

THE NIGER DELTA OIL CRISIS AND THE VICTIMISATION OF WOMEN: A SOCIO-ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

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Introduction

Women suffer great hardships in times of conflict. The women of the Niger Delta are no exception. During the conflicts with oil companies and the Nigerian government, women are subjected to all kinds of violence - sexual such as rape, physical violence such as beatings, maiming ... murder, and destruction of properties. Niger Delta women suffer unimaginable human rights abuses for which redress is unattainable because the agents of government who perpetrate the abuses cannot be subjected to the rule of law. Husbands, fathers and sons have been killed or maimed in the conflict and women have had to assume burdens of home responsibilities as heads of households.¹

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that this topic is the most paradoxical issue of the modern time. The problem of Niger Delta for more than half a century has never ceased but changes faces and clothes with passing time. As far back as 1958, the Willink Commission concerned about the regrettable situation in the region, recommended the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDB) to tackle the problems of underdevelopment,² yet nothing concrete was done. In attempt to look for a better way of getting to the heart of the problem, the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) was formed and that went moribund without success. Then the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was born since the crisis is still raging.

Again, one would think that the loud national and international outcry as a result of the 1995 execution of the renowned environmentalist and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his kinsmen by the late military dictator Sani Abacha would bring about a long-term change if not putting a halt to this age long crisis but with the state of things in that region, it seems that their extreme sacrifices for the cause of their people were in vain. Sadly enough, since then, that region has proved to be the sacrificial altar for so many men, women, youth and even children. As the above introductory quote confirms, in every unfavorable situation, women are the most victimised simply because they are the so-called 'weak sex',³ they are the wives, the mothers, the most uneducated, unemployed and the most exploited. In this sense then, it wouldn't be an overstatement to talk of the feminisation of the Niger Delta crisis. This marginality is the basis for diverse women's movements and their "engagement in struggles for justice, accommodation and fair access to benefits"⁴ as we shall see subsequently.

Why this article

On the note announcing the convocation of the 2007 Whlean Academy International symposium held in Owerri in December of the above year, it was written "today,... the area grabs headlines mainly in the form of dominating the revenue profile of Nigeria, remaining developmentally the most unjustly neglected part of the country." After reading this, with a deep sorrow in mind, I was moved to write this paper. This is because as the opening quotation rightly pointed out, within this "most unjustly" milieu, there is a group of people who bear the brunt of this injustice the most.

¹ Titi Salaam-Ogunniran, *Nigeria – Women's burdens demand socialist action*, March 7, 2007, p. 4, pp.1-5
<http://www.socialistnigeria.org/page.php?article=1222>.

² Bayelsa State, "Nigeria: Bayelsa State," <http://www.onlinenigeria.com/links/bayelsaadv.asp?blurb=204>, p. 1, pp.1-2.

³ Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250-1500*, vol. II, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002, p.185.

⁴ Augustine Ikelegbe, "Engendering civil society: Oil, women groups and resource conflicts in the Niger Delt region of Nigeria," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Cambridge: June 2005, vol. 43, p. 241.

Worse still, these sufferings pass unnoticed unless when this group protest and threaten to go naked.⁵ Even at that, as we shall see later, lips promises are made and the problem still remains. To find out who this group really is, in what ways this crisis affects them, what is their place and role within this scenario and a road-map for a better future is the aim of this article. To achieve this, we will try to analyse the following questions:

- a) How can we reconcile the paradox between the production of hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil per day with millions of dollars revenue and the shocking poverty in the ND region?
- b) How can a people who depends largely on agriculture for sustenance, be allowed to die away of hunger and starvation because of oil spillage and pollution which destroy their farmlands?
- c) Must women of the region protest or threaten striping before getting the basic infrastructure/amenities – electricity, water, education, employment for themselves, for their husbands and children which are basic human rights in other parts of the world?

Method and Theory

No one form of method or theory would be exhaustive to analyse the issue of Niger Delta region which is incredibly peripheral in justice but central in reality. For this reason, we are adopting what Kirsch and Hyland referred to as “methodological complementarity”⁶ or what Courtney Staley and Shockley-Zalabak called a “multilevel triangulation or multiple methodologies.”⁷ These are the critical and gender/feminist theories. Our reason for this double choice is because of our desperate search for the best way to arrive at a better understanding of the crisis in question and its effect on women. Explaining this point better Rychlak explained, “it is advised that a theorist try to stay within just one ground at a time, although he or she can then shift to a complementary ground to explain the same target without being inconsistent.”⁸ Then what are these theories in effect?

Critical theory

As already mentioned, we are adopting this theory proposed by the founders of the Frankfurt School of Critical theory.⁹ The group believed that modernity had brought many forms of social oppression and that the most appropriate social science is the critical analysis of causes of this oppression and exploitation.¹⁰ The main questions the critical tradition has posed in this regard were “why had the prospect of radical change in society so little popular or natural support? Why was there so little consciousness of the need for politically radical change – indeed how had that sense of need been

⁵ In Nigeria women going naked in public *en masse* is the highest act of protest which usually results to immediate action for change on the part of whoever is protested against. Women refer to this act as “sitting on a man.” See J. Van Allen, “Sitting on a Man: Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, vol. 6, 1972, p. 165, pp. 165-182; John Van Allen, “Aba riots or the Igbo women’s war? Ideology, stratification and the invisibility of women,” in N. J. Hafkin and E. G Bay (eds.), *Women in Africa*, California: Stanford University Press, 1988, pp. 59-85; Chike Dike (ed.), *The Women’s Revolt of 1929: Proceedings of a National Symposium to Mark the 60th Anniversary of the Women’s Uprising in South-Eastern Nigeria*, Lagos: Nelag, 1995 and Maria Grosz-Ngate and Omari H. Kokole (eds.), *Gendered encounters: Challenging cultural boundaries and social hierarchies in Africa*, New York: Routledge, 1997.

⁶ Irving Kirsch and Michael E. Hyland, “Complementarity and psychobiological explanation,” *American Psychologist*, vol. 49, 1994, p. 893, pp. 893-894. Also see Irving Kirsch and Michael E. Hyland, “methodological complementarity: with and without reductionism,” *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, vol. 9, 1988, pp. 5-12.

⁷ Constance Courtney Staley and Pamela Shockley-Zalabak, “Triangulation in gender research: The need for converging methodologies” in Kathryn Carter and Carole Spitzack (eds.), *Doing research on women’s communication: Perspectives on theory and method*, Norwood, New Jersey, Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1989, p. 244, pp.242-261.

⁸ Joseph F. Rychlak, “A suggested principle of complementarity for psychology: In theory, not method,” *American Psychologist*, vol. 48, 1993, p. 933, pp. 933-942.

⁹ This School is called so because of its location in Frankfurt Germany.

¹⁰ See Oliver Kozlarek, “Critical Theory and the Challenge of Globalisation,” *International Sociology*, vol. 16, 2001, pp. 607-622.

apparently eliminated from popular consciousness?”¹¹ Again these founders have insisted on a conception of critical theory as embedded in the processes of historical change, providing both analytical perspectives on the present and a lever on the future.¹² In their opinion the word ‘critique’ means not simply criticism but rather a deep examination of the conditions under which any particular form of thinking could operate.¹³ Hence, critical theory is a “human stance that has society itself as its object”¹⁴ and “dominated at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions of life.”¹⁵

In deed, critical tradition is all about the realisation of a ‘new society’ and it argues that theoretical analysis is required in order to understand why things are one way and not another. This idea is shaped by a critical engagement with or action in the society.¹⁶ In effect, critical theory is a liberating action oriented towards a positive social change. Therefore, to engage in critical analysis “is to take part in a process of world making, guided by.... a dream of a world less conditioned by misery, suffering, and the politics of deceit. It is, in short, a pragmatics of hope in an age of cynical reason.”¹⁷ As noted above, we chose this tradition because it is interested in the study of the social structure and how its organisation affects the individual persons.¹⁸ In addition, we decided to blend the above method with yet another one which serves as a straight way to the better understanding of our object of analysis – WOMEN.

Gender/feminist theory¹⁹

¹¹ Watson J. and Hill, A. *A Dictionary of Communication and Media Studies*, p. 89. Also see Michael Huspek, “Toward Normative Theories of Communication with Reference to the Frankfurt School: An Introduction,” *Communication Theory*, vol. 7, 1997, p. 269, pp. 265-276

¹² Jonathan H. Turner, *The Structure of Sociological Theory*, Fifth Edition, Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1991, p. 254

¹³ Craig Calhoun and Joseph Karaganis, “Critical Theory,” in George Ritzer and Barry Smart (eds.), *Handbook of Social theory*, London: Sage, 2003, p.180, pp. 179-200

¹⁴ Göran Therborn, “Critical Theory and the Legacy of Twentieth-Century Marxism,” in Bryan S. Turner (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, p.57, pp. 53-82

¹⁵ M. Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory” in M. J. O’Connell, *Critical Theory*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1972, p. 199, pp.188-243.

¹⁶ Craig Calhoun and Joseph Karaganis, “Critical Theory,” pp.180-181. See also Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981; Robert J. Antonio, “The Origin, Development, and Contemporary Status of Critical theory,” *Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 24, 1983, pp. 325-351; and Lawrence Grossberg, “Critical Theory and the Politics of Empirical Research” in Michael Gurevitch, Mark R. Levy, Steve M. Barkin and Edward L. Fink (eds.), *Mass Communication Review yearbook*, vol. 6, Newbury Park: Sage Publication, 1987, pp.86-106.

¹⁷ Joe L. Kincheloe and Peter L. McLaren, "Rethinking Critical Theory and Qualitative Research," in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994, p.154, pp. 138-157.

¹⁸ Joe L. Kincheloe and Peter L. McLaren, "Rethinking Critical Theory and Qualitative Research," p. 156.

¹⁹ The author of this paper did the combination of gender/feminist theory for the purpose of this analysis. In reality they are two different theories. The first deals with the distinction between the sexes in regards to roles and attitudes. For instance, men are meant to be pilots while women should be nurses. The colour pink is for baby girls while blue is for boys or the notion that women are soft and should always go for less strenuous things even in their choice of study while men are considered strong and should go for hard things. With is kind of concept, some of the authors cited here (C. Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*, London: Women’s Press, 1989; J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London: Routledge, 1990; Patricia Madoo Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge-Brantley, “Classical Feminist Social Theory,” in George Ritzer and Barry Smart (eds.), *Handbook of Social theory*, London: Sage, 2003, p. 125, pp. 125-137 and Ann Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.) argue that gender is “assigned” to the sexes from birth by the society and this affects the way men and women behave. It is this process of assigning gender that feminist theory questions. In short, the theory argues that in effect, there are many women pilots. Today men wear pink shirts and women wear blue trousers. What is needed for an equilibrium is “balanced childhood socialisation.” See Amakwe Mary John Bosco Ebere, *Factors influencing the mobility of women to leadership and management position in media industry in Nigeria*, Doctoral Dissertation, Gregorian University, Rome, 2006, pp. 22-24. Going back to our team, from the above

Following the Frankfurt tradition, this theory is strongly critical of the social and cultural structures, which subjugate women. An issue of crucial importance to this line of thought is the task of questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about women's experiences. Feminist/gender approaches to science provide for rigorous and rich analysis of human experience. Duelli Klein refers to this process as "intersubjectivity" in research arrangements, which creates a situation wherein the researcher not only shares her experiences, but also shares her research project with her participants.²⁰

This confirms what Foss and Foss meant when they argue that basic to the feminist/gender perspective in social research is the "notion that gender is a critical component of all dimensions of culture. When gender is seen as a category of analysis, it is not simply one of many variables that a researcher studies; instead, it is the major element studied."²¹ The feminist/gender perspective has a practical, activist as well as academic dimension.²² It is inherently radical because it goes "to the root" of the basics.²³ Like critical theory, the ultimate consequence of research informed by this method is social change. In contrast to other research paradigms, (which seeks simply to predict human behaviour like psychology), the feminist perspective seeks to understand human behaviour and through that understanding, to change social life.²⁴ By creating the "'right' kind of view of womanhood, and in speaking up for the ordinary woman," Liikkanen believes that feminist theory has "produced a link between womanhood and empirical women", and ultimately, through a critical empirical research, has called into question the very possibility of knowing women,"²⁵ and their struggles as we will try to do here.

Niger Delta region: The effect of the crisis.

Even though it is described by many authors as the "goose that lays Nigeria's golden egg,"²⁶ the deprivation people are experiencing in the region is alarming and should worry both the international and national consciences.

a. Poor condition of life

This is what we might call paradox number one and the analysis of the first question above. Despite living on land that yields billion dollars in oil exports annually, the people of Niger Delta still live in shocking poverty. No electricity, no good drinking water. Schools often have no roofs or

explanation, it is clear that the analysis of the life and place of Niger Delta women in regards to the oil crisis in the region will look into their gender roles as mothers and wives (gender theory) and above all as activists (feminist theory). Therefore the above combination is inevitable.

²⁰Renata Duelli Klein, "How to do what we do: Thoughts about feminist methodology," in G. Bowles & R. Duelli Klein (eds.), *Theories of Women's studies*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, p. 94.

²¹This is so because feminist communication or even social science scholars believe that "gender is a verb, created by and creating communication." For this reason, feminist theory has gone on to question the terms 'sex' and 'gender', challenging the very foundations upon which research based on these verbs is built. Feminist communication theory teaches us that to be engaged in gender research means being engaged in questions about the role of communication in the construction and accomplishment of a gender system. See Rakow, "Rethinking Gender Research in Communication," pp. 11-12; Renata Duelli Klein, "How to do what we do Thoughts about feminist methodology," p. 94.

²²P. A. Treichler, C. Kramarae and B. Stafford (eds.), *For Alma Mater: Theory and Practice in Feminist Scholarship*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985, p. 6.

²³Lana Rakow, "Rethinking Gender Research in Communication," p. 23.

²⁴H. Leslie Steeves, "Feminist Theories and Media Studies," p. 116.

²⁵Maija, Liikkanen. "The Question of Cultural Gender." in James Lull (Ed), *Culture in the Communication Age*. London: Routledge, 2001, p. 99. Also see Leslie H. Steeves, "Feminist Theories and Media Studies." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 4, 1987, pp. 95-135 and Susana Hall, "Cultural Studies and the Centre: Some Problematics and Problems," in S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (eds.), *Culture, Media & Language: Working Paper in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*, 1980, p. 38, pp. 15-47.

²⁶African Network for Environment and Economic Justice (ANEEJ), *Oil of poverty in Niger Delta*, Benin City: ANEEJ, 2004, p. ii.

books, hospitals have no equipment or windows and the villages have no sanitation. No good means of transportation either by land or sea.²⁷ This litany can go on and on.

b. Unemployment.

Who will ever believe that in an area where the third-largest oil company in world – US Chevron Texaco is operating, “exporting 450,000 barrels of crude oil per day,”²⁸ there is the highest rate of unemployment especially among the youth? Workers for the oil companies are mainly recruited from outside the region and overseas. This is paradox number two and part of the first question of this paper. According to one of the traditional rulers interviewed in 1996 by *The Times*, “about half of the population is under 20 years of age, faced with no hope of a job,”²⁹ thereby causing a long term problem of abject poverty in the region.

c. Rape and prostitution.

In a chaotic situation like that existing in the ND area, rape and prostitution are common. First of all, the angry and hungry young men who are fighting for their rights will make do with any woman around. Secondly, as we shall see below, the soldiers usually sent by the federal government to calm the rioting villagers use the women in the area as their resting place. At night, they invade private homes, terrorising residents with beatings and raping women and girls.³⁰ Thirdly, girls and young women who are looking for economic survival hang around the oil companies and keep themselves at the service of both the national and international oil workers who are believed to be ‘guys in money’. These women are given few Naira or at most few dollars at the end of every sexual meeting. It is clear then that, the staff of the multinationals are not only enjoying cheap labour but they also have cheap sex at their disposition. Worse still, most of these relationships end up with children and the women are left alone to carry the burden of bringing up these ‘fatherless babies.’ In fact, the association of Niger Delta Women for Justice (NDWJ) has been fighting for a law making it mandatory for the oil workers especially foreigners to claim their offspring and if possible the mothers of such children born out of any of the company's staff's promiscuous activities.³¹

d. Damages

► Environmental.

The environmental damage which in turn affects agriculture, the mainstay of the economy in region, has been a topic very dear to the inhabitants. Wamala explained this ecological hazard thus:

Gas flaring, a process whereby crude oil is burnt off, pollutes the Delta's rivers and streams and emits some 35 million tons of carbon dioxide and 12 million tons of methane a year, ...The construction of canals and roads, largely to service the industry, has resulted in extensive environmental degradation in the region, creating stagnant ponds of water, killing forests and flooding fields.... Every year the Delta is polluted by 2.3 billion cubic

²⁷ D'arcy Doran, “Women of Nigeria’s Delta hold 700 oil workers hostage as protests spread,” *The Independent*, London (UK): July 13, 2002, p. 14.

²⁸ Third World Network Features, “Nigerian women in oil-rich Delta Region protest,” <http://www.twinside.org.sg/title/2401.htm>, 2002, p. 1, pp.1-2

²⁹ Carl Mortished, “No longer in glorious isolation: Shell petroleum development,” *The Times*, London, July 8, 1996, p. 2, pp.1-4.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 3.

³¹ Niger Delta Women for Justice, “Declarations,” Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, 1999, p. 2, pp.1-2. <http://www.ndwj.kabissa.org/Declarations/declarations.html>

meters of oil... Shell Petroleum Development Corporationreports that 50,200 and 123,777 barrels of oil were spilled in 1998 and 1999.³²

Even despite the 1995 brutal assassination mentioned above of the frontline fighters against this danger, the owners of the land continued the fight. This is because as a result of the above frightening explanation, people in that area run the risk of not having portable drinking water, no good land to farm, no good air to breath, no good sea to fish, no forests to gather firewood because in search for straight lines for easy exploration, trees are cut down and forests destroyed. Majority of the people also have no good house to live in because of flooding and stagnation. In 1996 for instance, the people of Omadino community met with the Shell authorities and warned that oil spillage and gas flares are wrecking their environment and has done damage to their fishing and other forms of agriculture.³³

► **Sudden and disastrous deaths.**

This happens often among the youth and children. For instance, in 1998, more than 1,000 persons, including those scooping fuel from a burst pipe and farmers lost their lives in an inferno in Jesse in the region.³⁴ The disaster was followed by another one in 2000 in which about 312 persons from 11 communities were consumed by fire that resulted from petrol spillage that covered the entire creeks and waters around the region.³⁵ Indubitably, this situation has an indirect effect on women because when a man is harmed or killed, whether he is a father or husband or son, that impacts very strongly on both the social and economic life of women. This incident repeats itself every now and then and nothing is done other than attracting unproductive international and national media attention.

► **Breeding ground for criminality.**

The rate of organised and band criminality in the ND area especially among the youth increases with passing day. Some national and international commentators are right when they said that Niger Delta rebels are “product of prolonged, unbridled, ignoble exploitation.”³⁶ In this deplorable situation, one could easily predict no hope for a better way of life in the future lives of these youngsters. This is why in anger and bitterness, these young men often kidnap the workers and families of oil tycoons. Not only that, from time to time, cars and other means of transportation are hijacked, increasing incidence of pipeline vandalism are the order of the day. In short, violence has become a way of life in the region. As mentioned earlier, unemployment is the brain behind this.

► **Bribery and corruption** engineered by the multinationals are common among the chiefs and traditional rulers. In fact, it is said that “community politics is a new game for oil companies.”³⁷ Shell’s principles for instance, clearly state that the company will not involve itself in local politics, but in its increasing willingness to fill the gap left by the Nigerian government, it is potentially taking on a role of limitless proportions and huge political risks³⁸ within the villages especially with the village heads. Oil companies do publicly deny giving ransoms when staff are kidnapped, but

³² Irene Wamala, “Nigeria protests: Nigerian women take on the oil companies,” *Women & Environments International Magazine*, Toronto: Fall 2002, p. 38

³³ Carl Mortished, “No longer in glorious isolation: Shell petroleum development,” *The Times*, London, July 8, 1996, p. 1, pp.1-4.

³⁴ Teye Olori, “Environment-Nigeria: Cleaning up oilfields,” *Global Information Network*, New York, August 22, 2002, p. 1, pp.1-3.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ BBC Monitoring Africa, “Nigerian commentator says Niger-Delta rebels product of “prolonged exploitation,”” London: October 7, 2204, p. 1.

³⁷ Carl Mortished, “No longer in glorious isolation: Shell petroleum development,” *The Times*, London, July 8, 1996, p. 3, pp.1-4.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 4.

some executives have privately admitted to paying. By so doing, contributing to ravenous local bribery and corruption.³⁹ The politics of divide and rule of the colonial masters is still invoke. In most cases, this results in tribal disagreement and conflict or what we might call ‘ethnic suicide’ thus adding salt to injury.

The women of the Niger Delta

► Their role as wives, mothers and farmers

As with women in other parts of the globe, ND women retain certain economic responsibilities within the family as wives, mothers and farmers. First of all, they are the principal care-givers of their children and the aged. Even though they are the “food producers, procurers and preparers,”⁴⁰ they are also expected to be significant wage earners.⁴¹ This is because the intra-household income distribution patterns and the rise of women-headed households in Nigeria,⁴² coupled with servile poverty, forces them to take active financial role in their families. Since most of them are uneducated and therefore unemployed outside the home, their main source of income is agriculture where they “comprise 60-80 per cent of the agricultural labour force and account for 90 per cent of family food supply.”⁴³ Leith-Ross argues that “Nigerian women, because of their economic importance as mothers, farm cultivators and traders, have been rather more powerful than is generally thought.”⁴⁴ As a result of these responsibilities, the Niger Delta women are always willing to fight any unfavourable condition to the realisation of these duties, hence their struggle against degradation of any sort.

► Their struggles and protests

Chronologically, mass community protests against multinationals began with the Ogharefe women's protest in 1984 against US Pan Ocean.⁴⁵ As we shall see later, in each of the protest, the women's objectives were simple and their demands clear and right: oil companies and their god fathers must make concrete efforts to improve the economic, environmental, and social conditions of the rural communities – their hosts. In effect, they demanded that their youths and husbands be employed as a way of giving them some sense of belonging. They also requested the provisions of social amenities such as good roads, water, health care facilities and electricity supply to enhance their standard of living.⁴⁶

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Emem J. Okon, “Women and the Niger Delta struggle,” in R. Aduche Wokocha, *Development right issues in the Niger Delta*, Schaleworths Centre for Democracy and Development, 2002, p. 67, pp. 66-73.

⁴¹ Niara Sudarkasa, “The ‘Status of Women’ in Indigenous African Societies,” in Andrea Cornwall (ed.), *Reading Gender in Africa*, Indiana: James Currey, 2005, p. 27, pp.25-31.

⁴² See Patrick Kenechukwu Uchendu, *Education and the changing economic role of Nigerian women*, Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publication, 1995.

⁴³ Mary Theresa Picard, “Listening to and Learning from African Women Farmers” in Valentine Udoh James (ed.), *Women and Sustainable Development in Africa*, Westport: Praeger, 1995, p. 35. Also see C. J. Weidemann, *Agricultural extension for women farmers in Kaduna State, Nigeria*, A report to the World Bank, Washington, D. C., April 1987.

⁴⁴ S. Leith-Ross, *African women: A study of the Ibo of Nigeria*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1965, p. 21. Also see Gloria Chuku, *Igbo women and economic transformation in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900-1960*, London: Routledge, 2004.

⁴⁵ Heather Turcotte, *Beneath the oily surface: Women’s political movements against the state and oil in Nigeria*, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Toye Olori, “Environment-Nigeria: Cleaning up oilfields,” *Global Information Network*, New York, August 22, 2002, p. 2, pp. 1-3.

As already mentioned, in **1984** and **1986**,⁴⁷ women in Warri mobilised and protested against oil companies. They demanded that the companies should pay them for lands seized and pollution damage. When Pan Ocean refused to compensate the people for acquired lands use as oil fields or even pay for millions of dollars worth of crude oil it explores everyday, groups of women rose against this company and laid siege to it.⁴⁸ They halted production through dance, song and the threat of nakedness in an effort to restore their community's economic, environmental and social security.⁴⁹ After this protest, community action against the State and multinationals increased with a series of mass protests demanding economic, political and social justice.⁵⁰

That was why in **1999** the same scene repeated itself but this time against Shell. This year, to make matter worse, the Niger Delta women and their allies staged simultaneous protests in Nigeria and London against dangerous burning of natural gas by the oil companies. In Nigeria the women and allied men blocked the Shell oil stations, while in London, thirteen activists occupied Shell headquarters. They barricaded themselves in the managing director's offices and broadcasted to the outside via digital cameras, lap top computers and mobile phones.⁵¹

Then came the turn of Chevron in **2002**.⁵² This could be considered the most serious of all women uprising in the region because of the amount of international media attention it received, the long duration – 10 days and above all, the women threatened to strip⁵³ – the most natural and powerful way of getting their message across but an unthinkable gesture in the West. Led by the women of the Ijaw and Itsekiri communities, angry at the unemployment of their children and husbands, lack of infrastructure and economic empowerment by the federal government and multinational oil companies,⁵⁴ two to three hundred women occupied Chevron's exploration site. Around the same time, women from Ilaje and also some others from Ijaw and Itsekiri paralysed activities at the operational headquarters of Shell Petroleum Development Corporation (SPDC). Here again, the women asked that the multinationals should see to the electrification, foreshore walls, and housing projects in the nine host communities to improve the environmental and living conditions there.⁵⁵ To convince the women to call off the occupation, Chevron reached its usual lips

⁴⁷ Heather Turcotte, *Beneath the oily surface: Women's political movements against the state and oil in Nigeria*, p. 1. Also see Terisa Turner and M.O. Oshare, "Women's uprisings against the Nigerian oil industry," in Terisa Turner and Bryan Ferguson (eds.), *Arise! Ye Mighty People!: Gender, Class & Race in Popular Struggles*, Trenton: Africa World, 1994.

⁴⁸ Heather Turcotte, *Beneath the oily surface: Women's political movements against the state and oil in Nigeria*, 2002, 15-16, pp. 1-3, pp. 1-35. It is good to note here that Turcotte's work is a *carta magna* on the issue of women's demonstrations in the oil-producing areas of the Niger Delta State. Citing mainly Nigerian and also international authors, it is a historical anthology of all the women's protests that has ever taken place in the Eastern part of Nigeria. It also contained a detailed analysis of the causes of these riots.

Also see T. E. Turner and M. O. Oshare, "Women's uprisings against the Nigerian oil industry in the 1980s," Paper presented at the annual conference of the Canadian Association of Montreal, Canada, 1993, Online: www.uoguelph.ca/~tersatu/Counterplanning/c9.htm; Joanne Lewis, "Deadlier than male? Women, knowledge and power," *Africa*, Edinburgh, vol. 68, 1998, pp. 1-6 (see FAO library data base).

⁴⁹ See Heather Turcotte, "Slippery Security: National, International and Global Security Issues within Petroleum Production," *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, vol. 1, Winter 2002.

⁵⁰ Heather Turcotte, "Slippery Security: National, International and Global Security Issues within Petroleum Production."

⁵¹ Terisa E. Turner and Leigh Brownhill, "Climate justice and Nigerian women's gift to humanity," *Women & Environments International Magazine*, Toronto: Spring, 2007, pp. 47, pp. 47-48.

⁵² See INDYMEDIA, "One dies as women protesters lay siege to Shell, Chevron in Warri, Nigeria," Friday August 09, 2002, pp. 1-3. Online: <http://sf.indymedia.org/news>; Amnesty International, "Nigeria: Repression of women's protests in oil-producing delta region," 1 February, 2003, pp. 1-9. Online:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library> and Blessyn Okpowo and Sola Adebayo, "Itsekiri, Ijaw women seize Shell, Chevron Delta facilities," *Vanguard* (Lagos) News, August 9, 2002, pp. 1-4. Online: <http://www.waado.org/>

⁵³ Tania Branigan and John Vidal, "Women: Hands up or strip!," *The Guardian*, Manchester (UK), July 22, 2002, p.8.

⁵⁴ Third World Network Features, "Nigerian women in oil-rich Delta Region protest," <http://www.twinside.org.sg/title/2401.htm>, 2002, p. 1, pp.1-2

⁵⁵ Irene Wamala, "Nigeria protests: Nigerian women take on the oil companies," *Women & Environments International Magazine*, Toronto: Fall 2002, p. 38

agreement with the women pledging to improve sanitation, electrify villages and build schools, clinics and town halls. They also promised to employ 25 locals for five years and to build poultries and fish farms.⁵⁶ The literature so far reviewed show that these promises were not kept no wonder the women took to the site the following year.

2003: As already mentioned, after all the above protests and the never-fulfilled promises on the part of the Nigerian government and its accomplice – the multinationals, nothing changed. The condition of things in the region became worse than before. In reaction to this deplorable state, about 600 women young and old took to the oil sites one more time taking hostage of about 700 oil workers from different nationalities.⁵⁷ As were in the previous demonstrations, all they wanted was for the oil companies to give employment to their husbands, children and some of the oil riches for the development of the region most of which, as we have seen so far, have no basic amenities and infrastructure. In our opinion, things are the way they are because of the bad political system – especially the selfish and unjust control of the oil revenues on the part of the Nigerian government and the multinational companies.

The effect of the failed political economy of the ‘bigs’

► Neglect on the part of the Nigerian Government.

It is common knowledge that the protracted oil crisis in the Niger Delta region is as a result of major ethnic marginalisation.⁵⁸ This creates a situation of neglect of the region by the central governments. Also during conflicts, as many of the authors cited above, explained, the people will ask for dialogue on their poor condition of life, the government will send down troops. Women will protest armless and peacefully asking for basic rights and the government will respond with armed men who at times will wound and even kill people in order to protect the interest of the foreign companies and to make them stay at all cost. On several occasions, a non-governmental organisation, the Environmental Rights Action (ERA) called on the federal government to withdraw the soldiers deployed to guard oil flow stations and instead seek dialogue with the aggrieved communities.⁵⁹

► Exploitation on the part of the multinationals.

This could be economic, manpower or property. The drama of a people living in a land full of milk and honey but go hungry has been exhausted above. Here we can't but say that this people are undergoing "economic violence."⁶⁰ Graduates are not employed so they can't get to the top of any career in the oil companies that is why the multinationals employ only unskilled men and women who work as cleaners, messengers, drivers or guards and pay them very low. Is this not another form of slavery? Before slave trade was transatlantic but now it is inatlantic. The relationship between slaves and their masters is still the same.

► The internal war between the regional, State and federal government.

The ND has for some years been the site of major confrontation between the people who live there, the government ... and oil multinationals.⁶¹ The adage - when two elephants are fighting the grass suffers apply here. Regions and States in the area are demanding a greater control and

⁵⁶ Tania Branigan and John Vidal, "Women: Hands up or strip!," *The Guardian*, Manchester (UK), July 22, 2002, p.8.

⁵⁷ Usha Jesudasan, "Working together," *The Hindu*, Chennai: June 14, 2003, p.1, pp. 1-2.

⁵⁸ William D. Graf, *The Nigerian State: Political Economy, State class and political system in the Post-Colonial Era*, p.xiii.

⁵⁹ BBC Monitoring Africa - Political, "Nigerian: Lobby group calls on government to withdraw soldiers from oil stations," London: July 24, 2002, p. 1, pp. 1.2.

⁶⁰ Witness for Peace, "Stop the cycles of military and economic violence," http://www.witnessforpeace.org/colombia/cycles_econ_mil_violence.html

⁶¹ Human Rights Watch, *The Price of Oil*, New York, 1999, p. 1.

share of the oil wealth while the federal government has 80 per cent claim of the revenue.⁶² Above all, the 1978 Land Use Act, turned all natural resources in the region into federal government property,⁶³ with no control and ownership left for the government of the region. Under such condition, no one should expect peace because according to John Paul II of blessed memory, “there is no peace without justice.”⁶⁴ The question then is, how can this justice be achieved?

Summary

► Sincere change in the political economy of the Nigerian government and international bodies.

With the recent elections and a new president of the Republic, we think it is time for a forward-looking government to intervene and hold tripartite discussions to renegotiate the whole policy around oil and gas exploration activities in the Niger Delta region. There should exist within and among the new governmental term the “willingness to confront the untidy reality of the Nigerian political economy”⁶⁵ through critical approach. This method which Graf calls “critical political economy” does not ask how to make a given system of domination more functional or palatable, but it examines the operation of that system, exposes its beneficiaries, and – explicitly or implicitly – proposes alternatives to it.⁶⁶ Hence, it is time for a U-turn.

This is not only the duty of the Nigerian government because it is a known fact that the underdevelopment seen in the Niger Delta is as a result of right-strategical failure on the part of all the parties involved in ND issue. Therefore, there should exist an absolute interconnection of political, economic and social developments between the internal (Nigerian government) and the external (oil companies) to minimise or even dismantle the negative effects of the exploitative political system already in existence. If women threatening to go naked will move the Nigerian government and the multinationals to action, no matter how brief, will a good political, economic, social, environmental policy on the side of the Nigerian and foreign governments not do more?

► Cultivating the Culture of solidarity (COS) through women organisations

The best way of explaining this concept is by quoting what we might call a hymn to solidarity by an Indian writer. According to this author,

Solidarity helps us grow in friendship, and team work. It helps us to be selfless. Solidarity means sharing and being devoted to something bigger than ourselves. It enables us to work together in harmony.⁶⁷

But before this will happen, there should exist 'a mass consciousness or conscientisation' – mass mobilisation and mass participation. This is the only way to conscientise the masses at grassroots about their rights and to identify causes from which they do not benefit anything, whereas others do. This brings us to the topic of strong networking among different women organisations which has to be reorganised and encouraged among women themselves and the entire people of the region. This is because as seen earlier, women organisations are the most active and they often engage

⁶² Marcus Marbry, “The civilian president has a major crisis even before he’s sworn in; Oil, guns and fury in the Delta,” *Newsweek*, International Edition, New York: March 8, 1999, p.39.

⁶³ Marcus Marbry, “The civilian president has a major crisis even before he’s sworn in; Oil, guns and fury in the Delta,” p. 39.

⁶⁴ See Pope John Paul II, *In my own words*, Compiled and edited by Anthony F. Chiffolo, New York: Gramercy Books, 1998

⁶⁵ William D. Graf, *The Nigerian State: Political Economy, State class and political system in the Post-Colonial Era*, London, James Curry, 1998, p. xi.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p.xiii.

⁶⁷ Usha Jesudasan, “Working together,” *The Hindu*, Chennai: June 14, 2003, p.1, pp. 1-2.

themselves in the local economies. The different forms of peaceful protests described above were possible and successful because of networking among community and numerous grassroots women organisations within the region. Again as seen above, in 1999 COS took an international form. One of the participants in the London protest told the press that they did that in order “to show real solidarity with people in the Niger Delta rebelling against Big Oil and its private security force.”⁶⁸ Without such radical rethinking, anger will continue to build across the region and the situation will continue to be worse with passing year. Therefore, “getting women into the mainstream decision making process”⁶⁹ becomes an urgency.

► Long-term sustainable development

After all the explanations above, it is clear that the concept of sustainable development is immediacy. It was encouraging to read from Olori's article that in 2000, the Elf/Total Petroleum Nigeria said it spent more than 798.7 million Naira (about \$8 million) on community projects including education, electricity, road networks, agriculture, health and sports. Also in 2001, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) executed 641 projects worth of 9.4 billion Naira (about \$94 million) in the region.⁷⁰ Recently it was published that “some 20 local and foreign oil and gas firms, operating in the country, have contributed about \$362.24m” to the NDDC in the last four years.⁷¹ If these are not just paper projects and mere rhetoric, then there is an atom of hope. But considering the state of things in the region as we are talking, one begins to wonder whether the above claimed projects were carried out in effect. This brings us to the argument of constant monitoring/supervision and accurate/transparent accountability on the part of all involved in any project in that weeping region.

► Replace economic violence with economic independence.

We had already seen how the revenues from the ND are practically in the hands of federal government and the oil companies. These opportunities are “a function of the contradictions and dysfunctions of Nigerian political economic system itself.”⁷² Therefore, “deliberate, determined and patient counter-hegemonic work in all spheres of politics, society and the economy”⁷³ on the part of all involved is needed. In otherwards, there is the need for policy review especially in regards to the Oil and Land Acts. This is why in all the documents and declarations cited below, there is a strong reminder for economic autonomy – the right to the control and use of a fair proportion of the region's economic resources for the good of the people because “economic growth and surplus income are necessary for the alleviation of poverty and for providing and sustaining better health care, education and other living conditions”⁷⁴ in the region. Why the unjustifiable delay then?

► Revisiting the original intentions of the 1958 Willink Commission.

The above Commission was concerned about the problem of underdevelopment in the ND region. The question at this point is, after 49 years since its first move, has its intentions be

⁶⁸Terisa E. Turner and Leigh Brownhill, “Climate justice and Nigerian women's gift to humanity,” p. 47.

⁶⁹ Jereoma Thomas, “Women and the challenges of the Niger Delta” in Peter I OzO-Eson and Ukoha Ukiwo (eds), *Challenges of the Niger Delt*, Proceedings of a seminar on the Niger Delta, Centre for Advanced Social Science (CASS), PH, Rivers State, 2001, p. 17, pp.10-18.

⁷⁰ Toye Olori, “Environment-Nigeria: Cleaning up oilfields, p. 3.

⁷¹ Clara Nwachukwu, “20 companies pay \$362.24m to NDDC in 4yrs,” *Punch on the web*, November 22, 2007, p. 1, pp.1-3. <http://odili.net/news/source/2007/nov/22/410.htm>

⁷² William D. Graf, *The Nigerian State: Political Economy, State class and political system in the Post-Colonial Era*, 245

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Federal Government of Nigeria, *Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan*, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, 2006, p. 249.

respected or be of any help? If not, why? To grown it all, many ethnic groups and communities in the region through declarations and documents have been voicing out their concern over this life-long crisis. For instance, the Ogoni Bill of Rights⁷⁵ presented by this community to the government and people of Nigeria in November 1990 in which they asked among other things for economic rights in regards to the natural resources in their area. A similar document was published in 1998 – The Kaiama Declaration – by all Ijaw youth’s conference. In 1999, The Niger Delta Indigenous Women’s Conference for Women of Bayelsa State, The Egi Ethnic Coalition, The Oron People, The Warri Accord, Resolutions of the First Urhobo Economic Summit, The All Ikwerre Youths Convention, etc, issued different documents asking for the recognition of the dignity and fundamental rights of the ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta.⁷⁶ Also to calm the protesting women in 2002, Chevron signed the eight-page Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in which it promised to assist the poor villagers economically.⁷⁷ After all these, in 2006 came the *opus magnum* - “Master Plan” issued by the federal government “midwifed by NDDC in consultation with all the relevant stakeholders” which proposes integrated action towards balanced development in the ND up to the year 2020.⁷⁸ Now we think it is time for all the above documents to be revisited and proper action taken to actualise the issues raised in them. Again, an eye should be kept on the call made by 2006 Abuja Declaration for the right action to stop the excessive oil and gas exploration and production in order to minimise their devastating impact⁷⁹ in the region.

► **Organising political and social awareness workshops.** For instance, in 1999, the Niger Delta Women for Justice organised a workshop to create awareness about what a polluted environment can do to people.⁸⁰ Not only that, workshops of this nature will also help women in the region to know their rights and those of the people in general. The spirit of “defensive radicalism” or “anti-imperialism”⁸¹ is needed more than before in the region to bind the government – both international and federal to realise the social and human rights of the people and to end the “systematic exploitation”⁸² of women in particular. It is only through workshops and similar gatherings can this be achieved.

Conclusion

So far, using critical and gender/feminist theories, we have tried to go through the history of the oil crisis in the ND and saw how women are the innocent victims of this malady. We touched the different ways they are victimised – poor condition of life, unemployment, exploitation of various forms. In order to resist this situation, mass protests (presented chronologically) were women’s best weapon and there is the fear that these will continue if the status quo doesn't change.⁸³ One hopes that the Nigerian government and the multinationals “comprehend the enormity of what stalks the land. For the combustion in the ND is a reminder, above all, of the terrible price a nation pays by subjugating sections of its citizenry.”⁸⁴ It is time for all hands to be on deck. Doubtless, with firm cooperation and partnering among stakeholders in harmonious and faithful implementation of all said above, “the Niger Delta Region will make solid contribution to the national vision of becoming

⁷⁵ Association of Nigerian Scholars for Dialogue (ASND), Ogoni Bill of Rights, 1990, pp. 1-4
http://www.waado.org/nigerian_scholars/archieve/docum/ogoni.html

⁷⁶ Niger Delta Women for Justice, <http://www.ndwj.kabissa.org/Declarations/declarations.htm>

⁷⁷ Mike Oduniyi, “Nigeria, Meida: Ijaw Vs Chevron – Women fight the oil company,” August 6, 2002, p. 3, pp. 1-4,
<http://www.ainfos.ca/02aug/ainfos00075.html>

⁷⁸ Federal Government of Nigeria, *Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan*, pp.9-10.

⁷⁹ Terisa E. Turner and Leigh Brownhill, “Climate justice and Nigerian women’s gift to humanity,” p. 48.

⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 47.

⁸¹ See Claude Ake, *The Political Economy of Nigeria*, London: Longman, 1981.

⁸² William D. Graf, *The Nigerian State: Political Economy, State class and political system in the Post-Colonial Era*, p. 245.

⁸³ Kingsley Osadolor, “The rise of the women of the Niger Delta,” *World Press Review*, New York, Oct. 2002, p. 47

⁸⁴ BBC Monitoring Africa, “Nigerian commentator says Niger-Delta rebels product of “prolonged exploitation,”” London: October 7, 2004, p. 1.

Africa's leading economy by emerging as Africa's most prosperous, most peaceful and most pleasant region by 2020."⁸⁵ Please help us Oh God.

⁸⁵

Federal Government of Nigeria, *Niger Delta Regional Development Master Plan*, p. 248.