

WOMEN COMMUNITY GROUPS HELP BREAK BARRIERS TO PEACE IN NIGERIA

Community Initiatives to Promote Peace (CIPP)

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The Conflict

In Central Nigeria, polarizing narratives around religion have fueled violence, discrimination, and segregation between the country's Christian and Muslim communities. Out of a population of more than 203 million, 53.5 percent of Nigerians identify as Muslim and 45.9 percent as Christian.⁵ Longstanding ethno-religious divides have shaped politics and culture at the expense of national stability. Moreover, farmers and herders in central Nigeria have fought over resources for decades. In the past 20 years, the conflict has been exacerbated by increased population growth, farm expansion, and environmental deterioration in northern states as well.¹

Although the Government attempted to discourage discrimination through citizenship policy reform in 2006, the legal changes have marginalized certain ethnic and religious groups by classifying millions as second class citizens.²

Nigeria's government has been partnering with local religious leaders, media influencers, and country-wide radio shows to counter hateful and dangerous speech. However, the government has

made little progress in de-escalating religious tensions.



Members of Katsina State Women's Critical Discussion Group in September 2019. Photo Credit: Janet Ndubisi for Mercy Corps

Since 2018, ethno-religious conflict over resources and rights between citizens has grown in central Nigeria's Middle Belt region. USAID partner and global humanitarian non-profit, Mercy Corps, tracked 26 religious-based violence incidents that resulted in 291 deaths between January and December 2019 in the Kaduna state alone.

¹ "Central Nigeria: Overcoming Dangerous Speech and Endemic Religious Divides," U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, uscirf.gov/reports-briefs/special-reports/central-nigeria-overcoming-dangerous-speech-and-endemic-religious

² "Nigeria: Indigeneity Policies Marginalize Millions," Human Rights Watch, [hrw.org/news/2006/04/25/nigeria-indigeneity-policies-marginalize-millions](https://www.hrw.org/news/2006/04/25/nigeria-indigeneity-policies-marginalize-millions)



Members of Kasuwan Magani community Women's Critical Discussion Group in Kaduna State, December 2019. Photo Credit: Ibinabo Fibersima for Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps Intervention

Civil society groups in the Middle Belt region have worked to identify solutions. In 2019, USAID supported Mercy Corps' implementation of a program called Community Initiatives to Promote Peace (CIPP), which was designed to elevate women's voices to address religious-based violence.

In October 2019, CIPP created a series of Women's Critical Discussion Groups (WCDG) across five Middle Belt states: Kaduna, Katsina, Kano, Plateau Benue, and Kogi. The discussion groups consist of Christian and Muslim women that meet weekly to identify ways to solve ethno-religious conflict. Each week they listen to a radio program broadcasting peaceful messages that counteract widespread hate speech in the media. A CIPP-trained mediator leads the women's groups through discussions aimed at finding ways to build peace in their communities. The groups even record features for radio programs to air in each state.

As a result of these discussions, one of the WCDGs invited their counterpart group in a neighboring state to host a series of peace events across five states where CIPP operated. The first peace event, held in January 2019 in Kaduna state, convened more than 50 women, several religious

leaders, and heads of local governments from both faiths. They discussed the benefits of peace and ways to mitigate interfaith violence. Following the first event, the WCDGs hosted a festival where Muslims and Christians sang songs, performed theatrical demonstrations about peaceful coexistence, and led conversations about avoiding causes of extremism.

In addition to the festival, the women's groups in each state began hosting regular public meetings with Muslims and Christians. Male community and religious leaders regularly attend to share words of encouragement, recognizing women's efforts and role in building peace.



Members of Iyale Community Women's Critical Discussion Group in December 2019 in Kogi State. Photo Credit: Ajemina Ogan for Mercy Corps

One of the WCDGs in the state of Kogi convinced their traditional leaders to include them in a town hall meeting where they presented on the benefits of the peace events and why women should be part of community decision making. This was the first time women had ever done so. Between January and March 2020, they also organized 12 peace events and resolved 40% of the disputes reported to the women mediators trained through CIPP's Interest Negotiation and Mediation program. None of the resolved disputes have recurred, demonstrating the women's unique understanding of local conflicts and ways to resolve them, and challenging traditional views that only men are

capable of resolving disputes. As a local youth leader shared:

“Our mothers are getting better at navigating the cultural constraints and other structural barriers to their participation in peacebuilding. Several have joined [CIPP] peace activities”

Through CIPP’s mediation trainings, weekly meetings, and community peace events, the women have gained skills and confidence to help resolve interfaith conflict.

WCDG member Hafsat Mohammed noted:

“I had no idea how to address the issues in my community. I felt limited by my capabilities because I am a woman. Now the story is different. The CIPP women’s discussion group has helped me build my capacity and confidence. I dialogue with community leaders and security agents to provide solutions to pressing issues in the community. In the past, I had certain limitations as a woman but now I have a different view about leadership. Now I know that women are as capable as men to contribute to the development of the community.”

The events have empowered community leaders to address other local conflicts. For instance, School teacher Mallama Gambo Nasir is applying the mediation skills she gained by teaching her students about the dangers of drug abuse and recruitment by violent extremist groups. The women’s efforts have brought such relief to residents of Kasuwan Magani that a once-polarizing religious leader commented at one of the community events that,

“For the first time in many years, I have a lot of hope for my country because I now see that when people discuss their differences and work through them together, the stage is set for positive change to occur.”

This story was co-written by Mercy Corps and Haley Moen of USAID’s Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives in March 2020.

About CIPP

Mercy Corps is implementing the **Community Initiatives to Promote Peace (CIPP)**, a five-year peacebuilding program funded by United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to prevent violent conflict in the most at-risk communities across Katsina, Kaduna, Plateau, Kogi, Kano and Benue states in Nigeria’s North West and Middle Belt regions.

Mercy Corps’ works with community leaders, women, government officials and state-level actors to improve their ability to peacefully manage disputes; to strengthen Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) mechanisms for timely response to violent conflict, and facilitate collaboration among communities with government agencies, civil service organizations and local leaders to address root causes of conflict.

CIPP is implemented in partnership with Pastoral Resolve (PARE), Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC), Savannah Centre for Diplomacy, Democracy and Development (SCDDD), and the African Radio Drama Association (ARDA).

About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.

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