



BABATUNDE, ABUSO

Gender-based Violence in Contemporary Nigeria

Essays in Honour of
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Chapter 11:	Environmental Insecurity and Women Traditional Livelihoods in Nigeria's Niger Delta – <i>Abosede Oinowumi Babatunde</i>	174
Chapter 12:	Managing Difficult Widowhood Situations in Igboiland: The Experiences of Healing Hearts Widows Support Foundation Incorporated – <i>Gozie C. Udemezue</i>	194
Chapter 13:	Gender-based Violence Against Older Women in Nigeria: A Hidden Reality – <i>Friday Asiazabor Eboiyehi</i>	205
Chapter 14:	When Spouses Kill the Past and the Future – <i>Tenniope Abimbola Olajifa</i>	243
Chapter 15:	Domestic Violence Against Men and the Imperative of a Gendered Home in 21st-Century Nigeria – <i>Leke Oke</i>	257
Chapter 16:	Abused Men in an Intimate Relationship: Unrecognised Victims in Nigeria – <i>Friday Asiazabor Eboiyehi and Caroline Okundi Muoghalu</i>	278
Chapter 17:	Discourse and Counter-Discourse on "Domestic Violence": Emir Muhammad Saniusi II <i>Versus</i> Kano <i>Ulama</i> – <i>Kabiru Haruna Isa</i>	294
Chapter 18:	An Explanation of the Jos Crisis as "Men's war" and "Women's woes" – <i>Doyin Olaseyi Omiluyi</i>	306
Chapter 19:	Enforcement of Women's Socio-Economic Rights as Precursor to Combating Gender-based Violence (GBV) in Nigeria – <i>Ekundayo Babatunde</i>	327
Chapter 20:	Breaking the Cycle of Sexual Violence as a Strategy of Warfare – <i>Onolade Olomola</i>	353
Chapter 21:	A Cry for Justice: Eliminating the Complexities in Prosecuting Rape Cases in Nigeria – <i>Alero Akeredolu</i>	380

Chapter 22:	The Federation of Muslim Women Association in Nigeria and Peacebuilding in Kaduna State, Nigeria, 1999-2012 – <i>Jacob Kehinde Ayantayo and Taiwo Philip Orebiyi</i>	398
Chapter 23:	The Invincible Invisibles: Rethinking the Democracy, Gender and Peacebuilding Trilogy – <i>Obi Ndifon Neji</i>	415
Chapter 24:	Gender Dimension of Boko Haram Insurgency: The Instrumental Use of Female Suicide Bombers in Soft Target Attacks in Kano Metropolis – <i>Abdullahi Hamisu Shetia</i>	434
Chapter 25:	Beyond Rights and Responsibilities: Articulation of Deficits in Social Citizenship of Academic Women in Nigerian Universities – <i>Adepeju Olatide Aderogba-Ori</i>	446
Chapter 26:	Mainstreaming Gender in Nigeria's Higher Education: Strategies and Outcomes – <i>Stella Odehinde</i>	465
Chapter 27:	Struggles for Gender Empowerment: An Activist Perspective – <i>Comrade Mashood Erubani</i>	482
Index		497

Environmental Insecurity and Women Traditional Livelihoods in Nigeria's Niger Delta

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Studies have shown that oil exploration and production have been the single most important cause of environmental degradation in Nigeria's Niger Delta.¹ However, these studies have focused limited attention on the gender dimension of the environmental conflict which has serious implications for women in the Niger Delta.² This study attempts to fill this gap by examining the effect of oil-related environmental insecurity on the traditional livelihood of the local women in the Niger Delta.

The point of departure of the study is that women play a major role in the sustenance of the family through farming, fishing and trading in

1. C. Obi, Globalization in Nigeria's Oil Industry Implications for Local Politics, 2004. In A. A. B. Adigun, L. Diamond, and E. Onwudiwe Eds. *Nigeria's Struggle for Democracy and Good Governance*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press; Orubu *et al.*, 2004; Iwayemi, 2006; E.E. Osaghae, A. Ikelegbe, O.O. Olatimoye, S.I. Okhonna, 2011. *Youth Militias: Self Determination and Resource Control Struggles in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria*. Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa. Dakar, Senegal.
2. T.E. Turner and L.S. Brownhill, Why Women are at War with Chevron: Nigerian Subsistence Struggles against the International Oil Industry. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 2004, Vol. 39, pp. 63; W.N. Kanu, Gender Disparity in Agriculture Production: Implication for Sustainable Food Security in Imo State. Ph.D. thesis. Department of Sociology. Imo State University, Owerri, 2012.

agriculture, fishery and other goods.³ Women also play a dominant role in food production, processing and storage. Oil-related environmental crisis threatens these activities in the Niger Delta. The violent communal conflict results in the maiming and killing of innocent people, including women and children.⁴ The Niger Delta people, particularly the women are also confronted with widespread and unchecked human rights violations from the government and multinational oil companies' security forces. The failure of the Nigerian government and the multinational oil companies to comprehensively address the environmental challenges of the Niger Delta, and in particular the plight of the women, is a serious cause for concern.

Environmental Crises and the Challenges to Women's Livelihoods in the Oil-Bearing Niger Delta Communities

Before the advent of oil exploitation, the rural economy of the oil producing areas is based on fishing and occasional farming and these generally provide the means of sustenance for the people. Majority of the people, including the women depended largely on fishing, fish farming, shellfish harvesting or fish trading for their livelihoods. While some of the people were full-time fisherfolks, others were farmers or traders who supplemented their diets or incomes with occasional fishing. Field data indicated that about 80 percent of the sampled population engaged in fishing in inland rivers as well as offshore for both income and food. Thus, most fishing is carried out on a small-scale basis by fishermen and women in their wooden canoes and speedboat using mostly traditional methods.

However, oil industry activities have led to the depletion in the population of aquatic animals, and thwart the growth of food crop, timber and non-timber forest product. The rivers and creeks that used to boast

3. Kanu, 2012.
4. C. Ukeje, Youths Violence and the Collapse of Public Order in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. *Africa Development*, 2001, Vol. XXVI, No. 1 and 2; T.A. Imobigbe, Conflict in the Niger Delta. A Unique Case or a Model for Future Conflicts in other Oil Producing Countries? In Rudolf Traub-Metz. Ed. *Oil Policy in the Gulf of Guinea: Security and Conflict, Economic Growth, Social Development*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2004.

of different species of fishes have been polluted by oil spills.⁵ As Okonta and Douglas rightly observed, oil spills and gas flaring can destroy whole fishing communities, reducing vital fishery resources, destroying fishing implements and terrestrial animals.⁶ Also, the once fertile soil of the oil-bearing areas that sprouted robust crops leading to bountiful harvests have become famished and destroyed by incessant oil spillage and gas flaring.

While the negative externalities of oil exploitation affected all the people in the Niger Delta, women in particular have suffered more from the oil-induced environmental degradation in the region. In the Niger Delta, women play a significant role in the agricultural labour force and represent a vital resource in food crop production. The women have the major responsibility for generating food through farming, fishing and trading. They are also responsible for providing other necessities for the survival needs of their communities. As Oloade rightly points out, the Niger Delta women perform certain economic responsibilities within the family as wives, mothers, farmers and breadwinners.⁷ They are the principal care-givers for the children and the aged.⁸ Even though they are food producers, harvesters and cook, they are also expected to function as wage-earners. Since most of them are illiterate and therefore, unemployed outside the home, their major source of livelihood is subsistence farming because they comprise 60 to 80 percent of the agricultural labour force and account for 90 percent of family food supply. However, the women can no longer effectively perform their traditional role as a result of diminishing productivity and viability of local economies arising from oil-related negative externalities. They are confronted with the lack of financial capacity to afford feeding, education for their children and medical treatment among other basic needs.

5. J. Vidal, Shell Oil Spills in the Niger Delta: Nowhere and No One Has Escaped. *The Guardian*, 3 August, 2011.
6. I. Okonta, and O. Douglas, *Where Cultures Feasts: Forty Years of Shell in the Niger Delta*. Benin: ERA/FOEN, 2001.
7. O. Oloade, Women of the Delta: Their Lives as Victims. *The Nation*, Vol. 04, No. 01219, November 21, 2009, p. 29.
8. E.J. Okon, "Women and the Niger Delta struggle," In R. Aduche Wokocha (ed). *Development Right Issues in The Niger Delta*. Schaleworths Centre for Democracy and Development, 2002, pp 66-73; N. Sudarkasa, "The 'Status of Women' in Indigenous African Societies," in Andrea Cornwall (ed.), *Reading Gender in Africa*. Indiana: James Currey, 2005, pp. 25-31.

Drawing on available data, a group of independent environmental and oil experts visiting the Niger Delta in 2006 put the figure for oil spills, onshore and offshore, at 9 to 13 million barrels of oil over the past 50 years.⁹ The World Bank attributed the causes of the incessant oil spills in the Niger Delta to the corrosion of oil pipes, poor maintenance of infrastructure, spills or leaks during processing at refineries, human error and a consequence of deliberate vandalism or theft of oil.¹⁰

However, in recent times, the oil companies increasingly maintain that the majority of oil spills are caused by sabotage and not by their poor infrastructure or operational problems. The multinational claim of criminal sabotage is perceived as a tactic adopted by the oil companies to dodge their responsibility to ensure the proper maintenance of their infrastructure and also clean up spills. Such a claim will enable the oil companies to avoid paying compensation to the affected communities because Nigerian law does not require companies to pay compensation when environmental damage is the result of sabotage or vandalism.¹¹

Indeed, oil spillage constitutes the greatest havoc to fishing operations, and this spill can kill large number of fish in a small area.¹² The destruction of fishing nets and boats by oil spillage is a form of material deprivation for which damage the people are not adequately compensated.¹³ The damage to fisheries is widely acknowledged in the literature as one of the major negative externalities from the oil industry.¹⁴

9. Amnesty International, 2009.
10. World Bank, Nigeria Poverty in the midst of Plenty: The Challenges of Growth with inclusion. UN. May 31 Report No. 14733, 1996.
11. S. Pegg, and N. Zabbey, Oil and Water: The Bodo Spills and the Destruction of Traditional Livelihood Structures in the Niger Delta. *Oxford University Press and Community Development Journal*, 2013.
12. Human Rights Watch, *The Price of Oil: Corporate Responsibility and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria's Oil Producing communities*. London: HRW, 1999.
13. World Bank, World Development Report. Washington D.C., 2000/2001.
14. I.A. Eteng, The Nigeria State, Oil exploitation and Community Interest: Issues and Perspectives. University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria, 1997; F.O.N. Robert, *Managing the Minorities and Development Problems in Nigerian Federalism: The OMPADEC Initiatives*. NISER Monograph Series No. 11, 1998; HRW, 1999; C.O. Ikporukpo, Towards the Development of the Niger Delta Region. In S.I. Abumere and S. Adedoyin. Eds. *Development Policy and Analysis, Development Policy Centre*, Ibadan, 2001; G. Onosode, *Environmental Issues and the Challenges*

Since the women engage in inshore fishing and shellfish gathering, they are more affected than the men who have access to the open seas and can go further into the deep seas for offshore fishing. The small number of fishermen who could afford motorised fishing boats and which were not damaged by the oil spills could travel much further distances into the sea to search for fish, albeit at increased costs and diminished profits.¹⁵

According to the International Petroleum Industry Environmental Conservation Association (IPIECA), the direct effects of oil on inshore shellfish beds, and fish and shellfish in aquaculture units are of particular concern. At the greatest risk of direct effects (death or tainting) are inshore shellfish beds, and fish and shellfish in aquaculture units where there is a greater potential for direct contamination by oil. There is evidence that wild fish are able to detect and avoid oil-contaminated waters, but captive fish and shellfish are unable to swim away into unpolluted areas.¹⁶ The collection of shellfish, unlike traditional fishing is often done by women, who gather oysters and periwinkles from the streams and mangroves. The women in the sampled communities highlighted many cases in which oil spills had killed shellfish in significant numbers. In Nembe community, Bayelsa state, for instance, women interviewed claimed that shellfish which had been common in the mangroves and on which they relied, both for sale and for food, are disappearing because of the pollution arising from incessant oil spills and thus undermined access to protein for the community.

In addition, women in the FGD session in Brass community, Bayelsa narrated that they had to travel far in their fishing canoes to harvest periwinkles in neighbouring Rivers state so that they could sell to sustain their families. On the same note, one of the women leaders in Ayetoro community, Ilafe, complained that the shrimps and crabs that they

of the Niger Delta: Perspectives from the Niger Delta. Environmental Survey Process, Yaba: The CIBN Press Limited, 2003; Orubu *et al.*, International Crisis Group ICG, 2004; *Fuelling the Niger Delta Crisis*. Africa Report No. 118-128.

15. Pegg and Zabney *op. cit.*

16. Amnesty International, "Bad Information: Oil Spill Investigations in the Niger Delta". Amnesty International Publications, London: United Kingdom, 2013, www.amnesty.org.

harvested were affected by oil spills and could not be sold, and attempts to make the shrimps and crabs edible by smoking them was disastrous. As a result, it was not possible to sell them in the market. This resulted in huge economic loss to her. Another woman leader in the oil bearing community in Awoye, Ilafe, narrated that before the oil spills, she used to collect six bags of periwinkles a day from the creeks, which she sold at the Igbokoda market to sustain her family.

In other instances, respondents narrated how an oil spill from a high-pressure pipeline belonging to one of the oil companies, Shell in Ogba community, Bayelsa spread into many fish ponds and killed fish and shellfish on which the community relied for livelihood and food. Many of the affected community women in the FGD sessions lamented about the havoc that oil spillage caused on their sources of livelihood in the short- and medium-term.

Oil spills on land destroy crops and damage the quality and productivity of soil that communities use for farming. The farms, which used to support the whole community were destroyed because food crops such as cassava and yams were full of crude. When oil spills occur on agricultural land, they are usually devastating on crops in the ground which rarely survive. Fires associated with oil spills often increase the spread of the damage. However, the people are not adequately compensated for the resultant losses of crops as a result of oil spills and associated fires. The pollution of farmlands is not attributed to oil spills alone and these other pollutants have undermined long-term recovery potential for the Niger Delta. The construction of access roads has resulted in deforestation and has frequently involved cutting through the Niger Delta's mangrove forests, which are an important fish breeding ground.¹⁷

These longer-term impacts are rarely considered in compensation deals. Rather, people are compensated for the loss of the crop in the ground and not the long-term reduction in agricultural productivity.¹⁸ Staggering under economic impacts, poor health and broken promises,

17. *Ibid.*

18. I.S. Ibaba, *Environmental Protection Laws and Sustainable Development in the Niger Delta*, *Africana*, June, 2010.

communities have little recourse under the Nigerian legal system. They are afraid to sue for clean-up and compensation because history has shown that the oil companies will use their huge financial resources to win a case.¹⁹ The recourse to the Nigerian courts to seek redress has been confronted with a range of practical and legal obstacles partly because of the weak environmental law and regulation. The judiciary in Nigeria has generally taken a conservative approach to oil industry cases, tending to weigh the import of oil revenue to the Nigerian economy over individual inconvenience or environmental sustainability.²⁰

The devastation arising from oil spillage led to the search by many fisher folks for alternative means of livelihood in the form of harvesting dying mangrove trees to sell for firewood. Others resort to alternative work as guards or construction labourers for the oil companies or migrate to the urban centres. However Field Observation showed that some of the local men were provided with menial jobs at the oil platforms; hired to work in oil dredging, laying of oil pipes, security guard, and so on, while others migrate to the urban centres. As Omorodion points out, women's sexuality is exploited and it forms the basis of female economic power.²¹ The destruction of women's economic livelihood has made many grassroots women to become unemployed, confined to domestic servitude, forced into prostitution, among others. Some of the women in the FGD sessions claimed that they had to resort to doing menial jobs for the oil companies at a wage of ₦500 (\$3) per day. Therefore, observation data showed that many women in these oil-bearing communities engaged in prostitution, and other social vices as a means of livelihood or survival strategy. The informants in the sampled communities claimed they are forced into prostitution as a means of gaining financial support to pay for their education and cater for themselves.

In this light, the oil companies are accused of desecration of the cultural and moral values of the local communities. Oil workers and local men use the income generated from oil to purchase female sexuality in terms of sexual partners thereby encouraging the 'commodification' of women, since they are seen in terms of their sexuality. Apart from this humiliation, the security personnel sent to keep peace in the area during armed conflict treat the women as spoils of war, raping them and looting their properties.²² This situation has created a large commercial sex market in the region with all the associated health and social problems. The long-term implication is high vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus and Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS). In the reckoning of UNDP report on the Niger Delta, the Niger Delta region has the highest rate of HIV/AIDS prevalence in Nigeria.²³

The vulnerability of the women to sexual exploitation has not improved in subsequent years. Incidences of degrading and inhuman treatment of prostitutes by expatriate oil workers were reported. Children sired by expatriate oil workers are frequently abandoned. It is in this light that Ingwe et al argue that overwhelming poverty compels Delta girls/women to succumb to human traffickers for sex work, among other modern slavery methods arising from the violation of their rights by the government in complicity with the multinational oil companies.²⁴

Gendering of economic activities in the oil-bearing communities also perpetuates gender inequality.²⁵ Women's lack of access to land ownership limits their economic emancipation, autonomy and empowerment. Land distribution and ownership, and the invisibility of female economic activities arising from oil-related activities by the oil multinationals are perceived as modern patriarchal structures and process aimed at subjugating and delaying the emancipation of women as equal

19. UNDP, 2006.

20. J. G. Frynas, "Legal Change in Africa: Evidence from Oil-related Litigation in Nigeria", *Journal of African Law*, 1999, 2001, Vol. 43, No. 2 (1999), pp. 121-150; J. G. Frynas, "Problems of Access to Courts in Nigeria: Results of a Survey of Legal Practitioners", *Social and Legal Studies*, Sage, 2001.

21. F. I. Omorodion, "The Impact of Petroleum Refinery on the Economic Livelihoods of Women in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria", *Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, Issue 6, 2004.

22. G. Azubike, *The Niger Delta: Counting their Losses*, *Newswatch*, Vol. 48, No. 10, September, 2008, p. 28.

23. UNDP, 2006.

24. R. Ingwe, W. A. Mboio and Ude U. Ugwu, *Transnational Crime, Human Rights Violation and Human Trafficking in Nigeria's Oil-Rich Niger Delta*, *Romanian Journal of Society and Politics*, 2012.

25. A. J. Tickner, *Gendering World Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, p. 48.

partners in the society.²⁶ The direct consequences on the women include rising incidence of female prostitution, teenage pregnancy and broken homes. This approach is in tune with the practice of omitting women in development plan, making women an insignificant variable through provision of irrelevant women-centred activities complementing complementing male-oriented development.²⁷

The food, water, and cultural identity of many local peoples are closely related to the delta ecosystem. The rivers and streams are used for drinking, bathing, fishing, harvesting, and fermenting of food such as cassava. This implies that oil in water not only damages fisheries, but also contaminates ground water that people use for drinking and other domestic purposes. As Human Rights Watch observes, the incursion of salt water into freshwater is highly damaging to fisheries, and once saltwater enters freshwater, it is no longer usable for drinking or other domestic purposes.²⁸ In particular, the UNDP stated that the implication of oil-induced pollution on the food source in the Niger Delta is frightening, given that human health is tied to the web of food.²⁹

The people wash in the same water shimmering with a layer of crude because the government has not provided adequate alternative source of water.³⁰ Although the oil companies and government have engaged in development projects to help communities construct water and sanitation facilities, some of these development projects have been criticised by local and international organisations as inadequate and poorly executed.³¹ The borehole provided by development commission

(NDDC) in many of the oil-bearing communities is not potable. Also, the oil companies provided the communities with water tanks on a short-term basis however, it was not adequate to cater for the water need of locals, forcing them to still use the polluted groundwater for washing. Spills have access to such alternative and in most cases, only people in the immediate vicinity of an oil enjoy water supplies. People whose water is contaminated by waste materials, or who live downstream of oil spills, often do not have access to alternative sources of clean water.

In the household, women assist in harvesting the crops and processing food such as cassava into garri and smoking the fish. The oil in the fish and cassava expose the women to further pollution, complicating their health challenges. It is in this context that Environmental Rights Actions states that oil pollution remains the biggest challenge to the economic survival of women and children.³² In fact, the World Bank reports that health-wise, women and children in the oil producing areas are more susceptible to diseases than men.³³ Death rate among children is extremely high when the air, sea, water and farmland are polluted, as there is bound to be an outbreak of diseases.

Government's obligation to protect the right to health requires it to investigate and monitor the possible health impacts of oil pollution, considering the communities' concerns about the risks that it poses for their physical and mental health. The failure of the government and the companies to take the concerns of the communities seriously and take steps to ensure independent investigation into the health impacts of oil pollution is incomprehensible. Evidently, the oil producing areas do not have access to quality healthcare services despite the health hazard associated with oil exploitation. The oil-induced health situation in the Niger Delta is complicated by the failure of the government to provide adequate and effective services and water and sanitation facilities for

26. F.I. Omorodion, "The Impact of Petroleum Refinery on the Economic Livelihoods of Women in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria," *Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* Issue 6, 2004.

27. S.E. Charlton, "Development as History and Process", in N. Visvanathan, L. Duggan, L. Nisonoff, and Wiegiersma (eds.), *The Women, Gender and Development Reader*, Halifax, Canada: Fernwood Publishing Ltd., 1997; Visvanathan, N., Duggan, L., Nisonoff, L. and Wiegiersma, *The Women, Gender and Development Reader*, Halifax, Canada: Fernwood Publishing Ltd., 1997.

28. Human rights Watch, 1999.

29. UNDP, 2006.

30. Ibid.

31. Constitutional Rights Project, *Land, Oil and Human Rights in Nigeria's Delta Region*, Lagos: CRP, 1999; HRW, 1999, Human Rights Watch, *The Niger Delta: No Democratic Dividend*, New York: HRW, Vol. 14, No. 7, October 2002.

32. Environmental Rights Action ERA, Nigeria: Oil Pollution, Politics and Policy, Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria and Oilwatch Africa, October 2012.

33. World Bank, 1996.

the people. The visible lack of basic infrastructural facilities, particularly healthcare amenities, was aptly captured in the statement of respondents for the FGDs in the sampled communities, who alleged that there is no good hospital to give quality healthcare to the communities and the people depended on patent medicine sellers in their community for medical treatment, and if the ailment is very serious, they would travel to the urban centres for treatment.

Although both men and women are adversely affected by oil-induced pollution, women are marginalised in terms of compensation. The women in the sampled communities stated that they do not have a voice and find it difficult to make a claim. This implies that women are powerless to compel the oil multinationals to compensate them for the adverse effect of oil pollution on their livelihoods and health. Many of the women interviewed in the sampled communities lamented the fact that the government and the oil companies continue to refuse to pay compensation to or discuss the issue with grassroots women of the Niger Delta even though they bear the greater brunt of the environmental problems of the region. Women have had to rely on their male counterparts who are the community leaders and representatives to bargain with the oil companies. The voicelessness and powerlessness of the women of the Niger Delta is especially disheartening given that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights encapsulates the rights of both men and women without any discrimination.³⁴ Moreover, the oil companies frequently fail to conduct a full assessment of the damage caused to individual property, and the overall "package" agreed to by the community leaders is often not enough to repair all individual properties.³⁵ As a result, the damage done to individuals can be lost in the course of these negotiations, and more powerful members of the community may benefit at the expense of the more vulnerable members, particularly the women. The informal compensation system can place women at a particular disadvantage.

Also, the indigenous culture and the customary laws in Niger Delta and the other regions of Nigeria do not recognise the right of women to own land. In most cases, women are tenants who cultivate small plots

of land for food crop planting to feed their family and the remaining for sale in the market. Some of the oil companies, particularly Shell, do not pay compensation when a landlord cannot be identified and landlords also usually do not pay those who own properties in their land.³⁶ As such, individual farmers affected by oil spills are marginalised in the payment of compensation because they are not recognised as landlord. Women are therefore, completely schemed out of any compensation for damage to their food crop farms. This can cause untold hardship for women, particularly widows. These, indeed, are glaring manifestations of the denial of rights of the women.³⁷ This position of subordination, lack of viable opportunities as well as their exclusion from decision making, make them more vulnerable to poverty. Arising from this, it is imperative that the oil companies independently respect such occupiers' or tenants' rights and effect fair and adequate compensation payments.

In the Niger Delta, access to clean-up contracts is often seen as one way of gaining access to at least a little oil wealth even though poor practice in the award of compensation and contracts has prevented the people from getting their full entitlements.³⁸ The men comprising the traditional rulers, community leaders and other elite in the oil-bearing areas benefit from contract licence to bid and provide the oil companies with personnel, goods and oil-related services. However, women are disadvantaged in the award of contracts by the oil companies because most of the contracts are awarded to men. It would seem that women are considered more suitable for menial jobs. Indeed, gender was an issue in job negotiations with the oil companies, because women were hardly considered in job negotiation, contracting and compensation payments.

Gas flaring has also become another major pollutant of the local oil-bearing communities. Gas is a by-product of oil and in Nigeria most of it is burnt as waste. The burning of this "associated gas" has long been acknowledged as extremely wasteful and environmentally damaging. Amnesty International notes that there are over 200 such continuous

34. Pegg and Zabney, 2013.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. J. Power, *The Niger Delta: Using women to get rid of poverty*. Punch, Sunday, 2006, p. 2.

38. Osaghae, *et al.*, 2011.

flares burning across the Niger Delta.³⁹ Gas pollutants can affect communities within 30km of the flare and has a huge destructive impact on agriculture, due to acid rain. Although the government has announced various deadlines for the cessation of flaring, each deadline has passed and flaring continues because of the lack of political will to enforce deadlines to stopping gas flaring.

Flaring which continue for 24 hours a day in many areas, creates noise pollution, heat and local communities who are in proximity to the flares live with permanent light. Gas flaring also makes the rivers uninhabitable for aquatic animals. In Nembe community, Bayelsa state, the respondents for the FGDS revealed that gas flaring affected the health of many people, particularly the children. Many were taken to the hospital to be treated of ailments related to gas flaring. This is in consonance with the assertion of Naidoo, who observes that gas flaring has led to health problem and the children suffer respiratory problems, skin rashes and eye irritations. Other health risks include bronchitis, silicosis, sulphur poisoning of the blood, and cardiac complications. Extreme long-term exposure can predispose one to, or cause, skin cancer because gas flaring releases "nitrogen oxides and other substances such as benzene, toluene and xylene which are known to cause cancers.⁴⁰ Gas flaring can also reduce crop yield by 45 percent within 600 metres of gas flare site.⁴¹ The nitrogen and sulphur oxides also mix with atmospheric moisture to send down acid rains, leading to devastating agriculture yields.⁴²

Moreover, in another community in Brass, Bayelsa state, the women interviewed claimed that pregnant women among them had to leave the area because of exhaustion they relate to the gas flares. The claim of the respondent was collaborated by Amnesty International when it stated that although there is no direct evidence of impacts of gas flares on

pregnant women, they are more likely to be vulnerable to any airborne contaminants during this period and exposures to oil-related contamination have been shown to be linked to maternal outcomes such as spontaneous abortion.⁴³ However, the oil companies allege that claims of negative health impacts were not supported by any medical statistics because the health screening of workers living in the vicinity of flares did not disclose any abnormal results to support the claim.⁴⁴ The claim of the oil companies is spurious considering the level of coverage in Nigerian and international media on the effect of gas flaring on the people in the oil-bearing communities of the Niger Delta.

In this light, the World Bank points out that poverty in the Niger Delta region is multi-faceted and encompasses material deprivation, low levels of education and health, vulnerability and exposure to risk, and voicelessness and powerlessness.⁴⁵ Oil pollution in the Niger Delta has made the people vulnerable and exposed to risks which continue to dispossess them of their rights and undermine their security.⁴⁶ As a result of the Nigerian government's negligence, the transnational corporations directly impact the human rights of their local host communities.⁴⁷

The women are more vulnerable to the human rights violations and human insecurity arising from their marginalisation in terms of access to land, traditional livelihood, compensation, armed violence and the additional burden placed on them to care for the health challenges of children affected by oil-induced pollution, and so on.

In spite of the fact that the oil industries in the Niger Delta are operating in a relatively densely populated area characterised by high levels of poverty and vulnerability, successive Nigerian governments have failed in their responsibility to ensure the protection of the human rights and security of the Niger Delta people, particularly the women since the last 50 years that the multinational oil companies have been operating the region.

39. Amnesty International, 2009.

40. J. Naidoo, *Lords of the Niger Delta: The Shell Legacy of Profit before People*. Dally Maverick, South, Africa, 25 February 2014.

41. A.T. Salau, *Environmental Crisis and Development in Nigeria*. Inaugural Lecture, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria, 1993.

42. P. Middleton and S.L. Rhodes, "Acid rain and drinking water degradation", *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment*, Vol 4, No. 1, March 1984.

43. Amnesty International, 2009.

44. Fynas, 2000.

45. World Bank, 2001.

46. World Bank, 2006. Poverty Net (<http://web.worldbank.org>)

47. J.G. Fynas, *Oil in Nigeria: Conflict and Litigation between Oil Companies and Village Communities*. Transaction Publishers, 2000, p. 97.

The complexity of the Niger Delta is too frequently cited as an excuse for the failure to take action in line with international best practice and standards to prevent and address pollution and environmental damage and protect the human rights of communities affected by oil operations. There is no gainsaying the fact that the Niger Delta is a complex operating environment, characterised by conflicts within and between communities, mostly over claims to benefits from oil operation, conflict between the communities and the oil companies and conflict between armed groups and the oil companies and Nigerian security forces.⁴⁸ However, the crisis that has bedevilled the Niger Delta region since the 1990s has been closely associated with the environmental question.⁴⁹ In the same vein, the World Bank opines that the current compensation programme aggravates community relations in the oil-bearing areas of the Niger Delta because of the lack of transparency in the payments regarding who the companies pay compensation to, the basis on which the amount is calculated, and how individual or communal compensation is divided.⁵⁰ Therefore, most of the oil-bearing communities have become deeply suspicious of anyone associated with the oil companies, and often demand payments before allowing access to sites.

The belief of the people is that the oil companies do not consider themselves accountable to the local people. Resentment of their marginalisation in contrast to the value of the oil reserves has resulted in clashes in the oil company personnel, federal police and military forces. Such conflicts are also a result of competition for employment opportunities in the oil companies and over land where oil wells are located. The youth of the oil-bearing areas are at the centre of these conflicts. The incessant violent conflict and youth militancy in the region also complicate the environmental problem through the destruction of infrastructure, settlements, fishing grounds, farmlands and lives. The youth radicalised by years of unfulfilled government's promises and their inability to find gainful employment have resorted to violence and

armed struggle.⁵¹ Also, hostage-taking, kidnapping of oil personnel and oil bunkering are tactics adopted by the youth to exert more payment from the oil multinationals because of the lack of transparency in the payment of compensation.⁵²

In the ensuing situation of crises, women bear the negative impact of the violent conflict. The human cost of conflicts are high and are borne principally by the civilian population, particularly women and children frequently viewed as targets by warring parties and criminal gangs. During the conflicts with the oil companies and the Nigerian government, women are subjected to all kinds of violence including sexual violence such as rape, physical violence such as beatings, maiming, murder, and destruction of properties.⁵³ In some cases, the women may lose their husbands and sons in the violent conflict that have engulfed the Niger Delta region. As a result, they are confronted with the task of assuming responsibilities as heads of households. Kidnapping of children increases their agonies and indirectly affects the women's level of productivity. Moreover, women may also become victims of kidnapping and hostage taking by youth militants. However, they have not been able to respond with violence like their male counterparts.⁵⁴ Niger Delta women suffer human rights abuses for which justice is denied because the agents of government who are the perpetrators of the abuses cannot be subjected to the rule of law. It is quite glaring that the government lack the political will to abide by Article 13 of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women such 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 equality of men and women.

The failure of the government was made obvious by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) in the landmark ruling on Ogoniland. The report notes that the oil multinationals had failed to maintain its facilities causing numerous avoidable spills in the proximity of villages and that the resulting contamination of water, soil

48. Imobigbe, 2004.

49. C.O. Orubu, Compensating for trampled surface rights in the Nigeria Petroleum Industry: Suggestion for a sustainable livelihood approach. *The Nigerian Economic and Financial Review*, 2001, Vol. 6, No. 1.

50. World Bank, 2001.

51. Ukeje, 2001.

52. Osaghae, *et al.* 2011.

53. Azubuike, 2008.

54. *Ibid.*

and air had serious short- and long-term health impacts and that it would take a lifetime or about 30 years at the least to clean up the devastation on the Ogoniland. The Ogoniland as well as other Niger Delta oil-producing areas remains polluted and the human rights violations detailed by the African Commission persist. The consequences of this inaction of the part of the Nigerian government is that land alienation, environmental displacements and erosion of livelihoods of the people, particularly the most vulnerable groups such as the women become a persistent features of the Niger Delta region.

Despite the social mores of a predominantly patriarchal society, and the socio-economic difficulties resulting from the oil industry, women in many communities have been very effective in voicing the demands of their communities to the oil companies and government. The women have resorted to mild protests to express their grievances against the government and the oil multinationals. This is attested to by the massive non-violent protests by women from several communities in the Niger Delta states, particularly in Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers states since the 1984 Ogharefe Women's Protest against US Pan Ocean Company.⁵⁵ However, this peaceful demonstration by the women has not brought about any significant changes in ameliorating their deplorable situation. Rather, as Digifa notes, it has led to more instability in the area as the women are gradually becoming militant in their quest for development.⁵⁶ The tendencies towards militancy by the women was illustrated in their protestations which include the Ogharefe Women's Protest in 1984, Ekpan's Women's Uprising in 1986, the Okutukutu and Etege Women Protest in 1991, the Obunagha community protest in 1992 and the

Escravos Episode 2002 among others. In each of the protests, the women's major demand was that the oil companies and the government should make concrete efforts to improve the economic, environmental, and social conditions of the host communities.⁵⁷

However, rather than adopting a peaceful means 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 womenfolk.⁵⁸ Women have been victims' of state security force harassment and repression. The Nigerian security forces, in particular, have been accused of brutal repression of women protesters comprising mostly the elderly and nursing mothers in the Niger Delta. In most of these confrontations, the state had acted with force, deploying military men and weapons to maintain the peace. A case in point was the Odi tragedy, in which many civilians lost their lives, majority of them women and children.⁵⁹

Moreover, although state governments in the Niger Delta region have designed programmes to promote the welfare of women in the oil-bearing communities and their socio-economic empowerment through skill acquisition programmes, micro-enterprises, credit facilities, educational support, and so on, the reality depicts that such programmes have not been implemented in most of the Niger Delta states. There is no gainsaying the fact that the women of the Niger Delta are also undermined in terms of participation in the peace process in the region, even though they have played active roles in the conflict between the oil-bearing communities, the state and oil companies. The Federal government created the Niger Delta Peace and Security Strategy (PASS) in 2005 to address issues of conflict and sustainable development in the region. Emphasis was on oil theft, corporate responsibility, reconciliation,

55. C. Ukeje, From Aba to Ugborodo: Gender Identity and Alternative Discourse of Social Protest Among Women in the Oil Delta of Nigeria. CODESRIA Gender Series 3. Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa. Dakar, Senegal, 2004; Turner and Brownhill, 2004; A. Ikelegbe, Engendering Civil Society: Oil, Women Groups and Resource Conflicts in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 2005, Vol. 43, pp. 241-270.
56. W. N. Digifa, "Voice of Izon". In Babawale, T. (ed), *Urban Violence, Ethnic Militias and the Challenge of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria*, Lagos: Malthouse, 2003, pp. 121-124

57. C. Ajero, The Men Behind the Trigger in Niger Delta. *Newswatch*, Vol. 48, No. 10, September, 2008, pp. 12-19.
58. Human Right Watch, Rivers and Blood: Guns, Oil and Power in Nigeria's River State. A Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper, 2005.
59. I.O. Albert, The Odi Massacre in 1999 in the Context of the Graffiti left by the Invading Nigerian Army Ibadan: John Archers, PERS Monograph New Series No. 1, 2003; O. Ogege, The State, Multinational Oil Companies and the Dialectics of Agitations in the Niger Delta. *Paper Presented at the 7th International Conference of Nigerian Sociological Association*, November, Abuja, 2007, pp. 7-9.

illicit arms, money laundering, good governance, implementing an early warning system, and developing a disarmament strategy. However, very few women were included in the PASS committee, even though the PASS process was facilitated by a woman.⁶⁰ In addition, Nigerian government adopted the National Gender Policy which is guided by the global instrument on the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its optional Protocols. However, this policy has not been implemented in such a manner that can eliminate women dispossession and ensure gender equality and justice for the Niger Delta women.

It is therefore, imperative that the government empowers the women through skill acquisition and training, educational empowerment, environmental rejuvenation, eradication of poverty, increased representation of women in government at decision-making levels, and affirmative legislative action against laws, custom and practices which discriminate or dehumanise womanhood.

Conclusion

Oil exploitation in the oil-bearing local communities in the Niger Delta has undermined the security and development of the local women who should be seen as equal partners in the development process in the Niger Delta region. Therefore, the neglect and destruction of female economic activities and lack of provision of basic infrastructural facilities by the oil multinationals and government are deliberate attempts to destroy women's reliance and nurturing of nature for their survival, families and communities. In spite of available legislative and administrative frameworks for fostering gender-equality in Nigeria, there are still structural and cultural discriminations against women. It is vital that the government ensure adequate compensation to women for the violations of their rights and undertake a comprehensive clean-up of land and rivers damaged by oil operations.

60. I. Oruwari, "Women, Conflict and Conflict Resolution" in *Enhancing the Capacity of Women Leaders of Community Organizations towards Peace building in the Niger Delta Region*, Nigeria. Port Harcourt: CASS Publishers, 2005.

If the gender dimensions of the environmental conflict are not addressed, the multinational oil companies will continue with the wanton destruction of the environment and land of the Niger Delta with the attendant grave implication for the local people, particularly the women who are more vulnerable and affected by oil-induced negative environmental externalities.

Indeed, women should play active roles in current and future peacebuilding and conflict prevention initiatives in the Niger Delta. There should be increased participation of women in decision-making affecting their communities. This will go a long way in establishing a platform where women can voice out their grievances. At the point in history when female economic activities and emancipation become of focal interests in globalisation and the issue of development, it is only when women are empowered would the impoverishment of many African nation states, including that of Nigeria be eliminated.