

The Nigerian Woman Can Only Truly Be Liberated the Moment She Realizes Her Strength”– Eleanor Nwadinobi Interview

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Eleanor Nwadinobi Interview by Mary Ajayi – August 9, 2016

*Trained as a medical doctor, **Eleanor Nwadinobi**, Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme's Manager (Women and Girls), has worked for the rights of women, girls and widows for 28yrs. Also a member of the Medical Women's International Association (MWIA) for 32yrs, she was part of the contestants for MWIA's International President during the election that held in Austria in July, last month. Dr Eleanor has worked with different organisations and the Federal Government of Nigeria in various positions, to address different issues of conflict and the rights of women. In this conversation with **Mary Ajayi**, she talks extensively about her work, the condition of the Nigerian woman, religious conflicts and how they can be mitigated, and lots more;*

Mary Ajayi: You're the Manager, Women and Girls, for Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP). Sounds like a fancy title but I believe there's more to it than the name. What does this role entail?

Eleanor Nwadinobi: My role entails the facilitation of the reduction of violence against women and girls as well as their involvement in peace building processes especially in violent conflict. As manager for women and girls, I oversee our interventions at the Federal level and in our eight programme States which include Bayelsa, Borno, Delta, Kaduna, Kano, Plateau, Rivers and Yobe. These interventions include supporting and monitoring implementation of Government on issues of Women, Peace and Security. It also involves the running of peace clubs where young girls and boys are taught life skills. Additionally, through our online platform, called the *Observatory*, we monitor the trends of violence against women and girls and support stakeholders to respond appropriately.

Mary: The average Nigerian woman has been deemed an enemy of her own liberation – women would rather stay in abusive relationships for the sake of their children, would fight feminism and denounce it and reject the help of feminists, subject themselves to religious bondage while covering up abuses and hiding behind prayers, etc. Can the Nigerian woman be truly liberated?

Eleanor: The Nigerian woman can only truly be liberated the moment she realises her strength and potential as a woman. Most times women concede their innate strength to men in their lives simply because culture or religion demands it of them, or because their role is misinterpreted to their disadvantage. In other cases, because girls are denied education or opportunities to maximise their potential they are forced to remain in a cycle of violence or seek unsavoury options for survival.

Mary: Have you had women reject your help in your work experience?

Eleanor: Women have rejected help several times out of fear of losing the only security they know. For example, women who have suffered violation may be reluctant to report their spouses or relations because they are dependent on the same violent family for shelter and income, or for fear of losing their children; they therefore reject help not because they want to, but because they have no choice.

Mary: You're also a medical doctor. Did you specialise?

Eleanor: I am a medical doctor and started out in the field of anaesthesia but I gave that up to work as a consultant to development agencies in areas of health, in order to give more time to my family.

Mary: Does medicine, and perhaps being a woman, explain your interest and consistency in working with women and girls?

Eleanor: Medicine remains my profession. My occupation is health, gender and human rights. My vocation is to be the voice for the voiceless, and my passion remains working for the rights of women and girls. It means that my knowledge of medicine contributes to and reinforces the expertise that I bring to my work for women and girls.

Mary: You've been a member of the Medical Women's International Association (MWIA) for 34 years. From a member, you became the president of State Branch Association, became the National President (Nigeria), and you contested for the position of the international president elect for MWIA during the international election that held last month in Austria. What has kept you in the association for this long, and not just as a member but as a leader?

Eleanor: Passion for women's health and rights has kept me interested and active in my professional Association. The Medical Women's International Association has been a platform for advocating for policy change regarding women's global health and rights. Professional associations afford one the opportunity to keep up with innovations in one's field of endeavour, to contribute to global discourse in one's chosen field and to mentor young professionals.

Mary: You've been working with the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development for a while, can you comment on the ministry's work to ensure the total safety of women?

Eleanor: The Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development is a ministry dedicated to issues concerning women and children and remains the custodian of policy and advocacy for women and children in Nigeria. Their work is therefore crucial to the economic, social and psychological wellbeing of women and their children.

Mary: You've also been part of the Nigerian delegation to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) for two years consecutively; did you have young women as part of the delegation?

Eleanor: Absolutely, not only do we have young women as part of the delegation, we also have young members who make presentations during the sessions. The UNCSW is a great opportunity for mentoring.

Mary: Can you comment on the ministry's work to groom young women leaders?

Eleanor: I cannot speak for the Ministry, but I applaud their efforts at ensuring that female role models are documented in the hall of fame within the Women Development Centre. This serves as a means of motivating young Nigerian women towards aspiring and excelling in their chosen field of endeavour.

Mary: We speak about women being at the helm of affairs, judging from the caliber of women you've met at the helm of affairs in Nigeria, can you say Nigerian women leaders are capable of initiating and implementing the change the country sorely needs?

Eleanor: Absolutely. Women leaders have shown immense capability in all spheres of public life in Nigeria and Diaspora. When conducive policy environment and space is created for women's meaningful participation, they rise to the occasion. More and more Nations are coming to the realisation that development cannot take place with the exclusion of women.

Mary: One of NSRP's work goals is to "improve the coverage of issues (conflict) in the Nigeria media". What does this mean, and how has it done that?

Eleanor: NSRP media component focuses on conflict sensitive communication – ensuring that any communication by traditional and social media does not cause an escalation of conflict. In addition, monitoring social media and countering hate speech. NSRP has also trained media practitioners to cover issues of women's participation in peace building.

Mary: Is NSRP working with the Federal Government on something to tackle present violent conflict and insurgency in Nigeria?

Eleanor: NSRP is working with both State and non-State actors in Nigeria to reduce violent conflict. NSRP has supported the Federal Government in various ways including the launch of a National Action plan on Women, Peace and Security. We have supported the process of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition bill, as well as the National Security Strategy, and more recently, the working group for the development of a National Action Plan on Countering Violent Extremism.

Mary: NSRP has a five year deadline on it. Since the programme was set up for Nigerians to manage and ensure the reduction of cases of violent conflict, and there has been an upward surge in violent conflict in the country, will it fold up come 2018 or be sustained?

Eleanor: We are hoping very much that the programme will be extended but this is dependent on continued funding support. However, all our interventions have an inbuilt sustainability plan, which is designed for ownership to lie with communities and relevant government agencies.

Mary: Religion has been known to perpetrate evil in the name of God. What can be done to curb religious "freedom", to hold so called "men of God" accountable for crimes against humanity perpetrated in the name of their "gods"?

Eleanor: Monitoring of sermons and working closely with religious leaders as agents of positive change is one way that religion can be a vehicle for peace and reconciliation.

Mary: Can religious conflicts be mitigated in any other way, besides discussions?

Eleanor: Dialogue and providing the space for constructive conversations is always the best. Every known conflict has ended up in dialogue.

Mary: Do you foresee any solution in sight for the violent ongoing religious conflicts in Nigeria?

Eleanor: I remain hopeful for a peaceful Nigeria, but it would be naive to expect that it would just happen overnight. We have to be a part of making it happen by investing in bringing up children, religious tolerance, integration, respect for good culture, sense of patriotism, and inclusive orientation. Additionally, the root cause of violent conflict must be addressed. You cannot put plaster over a festering wound without treating the infection. Reparations must also be provided for the aggrieved. Lives cannot be replaced but some form of compensation provides solace for those who have lost loved ones and irreplaceable property.