

Environmental Degradation and the Resurgence of Non-violent Protest by Women in the Warri Metropolis of Southern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT The year 1929 marks a watershed in the history of non-violent struggle by women in Nigeria. In that year, the womenfolk in Aba metropolis staged a peaceful and well orchestrated resistance to the invidious machination of the colonial government. In similar vein, the Warri women felt they could provoke social change in a much more spectacular manner. The youths had made attempts in the past with little result. The men were perceived to be eternally compromising because of the greed for money. Thus, the women of the Niger-Delta took the historic decision to re-enact the Aba women resistance of 1929.

INTRODUCTION

The Vanguard Newspaper editorial of August 26, 2002 provides a bird's eye view of the Warri Women protest. According to the editorial, the protest was unique because of its being an all women affair. In spite of its rarity, the points of these women on total neglect of the area in terms of provision of social amenities and creation of jobs for their sons and daughters cannot be faulted. Without equivocation, the women have the right to ask questions on why they should continue to be denied these amenities of good living even though resources for sustaining the company and the host nation are being derived from oil explored from these areas (Vanguard Editorial, August 26, 2002, p. 6).

The Warri women protest must be placed in perspective to avoid conceptual distortions that might unwittingly whittle down the core demands made on the oil companies. The women were not just agitating for financial compensation for several years of environmental pillage by the oil companies. They were not just asking for amenities or that modern infrastructures to be installed in the Niger-Delta to enhance the quality of life and facilitate daily living. They were asking more fundamental questions and especially questioning the social responsibility (if one existed) of oil companies to the host communities. For denigrating vast stretches of the Niger-Delta environment with the attendant public health consequences and pretending that nothing was wrong and that business can go on as usual (Akoroda 2000).

The groundswell of disenchantment among the women of the Niger-Delta reached a peak on August 8, 2002 when a coalescence of several ethnic groups, viz., Itsekiri, Ijaw and Ilaje stormed the operational headquarters of Shell Petroleum Development Company and Chevron-Texaco Nigeria and paralysed all activities. It was an uncanny solidarity of hitherto acrimonious ethnic groups who identified a common connecting thread of deprivation and resolved to alter the exploitative machinations of the oil companies.

The gender resonance of the resurgent environmental activism was unique and unmistakable. As Okpowo (2002) remarked in the Vanguard of August 17, 2002 "the protest marked a rare and unparalleled solidarity and unity among hitherto acrimonious ethnic groups. The Ijaws, Ilajes and Itsekiris have been known to be at each other's throat in the past. But in this particular instance they put whatever suspicion and acrimony they had completely behind them and were able to identify the common foe that was responsible for their woes and miseries". More fundamentally, Okpowo (2002) rightly asserted that "the protests marked a remarkable departure from the known forms of agitation by the people of the oil-rich Niger-Delta for equity and justice over decades of exploitation and criminal neglect by the Federal Government and oil companies. Whereas in the past, the youths and leaders of the region were the arrow heads of such protests, in this particular case, it was the women folk, whose place is usually in the kitchen, who took over the struggle. The significance of this development is that the Niger-Delta may never be the same again" (p. 20).

**ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND
WOMEN ACTIVISM:
THE CRITICAL NEXUS**

Much of the plunder of the Niger Delta environment by multinational oil companies has been documented in scholarly literature. Jike (2002) has highlighted the negative impact of oil exploration activities on cultivable land and wild life and has even gone much further to outline the spate of social activism which centre around the steady degradation of the environment of the Niger Delta.

Drawing from the prior thesis of a linkage between gas flaring and pollution (Isichei and Sanford 1993). Aghalino (2002) has bemoaned the manipulation of Isoko land rights by Shell Petroleum Development Company. According to Aghalino (2002: 13) in the Isoko area of Delta State, the Shell Petroleum Development Company acquired as much as 1,723 area of land for drilling activities as early as 1973. By manipulating the Land Use Act which rested ownership of land on Government, oil companies in Nigeria have capitalised on this legal lee-way to appropriate peasants' land without due compensation (Aghalino 1999).

Much of the social indices of degradation including loss of soil fertility, the depletion of several species of aquatic life, gas flaring and the pervasive disequilibria of social life especially high divorce rates, abandonment of matrimonial responsibilities by the menfolk who have been displaced from agricultural farmsteads together coalesced to galvanise the Warri women into social action to salvage part of what had been lost and to regain some measure of human dignity and a modicum of social justice where non existed.

Part of the environmental problems that have given rise to widespread disequilibrium in social relationships have been highlighted in my previous work (Jike 2002, 2004). The point that needs reiteration, perhaps, is how the prevailing environmental degradation also create disruption in the indigenous peoples' communitarian ethos. The economic substructure is impaired and compromised. Incessant oil spillage and the attendant gas flaring make whole communities vulnerable to health hazards. As a consequence, social relations otherwise closely knit and cohesive become unpredictable and prone to rebelliousness. Since oil exploration has an omnibus

environmental impact on the indigenous people it is only proper that any solution to these problems should adopt a holistic approach. The severe environmental problem in the Niger – Delta was the reason why the Federal Government launched the Oil Industry's Environmental Guidelines and standards through the Department of Petroleum Resources (DPR) in Lagos in August, 2002 .

According to the Guardian editorial of August 30, 2002, Dr. Rilwanu Lukman, Presidential Adviser for Petroleum and Energy during the occasion read the Riot Act to the operators in the oil industry to put their best legs foremost in complying with the subsisting standard environmental guidelines. He noted that there were 35,000 metric tonnes of drill cuttings stockpiled in abandoned drill locations which the operators intended to dump in some unnamed remote locations. The Federal Government also noted with dismay, that over 134 yawning waste pits constituting a great menace in the Niger-Delta were left unattended to by the oil industry operators (Guardian Newspaper editorial, August 30, 2002).

Similar concerns on the environment were articulated during the recently concluded Earth Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa. While addressing the over 5,700 delegations from across the world, President Mbeki of South Africa warned of the sombre consequences of a planet whose capacity to sustain life is steadily shrinking. According to Mbeki, poverty, underdevelopment, inequality within and among countries together with the worsening global ecological crisis, sum up the dark shadow under which most of the world lives.

Environmental Disequilibrium in the Niger-Delta

For people resident in the creeks of the Niger-Delta, survival is a daily miracle. Everyday, they wake up hoping that they would be lucky enough to make it till the end of the day. Within 24 hours anything can happen. A man you see in the morning can die before nightfall. And the cause of death may be as little as a headache. Or you could just feel like taking a cup of water and from there develop some complications, which can result in death. This is because everything that makes life safe in the region is polluted, the air they breathe is polluted, the water they drink is

polluted. The soil they farm on is polluted. The ponds where they kill fish is polluted, therefore, the fishes which they eat are polluted right from the rooftop to their very foundation. For example, in Uzere the hometown of the Chief of Defence Staff, Lt. General Alexander Ogomudia, the gas flare going on in the town has virtually turned the entire town into an oven. Tapioca, the major agricultural produce which normally took five days of sunny weather to dry now takes about three minutes because of the scorching heat from gas flaring in the area (Dafe, Vanguard Newspaper of August 26, 2002).

This provides a backdrop to the Warri women protest. Oil exploration/production and especially spillages and consequent environmental problems have begun to affect the local people in ways that they can no longer keep mute. For once, these Warri women went beyond customary gender issues of patriarchy and subjugation to more fundamental and complex environmental issues. They stated unequivocally that their farmsteads had been irretrievably damaged by a combination of the deleterious impact of oil exploration and ancillary spillages. This also has had adverse effect on aquatic life, which according to them have virtually disappeared. They mentioned incessant gas flaring which had brought alien illnesses and caused several premature deaths. One of the Itsekiri women leaders, Mrs. Elizabeth Ebido, summarised the mood of the protesters:

“we are all women here. We are angry and grieved that is why we have come together, we cannot rely on our husbands anymore for this fight because they are not giving us the desired result-my only occupation is fishing. But nowadays when I go to the riverine areas, there is no fish any more to kill. Oil pollution and gas flaring has killed all the fishes. Farmers who farm the land cannot get anything from their land any more because of gross environmental degradation. Oil spillages have destroyed their lands. As a result of these, we are hungry. Our children are suffering. This gas they are flaring is causing so many of us to die pre-maturely. Three days ago, I lost my sister. She died from suffocation. She was just crying my throat! my throat! and she died within 30 minutes” (August 8, 2002 at Okere, Warri).

Recounting the Litany of environmental woes, Madam Doris Karaki one of the Ijaw women leaders of the protesters, on her part, stated:

When rain falls, gas comes on top of the water and the water becomes acid water which is not fit for drinking. If we drink it because we have no option, we become sick, our stomach begins to ache us and when we go to the clinic, the doctors tell us we lack blood as a result of gas flaring. But before you could get to the clinic here in Warri, you will be dead because there are no clinics in the villages. Our boats cannot move fast enough to rush sick people from the village to Warri here. This is why many of our people die from common ailments such as malaria and stomach aches. Moreover, our lands, the oil sites where the exploration and exploitation is done is sinking. We are scared because we feel we have a big problem in our hand and we feel they should come to our aid and help us (Vanguard Newspaper, August 17, 2002).

With the women protest of August 8, 2002, the environment has begun to acquire a special relevance in determining the relationship between oil companies and oil communities. In recent times, this relationship has been far from cordial. Repeated oil spillages and attendant communal clamour for appropriate compensation have been a continuing source of conflict. Some oil companies have incurred colossal losses because of forced work stoppages, vandalised infrastructures or sabotage perpetrated by oil community indigenes reacting to a felt sense of alienation due to the damage to flora, fauna and farmstead. As Mr. G.G. Onosode, Chairman of the Niger-Delta Environmental Survey (NDES) once noted “For all the ecological and socio-economic trauma suffered and endured by these communities, they have no assuaging reminders of the boom times, no enduring legacy of the past from which to take solace (Guardian Newspaper, November 20, 1996).

At the crux of the women’s protest are the critical development issues of survival and sustainability (Weiss and Young 1996; Razari and Miller 2002). A community on which oil wells are located and which experiences oil spillages advertently or inadvertently grapples with critical problems of survival. Repeated oil spillages have adverse consequences for environmental fertility. The sludge causes soil toxicity and destroys vital nutrients needed for the growth of crops. The ecological system may be so pervasively breached that everything of worth becomes a shadow of their former selves. The average sizes of yam tubers are reduced, cassava crops begin to do

unusually badly and even aquatic life is adversely affected. This negative scenario is partly responsible for the rising wave of joblessness among virile young men in oil-bearing communities.

Environmental Degradation and the Spectre of Poverty

The Warri women's riot brought to the fore the lingering issue of pervasive poverty amidst the resource-plentiful Niger-Delta; it also established a firm nexus between environmental degradation and poverty. The Ilaje women leader, B.I. Ugbasanin was the one who decried a situation where the oil workers enjoyed a good life, while the inhabitants of the oil bearing communities lived in abject poverty (Tell Magazine, August 26, 2002). Almost in a coherent chorus the protesting women argued that environmental degradation impoverished the women more than the men (Jackson and Palmer-Jones 1997).

Women constituted the bulk of peasant farmers whose lands had become permanently denigrated. Some were fisherwomen and most of them took charge of the domestic chores and the economic functions of men since the latter had been environmentally uprooted and displaced as breadwinners within the network of traditional role play. As Veeran (2000) rightly noted Women's position in society is dictated by the various roles they play. In most, if not all situations, women have the dual responsibility of maintaining a household and working. Generally, most women spend a greater number of hours working than men. However, their work is not calculated in terms of monetary gain or contribution to the economic development of society. Much of the work women are involved in include childcare, domestic and other related chores. Despite the vastly different circumstance among developing and developed countries a remarkable similarity exists in the role fathers play in childcare. One can advance the argument by stating that the roles between men and women in the Niger-Delta have narrowed substantially and even reversed in some cases. That perhaps explains the reason why Mrs. Elizabeth Ebido, the Itsekiri women leader in the protesting groups, succinctly stated that:

We are all women here. We are angry and grieved that is why we have come together. We cannot rely on our husband any more for this fight because they are not giving us the desired

results. Moreover, these days, you know that it is the women that take up most of the responsibilities. We train the children, pay their fees and feed them. (Vanguard Newspaper, August 17, 2002).

One can now begin to imagine why the women are angry. Firstly, because of the poverty that is feminised (Goldberg and Kremen 1990) and other development accruals "democracy dividends" that are skewed in disfavour of women. There is substantial evidence in the literature that environmental stress of a long duration may predispose the individual to an unpleasant stress situation which might lead to unpredictable outburst of social action such as strike, demonstrations, protests, etc. (Singer 1980; Benjamin et al. 1990).

Outcomes and Ongoing Challenges Confronting Warri Women Protesters

Women in Nigeria face two formidable challenges. First, they contend with being women who are structurally disadvantaged within the context of Africa patriarchy. They are not entitled to any inheritance within the family structure. There are several man-made ceilings against women aspirations. For example, a woman is not allowed to sign a bail bond to release a suspect from police custody. A woman is not also allowed to break cola at a family meeting where men are present. The responsibility of breaking colanuts which is well-revered in Africa is a prerogative of men.

Secondly, women suffer the brunt of the failings of men in society, when men's economic policies founder as they do so often in Africa, it is women and children who suffer most. These challenges, nonetheless can be overcome if women are empowered to play a much more enriching role in the mainstream of the nation's economy. With farmsteads desecrated and women left to depend on the menfolk, the plight of women already subjugated by an African patriarchal system can only worsen. The government and oil companies must go beyond palliatives to more fundamental issues of women empowerment.

The provision of social amenities by oil companies and the payment of compensation to assuage the feelings of the victims of environmental degradation merely skirt over serious issues of environmental fertility and the sus-

tenance of life. Every oil spillage or exploration activity reduces to a significant degree the carrying capacity of the environment and displaces rural folk from gainful employment. Remediation, after all, constitutes the new threshold for environmental restitution that may keep the women of Warri in perpetual peace. It is quite remarkable that the non-violent strategy of women have begun to elicit positive responses from the management of oil companies to several oil bearing communities in the Niger-Delta. A non-violent approach has succeeded where a violent approach has failed.

RELATED CURRENT ISSUES

Women have inadvertently deployed non-violent technique to achieve results where other forms of abrasive struggle have failed. Youths in the Niger-Delta are beginning to embrace non-violent techniques in their negotiations with oil companies and the Federal Government. It is quite revealing that otherwise combative militiamen in the volatile region of the Niger-Delta are beginning to embrace non-violence as a strategy for negotiation with the government. It is quite soothing that Tom Atare and Dokubo Asare who threatened to blow up oil pipelines in the Niger-Delta and actually gave expatriate oil personnel a deadline of October 1, 2004 to leave the area, have finally laid down their arms and are now preaching peace (Guardian Newspaper, October 22, 2004). This is a worthwhile aftermath of the Warri women protest.

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