

International Women's Day Forum on: Women Be Bold for Change in Community Leadership and Peace Building

March 29, 2017, Yenagoa, Bayelsa State

Organized by:

- **Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND)**
- **Participatory Partnership for Community Development (PPCD) Project**
- **Bayelsa Community and Social Development Agency (CSDA)**
- **Partners for Peace in Niger Delta Project (P4P)**

Report by:

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Introduction

As part of activities to celebrate the 2017 International Women's Day theme of 'Be Bold For Change' and in solidarity with women across the world, the Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND), the Participatory Partnership for Community Development (PPCD) Project, Warri; the Bayelsa Community and Social Development Agency (CSDA); and the Partners for Peace in Niger Delta Project (P4P) held a forum on "Women be Bold for Change in Community Leadership and Peace Building". The forum was held on March 29 in Bayelsa with 104 persons (92 females and 12 males) in attendance". The objectives of the forum included were to:

- Inspire women to play active roles in community leadership in Niger Delta communities;
- Promote women's involvement in peace building including facilitating opportunity for women to share information and experiences in mitigating conflicts/peace building; and
- Provide avenue for networking and collaboration.

Opening

Special guests and delegates from the nine Niger Delta States were recognized during the opening by the anchors of the Forum; Ms. Alfreder Ato, Partners for Peace Executive member and Mr. Eriye Tuaweri a peace activist. The Forum was declared opened by Hon. Mrs Ebizi Ndiomu Brown, Bayelsa State Deputy Chief of Staff. Hon. Brown charged women to be of inspiration to one another because women had to demonstrate extra capability to achieve the same feat as men due to cultural stereotyping. She said women have inherent ability to perform multiple task simultaneously.

Welcome Remarks

Mr Sylvester Okoh, PIND Foundation Field Projects Manager, in his welcome address appreciated States that have shown good examples of appointing women into strategic positions such as Bayelsa State with woman as the Deputy Chief of Staff and Lagos State that has a woman as Deputy Governor. He advised that more women should be brought into leadership positions in the country.

Mr Okoh, thereafter, gave insight to the commencement of Partners for Peace (P4P) network which he said started in 2013 with 130 members, of which 79 were women. He said that as at 2017, P4P had recorded 4,000 members from the 9 Niger Delta States, with a woman as the focal person for P4P in Abia State. He gave a brief on PIND Foundation's Programs which he said were hinged on equitable economic development and peace building.

He rounded off his welcome address by encouraging women to achieve more feats as they have inherent capacity for such and also because women are notable time-managers.

Busola Babalola, PPCD Communication and Advocacy Manager

Busola said PPCD's program focus aligns with Chevron Nigeria's operations. PPCD identified the need for the inclusion of women in the signing of the Global Memorandum of Understanding (GMOU) for Regional Development Committees (RDCs). Hence, PPCD engaged a Gender Focal Persons (GFP) to be part of its Community Building Programs and support for the RDCs. Busola said PPCD trained women to be appropriately fit for leadership positions at various levels noting that one of the trained women was a panellist at the IWD Forum.

Mrs Babalola concluded with the quote: "It is not the strongest that survives but the one that is most responsive to change".

Bayelsa State Honourable Commissioner of Women Affairs

The commissioner was represented by the Director of Women Affairs in the State, Mrs Sabana Alale. Alale in her remarks encouraged women to be bold to make changes in all areas of life and to also be bold in decision making positions. She expressed hope that various international conventions and resolutions addressing women's rights and empowerment would have been domesticated and be implemented by 2030. The Director informed the Forum that the mission of her ministry included promoting better living for families, women, children, physically challenged and the elderly.

General Manager, Bayelsa State Community and Social Development Agency – Mrs. Eve Oyintonyo

Oyintonyo advised on the need for women to build strong network, to not only help one another, but to mentor young and upcoming women. Noting that the present institutional arrangements did not encourage women to optimize use of their potentials, she called

on women at leadership positions to reach out to striving women. She concluded by expressing hopes that the outcomes of the IWD Forum would serve as an impetus for women to be bold for desired change.

Ondo State P4P Coordinator – Madam Florence Ajih

Florence said she was the second woman to be in the Central Working Committee of P4P. For Florence, information is a potential power until it is acted upon. She enjoined women to act boldly to effect change, starting from their families. She urged participants to internalize and take actions on the outcomes of the IWD.

Bayelsa State P4P Coordinator - Aworabiri Mekwuna

The Coordinator, appreciated PIND Foundation, PPCD and BCSDA for partnering with P4P to organize the IWD Forum. He advised women in communities to take advantage of their large population to boldly effect change. He recalled his experience working with the National Council for Women Development on community mediation in the State. He was positive that women’s involvement in peace building and community leadership would greatly impact community development.

Hon. Ebiowu Obiyai, Member, Bayelsa State House of Assembly representing Yenogoa Constituency 2.

Hon. Obiyai said women would be bold for change if they desist from having inferior notion of themselves. She discussed the role early socialization play in women being bold. For instance she said, young girls exposed to equal opportunities when growing up will become bold and take on challenges to achieve equal status in the society. She admonished women to be persistent in their commitments and resist cultural sentiments that affect their self-esteem and confidence. Hon. Obiyai emphasized that education is fundamental to being bold to make a change. Hence, women must strive to be educated. She also encouraged women to participate in politics and stressed the need for women to be strategic in order to gain recognition and make impact in politics.

Presentations

Two presentations were made at the Forum. The first presentation was on “Women Be Bold for Change in Community Leadership” by Her Royal Majesty, Princess Joyce Adesola Oladiran-Ebiseni, the Regent of Kalasuwe of Ijaw Apoi Land, Ese-Odo Local Government Area of Ondo State. The second presentation was on “Women Be Bold for Change in Building Peace” by renowned actress and Peace Activist, Mrs. Hilda Dokubo.

In her presentation, the Regent defined community - in the sociological sense - as a body of persons in a social environment bound together by geography, the environment, culture and language and these differentiate or distinguish them from other groups.

She gave an overview of the Niger Delta environment, communities, geographical features its resources and economic activities. She mentioned common occupations of fishing, lumbering and farming, with cocoa, rubber and palm produce as dominant cash crops. She explained that patriarchal culture has perpetuated male ascendancy and leadership in communities of the Niger Delta. She further said that while there are biases against women in the cultural sphere, women were not discriminated against occupationally.

The Regent said Apoi Ijaw of Ondo State where she rules is sandwiched between Ilaje and Ikale Yoruba speaking groups and has a mixture of Ijaw and Yoruba languages and culture. However, she said her Kingdom, Apoi Ijaw, was originally from the central Apoi District of the Southern Ijaw area of Bayelsa State.

The Regent said religious teachings have been used to support discriminatory practices against women. She referenced scriptures in the Bible used to argue for women being chaste (while men are exempted) and women keeping silence in public. In the same vein, she identified women also in the Bible such as Eve, Deborah, Delilah, Esther and Jezebel who took exceptional courage to achieve their feats, either for good or for evil purposes.

The regent, narrating her experience about challenges she encountered before ascending the throne of Kalasuwe, as the first female Paramount Ruler of the kingdom said Kalasuwe is a confederation of nine communities made up of Sabomi, Oboro, Kiribo, Igbovini, Igbootu, Inikorogha, Ojuala, Igbekebo and Ipoke, with each community having its own traditional ruler. While her father passed on in 2007, she did not ascend the throne until 2011 due to prevailing cultural restrictions favouring male enthronement.

She also acknowledged the invaluable support from some traditional leaders, her husband and citizens that was instrumental to her enthronement. Lesson from this she said was that women need men's support and endorsement in their leadership aspirations and in this regard, partnership with progressive men should be built. The Regent also said given that culture is ingrained, changing unfavourable cultural practices could be difficult and slow. There is need to be patient and persistent.

The Regent was also emphatic about the role education plays as an instrument of social change that provides the capacity and opportunities for women to aspire and compete effectively for leadership positions.

The Regent who emphasized that women should use leadership positions to improve the lives of women, mentioned some achievements she has recorded after ascending the throne for women:

- Abolished the practice of forcing a widow to bath at the beach under very harsh weather conditions as part of mourning process;
- Abolished widows staying in solitude; and
- Her enthronement has influenced the ascension of two Female Regents in Ilaje Land

Princess Oladiran-Ebiseni ended by emphasizing that any community desirous of peace should focus on women.

Hilda Dokubo in her presentation on “**Women Be Bold for Change in Building Peace**”, informed the forum that Nigeria is a signatory to international conventions that protect the rights of women such as the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights, noting that the country is yet to fully implement the provisions. She called on women to pursue the implementation of these instruments in the context of building peace and protecting the rights of women in conflicts.

Hilda also discussed the need to ensure that peace building and conflict resolution institutions and structures as well as integration facilities cover women’s needs and interests. For instance she disclosed that women were included in the Federal Government Amnesty Program as a result of advocacy by activists (including herself) for the inclusion of women.

She stressed the need for women to advocate for appropriate shelter and living conditions for women who are internally displaced as a result of conflicts. She buttressed her point by highlighting her role in agitating for shelter for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) which resulted in the setting up of the Gbaramatu Camp in Delta State.

Hilda also noted that leadership positions provide opportunities to be involved in conflict resolution and peace building discussions and decisions. This was why she advised women in deputizing positions to use such platforms to understudy the intricacies of leadership and use these platforms to climb to the very helm of leaderships.

Reiterating the need to ensure that female children in rural communities are educated, she advised that peculiarities of the circumstances of girls in rural communities should be understood in order to proffer sustainable solution to reduce rate of female dropouts in schools. Such peculiarities include riverine nature of some communities that makes access to schools a challenge, ignorance of importance of education by parents in communities and early marriage.

Other issues discussed in her presentation included the need for “every woman to regard herself as a mother to the child she finds or interacts with” and the advice that men should ensure that their female children are empowered. Hilda also said husbands who batter their wives started out as ‘*Sisters Beaters*’ and thus encouraged mothers to check this trend in their boys.

She further advised concerning women and peace building: embark on peace awareness campaign, grow in self-esteem, develop the ability to identify abusive behavior and resist such, get educated and encourage female children to be educated and counsel girls to see themselves as equal partners in a free and fair society.

Hilda said all the Millennium Development Goals were necessary actions needed to accelerate the involvement of women in community building. She also highlighted collaboration of men and women, mainstreaming of women issues and needs in all aspects of community, state and national development as the way forward in nation building.

She concluded by stating expressly that a nation that denies women their role to contribute to nation building is a nation that will fail.

Panel discussion on ‘Women and Community Leadership’ presentation

Mrs Marian Ebike Anomughanran, Member Peace Building Committee of Egbema Gbamaratu Communities Development Foundation

Mrs Anomughanran said she contested for the Delta State House of Assembly elections in 2011 but lost to the ruling party. She joined the RDC in 2014 and requested to be co-opted into the committee on Micro Credit. She was accepted and charged with the responsibility of recovering loans given to women which she did successfully. The success led to the lifting of a ban on disbursement of loans to women. Her feats in community leadership also included facilitating rehabilitation of a health center and becoming auditor for the Egbema Community. She encouraged women to make themselves available for service and to serve diligently.

Chief Mrs Juliet Pulu Zifawei, Director-General of Bayelsa State Government Girl-Child Agency

Mrs Juliet said she organized women in her husband's community to participate in conflict resolution activities. Conflicts were resolved and the inclusion of women earned her the position of public relations officer. She remembered speaking out boldly during a Council Meeting chaired by Ex-President Olusegun Obasanjo demanding for development of infrastructure to check erosion in her husband's community. This demand was granted. For her various feats in community leadership, she has been presented severally with symbolic honorary community items such as lantern, machete by traditional rulers and leaders of the community.

Mrs Juliet was formerly a Senior Special Assistant but due to her exceptional achievements, when a Bureau for The Girl Child was created, she was made the Director General (DG). She said she also contested for the House of Representatives election but did not make it beyond the primaries, amidst a lot of pressure to step down. For her, "there is no word like *impossibility*".

Miss Becky Uahomo, First Female Senate President, Niger Delta Students Union Government (NIDSUG) Worldwide

Miss Uahomo narrated her unprecedented journey to NIDSUG leadership. She said there was no female on the board of her predecessors and that the incumbent specifically told her he did not want to hand over the leadership mantle to a female. She also said there were several defaming stories peddled against her including being pregnant but her sheer zeal, determination and enormous support from some male supporters (and large female supporters) saw her win the election as the president.

Miss Becky now runs a Foundation which has a mission to encourage female education especially among women in the creeks who do not see the need to be educated. She urged older women to keep supporting the younger ones.

Barrister Agatha Osieke, Chairperson, Partners for Peace, Edo State and Executive Director, Women Youth and Children Advancement program, Benin

Barrister Osieke said she is from Imo State but lives and works in Edo State and therefore, encouraged women to see their marriages, places of work, residence, and academic environment etcetera as their communities.

She regarded Edo state as highly patriarchal "even the church". Her feat in leadership included using the Book of Leviticus of the Holy Bible to re-orientate the church leadership to reverse discriminatory norms against women. Such norms included confining women to some particular seats in the church, preventing women in their menstrual period to perform some functions. She felt fulfilled that

her efforts improved women's participation in religious activities. She encouraged Niger Delta women to support women delegates at all levels of leadership. She shared experience of how she prepared adequately and mobilized to clinch the P4P leadership position in Edo State

She concluded by inspiring women to persevere, be consistent, be adequately prepared and be bold on issues of community leadership.

Dr (Mrs) Celine Anosike, Seasoned Educationist, Peace/Health Activist and Entrepreneur, Imo State.

Dr Anosike is from a royal and polygamous family and was a victim of discrimination against girl-child education. She said it took the intervention of an extended uncle before she was sent to school. Her education and hard work made her to become the first female Sanitary Inspector in Imo State.

After her retirement she accidentally discovered P4P and became an active member. She was instrumental in mobilizing women to collaborate with security operatives in building peace in Imo State. She encouraged women not to be disenfranchised for whatever reasons.

Hon. Helen Bob, Former Brass Local Government Chair and currently Special Adviser to Bayelsa State Government on Talent Hunt.

Hon. Bob said hard work, humility, dedication and service, which remained her guiding principles, were instilled in her by her step-mother. She said despite the fact that her community strongly opposed female leadership, she strived for leadership through her various activities such as mobilizing women for community deliberations and for political participation. This earned her being nominated as the PDP Bayelsa State Women Leader at the age of 33 in 2006. She is currently the Senior Special Assistant to the Bayelsa State Government on Talent Development, working to discover and nurture talents in women, children and the physically challenged.

Panel discussion on “Women and Peace Building”.

Mrs Egonda Esinwoke-Ogbalor, Executive Director, Community Initiative for Enhanced Peace and Development, Rivers State

Esinwoke-Ogbalor started her peace building activities in 2003 when she helped out during communal crisis between the Ijaw and the Itsekiris. She advised women to be clear and transparent in peace building work to earn the trust of the people. She rounded off by encouraging women to get acquainted with the National Action Plan for UNSC Resolution 1325.

Mrs. Bridget Affiah, Executive Director, Ideal Women Advancement Initiative, Warri, Delta State

Mrs Affiah who said the IWD forum was the best program she had attended in 2017 told the forum that she started peace work in 1997 and encouraged women to join in the work. One of her major work was support to the Gbaramatu Kingdom for the last ten (10) years. She said women qualify for peace work because women are patient in nature. Peace work, according to her is also tedious and requires being trustworthy.

She insisted that women needed their capacity built in order to be a peace builder stating that she has undergone twenty-two (22) trainings and built the capacity of two 2,622 women. She was honoured in 2015 by the US Consulate for her peace building activities.

Barrister Ekaette Anwana, PREVENT Council, Partners for Peace, Akwa Ibom State

Barrister Anwana as a member of P4P in Akwa Ibom State was among those who brokered peace during the Akwa Ibom and Ondo States crisis. She encouraged women to be part of peace work in whatever community they find themselves because women are great motivators and should take advantage of their large population to effect change. She specifically requested women to reject all forms of inducements during electioneering.

Barrister Dise Ogbise-Erhisere, Chairperson, Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), Bayelsa State

Barrister Dise encouraged women to get educated, be united and get acquainted with existing laws to be able to contribute effectively to peace building. She asked women to know their rights and be part of peace work because “they are better negotiators”.

Commitment to Action

The participants including P4P delegates from the various chapters drafted their action plan as an outcome of the Forum.

Closing

The IWD Forum came to a close at 3.30pm with closing prayer by a participant; following panelists' responses to participants' questions, recap of the major highlights by the rapporteurs, Elizabeth Adebanjo and Chinyere Ihekaibe and a closing remarks by Bose Eitokpah.

Appendix

List of Participants

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