

The Travail of Women in the Crises in the Niger Delta Area

Emmanuel Osewe Akubor

History Department, Gombe State University, P.M.B, 127, Gombe, Nigeria
E-mail: akubor4ever@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT In situation of crises, women bear the brunt of the problems arising from such crises. Apart from this, they (women) constitute about 70% of those who are poor in the world, in the developing world they are the poorest. In the Niger Delta, the situation is not different, as the women suffer both the confiscation of their agricultural land by the government and multinationals on the one hand, and rape and other assault by oil workers and soldiers on the other hand. They are also denied access to the oil wealth as well as remain the most vulnerable group to production of oil that has caused environmental crisis. The paper therefore seeks to examine women in the face of crises in the developing world with particular reference to the Niger Delta area. It hopes to proffer possible solutions to this problem.

INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta region is a prominent region of the southern part of Nigeria, covering an area of about 70,000 square kilometres comprising of the following states: Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Cross Rivers, as well as Edo, Abia, Imo and Ondo States, with about one third of it made up of wetlands, swamp and mangrove forest and meandering water ways which stretch for over 300 miles from the Benin River in the west to the Cross River in the East. It is Africa's largest delta and the world's third largest mangrove (Tayo 2007).

Women in the Niger Delta

Women in the Niger Delta are like their counterparts in the other parts of the world, despite their number and crucial functions. The division of roles between the male and female sexes, as prescribed by most cultures assign the subordinate position to women. As a consequence, these women have for long suffered various forms of brutality, discrimination, inequality exclusion and violence. According to Oakley (1974), theory in social sciences has developed without the benefit of women's voices on their experiences. One needs to know the plight of women generally, all over the world to be able to understand the particular case of the women of the Niger Delta, who are the poorest in the world as a result of the production of oil, which brought about environmental degradation and poverty and subsequent crisis.

Ololade (2009), captured the situation of women in the Niger Delta thus,

"Niger Delta women perform certain economic responsibilities within the family as wives, mothers, farmers and breadwinners. They are the principal care giver of the children and the aged. Even though they are food producers, harvesters and cook, they are also expected to function of wage earners. This is because the intra housing income distribution pattern and the rise of matriarchal household in the country, coupled with poverty, force them to take active financial role in their families. Since most of them are uneducated and therefore unemployed outside the home, their major source of livelihood is subsistence farming as they comprise 60 to 80% of the agricultural labour force and account for 90% of family food supply"

Analysing the genesis of modern day brutality against women in the Niger Delta area, scholars have pointed to the beginning of the exploration and exploitation of oil in the area. According to these scholars, the exploitation of oil resources in the Niger Delta has resulted in particular economic and environmental conflicts, with the female folks bearing the brunt of the situation. Studies have shown that oil provides over 90% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings, yet the people of the Niger Delta, especially the women are among the poorest in Nigeria. This is because in the area where the men are known to always go in pursuit of contracts, the women are engaged in full time farming. Thus, in the upland area where agriculture activities are high, crop yields have greatly declined, this is largely due to the fact

that farmlands have been taken away from women, who are the main farmers. These lands have been used for laying oil pipelines which criss-cross the land and contaminate it. With this situation, there is acute shortage in arable land for agriculture, hence the attendant food shortage. The direct impact is that it has led to a situation within the region where the already impoverished women must import food from other parts of the country leading to high cost of food. It is also worthy of note that despite the agony of these women, 90% of them still rely on the use of other crude implements like cutlasses, hoes, knives to carry out their farming activities (African 2002).

The above situation in the area has not in any way lessened with the coming of the multinational oil giants, rather they have continued to bearing the brunt of hardship in times of conflict. Available evidence indicates that women in the area were subjected to all kinds of violence, sexual violence such as rape, physical violence such as beatings, maiming and murder, as well as destruction of their properties. They have suffered unimaginable human right abuses for which redress is unattainable because their husbands and sons have been killed or maimed in the conflict and women have had to assume burdensome responsibilities as heads of households. To this they have not been able to respond with violence like their male counterparts (Onduku 2004; Azubuike 2008).

As a result of the above, women have resorted to mild protests, which to a large extent have not yielded much meaningful result. This is attested to by the massive non-violent protests by women from several communities in the Niger Delta since the 1984 Ogharefe Women Protest against US Pan Ocean. The tactics and determination of the women forced the Chevron oil company to send their representatives to negotiate with the women. During the negotiation, the women made clear their position, in which they ask the oil companies to make concrete efforts at improving the economic, environment and social conditions of the people. However, at the end of the day, no concrete attempt was made by the oil companies and did not implement their Memorandum of Understanding, instead the company chose to use divide and rule tactics to destabilise the women.

In the case of Pan Ocean, the company bluntly refused to pay the people any compensation, despite the series of protest, carried out by the

women between 1984 and 1986. This was also the case of Shell in 1999, which refused to compensate the community despite the protests both in Nigeria and in London, particularly against gas flaring. These indeed are glaring manifestation of the rights of the women and outright denial of compensation for taking the source of livelihood and the destruction of the environment. This has in adverse, relegated women in the area to the background despite their immense contribution to the economy of the area, especially in the area of food production (Power 2006). This position of subordination, lack of opportunities as well as their exclusion from decision making, make them more vulnerable to poverty. This is apart from the fact that most of these companies have refused to offer them employment in the firms. Apart from this humiliation, those often sent to keep peace in the area in time of conflict, treat the women as spoils of war, raping them and looting their properties (Azubuike 2008).

This situation has created a large commercial sex market in the region with all the associated health and social problems. It is in the Niger Delta region that the country has recorded one of the highest level of HIV/AIDS. The presence of the effluent oil workers in the mist of such poverty in the region has led to high rate of prostitution. This had earlier been observed by earlier European visitors to the area in the early 1900s. For example, the Benin Province report as documented in Akubor (2005) captured it thus,

“the companies policies which destroyed the family cohesion among the peasants forcing them to seek cash paying jobs, led to massive migration of the physically fit individuals to the nearest urban centres to seek their fortune....the female members of this group constitute naissance to the community and environs...this was because most of them were forced into prostitution, since they were never able to get occasional jobs like the men ... this group of people were greatly patronised by young men, who worked in the foreign firms... a lot of them go about the camps and towns ...begging for money...they seduced them to buy them wearing apparels and trinkets”

However, Thomas (2003), captured it in another dimension when he contended that the multinational oil workers have often been very brutal to the women, behaving like animals as they take advantage of the poor hungry illiterate girls of the Niger Delta by making them victims of their lust forcefully. These girls according to the scholar

inhabit creeks and villages separated by rivers and seas and had little contact with the outside world. (This he argued is due to devastation caused by the crises in the area as well as the denial of these areas access to basic social amenities and marginalization by the federal government, multinational oil companies and some time leaders from such areas). Thomas further testified that the living conditions of these women and young girls is akin to Stone Age, due to their poor living conditions, thus making them fall victims to these men. At the end of their search and exploitation for oil, these workers leave the women behind with no contact address. They leave behind young unemployed mothers and the kids.

The activities of these explorers is not restricted to only single ladies/ girls. The biting poverty in these communities has forced some married women to respond positively to their lusty demands. At the end, these women who think they have found a solution to their problems realise later that they have made it worse (Akoda 2008). Closely related to this is the fact that, the women of this area have suddenly become articles of trade in the hands of both the foreign workers and those who promise to make life better for them outside the crises area. This has resulted in human trafficking in which most women and girls from the area have been sold out for the purpose of prostitution, which is a form of modern slavery. For instance, in 2002, 15000 Nigerian women and girls were engaged in prostitution in Italy alone, while countless more were going about it in Nigeria. In fact, 95% of these numbers were from the Niger Delta area alone (JDP/Caritas Nigeria 2008). Analysis shows that in Edo state alone, over 150 families have been traced so far and contacts between them and their daughters, for those still in their destination countries have been established

The above according to Digifa (2008), has led to more instability in the area as the women are gradually becoming militant in their quest for succour. Examples of these almost militant actions includes the Ogharefe Women Protest in 1984, Ekpan's Women's Uprising in 1986, the Okutukutu and Etegwe Women Protest in November 1991 due to over flooding of their farm lands caused Gbaran link in Yenagoa, the Obunagha community protest in 1992 due to lack of social responsibility by Shell while drilling Gbarana I (the demands of the women in this case include clean environment,

conducive for survival, jobs for their children, safe drinking water, hospital, pollution of rivers and creeks low farm yields, no fishes and crawfish) and the Escravos Episode in which about 600 women (age 30 to 90) held 700 Chevron Texaco workers at the Escravos terminal in July, 14, 2002 among others.

According to Ogbogbo (2005), the above issues raised by the women is a clear indication that oil production and the related crises which is the most crucial factor in Nigeria has impacted beyond endurance on the people of the Niger Delta. It is the consequence of the intense pollution of the Niger Delta on the economy of the people and their general standard of life that has given birth to the phenomenon which is general known as the Niger Delta crisis (Ajaero 2008).

It is, however, unfortunate that instead of a more civilized way of addressing these issues raised by the women, the government and the oil companies on the one hand and the militants on the other, have continued to brutalise the women folks, as illustrated by the catalogue below.

On August 8, 2002, about 800 women sustained injuries when the police attempted to disperse over a thousand women from Ijaw, Illaje, and Itshekiri groups who were holding protest over environmental degradation by oil companies. Lack of amenities and allege violation of compensation agreement by S. P. D. C Warri.

Also in 2003, no fewer than 10 women were killed following the outbreak of unrest at Iri, Isoko South council when a traditional ruler was alleged to have sold the rights of the community to Agip Oil. Properties worth millions of naira were vandalised. On 15th January, 2003, indigenes of Ohoror-Uweru community, Ugheli North Local council of Delta state were attacked by a detachment of solders from J. T. F 'Operation Restore Hope. This included women who were in the majority.

In January 2004, suspected Itshekiri militants invaded some communities in Okpe Kingdom killing 17 people and injuring three others. Nine months later (in October 2004), Ke and Ijaw communities in Rivers State were attacked by an unidentified group and houses and properties running into millions of naira were destroyed. According to the news, those most affected were women, who were either raped or maimed to death (The Punch October 5, 2004). For several hours, youths of Igudu and soldiers of the JTF clashed

in Igbudu area of Warri. This led to loss of lives of women and properties. Some twenty days later (on November 22, 2004), 12 persons including women were shot and injured in a clash between youths of Ojobo oil community in Burutu LGA, Delta state and soldiers of the J. T. F deployed to guard the Benideide flow station operated by S. P. D. C. The youths were protesting alleged marginalization and violation of MOU by the company.

On December 23, 2004: Over a hundred houses were ransacked, women raped and property running into millions of naira destroyed when youths in Ogbe-Osewa and Ogbe-Illo quarters in Asaba clashed.

On February 3, 2005: 12 people including four councillors and a pregnant woman, travelling to Obioku on a peace keeping mission were killed when gunmen attacked their boat on Akananga River in Neme Axis of Bayelsa East senatorial District.

On February 12, 2005: Federal troops from J. T. F invaded the coastal town of Odioma leaving about 80 persons dead and no fewer than 78 houses, nine mausoleums and other historic relics in ruins. The troops were invited by Bayelsa state Governor, Chief D. S. P. Alamiyeseigha to fish out alleged killers of four councilors, a pregnant woman and seven others on February 3, 2005.

On January 5th, 2008, Ogochukwu Orisa Onyiri was kidnapped and a ransom of fifty million naira was demanded. In June, Augustina Ekeowei, was kidnapped and a ransom of seven million naira was demanded. On July 3rd 2008, Folake Coker was abducted, although a ransom of fifty million naira was demanded, she was later found in Ghana. Other related cases include the kidnapping of Adaobi Nnenna Eze, demanding three million naira ransom; Mrs Meg Idisi, abducted from her family house, demanding one billion naira for her release, Mrs Goldcoast Dickson, Mrs Seinye Lulu Briggs, Miss Margaret Hill, Franca and Francisca Ehilemi among others (Asoye 2008).

On August 4, 2008: The Joint Task Force invaded Agge in Bayelsa State destroying over 300 homes. In most of these houses women were killed (The News, August, 11th 2003). In September, 2008, in a Joint Task Force raid of Yenogoa/Torugbene- Lobia town bound transport speed boat, 12 passengers were killed including a pregnant woman.

In most of these confrontations, the state had acted with force, deploying military men and

weapons to maintain the peace. For instance, in the confrontation of May 14, 2009, the government deployed sophisticated weaponry against the hapless residents of Gbaramatu Kingdom made up of 163 communities. The weaponry deployed to the area included four helicopter gunboats for aerial bombing, two Naval ships; NNS Obula and NNS Nwanba and a large troop of soldiers. In the case of the Odi attack, it was reported that close to 2,873 civilians lost their lives, majority of them women and children (Ogege 2007).

Although one is not claiming that this violence was directed against the women and children, but the argument is that consciously or unconsciously, they have become targets. This is because they are either used as shield in time of crises or as ransom seeking implements. Although the government have declared in Article 13 of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against women and that state parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in other areas of economic and social life in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, the same right; this still remains as lip service.

Conclusively, the activities of multinational companies, that is, oil exploration in the Niger Delta area which has been the bone of contention between the people and the companies has brought more devastating effect on the communities, much more so for the womenfolk. Apart from the loss of farm land, which is the main source of livelihood, oil spillages have led to displacement of settlements as well as extensive deforestation with no adequate replanting practices. This has often brought the people in direct confrontation with the foreign firms, during which military is employed with the major victims being the women and children (Aboribo 2007).

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings of the survey conducted, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. That there should be increase women's participation in politics as well as to ensure gender equality in the society and in all government appointments. This will help women voice out their grievances.
2. That the government should utilize Nigerian Government Programs like Women Fund for Economic Empowerment (WOFEE), and

- Business, Development Fund for Women (BUDFOW) and Family Support Program,
3. Women should be given a forum to air their views on issues pertaining to them. Thus, there is the need to establish rapport and a working relationship between the various women groups in the country.
 4. Women should be included in negotiations between the federal government, multinational oil companies and host communities.
 5. Enlighten women on their rights and the Niger Delta crisis. This will certainly require the setting up of Civic Education Program especially for girls and women, in order to build up awareness for the equal rights, responsibilities of women.
 6. Women of the area should be encouraged to pursue education and the government and the firms should invest massively in the building of schools and granting scholarship to the women folk.
 7. Considering the enormity of the role the women play in the society, the oil firms should have special concession for them in terms of job opportunities. This will empower the women as they will be able to concentrate on other activities instead of dedicating their whole life to agriculture using crude tools like cutlasses, hoes and knives. In this way, the women will be even more independent especially at the death of their husbands in these senseless crises.
 8. Basic amenities should be provided for these communities. It is rather unfortunate that most of these communities do not have pipe borne water, or electricity, they lack access roads, hospitals and schools. All these make life unbearable for the people especially the women.
 9. Open Vocational Training Centres should be open in these interiors to educate these women and their children on how to take up other occupations apart from farming. This will help the women make use of some of the natural resources in the area for creative works. This will lessen their dependence on oil workers. In these centres, they should also be taught modern farming methods, to enhance their agricultural yields.
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