

32ndNiwano Peace Prize: Awarded to Mrs. Esther Abimiku Ibanga

The 32ndNiwano Peace Prize is awarded to Mrs. Esther Abimiku Ibanga of Nigeria, a pastor and an activist. She founded “Women Without Walls Initiative” in March 2010, born out of the desperation to put an end to the violent and senseless killings of women and children in Plateau state Nigeria. Since inception, the organization has become a strong coalition of women groups across religious and ethnic divides. From this platform, women have been placed at an advantageous position of raising their voices in the calls for peace in the troubled regions of Nigeria. WOWWI has brought to the fore the power of women’s voices and created an opportunity for an organized platform for women to play an active role in peace building. It is on record that Women Without Walls Initiative is the first organization to have on its membership all the tribal women leaders, including Christian and Muslim women leaders. These women act as entry points into the various communities in her city particularly in reaching the youths and all community stakeholders. A courageous and dedicated religious leader, Esther has worked extensively to foster and facilitate reconciliation between conflicting religious and tribal groups.

Pastor Ibanga has pushed tirelessly for the realization of WOWWI’s vision which is ‘to develop a creative, nonviolent and all inclusive approach to conflict resolution and transformation in Nigeria through women. The organization has many goals including to form a strong coalition of women’s groups nationally and internationally across all forms of divide, to partner with other women in different spheres of influence and create an awareness about the important role of women in peace building, to support and participate in intensive and comprehensive research in situations where women have used unique methodologies and approaches to contribute to peace building, to expand training programs specifically designed to empower women politically and economically, to partner with government, local organizations, international organizations and also individuals for sustainable projects, to train women and civil society organizations in gender awareness, conflict resolution and peace building. WOWWI also strives to ensure the protection of women’s and children’s rights, pushing for legislation that would protect them especially in conflict zones.

To achieve these goals and objectives, Women Without Walls initiative under the leadership of Esther has taken a very firm and decisive stand on the empowerment of women through skills acquisition; micro finance and job replacement programs. In most conflicts across Africa, including Nigeria, women and children suffer the worst consequences. In the same vein, as mothers, women are the first educators of human kind because education begins at home in a mother's lap. It is with regard to this that Esther's work focuses on promoting and harnessing the potential of women as peacemakers, recognizing that women can have a very strong influence on the men (fathers, brothers, husbands and sons) in their lives. She has been one of the most vocal religious leaders condemning the Boko Haram kidnappings in her home country by organizing protest marches, and tirelessly calling on the Nigerian government and decision makers to address the issue of the ill treatment and abuse of women. Esther is also pioneering an ingenious role among youths, 'amplifying the positive voices of mothers above that of politicians, religious leaders and warlords' who use religion to mobilize youths to perpetrate violence to satisfy their selfish motives.

Furthermore, to achieve their goals and objectives, Women Without Walls Initiative has carried out groundbreaking work. They led two women's protests during the Jos crisis. This was done to appeal for peace and an end to the violence and demand for justice for victims and application of the Law for the perpetrators of evil. They managed the donation of relief materials to women and children affected by the conflict in areas such as Dogon Nahawa village, where over 500 people mostly women and children were massacred in an overnight attack. They have carried out peace advocacy visits to stakeholders such as security agencies, tribal chiefs and traditional rulers; religious leaders and government bodies. They have organized peace advocacy and peace education forums with women and youth in volatile communities within the Jos metropolis. The organization has also represented women in international conferences and forums in many countries including Rwanda, South Africa, Austria and the United States of America. They have worked closely with other local and international organizations in the quest for peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Pastor Ibanga has

also presented a paper at the United Nations in Geneva on “Preventing and Addressing Violence and Atrocity Crimes targeted against Minorities”.

They have introduced skills acquisition and empowerment programs for women and youths. However their flagship program remains the conflict management training workshops for women. Women Without Walls Initiative is the first to introduce Police Community Dialogues as a way of building confidence and fostering trust between the communities and the police, in an attempt to counter terrorism. The organization has also collaborated with other peacebuilding actors in the state to carry out peace carnivals and storytelling activities in primary and secondary schools on the Plateau providing a platform for children to express themselves and to also play an active role in peacebuilding, more importantly, to give young children a different picture of life from the war situation around them. WOWWI has also sponsored six war victims (three Christians girls and three Moslem girls) in the last three years to the United States of America to participate in Trauma Healing and Reconciliation Workshops.

In their quest for peace and reconciliation, Women Without Walls Initiative has donated artificial limbs to two women who lost their legs in a bomb blast in December 2010 in the Kabong area of Jos, installed a borehole called Peace Well in Angwan Rukuba community of Jos Nigeria (both Christian Communities); and distribution of 13 tricycles to the disabled in Dilimi as well as renovating a dilapidated primary school in Gangare (both Muslim Communities in Jos Nigeria).

The Niwano Peace Prize honors Pastor Esther Abimiku Ibanga’s service to humanity in the search for peaceful co-existence. She has not only touched the lives of thousands but has founded and leads an organization that will impact thousands more. It is for this dedication in the pursuit of peace that Esther is being awarded the Niwano Peace Prize for 2015.