeria and was crucial in advocating for women's involvement in peacebuilding. It is against this background that Veronica observed that, 'WFBMs are often confronted with hurdles to accessing financial resources and ensuring their sustainability.'⁴⁴

Increase capacity-building opportunities

Capacity-building has been identified as a specific need for WFBMs in Nigeria. Uduak Udofia, a mediator and peace advocate from Lagos with extensive experiences in facilitating negotiations and peace agreements as a member of FemWise Africa, notes, 'support is needed around capacity-building to equip WFBMs with the requisite skills to be effective in the mediation space.'⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Onyeansi Veronica Ifeyinwa: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Kaduna State-Northwest Nigeria, February 17, 2023, Kaduna.

⁴⁵ Uduak Udofia: WFBM, above 35, Christianity, Head of NGO, Lagos State-Southwest Nigeria, January 25, 2023, Lagos.

WFBMs are often confronted with hurdles to accessing financial resources and ensuring their sustainability.

Veronica O. Ifeyinwa

Support the development of networks and multi-stakeholder engagements

Multi-stakeholder engagement and locally developed networks strengthen opportunities for successful mediation. Lantana Bako Abdullahi sees, ‘a vital role of WFBMs in addressing religiously motivated conflicts.’⁴⁶ She states that there is a, ‘specific need around strengthening more productive and collaborative partnership among WFBMs with relevant stakeholders, both locally and internationally.’⁴⁷ Along similar lines, Ijeoma Stephanie Ladele stresses that, ‘as WFBMs, we need to strengthen our relationship with other faith organizations as well as civil societies and state-owned peace building institutions.’⁴⁸ For strengthening networking opportunities as well as enhancing capacity-building, WFBMs see a crucial role for platforms and networks. Against the positive experience of being part of various mediation platforms at national, regional and international levels,⁴⁹ there are calls for the creation of a Nigerian network, specifically dedicated to WFBMs to support and nurture skills and peer learning using faith mediation to effectively respond to increasing religious conflicts.

⁴⁶ Lantana Abdullahi Bako: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Abuja-Nigeria, March 9, 2023, Abuja.

⁴⁷ Lantana Abdullahi Bako: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Abuja-Nigeria, March 9, 2023, Abuja.

⁴⁸ Ijeoma Stephanie Ladele, WFBM, above 35, Christianity, Head of NGO, Oyo State-Southwest Nigeria, January 27, 2023, Ibadan.

⁴⁹ Amongst others, the Nigerian Women Mediators Network, FemWise West Africa and Africa, and Women Mediators across the Commonwealth.

Strengthening support and engagement with male counterparts

WFBMs have varying perceptions on the relevance, recognition, technical support and moral backing that religious and traditional institutions hold. Using this leverage to garner support towards the prevention of violence, Lucy Dlama from Women in the New Nigeria states that, ‘...men, especially religious and traditional leaders need to do more in terms of believing in the capacity of WFBMs and use their influence to champion sensitization.’⁵⁰ Male faith-based pioneer mediators, such as Dr. Salem Musa Umar, Reverend James Movel Wuye, and Imam Muhammad Ashafa, who have for long dominated the mediation process have solicited the support of religious leaders towards directing adequate support for the meaningful engagement of WFBMs.⁵¹ According to Rev. John Joseph Hayab, ‘We should advocate and sensitize people [...] that working with WFBMs gives a lot of advantage.’⁵²

As WFBMs, we need to strengthen our relationship with other faith organizations as well as civil societies and state-owned peace building institutions.

Ijeoma Stephanie Ladele

⁵⁰ Lucy Dlama Women in the New Nigeria (WINN).

⁵¹ James Movel Wuye: MFBM, above 35, Christianity, Head of NGO/Religious Leader, Kaduna State-Northwest Nigeria, February 16, 2023, Jos.

⁵² Rev. John Joseph Hayab: MFBM, above 35, Christianity, Religious Leader, Kaduna State-Northwest Nigeria, February 18, 2023, Kaduna.

Ensure physical and psychological wellbeing of WFBM

Security for WFBMs is a cardinal issue to ensure that they are not exposed to dangers before, during and after mediation. WFBMs are vulnerable due to societal constructs and conflict-related situations, including sexual gender-based violence. For example, Boko Haram has occasionally drawn WFBM Hamsatu Allamin to mediate with the Nigerian government. Such action has exposed her to many security risks, which was further exacerbated by her gender. In 2013, she tried to convene a mediation session with local stakeholders in Borno state, which included victims of Boko Haram insurgency and repentant insurgents. Unfortunately, the venue was disrupted, and the event was halted by security forces. Although Hamsatu did not sustain any physical harm, the militarization of the venue left her traumatized and demoralized on a psychological level.

Increase documentation on the role of WFBMs

While conducting this study in Nigeria, it was evident that data and information about WFBMs are almost non-existent, as it is a new discourse in the field of mediation. WFBMs interviewed for this study did not differentiate their work from that of faith-based organizations in general. This might have been based on the limitation in the data collected and stories about WFBMs. WFBMs as a community has expressed interest to strengthen their work and profile, especially as there is little access to materials or resources to strengthen capacity in this specific field.⁵³

7. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

WFBMs have emerged as a crucial force in Nigeria to address its variety of conflicts. WFBMs possess a unique level of trust and credibility, connecting with women in conservative religious and cultural communities. Their faith-based approach allows them to de-radicalize extremists, facilitate peaceful reintegration, and build networks across religious divides. However, WFBMs face challenges including patriarchal structures, discrimination within religious leadership, security risks, and limited support and recognition by authorities and the international community. Strengthening policy frameworks, providing financial resources, enhancing capacity-building, establishing networks, and addressing security concerns are crucial for supporting and empowering WFBMs in their vital peacebuilding efforts. By recognizing and addressing the risks and needs of WFBMs, Nigeria can harness the opportunities presented by their meaningful engagement and contributions to resolving conflicts.

... men, especially religious and traditional leaders, need to do more in terms of believing in the capacity of WFBMs and use their influence to champion sensitization.

Lucy Dlama

⁵³ Lantana Abdullahi Bako: WFBM, above 35, Islam, Head of NGO, Abuja-Nigeria, March 9, 2023, Abuja.

Recommendations provided by WFBMs

- 1 Recognize the leadership and participation of WFBMs.** Religious and traditional institutions should be dogmatic in leadership style when it comes to the issues of patriarchy. This should be liberalized when it comes to the role of WFBMs in conflict management.
- 2 Protect WFBMs as they conduct their work.** Ensuring the protection of WFBMs is very crucial. Women are often harassed and threatened by security agents and communities while engaging, directly or indirectly, with armed actors. This rights and the security of WFBMs should therefore be respected and guaranteed while discharging their values.
- 3 Establish policy frameworks on WFBMs.** Nigeria is presently working to develop its third National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. WFBMs should be specifically considered and consulted within these efforts.
- 4 Establish viable platforms for WFBMs at all levels.** Instituting platforms at global, regional, national, state and local levels will provide WFBMs with opportunities to converge and address a wide range of issues around funding, capacity-building, networking, experience sharing, etc. This will further aid them in creating a specialized WFBM platform and ensure access to needed opportunities and the promotion of faith-based mediation as a sustainable approach to peacebuilding.
- 5 Provide more funding opportunities specifically for WFBMs.** The creation and sustainment of special funding opportunities is critical to enhance the work of WFBMs and to enable them to meaningfully participate in mediation, negotiation and peace processes.
- 6 Support advocacy and sensitization efforts on the work of WFBMs.** Advocacy and sensitization supporting the work of WFBMs will help mitigate the risks of physical assault or violence, discrimination, harassment, not being welcomed within the space and agreements not being honored. The elements surrounding violence arise from misperceptions, prejudices, the institutionalized patriarchal system, and gender stereotyping viewed by WFBMs in the mediation space.

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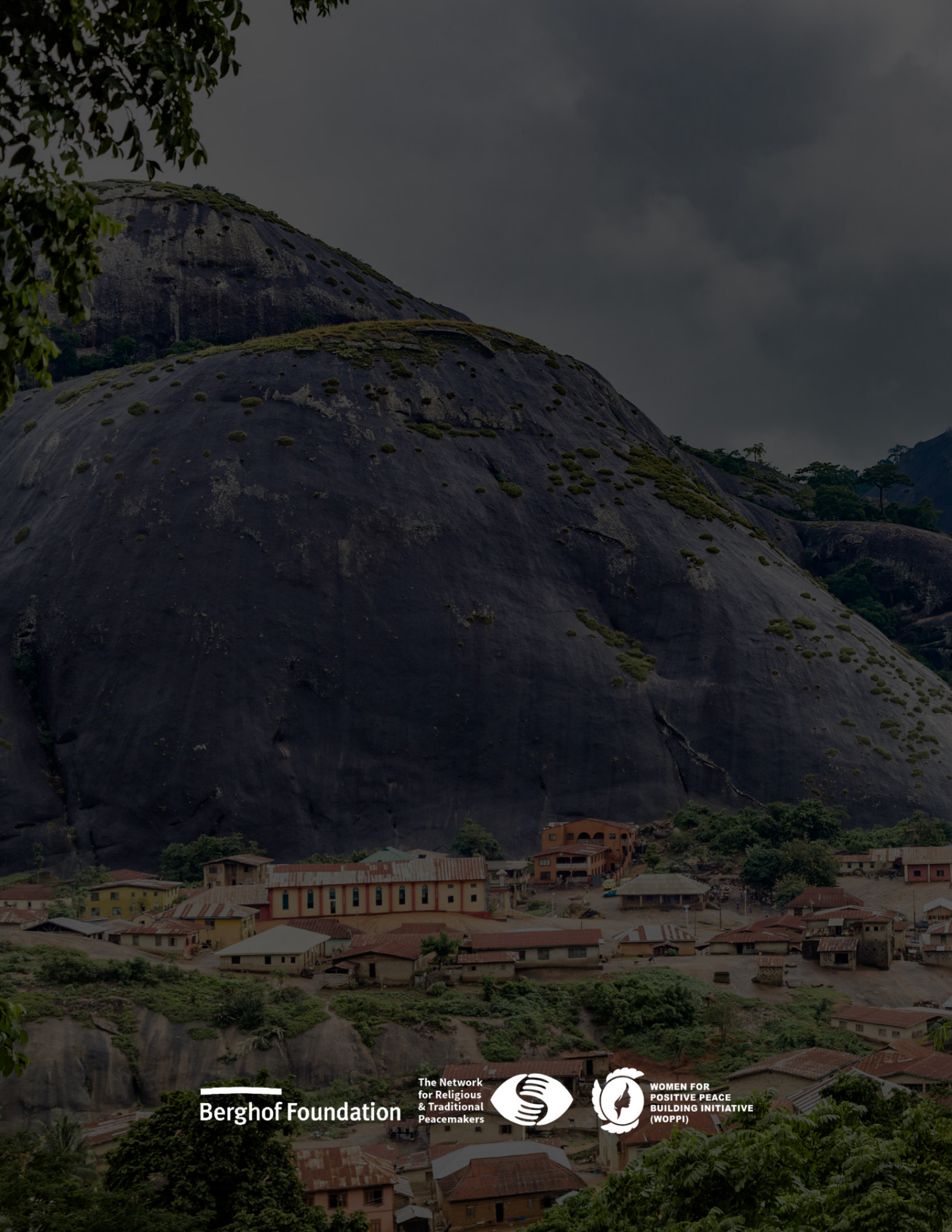
ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

Lantana Bako Abdullahi has extensive experience working in Nigeria's non-profit and peacebuilding sector leading several mediation efforts between pastoralists and farmers, communal violence, land disputes etc. She has served as a mentor with UN Women Nigeria and is the Co-Founder and National Co-Coordinator of the Nigerian Women Mediators Network. Lantana leads the Women for Positive Peacebuilding Initiative (WOPPI), which mentors and trains women and girls on peace, security and governance. She is a member of the Women Mediators across the Commonwealth (WMC) and member and steering committee of FemWise West Africa. Lantana was the Plateau State Peacebuilding Agency Director of Programme where she leads the Women for Positive Peacebuilding Initiative. Lantana is a 2018 KAICIID Fellow and is the recipient of the 2020 Commonwealth Point of Light.



About the Women for Positive Peacebuilding Initiative

The Women for Positive Peacebuilding Initiative (WOPPI) was established as a community-driven, development-led and peacebuilding organization in Nigeria to support inclusive and sustainable resolution of conflicts. Our approach uses traditional and conventional models to engage actors and local leaders in a context-specific and conflict-sensitive manner in recognition of the cultural and traditional norms of communities. Our work intends to reach complex and historically marginalized and/or maligned actors and communities to enhance their capacities to engage, collaborate and address challenges in a collaborative approach. WOPPI has worked in strengthening women's active participating in inclusive peace processes, supported research across Africa and designs programmes that supports meaningful durable transformation of conflicts.




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