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### **EDITORIAL COMMENT**

In line with the goal and tradition of the Department of History and International Studies at Babcock University, this edition of BUJOHIS "Volume 4, Number 2, December 2019" offers its readers and subscribers another opportunity to glean from evolving opinions and discoveries from research-based empirical evidences. We hope that the wealth of knowledge embedded in this volume will equip our readers and subscribers for better functionality in the process of problem solving within their milieus in Nigeria, Africa, and the world at large, while concurrently emphasising and expanding the utilitarian frontiers of historical information.

Thank you.

**Charles C. Akpuh**, Ph.D.  
Editor, December 2019.

**BABCOCK UNIVERSITY JOURNAL OF  
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## ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NIGER DELTA REGION, 1995-2018

By

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### Abstract

*Nigerian women are generally accorded limited recognition in the different sectors of national life. The role of women in the Niger Delta is not much different. Yet women in the Niger Delta have made tremendous contributions to the economic and social development of the region in spite of several challenges and discrimination they experience. The patriarchal society for instance, has defined boundaries for the roles of women in religion, tradition, culture, social and political spheres. The women in the Niger Delta have contributed to the attainment of purposeful and visionary leadership and management through the attainment of some policies that have resulted in the advancement of the region. They have also systematically and consistently made inroads in the areas of community mobilization, conflict resolution, small, micro, agriculture and medium term industrialization, policy making and have played significant roles in governance. However the role of women in the Niger Delta region has not really received scholarly/critical documentation to impact on the narrative on women's contribution to nation building. The critical thrust of this paper therefore, is to examine the role of women in economic development of the Niger Delta region, using primary and secondary sources. The paper concludes that from about the years 1995 to 2018, the women in the Niger Delta have contributed significantly to the economic growth and development of the region and as such should be recognized as useful participants/contributors to nation building.*

**Keywords:** Women, Nation Building, Economic Development.

**Word count:** 235

### Introduction

The region called Niger Delta is a prominent region of the southern part of Nigeria covering about 70,000 square kilometers<sup>1</sup>. It comprises of nine States: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Edo, Imo, Delta, Ondo and Rivers and with about one third of it made up of wetlands, swamps and mangrove forests. It is Africa's largest Delta and the third largest world mangrove<sup>2</sup>. The Niger Delta is popularly referred to as the 'wealth base of the nation'. The main ethnic groups of the Niger Delta are: the Ijaws (who are the largest ethnic group in the area), the Urhobos, Itsekiris, Isokos, Efiks, Ibibios and other smaller ethnic groups. Since

the discovery of crude oil at Oloibiri oil fields in Bayelsa State, in 1956, over 50 years ago, other viable sectors of the economy such as agriculture and mining have been obviously neglected, for instance, in 1990, Nigeria had about 43 percent of her total population working in agriculture<sup>3</sup>. Since the discovery of oil in Nigeria till date, the country's economy has been heavily dependent on crude oil which accounts for 95 percent of government revenue. A World Bank<sup>4</sup> report in the 1950s indicated that the Niger Delta had tremendous agricultural and trading potential enough to produce crops for itself and for export. But now, with a rapidly declining agricultural industry, Nigeria imports many of the crops it used to export, such as groundnuts, palm oil and cocoa. Women are the main producers of food in the region<sup>5</sup>. Apparently, women are contributing to the quest for nation building in the country. To this end, nation building involves the transformation of existing structures through the collective efforts of the citizens of state (country)<sup>6</sup>. It is collaborated with the process of mobilizing available resources, human, materials and financial, for socio-economic and political development of a given nation state<sup>7</sup>. In other words, the contribution of every segment of the Nigerian society including the women folk is needed for a sustainable nation building.

The term women is taken here to be adults who belong to a sex that have the biological makeup to bear children and have the biological responsibility to perform the functions of wives and mothers in their respective homes beside their public lives<sup>8</sup>. A typical African woman has the primary responsibility to manage her home as a wife, take care of her children as a mother and play supporting socio-economic role to her husband as a wife. It is on the basis of these inherent features of women in which Tsuwa and Ochoga gave less emphasis in their study that this paper seeks to examine the role of the Niger Delta women in the economic development of the region<sup>9</sup>.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

This paper adopts the Social Exchange Theory. The theory is associated with the ground work of Gro Harlem Brundtland. The theory buttresses how we feel about a relationship with other persons depending on our perception of fairness. The Social Exchange Theory is a social psychological and sociological perspective that explains social change and stability as a process of negotiated exchange. The social exchange theory becomes a useful tool in explaining and finding answers to the current marginalized positions of women in the Niger Delta where they have little or no representation in formulating and implementing policies which directly affect them. They remain invisible and silent in developmental issues with the exception of a few in the words of Brundtland<sup>10</sup>. Experience shows that investing in women is one of the most cost-effective ways

of promoting development. As mothers, as producers or suppliers of food, fuel and water, as traders and manufacturers, as political and community leaders, women are at the centre of the process of change<sup>11</sup>. Because women are central to development, they need not be silent and invisible in developmental issues even though there is a call for new reforms that will enhance productivity and sustainable development which addresses the needs of women and children as well as other vulnerable groups in the Niger Delta and beyond. The nature and character of the development in the Niger Delta area has brought about several agitations which have taken various dimensions. The region is confronted by farmers especially the rural women who engage in agricultural practices yet, cannot afford a good meal per day. In spite of women's enormous contribution to development, several militating factors tend to hinder steady supply of food crops for local consumption and cash crops for export. It however, calls for a rational thinking with a view to lighten the burden of this disadvantaged group of people. There is need however for a 'give and take' approach. If women give so much in nation building, they deserve so much in return.

#### **Niger Delta Women and Economic Development:**

*This section discusses the contributions of the Niger Delta women in some key sectors of the economy which have contributed to nation building.*

#### **The Fishing Industry**

Niger Delta women in the coastal areas have credibly engaged in fishing activities by taking advantage of the geographical propinquity. Thus, fishing constituted a dominant economic venture embarked on by women in the region. The antiquity of the fishing occupation of the Niger Delta people has been attested to by many writers of the economic history of the Niger Delta<sup>12</sup>. It is on this historical premise that Moser contended that there is the un-contestable fact that the Niger Delta region lacked sufficient arable land for farming. Therefore, from the earliest times after settlement the Niger Delta people did not practice farming<sup>13</sup>. However, scholars such as Njoku or Ifediora among others have established the fact that right from inception the Niger Delta region was noted for agriculture and other notable economic activities<sup>14</sup>. It is pertinent to note that women of the Niger Delta region were heavily involved in the economic development of the area and farming was part of their occupation. This fact has been attested to by the various traditions collected from the various communities of the Niger Delta. Among the various traditions, the Nembe traditions hold that the founding fathers of the metropolis had fed mainly on fish; supplemented by the few vegetable diets, gathered or imported from the hinterland<sup>14</sup>. This fact was supported by the archaeological works of Nzenwunwa at Okochiri in Okrika where fish bones were excavated; at Onyoma and Saikiripogu in Nembe and Ke in Kalabari where similar finds were recovered<sup>15</sup>.

The above were meant for the brushing of the moulds and to establish the antiquity of the fishing occupation confirming the antiquity of the fishing occupation among the Andoni in the Niger Delta<sup>16</sup>. Ejituwu Nnande noted that one certainty about the early ancestors of Andoni immediately after settling down, subsequently spread as fishermen controlling the entire water-ways between the Bonny River, and the Ibeno country and had the prowess to exploit both the small creek, and the great estuaries<sup>17</sup>. Whilst the men killed fish or large water mammals, their womenfolk devoted considerable time and energy to the collection of abundant shell-fish, and to the trapping of prawns, which they did in creeks<sup>18</sup>. Prawns and other fries were trapped in a variety of small basket-work devices, the most notable being *Oket*, *Ekongh* and *Ukporo*. In these activities, women went out in the fishing expeditions in small ad-hoc groups of varying numbers. They operated from their home villages as against the long-distance operations of the men. In developing their fishing skills and expertise, Obolo women acquired a deep empirical knowledge of the aquatic environment, of the vagaries of wind, weather and tide, while holding elaborate theories regarding the spiritual forces controlling and regulating the availability of aquatic contents and several other elements. Understanding of the nature and behaviour of the fish, prawns and fries modelled the design and manufacture of various kinds of instruments for the exploitation of the aquatic environment of the Niger Delta. Such instruments include *Oket*, *Ekongh* and *Ukporo*. The *Oket* falls within the category of fishing traps referred to as the *non-return* value traps<sup>19</sup>. In this category also falls *nkata*. The collective or common feature of the instruments in this category is that they were operated on the principle of allowing fish or pawns and other fries entry into the trap but disallowing their exit or escape by means of the preventive values. The *oket* and the *nkata* were of different designs and sizes. They were usually made from either the hard-mid-rib of the oil-palm trees leaves, the prop-roots of the mangrove trees, or from the hand branches of the raphia palm, and woven to produce a conical-shaped trap. The *oket* is usually larger than the *nkata*. While the *nkata* is usually used particularly for such fish as mudskippers, the *oket* is mainly used to trap crayfish and prawns. They are common among the Kalabari, Okrika, Andoni, Ogoni and the migrant Ibibio and Efik fisher folks. The important point here is that the use of *oket* in the fishing operations in Andoni is the responsibility of the women and their exclusive preserve<sup>20</sup>.

Another important and one of the earliest methods of the fishing occupation of the Niger Delta people is the hook-and-line fishing. In this method, bait (fish food) was attached to the hook at the end of the line so that if any fish swallowed the bait, it would swallow the hook also and get caught. From archaeological evidence we were made to understand that bone and wooden hooks were used before the coming of the Europeans<sup>21</sup>. A particular method of the

hook system of fishing is the poled hook-and-line that possessed just a single hook, tied to the loose-end of the line. It was in turn tied strongly to a short or long pole, depending on the nature of fish being sought. This type of gear and fishing method was commonly used among the womenfolk and children in smaller streams, flood plains and marginal plains of the Delta. Another important point to make here is that women cannot be removed or separated from this fishing method as their contributions in this area traversed many aspects. Apart from playing the role of drivers to their husbands, they usually provided the bait (the fish food)<sup>22</sup>. What about fishing with nets? It appears this was one area where Niger Delta women contributed immensely. Before the advent of the Europeans, Niger Delta women developed the act of net fishing with profound ingenuity. The available nets in use then were locally woven from local fibre and canes<sup>23</sup>. These were the nets with which the Niger Delta exploited their immediate environment. The nets called *ukporo* by the Andoni and *piri-ori* or *nunu* by the dominant Ijo groups were used principally in the Niger Delta to scoop prawns, fishes and various crustaceans in the shallow creeks and alluvial banks of the rivers and rivulets.

#### **Women and Trade in the Niger Delta**

Another important aspect of the early Niger Delta economy was trade where women also found profound influence in the evolution and development of the Niger Delta. The successful exploitation of the Niger Delta environment necessitated the generation and production of surpluses for distribution and exchange. Distribution and exchange, which are otherwise called or referred to as trade among the Niger Delta communities was not well developed, probably for the major reason that the communities were almost self-sufficient<sup>24</sup>. However, with the challenges of societal development and evolution in the post-settlement period, the natural tendency towards a self-sufficient and autarkic option for survival proved unrealistic paving way for the exchange of the riverine products of the Niger Delta with the upland products of their hinterland neighbours. Hence the development of both short distance trade and the long-distance trade. It is plausible to contend that the development of trade within the Niger Delta region and with the outside neighbours could have been necessitated by firstly, the varying levels of individual households' or bonds' involvement in such different occupation as fishing, salt-manufacturing, canoe-making, and pottery<sup>25</sup>. Secondly the differences in the natural endowments of the different micro-environments of the Niger Delta; and, thirdly, different levels of natural endowments between the Delta communities and their hinterland neighbours. It is important to stress here that every writer on the Niger Delta region has come to the conclusion that there was a great deal of trade and exchange in the Niger Delta in the pre-colonial period, preceding the trans-Atlantic trade. Also, that trade

contributed to the establishment and development of some Niger Delta communities. In fact, women contributed and participated in every aspect of the trade. Therefore, women would have contributed to these series of evolutionary trends and developments<sup>26</sup>.

### **Women and Farming in the Niger Delta**

The strategic role of women in food production and security is now widely recognized. Many studies suggest that this has become even more important as a result of men's increased migration to the cities and towns. Unlike most parts of Northern Nigeria where the men are responsible for food production and food processing of all kinds, the average rural Niger Delta woman makes significant contributions to food stuff production, processing and marketing. However, they still face formidable challenges to their potential role as a major economic and social force in the development of the agricultural sector, such as lack of modern agricultural implements, poor storage facilities, post-harvest loss of farm produce, lack of good access roads to their farms, natural disasters and other daunting ecological problems<sup>27</sup>. The position of women in meeting the challenges of agricultural development and food security cannot be over-emphasized. The primacy of women in food production and processing must be recognized. As women are the backbone of the agricultural sector, accounting for 60-80 percent of agricultural labour and being responsible for 80 percent of food production. It is important to bridge actual potential productivity gap and enhance the overall economic development of the populace. Women contribute significantly to ensure availability of food supply for the teeming population of the Niger Delta ushered in by oil production activities. The women are involved in practically all aspects of agriculture from rice, cassava, plantain and fish farming to snail rearing and animal husbandry although on a small scale<sup>28</sup>. It is acknowledged that few women concentrate on cash crops such as rubber, palm kernel among others for both local consumption and export, majority of the women are involved in the cultivation of food crops of all kinds (cassava, rice, plantain, fruits, vegetables etc). These are seasonal and perishable crops meant for immediate consumption or processed for other long-term usage. Suffice to add that the women not only produce, but are also directly involved in the processing and market distribution of the various farm produce. Indeed, this segment of the population depends heavily on agricultural activities for their livelihood. World Bank, reports that "Women in Africa are prominent in agricultural activities especially food processing and marketing, cash crops and animal husbandry"<sup>29</sup>. The agricultural input of women in the Niger Delta cannot be over-emphasized.

The economy of Nigeria is heavily reliant on the oil and gas industry that permeates the Niger Delta, yet many people living in the Niger Delta are unable to access employment, and Nigeria's global human development ranking continues

to worsen. As a result of this, both the Federal and State Governments have implemented a range of pilot livelihood projects to test their viability with the aim to attract the necessary investment to replicate and scale up those demonstrating potential for women economic empowerment. One of these livelihood projects tested the viability of commercial rice cultivation, which our research indicated is a highly valued commodity in the Niger Delta, a region that also provides favourable growing conditions. However, women farmers are often unable to gain the credit needed for training and equipment to cultivate rice on a commercial scale, or insure themselves against poor crop yields or failure<sup>30</sup>. There is need to partner with private sector providers of agricultural management and services, to reduce the risks and barriers to small-holder and unemployed farmers growing rice and other crops on a commercial scale in the region<sup>31</sup>. This partnership with private sector providers is intended to test how the productive potential of the private sector can be harnessed for development gains by incentivising 'social investment'. In this case, access to credit should be provided by government at every level, using funding from the UK Government, to support the women living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities of the region. Thus, this approach has the potential to promote the social, political, and economic inclusion of women across the region. The 'Trader-Moni' Scheme of the Federal Government is commendable but the approach should be more of economic problem solving than political tactics. The sustainability of the scheme is imperatively demanding. When small scale traders get the fund as at when due it will become a buster to economic engineering for women do not have the fund to start small scale trading.

Women are more likely to become active in nation building if they; (i) consider the rewards to be substantial, (ii) think the system is encouraging, (iii) believe that the system will allow care for all and sundry, (iv) accept their state of knowledge and seek for improvement, and (v) feel that Nigerian society will be free from violence. The notion that women are exclusively reserved as wives and mothers for the purpose of marriage, procreation and family, not politics, is a misconception because a classical advocate of democracy and egalitarianism, John Locke has established that all men are by nature equal' and he never agreed that women are lower than the men<sup>32</sup>. It has evidently been shown that the level of women economic involvement is still higher than that of men. Therefore, all forms of discrimination against women should be abrogated. Because the prize an honest society pays for keeping women out of nation building and not getting involved in critical economic development process, is to be ruled by dishonest men<sup>33</sup>.

## Conclusion

The paper has established that the women play fundamental roles in the economic development of the Niger Delta region. The study showed that their

involvement in fishing, trading and farming ventures are critical to nation building. In other words, food security in the region is tied to the efforts of women. Unfortunately, initial progress in growing rice at a commercial scale was greatly challenged following the severe flooding in September of 2018 that almost washed off the rice farms resulting in massive crop-loss. The resulting crop failure underscores the importance of insurance for farmers, but unfortunately the would be insurer refused insurance cover just as the flooding began, despite receiving the insurance application months in advance. Despite the crop-loss, they have been able to gain substantial knowledge in rice farming and they are eager to use their training to improve their own rice farms, thus contributing substantially to nation building through ensuring food security in the region.

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<sup>30</sup>Opt cit

<sup>31</sup>Oral Interview with Mary Nme, 65+ years, Calabar, Cross River State, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 2019.

<sup>32</sup>World Bank report Stepping Stone Nigeria; the Niger Delta: A case of poverty amongst plenty in [www.steppingstonesnigeria.org.deltastatistics](http://www.steppingstonesnigeria.org.deltastatistics) accessed January 25<sup>th</sup> 1950s

<sup>33</sup>Oral interview with N. Usolor, 72, Ogoni, 23<sup>th</sup> August, 2019