

Full Length Research Paper

The effects of the Niger Delta oil crisis on women folks

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The Niger Delta area is one of the locations that is seriously affected by oil spill in Nigeria's fifty one years of oil exploration. This study was designed to investigate the effects of the Niger Delta oil crisis on the women folks. Oil crisis could result in vast effects on humans and animals which include social, ecological, health, economical amongst others. The environment (air, water, soil) usually indicates the presence of hydrocarbon and petrogenic pollution and this affects aquatic lives and agricultural practices. These result in decrease in fishing resources, damage to marine flora and fauna, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, coastal and marine erosion and flooding. The inability of the people to fix these problems and the supposedly government insensitivity had been the cause of persistent conflicts and confrontation with government and oil companies in the area. Women suffer great hardships in times of conflict and the Niger Delta women 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. The effects of these conflicts on the social wellbeing of the women folks in this area were assessed in this study.

Key words: Niger Delta, oil, pollution, women, crisis.

INTRODUCTION

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 spreading in about 5,000 communities. The Niger Delta is often labelled the minorities of the Southern Nigeria but has recently transformed, and famous because of oil exploration and now popularly known as the 'oil producing states' (Olorode, 2000; Raji et al., 2000).

The oil rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been embroiled in crisis between the government forces and some militant elements that are aggrieved over certain fundamental issues affecting the region. Since the last few years, militants have fought with government forces,

sabotaged oil installations, taken foreign oil workers hostage and carried out lethal car bombings amongst others. At the root of the problem is a crisis of underdevelopment. The crisis has been exacerbated by emergent issues of a gross distortion of Nigerian federalism in respect to resource control; citizenship rights and environmental degradation (Ejibunu, 2007).

The violence between Ijaw and Itsekiri militias in Delta and Ondo states during the last decade killed thousands and destroyed scores of towns and villages, some of them multiple times. One major flare-up occurred in March 1997 in the oil city of Warri, ostensibly over the decision by military authorities to relocate local government headquarters from the Ijaw town of Ogbe-Ijaw to the Itsekiri community of Ogidigben. Six Shell flow stations were seized by community groups and 127 Shell staff

were held hostage. A seventh flow station was later shut down, together cutting Shell's Nigeria output by some 210,000 barrels of oil per day for more than a week. Large numbers of military troops were subsequently deployed to the western Niger Delta, although violence continued to erupt periodically in the entire region (Brisibe, 2001; Essential Action and Global Exchange, 2000).

Women suffer great hardships in times of conflict and the women of the Niger Delta are no exception. During these 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. The 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 additional burdens of home responsibilities as heads of households (Salaam-Ogunniran, 2007).

The problems of Niger Delta for more than half a century has never ceased but continues changing with each passing day. 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 (NDDDB) to tackle the problems of underdevelopment, 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. Currently, the Delta State Oil Producing Areas Development Commission (DESOPADEC) has been created (Omoweh, 2000; Raji, et al., 2000).

However, the problems in the Niger Delta are taking on a new dimension. It is now becoming more and more dangerous for the women and children in the area to live and work in peace. Their lives are defined by poverty and from afar they watch as the rich expatriates live comfortably from the proceeds of their land. They watch as their village heads collect bribes from both the oil companies and the government while they get nothing. Not to mention the fund generated been used to develop other parts of the country. They watch as their men become militants, kidnapping the rich and making money for the struggle. 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, youths and even children (Osadolor, 2002).

In every unfavourable situation, women are the most victimised simply because they are the so-called 'weak sex'; they are the wives, mothers, some uneducated, unemployed and the most exploited. This marginality is the basis for diverse women's movements and their "engagement in struggles for justice, accommodation and fair access to benefits". To achieve the objectives, this study assessed the following:

1. To assess the effect of oil crisis on the Niger Delta women folks.
2. To assess the damage of oil operations on the social-economic lives of women.
3. To proffer possible solutions to alleviating the suffering of women and people in the Niger Delta.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling was carried out in five different communities in the Niger-Delta, namely Odidi, Batan, Ogbe-ljaw, Egwa, Olisaro and Benette Island. In each community, twenty women making a total of 100 women were given oral interview. The questionnaires were distributed and later collected on another sampling date due to the sensitivity of the questions and the immediate lack of response by some of the women folk, who initially resisted but on the assurance that they secret would be kept and issues addressed. The following represents the outcome of some of the oral interviews and discussion the study team had with them.

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," the deprivation people are experiencing in the region is alarming and should worry both the international and national consciences.

Poor condition of life

This is what we might call paradox number one and the analysis of the major effect of the problem. Despite living on land that yields billion dollars in oil exports annually, the people of Niger Delta still live in shocking poverty. In some villages and town namely, Ogbe-ljaw, Ogidigben, Odidi, Eqwa, Batan, Olisaro and Benette Island amongst others, there is no electricity or potable water. Natives in these regions drink water from the open river, where other domestic activities like washing take place. Chemical analysis carried out on the water from these rivers reveals that the water was brackish. The physico-chemical data for pH was 6.89 ± 0.01 ; total dissolved solids (TDS) (5670 ± 45 mg/l), salinity (3450 ± 28 mg/l) and turbidity (15 ± 1 NTU). The heavy metal concentrations (lead, cadmium, zinc and chromium) were relatively low except iron which recorded 1.23 ± 0.01 mg/l. The schools in these and some other areas of the Niger Delta are poorly equipped and often have no roofs or books. Hospitals operate on a daily basis with only outward patients with no admissions, no adequate equipment or windows. Most of the residents in the areas mention above travel by boat to seek medical attention in Odidi, which is the central. The villagers have no proper

Table 1. Incidence of poverty in the Niger Delta from 1980-2004.

	1980	1985	1992	1996	2004	
Nigeria	28.1	46.3	42.7	65.6	54.4	
Edo/Delta	19.8	52.4	33.9	56.1	Delta	45.35
					Edo	33.09
Cross River	10.2	41.9	45.5	66.9	41.61	
Imo/Abia	14.4	33.1	49.9	56.2	Imo	27.39
					Abia	22.27
Ondo	24.9	47.3	46.6	71.6	42.15	
Rivers/Bayelsa	7.2	44.4	43.4	44.3	Rivers	29.09
					Bayelsa	19.98

Source: National Bureau of Statistics 2004 as cited in the United Nations Human Development Report on the Niger Delta.

sanitation, most defecate in the open river since there are no latrines or septic system in these areas. There are also no good means of transportation either by land or sea. This litany can go on and on (Osadolor, 2002; Ikejiaku, (2009).

The statistical data showed the poverty distribution over a period of four crucial years in Niger Delta history (Table 1). Thus, it is in the midst of this excruciating poverty that is facing Nigeria that the people of the Niger Delta are routinely being impoverished and pauperized.

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,” there is the highest rate of unemployment especially among the youths? Workers for the oil companies are mainly recruited from outside the region and overseas. Except in Chevron where the Itsekiris are majorly recruited, most oil companies recruit candidates mainly from other states. It is common knowledge that these natives are treated as second class citizens in their own regions (Darah, 2001; Okonta and Douglas, 2001). According to one of the traditional rulers interviewed in 1996 by *The Times*, “about half of the population is under 20 years of age; they are faced with no hope of getting a job,” thereby causing a long term problem of abject poverty in the region (Okon, 2002).

Rape and prostitution

In a chaotic situation like that existing in the Niger Delta area, rape and prostitution is also rampant throughout the Niger Delta. First of all, the angry and hungry young men who are fighting for their rights will make do with any woman around. Secondly, 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, terrorizing residents with beatings and raping women and girls. 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. Rape leaves a terrible scar in the heart of its victim; in some areas of the Niger Delta, nine out of ten women have been violated (Turner and Brownhill, 2007).

An academic study undertaken in Nigeria identified members of the security forces as primarily responsible for the gender-based violence (including rape, sexual slavery and forced pregnancy) committed against the tribal women of the Delta’s Ogoni land between 1990 and 1998. A 2001 report published by the non-governmental organization Centre for Democracy and Development also documented gender-based violence in the Niger Delta, perpetrated for the most part by the military. The government’s investigation into human rights violations (covering the period of 1966-1999) by the security forces in Ogoni land has been limited to the work of the Oputa Panel, whose public hearings included sessions in the country’s chief oil-refining city, Port Harcourt, where the experiences of victims and their families were documented (Onduku, 2001; Ikelegbe, 2005).

One victim, Grace, an Ogoni human rights defender in her 40s, described how soldiers had gang-raped her. She was raped by three uniformed army men with guns. They broke into her house and hit her on the face, threw her on the bed and raped her using a gun. When her son tried to run away from the soldiers, they held and beat him up. However, she could not report the case to the police since there were no police in Ogoniland. She however testified at the Oputa Panel with her face covered with black cloth. Since she has no money, she could not seek redress in court.

Another victim Fatima also described how she was raped. She said she was 10 years old at the time the incident took place. She was repeatedly raped and held in sexual slavery for five days in April 1994. She said soldiers came in at night and asked about her brother and father. She told them she had no idea of their where about. They took her to the station, where she was beaten and raped by four men for five days. When they saw that she was almost dead, they dropped her along the road. She then ran into a local clinic in the bush, where she was operated upon. The man who treated her was later shot by the armed men. After a while, people in the community made jest of her by calling her names. Her father later disowned her.

Fatima testified at the Oputa Panel hearings, but expressed disappointment that the Panel’s investigations had led neither to prosecution of the alleged perpetrators nor reparations for the

victims. Though the Opota Panel's report was submitted to the Federal Government in May 2002, it has yet to be made fully public and accessible to the Nigerian people (Ikelegbe, 2005).

Tosan was raped in the heat of the Niger- Delta crisis of 2007 by men deployed by the Federal Government to quell the crisis. She later resulted to offering herself for commercial sex for little token given to her by her clients. Currently, she is into drug and finds herself helpless with no hope for the future.

Preye, on the other hand, could not absorb the shame and humiliation suffered after she was raped by five armed men who came to her house close to a flow-station. She later committed suicide after raining curses on the men who raped and abused her. In the case of eleven year old Onome, who was raped by five men, she later discovered she was pregnant after two months. Being an orphan, she went through the suffering of pregnancy and childbearing all alone. She gave birth through caesarian section. There was no identity or paternity of the child, a stigma she will have to carry all her life. The story goes on and on.

In October 1999, security forces raped Ikwerre tribal women from Choba (a community based in Port Harcourt), who were protesting against what they perceived as long-standing and unfulfilled promises by Wilbros, a US-based oil production company. A report by Human Rights Watch provides eyewitness accounts of uniformed security forces and the use of military vehicles in the attack. This ungodly act committed by oil workers and military men 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 those responsible to claim their offspring (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

Environmental damages

The environmental damage which in turn affects agriculture, the mainstay of the economy in region, has been a topic very dear to the inhabitants. 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 meters of oil. Shell Petroleum Development Corporation (SPDC) reported that 50,200 and 123,777 barrels of oil were spilled in 1998 and 1999 respectively. The people in that area run the risk of not having potable drinking water, no good land to farm, no good air to breathe, 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 SPDC 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 (Soeze, 2007). In protest, the women lamented, "We are farmers, fisherwomen and hunters. With all the flaming and pumping of oil into our swamp areas, the oil companies have denied us every living thing. Today, we have no hope, while they are making billions of naira with our gifts from God. They don't care or hear our cry; they only throw tear gas on us, beat us, and drive us out of our land" (Singh et al., 1995; Sagay, 2001; Akpan, 2003).

Health

In the Niger Delta area, most villages and urban slums have no health facilities, leading to increased maternal and infant mortality

and miscarriages. Many women in these subsistence communities bear the burdensome task of caring for their families, protecting them from harsh pollution. The rate of cases of cancer, infertility, leukemia, bronchitis, asthma, still-births, deformed babies and other pollution-related ailments are unusually high in this region (Eaton, 1997).

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. 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. 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 (Okonta, 2000; Okonta and Douglas, 2001).

Breeding ground for criminality

The rate of organized and band criminality in the Niger Delta area especially among the youths increases with each passing day. Some national and international commentators are right when they said that Niger Delta rebels are "product of prolonged, unbridled, ignoble exploitation." 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 (Okonta, 2000; Okenwa, 2001).

Bribery and corruption

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." SPDC'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 risks within the villages especially with the village heads. Oil companies do publicly deny giving ransoms when staff are kidnapped, but some executives have privately admitted to paying, thus contributing to ravenous local bribery and corruption. The politics of divide and rule of the colonial masters is still in vogue. In most cases, this results in tribal disagreement and conflict.

RESULTS

The women of the Niger Delta

As with women in other parts of the globe, the Niger Delta 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,” they are also expected to be significant wage earners. This is because the intra-household income distribution patterns and the rise of women-headed households in Nigeria, coupled with servile poverty, force 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% of the agricultural labour force and account for 90% of family food supply. 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 (Okon, 2002).

Chronologically, mass community protests against multinationals began with the Ogharefe women's protest in 1984 against US Pan Ocean. 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.

In 1984 and 1986, 47 women in Warri mobilised and pro-tested 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 every day, groups of women rose against this company and laid siege to it. In 1999 the same scene repeated itself but this time against SPDC. The women and allied men blocked the SPDC oil stations.

The most serious of all women uprising in the region occurred in 2002 against Chevron and it lasted for 10 days. The women threatened to strip – 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, 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 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. To convince the women to call off the occupation,

Chevron reached its usual lips 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.

The literature so far reviewed show that these promises were not kept no wonder the women took to the site the following year, 2003. 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. 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 have no basic amenities and infrastructure. Things are possibly 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 (Ikelegbe, 2005).

DISCUSSION

The effect on the social-economic lives of the Niger Delta women

It is common knowledge that the protracted oil crisis in the Niger Delta region is as a result of major ethnic marginalization. This has created a situation of neglect of the region by the central governments. Also during conflicts, women would protest armless and peacefully asking for basic rights and the government would respond with armed men who at times would 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 occasion, 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 but to no avail. The struggles and protests are still ongoing (Ozo-Eson, 2000; Branigan and Vidal, 2002). The drama of a people living in a land full of milk and honey but go hungry is terrible. Majority of the children of the Niger Delta Women (graduates) are not employed so they cannot get to the top of any career in the oil companies and that is why the multinationals employ only unskilled men and women who work as cleaners, messengers, drivers or guards and pay them very low (Darah, 2001).

The Niger Delta has for some years been the site of major confrontation between the people who live there, the government and oil multinationals. Regions and

States in the area are demanding a greater control and share of the oil wealth. Formerly the federal government has 80 per cent claim of the revenue (now 13% derivation to each oil producing State while 77% to the federal government). Above all, the 1978 Land Use Act, turned all natural resources in the region into federal government property, 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." The question then is, how can this justice be achieved (Pope John Paul II, 1998; Agbola and Olurin, 2003; Torulagha, 2007)?

Most of the issues raised by the women of these communities reveal that the multinationals and Government are not completely committed to improving the lives of the indigenes in the Niger-Delta areas. Unemployment is more on the increase with most youth roaming the street unoccupied. The water ways are still guided by armed military men who still carry out their evil act of rape and abuse. Gas flaring and environmental pollution is still a long way from been stopped and solutions found. Not to mention the problem of criminality, bribery and corruption, this is gradually getting out of control. To state that there is improvement in any of these communities would mean that there was a drastic over night change, which has not been done (Ikelegbe, 2005).

Ways to resolving the Niger Delta crisis

The Nigerian system should be made to encourage proper monitoring of the activities of oil companies. Nigeria is a signatory to the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights ('ICCPR') and the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ('ICESCR'). The ICCPR guarantees the protection of civil rights and the ICESCR guarantees the right to health, an adequate standard of living including food and housing. The Nigerian government owes a duty to ensure that the basic elements of these covenants are respected and not contravening the covenants to which it is a party.

Solidarity helps us grow in friendship, to be selfless and encourages team work. For this to happen there should be 'mass consciousness' i.e. 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. In this regards, women organisations are the most active. In 1999, Culture of solidarity (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." Without such radical rethinking, anger would continue to build across the region and the situation would continue to be worse with each passing year.

It is clear that the concept of sustainable development is immediacy. According to Olori (2000), 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. 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. 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 (Sala-I-Martin and Subramanian, 2003; Salaam-Ogunniran 2007). In this light, the oil companies must be made to publish their developmental activities/plans for the community which they operate and provide avenues for public comments on their operations. The Federal, the State and the Local governments must show greater commitment to developing the non-oil sector particularly by promoting manufacturing and agricultural development and reduce dependence on oil. The growths of these non-oil sectors will create low-skilled workforce and boost rural income.

We had seen how the revenues from the Niger Delta 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. Therefore, deliberate, determined and patient counter-hegemonic work in all spheres of politics, society and the economy on the part of all involved is needed. In other words, there is the need for policy review especially in regards to the Oil and Land Acts (Agbola and Olurin, 2003).

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, issued different documents asking for the recognition of the dignity and fundamental rights of the ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta (Turner and Brownhill, 2007). 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. 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 Niger Delta up to the year 2020 (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2006; Whelan, 2007). Now it is time for all the above documents to be revisited and proper action taken to actualize the issues raised. Again, a watch 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 impact in the region (Sala-I-Martin and Subramanian, 2007).

On the recent amnesty call by the late President Umaru Musa Yaradua in 2009, this solution may bring some relieve mainly to the restive youth. However, more youths are still coming out in their number to request inclusion in the amnesty programme but the government has responded that the programme was closed. The question therefore is "what happens to those that are willing to lay down their arms and were rejected, would they not return to the creeks and street and unleash more havoc?"

In 1999, the Niger Delta Women for Justice organised a workshop to create awareness about what a polluted environment can do to people (Niger Delta Women for Justice, 1999). Similarly, workshops of this nature would help women in the region to know their rights and those of the people in general. The spirit of defensive radicalism or anti-imperialism 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 of women in particular. It is only through workshops, seminars, conferences and similar gatherings that the voices of the battered Niger Delta women would be heard.

Conclusion

The direct impact of oil exploration in the region has been felt by everyone living in the area especially the women folks. Some of these issues include ecological degradation, environmental pollution, lack of economic growth, associated human rights abuses, high inflation and loss of livelihood, poor governance and poor attitudinal response to the concern of the people of the region by both the government and oil multinationals. We have seen the different ways women are victimised – poor condition of life, unemployment, exploitation of various forms. However, it would only be fair if these groups of people are appropriately compensated, not with money but with social amenities and adequate employment. It should be noted that the security situation is deteriorating, with consequences for the oil industry and Nigeria, as a country, because of the strategic importance of the region to the socio-economic development and wellbeing of the nation. The government of Nigeria, the other stakeholders and the international community should address the region's grievances before the situation further degenerates. It is our belief that the Niger Delta Region would make solid contribution to the national vision of becoming Africa's leading economy by emerging as Africa's most prosperous, peaceful and pleasant region by 2020.

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