Women Experience in Conflict Resolution and Peace Building: Story of the Niger Delta Region.

By

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Abstracts

The Niger Delta is located in the South-South region of Nigeria. Due to oil wells discovered in that region, Nigeria became one of the major oils producing nations. The country also, over the years, has made prominent contributions in the peace keeping of West Africa as ECOWAS member nation. However, the nation is not able to maintain peace in the Niger Delta region, and the situation leaves some negative impact on the indigenes of the area because of successive and incessant violence resulting from the activities of militant groups who are provoked by injustice meted on the nation at the detriment of their ecosystem. Women who ought to be made to participate in conflict resolution and peace building process from domestic level receive most of the time, the worst impact that suppress their chances to act in their capacities as peace builders as evident in some nations. The paper recommends Collaboration, dialogue and negotiation for effective conflict resolution

Keywords: Niger Delta, Women, Violence, Conflict Resolution, Peace

Introduction

The richness of oil in the Niger Delta made Nigeria one of the major oil producing nations. Nigeria as a member of the Africa Union (AU), NEPAD. and ECOWAS, plays a prominent role as a peace keeper in West African sub-region. Ironically, in the Niger Delta, Nigeria has not been able to maintain peace. The area has not known peace but chaos, abduction, killing, armed robbery, prostitution and kidnapping. The effect of this, is devastation, sabotage, unemployment, militancy, lack of amenities and abject poverty.[1] Among the problems, causing, unrest, confusion, destructions, underdevelopment in the nation of Nigeria, especially the Niger Delta region, is the oil and gas. Ogege says "the activities of

[1] A. Ukoko. "The Tragedies of the Oil Richness of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria" *Women of Africa*, 2005. http//www.women of africa.org. accessed 10 Nov. 2009.

the multinational oil companies have ushered in various manifestations of conflict".[2] Oluyemisi portrays the Niger Delta of Nigeria to be known for violence, and conflicts instigated by the opposition of militant groups to oil explorations activities.[3] And apparent justification for some of the issues that trigger conflicts when placed under common rationale could mostly be the fact that

> Niger Delta communities continue to live in poverty, while the multinationals and the elite live in affluence…This has resulted to systematic human rights abuses and environment devastation. The Niger Delta is also faced with severe environment degradation from oil pollution. The atmosphere has been polluted, water contaminated, trees poisoned and their flora and fauna have virtually disappeared. They face high incidence of health hazards like birth defects, diseases, early deaths and acid rain, so toxic that it corrodes metal roofs.[4]

This is due to failures of the agencies that are directly responsible for bringing intervention in all important areas of living. Some scholars have concluded that failures stemming from economic interventionist agencies make conditions of people in the aspects of their socioeconomic and political lives worse. Such situations in the Niger Delta region led to conflicts in that region in which people violently protested against incessant oil spillages-pollution and sundry under-development which have negatively impacted the people of the region and the environmental ecology.[5]

Scholars have said a lot about situations of conflicts and how in the face of all odds women's role in conflict resolution and peace building have been one immense feminine contribution to alleviate life's numerous ordeals. Just a thought in line with it, one says that, Women, who are (role designed without other considerations) expected to cater for the welfare of their children…are the worst hit.[6] This paper argues that women by their nature are home managers, calm and peace loving. Thus, adopt non-confrontational or violent free strategies when tackling issues of conflict and peace building. They solicit for agenda to combat, gender discriminatory policies and legislations inculcated, towards

[2] S. O. Ogege, Conflict Resolution and Peace Building: The Gender Question in the Niger Delta Crisis in Nigeria." *African Research Review*, vol. 3, no. 5, 2009, p. 403.
[3] S. O. Ogege …… 403
[4] Izeoma C. Chinda. and Frank O Amugo. "Conflict Resolution in Nigeria: The Niger Delta Experience." *Academia Arena*, vol. 11, no.1, 2019, pp. 1-7. Doi: 10.7537/marsaaj11011.01. Accessed 30 Jul. 2022. p. 3

[5] A. Ukoko……..38
[6] Okolo, Philip O. "NNDC, Conflict, Peace-Building and Community Development, in the Niger Delta Region." *Global Journal of Political Science and Administration*, vol.2, no.1, 2014, p. 36.

conflict resolution and peace building process in the Niger Delta considering the efforts of the Federal Government's approaches, NGOs, and other organizations to solve the conflicts to no avail.[7]

Furthermore, considering the position and population of women in Nigeria, Hauwa Evelyn Shekarau in raising her voice explains on a global level, about a fact that the estimation of Nigeria's population by the year 2019 stood at about 199 million with women getting 49.2%, while men getting 50.8% of the total population. However, in spite of this almost even population distribution, gender inclusion and equality in most part of the history of the nation have not been the same. 38% of women lack formal education as against 25% of their men counterparts. This brings Nigeria to be ranked 158 of 191 countries in the Gender Equality Index (GEI) and that also led to ranking the country to be 158 in the overall loss of Human Development Index (HDI) because of Inequality.[8] This situation is true mostly of the experience of Niger-Delta region.

The researcher further gives input by quoting from what is obtainable on the report by the Global Volunteers that

> Throughout history, the central role of women in society has ensured the stability, progress and long-term development of nations…across Africa, 80 percent of the agricultural production comes from small farmers, most of whom are rural women. It's widely accepted that agriculture can be the engine of growth and poverty reduction in developing nations. Women, notably mothers, play the largest role in decision-making about family meal planning and diet. And, women self-report more often their initiative in preserving child health and nutrition.[9]

She further concludes that, due to some negative factors, in reality, the potentials and contributions of women in the development of the nation are undermined and considered of no value because of the fact that women in Nigeria are confronted with several challenges, such as lack of formal education, poverty zero access to credit, to good and affordable healthcare facilities and sundry.[10] Among all these women in Nigeria, especially those of Niger-Delta region who would have been so instrumental in conflict resolution and peace building if the number of issues considered have been on the positive and

[7] S. O. Ogege …… 404
[8] Hauwa Evelyn Shekarau. "Flying With a Single Engine: The Crisis of Gender Exclusion and Development." *The Nigeria Green Papers*, 2020, p. 164
[9] Hauwa Evelyn Shekarau ……164
[10] Hauwa Evelyn Shekarau ……164

indigenous to them, but things have been taking opposite turn in that regard. On the other hand, some scholars insist on common believe as against the efforts of women being instrumental in working for peace. For example, Osisiomasays that,

> Peace building can come in form of direct effort that focusses intentionally on the factors driving or mitigating conflict, in an attempt to reduce structural or direct violence. Alternately, it may refer to efforts to coordinate a multi-level, multi-sectoral strategy that includes the funding and proper communication and coordination mechanisms between humanitarian assistance, development, governance, security, justice and other sectors within the polity.[11]

The Niger/Delta region

The Niger Delta region is made up of 9 States of the Nigerian Federation namely Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers States. These states are collectively made up of a population of about 20 million people. The Niger Delta has diverse ethnic group speaking about 250 dialects spread in about 5,000 communities. The Niger Delta is often labelled the minorities of the Southern Nigeria but has recently transformed, and become famous because of oil exploration and now popularly known as the "oil producing states".[12] Notably, the traditional occupation of the people is mainly fishing and oil palm farming. Therefore, the Delta has a high dependency on the river and land for survival. Unfortunately, the rivers and the lands are all polluted by oil spillages and sundry pollutions frequently happening there.[13]

Adebanjoko, reveals very important fact about the region in question that the region has witnessed series of conflicts which originated from the periods before the colonization of Nigeria, which came to bare as a result of the protest against injustice, while the one happening in recent years in the quest for resource control. Efforts to resolve conflict in the region since then failed until in the year 2009 when amnesty was declared by the Yar'adua/Jonathan administration and some form of uneasy peace prevailed in that region. However, seven years down the line, there was a renewed militancy in the region and much effort has once again been geared towards finding lasting peace to date. The oil and gas problem in the southern Part of Nigeria has caused ravaging conflicts among stake

[11] Osijioma Samuel Ugochukwu. "The Role of Women in Conflict Resolution: A Case Study of the Niger-Delta Crises." *A Humanity and Social Science Research*, vol. 4, no. 13, 2019, pp. 317-324. Gender and Security.org/ project-resources/ research/role-women-conflict- resolution. Accessed 6 Jul. 2022. p. 8

[12] O. Olorode. The Crisis in the Oil Producing Communities in Nigeria. *Boiling Point Lagos*, 2000, p. 9.

[13] A. Ukoko……..38

holders, along with Government and the community clashes.[14] The scholars further explains that the ill experiences such as pollution, which is a common occurrence in the region rising from oil exploitation and gas flaring releases various hydrocarbons, polyaromatics, chromium lead, and cadmium, benzene etc., which are capable of causing various diseases like; kidney disease, strokes, cancer, etc. Also, the scourge of HIV/AIDs, whereby, the women seeking greener pasture are infected.

The Niger Delta has distinct ecological zones, that give potentials, for agriculture, forestry development, fishing, inland waterway development, ecotourism, determines traditional and economic activities of men and women. The region being described as one of the world's largest wetlands and Africa's largest delta…comprises of four ecological zones: namely coastal barrier islands, mangroves, fresh water and low land rain forest".[15] And according to Nyananyo, a lot of activities going on in the Niger Delta have introduced considerable changes in urban growing agriculture, including fishing, industrial development of natural resources.[16]

Women in the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta women are known to be engaged in household subsistence activities and are highly dependent on the environment for their task.[17] Women are expected to be caretakers of the welfare of their children and the home. Over the matter of gender inequality, Onongo argues, that "the traditional division of labour gives the rural women responsibility for providing and managing natural energy sources required for the maintenance of the family household, environment pollution places".[18] And that these rural women are also the last to be hired by the oil companies.[19] This is where employers, stakeholders and sundry by pretense or ignorance have been unaware of inflicting the women folk with various unjust treatments in which most of them are languishing, and by all evaluation, if things continue to be what it is realized now, the women will not be able to live to exercise their God-given potential in times of needs which have always been through several experiences of theirs within the region. The menace of such disparity goes far beyond what can be imagined.

[14] Angela Ajodo Adebanjoko. "Gender Roles in Nigeria's Non-Violent Oil Resistant Movement." *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, vol.55, no.1. 228
[15] Izeoma C. Chinda and Frank O. Amugo……. 2.
[16] Angela Ajodo Adebanjoko……..……..227
[17] Wrapa Onuwa. "Violence Against Women." News Later January-March,2002. p. 226.
[18] Wrapa Onuwa…….…… 226
[19] Wrapa Onuwa……..226

> The testimony of the Niger Delta women of the Ogoni region at the Oputa Panel set up by the federal government in 1999 gave a scary picture and provides a troubling example of the extent women suffered, being at the receiving end of the several conflicts that have characterized the region. The women became widows, they were sexually assaulted, raped and became a weapon of conflict in the hands of the ethnic militia and the Nigeria security forces who were supposed to protect citizens from both internal and external invitations.[20]

Ogege says, women neither own lands, nor inherit any in the Delta. The traditional practice which only allows them access to land is through their spouses, sons, brothers, and or male relation.[21]

Women essentially bore the burden of the oil palm processing, to stimulate and promote the production of raw materials needed for the metropole, using the indigenous technology pocked out the nuts and squeeze the oil from the pericarp with their hands. The same process was applied to the manufacturing of oil palm. Yet, they were neglected and excluded from gaining access to loan, and development, while the men greatly benefitted. Citing Denzor, Abasialtai lucidly informs that in the new cash economy, women suffered more than men from being denied access to mechanisms of capital accumulation, loans, and exclusion from development projects. Thus, while women's labour accumulated for a majority of subsistence crop production and for the distribution of produce and commodities, most were not able to enter into the new business created by colonial rule or take advantage of opportunities offered by cash crop production. By and large, men-controlled cash crop farming, while women were relegated to the much less remunerative subsistence farming.[22]

Impact of the violence

The various forms of violence seem to have a far reaching, but negative effect on the women folks and as such, the conflicts which notably leave telling effects on facilities such as schools, houses etc., also inflict communities through displacements of people in the rural areas especially women with their children. This has been, for example, results into losses and setbacks experienced by Nigeria in crises such as the Warri and riverine areas of Niger-Delta regions.[23] Those (women) who ought to be made to participate in conflict

[20] S. O. Ogege …….. 408
[21] S. O. Ogege …….. 409
[22] Osisioma, Benjamin Chuka. "Conflict Management and Peace Building in Nigeria: Finding the Common Ground." *Research Gate*, 2016, pp.1-12. www.researchgate.net/publication/308691154. Accessed 30 Jul, 2022. p. 574-573
[23] Johnson Osagie et. al. "Causes of Conflicts in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria as Expressed by the Youths in Delta State." *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 5, 2010, p. 84.

resolution and peace building process receive most of the time the greatest impacts that suppress their chance to act in their capacities as peace builders. They might have experienced different levels of Violence and torture; rape, forced labor, sex slavery, and brutal murder of their family members. However, On the contrary, Ogege states that "women are made to believe that their rightful gender role is in the home front as housewives, mothers, and caregivers while the men carry on with important societal roles of conflict resolution and peace building".[24] But, Onuwa, further insists that "women are at the receiving end of these harmful practices".[25] On account of this, Ogege says that "these practices resulted in the inability to continue with their economic activities, such as farming or fishing due to displacements caused by the conflicts".[26] The conflicts have resulted in the loss of lives and property; youth restiveness, low level of women empowerment and lack of peaceful coexistence.[27] The menace is devastating and seems unending that it becomes necessary to revisit the genesis of the crises towards ending the conflict and insecurity in the Niger Delta region.[28]

In September 2017, efforts to resolving conflict in the region has not been successful because it has not adequately addressed the issues that gave rise to the conflict, and because of its emphasis on the use of force which to a greater extent compounded the problem for women especially. Aneimeka, says "women continue to suffer the effect of military evasion of their lands".[29]

> Multinational corporation expatriates appear to be among the clienteles that patronize women whom poverty has turned into prostitutes, unfortunately four years ago, at the attack on Ogoni land, the federal government of Nigeria ordered a military attack on Odi in Bayelsa region. Odi was destroyed many mothers buried their sons, brothers and fathers. While the women in the region watched helplessly.[30]

However, it is amazing that "despite, the chaos and violence, that surrounds them, they were undaunted in carrying on with their daily routines".[31]

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[24] S. O. Ogege ……. 403
[25] Wrapa Onuwa……17
[26] S. O. Ogege ……. 403
[27] Ekiyor, T. *Women in Peace Building; An Account of the Niger Delta Women*. WANEP. 8th edition, 2005. p. 30
[28] Ajodo Angela Adebanjoko. "Gender Roles in Nigeria's Non-Violent Oil Resistant Movement." Canadian Journal of African Studies, vol.55, no.1. np
[29] Ijeoma Aneimaka *The Indispensability of Women in Conflict Resolution in the Niger Delta.* p. 3
[30] Ijeoma Aneimaka……3
[31] Ijeoma Aneimaka…… 3

Resolution Efforts

Adebanjoko states that "a Collective Non-violent Conflict Management approach involving a group of negotiators, both international and local, an international mediator, as well as all the parties to the conflict as the means for resolving conflict in the region. There is no doubt that a viable resource conflict strategy based on an alternative framework of multilateral cooperation is necessary for resolving and preventing a recurrence of future conflict in the Niger Delta region.[32] Women's initiative in conflict resolution has historically led to making right decision".[33] And that, "Women voices are heard and recognized as valuable; more sustainable and social stability is achieved".[34] Though this sounds contradictory to Abimbola's statement that "Majority of women and girls were and are still victims" Assuming this is still happening, the quest is, how can such be eliminated completely?

Abimbola in response says that, "Several international declarations have affirmed a woman's right to participate in politics, peace building, and economic development of the society" (4). It is intriguing, if men can be beneficiaries and women who are their sisters, daughters, mothers,' wives and nieces, cannot also benefit alongside them should continue to pose a question of what could be the barrier? Few out of several indices that barred women, most of the time, could be investigated and discovered. Could they be issues ranging from the culture that dominates them, or the government that finds them weaker vessels; or the society, or even the religious bodies that tend to suppress them as women? To this, Aneimeka's argument presents a supportive point to what contrasts the ideal for them that, "Ironically women continue to be systematically, excluded, from, peace talks, decision making, and societal change".[35] In the Niger delta, the government has utilized various plans to ensure that peace reigns but to no avail. Aneimeka further comments that "Amnesty as a strategy introduce as it stands alone cannot workout and resolve the problem, it can be counterproductive".[36] He further says that, "it is not those who carry arms that only need to be appeased, this will mean rewarding violence".[37] The question is, what better initiative could be taken if the government fails in applying amnesty?

Aneimeka, expresses further concern about the women in the Niger Delta stating that "women of the Niger Delta, were relentless in their pursuit of freedom and demands".[38] However, despite their pains, they are "excluded from official peace building conflict, still

[32] Ajodo Angela Adebanjoko…….. np
[33] Ijeoma Aneimaka……4
[34] Ijeoma Aneimaka…… 4
[35] Ijeoma Aneimaka ……7
[36] Ijeoma Aneimaka ……7
[37] Ijeoma Aneimaka……..7
[38] Ijeoma Aneimaka ……7

organizes themselves in many unofficial ways to participate in non–profit organization, support groups and grass roots activism in their communities in Niger Delta.[39] Some of the women are known to advocate for justice in which the women "created awareness amongst them as regards to their human and environmental rights".[40] For example, "they publish abuses meted on women in the dailies and calling on the government officials and the first ladies to come to the rescue of these disadvantaged women".[41]

Traditionally, peace keeping has been the role of women; for instance, in the Rwandan culture, women are perceived as being better skilled than men as affirmed by Aneimeka who presents further facts that "in Rwanda women were mobilized for peace and its sustainability is unique beyond doubt, despite their hurts".[42] Women can move mountains; they are care givers to the injured.[43] And as the cultures identify the women as peace makers of the society, they should be believed as vital cultural resources to draw on for resolutions.[44] Williams, the director of Women of Zimbabwe Arise, describes the power of women as "tough love," and ascertains that "women have been the true liberators of the society. Women can help to foster change in these challenging circumstances".[45] Aneimeka, also urges humanitarian organizations to continue to bear upon presidents to give peace a chance by allowing and encouraging women organizations.[46] Utoko in her lament explains that the "women maintain that the ultimate goal of any power should be happiness or pleasure and fidelity.[47] Corporation with nature, the willingness to be vulnerable, risk taking, imputing listening, caring for humanity and cooperating with those we consider our enemies is power in its heights existential understanding.[48]

Conclusion

The conflict resolution process in the region of Niger Delta of Nigeria has been an issue that confronts every group of people within all social domains in the area. It places all necessary facilities at the verge of becoming wasted in the region. On the account of this, the government of Nigeria needs to arise to ensure absolute peace through number of

[39] T. Ekiyor…….26
[40] S. O. Ogege …….. 403
[41] Ijeoma Aneimaka…… 8
[42] Ijeoma Aneimeka ……10
[43] Ijeoma Aneimeka……...10
[44] Ijeoma Aneimeka…… .10
[45] Ijeoma Aneimeka……2
[46] Ijeoma Aneimaka…….. 10
[47] A. Utoko, A. "The Tragedies of the Oil Richness of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria" *Women of Africa*, 2005. http//www.women of africa.org. accessed 10 Nov. 2009. p. 10
[48] Ukoko, A. "The Tragedies of the Oil Richness of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria" *Women of Africa*, 2005. http//www.women of africa.org. accessed 10 Nov. 2009. p. 12

ways, which include; commitment to initiating and sustaining a holistic development program which must first be focused towards women empowerment. The reason for this is that, the violence in any society begins from the failure from home where women role is most played. So, if there is no serenity resulting from stability of emotions on the part of women, any of such roles are not played because of lack of composure. The concept of holistic development means both arrest to the ongoing violence by creating means of diversion from resentments and sundry causes and any societal vices, and to also push in a bit to realizing a future stability which is not possible without building women capacity as keepers and trainers of the society from home. This will in all wise forestall perpetual violence within the region of Niger Delta.

Recommendations

The feeling of neglect, deprivation and underdevelopment which gave rise to so many violent conflicts in recent times must be reversed, to caring, protecting and providing for the neglected communities. There is great need for local collaboration, dialogue, and negotiation to know the causes of a particular conflict in a particular area, for effective conflict resolution.

The use of force has never been found to be a solution for problems such as those of the Niger Delta and therefore a multilateral non-violent approach is recommended. A cooperative approach to resource conflict management is not only necessary for avoiding conflict and addressing social and environmental crises, but it would also salvage significant financial resources and foster goodwill among parties to the dispute.

The country should have credible members not lip service members of the commission in the government with all the stakeholders, Feral government and other operational institutions, NGOs etc. partnering with one another in an atmosphere of mutual understanding, trust and respect, to successfully combat the challenges. And the full implementation of the Master plan for the Niger Delta should be taken seriously. Where necessary there should be creation of new local government areas in the Niger Delta region as this will certainly enhance greater development in the region. Members of the conflicting areas need to have the right skills and resources for the success of the task at hand and as a result they need a long-term planning, training and mobilisation of resources which depend on availability of funds.

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