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EFFECT OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION ON WOMEN FARMERS IN OGONI, NIGER DELTA

Okah Fortune Nne,
[1]Rivers State local Government Service Commission, Port Harcourt, Rivers State
Corresponding Email: nnefortuneokah@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This paper is an exploratory literature search of oil exploitation in the Niger Delta region and how it has largely helped to degrade the environment. Specifically, the paper looks at the impact of oil exploration, environmental degradation on the farming activities of Ogoni women. As pointed out, data for this paper were obtained from published information from literature search.

Ogoni women remain educationally disadvantaged, oil exploitation and the resultant pollution have left the Ogoni women with no adequate means to maintain or support their families, and this gives rise to tension in the home and community. Environmental degradation places the entire population of the region at risk. Security forces often beat, rape women, and commit other sexual criminal acts.

The paper recommends that, Extension agents should redesign a strategic plan to educate female farmers and increase their knowledge and skill base, which are essential for effective use of inputs. Oil companies should ensure proper trapping of gases, prevent the occurrence of oil spillage, and drilling should be done far away from the farm settlements.

INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta

According to Niger Delta Report (1998), "the Niger Delta is the territory that lies between the estuaries of the Benin River to the West, and the Cross River to the East of the River Niger. It covers a distance of about 270 miles along the Atlantic Coast, and stretches for about 120 miles inland". The region is described by SPDC (2004) as the largest wetland in Africa, and the second largest in the world after the Mississippi. The Niger Delta is crisscrossed by an intricate watery maze of marshlands, labyrinthine creeks, tributaries, and lagoons, which link together the main rivers: Forcados, Nun, Benin, Brass, Bonny (all estuaries of the River Niger), Kwa-Ibo, the Cross and other separate streams.

The current legislative definition of the Niger Delta by the Federal Government of Nigeria includes a geographical area covering nine States (Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers) in the southern part of the country. The region is inhabited by numerous ethnic nationalities such as the Ijaw, Urhobo, Isoko, Itsekiri, Ogoni, Igbo, Kwale, Kalabari, Ikwerre, Okrika, Ibani, Ekpeye, Gokana, Eleme, Ndoni, Abua, Odual, Edo.

Ogoni land

Ogoni land is part of the Niger Delta region, and it is located in Rivers State on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea, east of the city of Port Harcourt. It extends across the Local Government Areas (LGAs) - Khana, Gokhana, Eleme and Tai. Traditionally, Ogoniland is divided into the six kingdoms of Babbe, Gokana, Ken-Khana, Nyo-Khana, Eleme and Tai. The Ogoni Kingdom (also known as the Ogonis) is one of the many indigenous groups in the region of south-east Nigeria. They number about 1.5 million people, and live in a 404-square-mile (1,050 km^2) homeland which they also refer to as Ogoni, or Ogoni land. They share common oil-related environmental problems with the Ijaw people of Niger Delta (NDDP, 2006). The Ogoni rose to international attention after a massive public protest campaign against Shell Oil, led by the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP).

Despite these challenges, the discovery of crude oil in the late 1950s has transformed the Niger-Delta region from a primarily fishing and agrarian economy into a complex web of economic and industrial activities of unimaginable proportions. Overnight, the serene and peaceful creeks and swamps were turned into a convoluted sprawling mass of industrial waste, noise pollution, overpopulation, exploitation, poverty, deprivation, and squalor (Nwachukwu and Ekanem, 2016). Yet, in spite of the mess, Multi-National Oil Companies (MNOCs)flow out millions of barrels of crude oil per day (Okonofua, 2011). Environmental degradation caused by the oil

spill and other oil and gas activities has worsened the economic levels of the people by destroying the once abundant fishing grounds and decreasing availability of quality agricultural land, thereby furthering impoverishment of those affected (Kingston, 2011).

Ogoni Women

Ogoni women in the Niger Delta are traditionally very hard-working income earners as they are required to help feed their families. Both men and women supplement family living expenses by undertaking projects such as the education of the children and housing provision, as well as through subsistence farming, fishing, petty trading and activities in the informal sector (Okah, 2017). However, the women have benefited least from employment in the oil companies and from the token compensation arising from acquisition, pollution and devastation of farm lands and fishing waters. Compensation claims are made by traditional rulers and local elites, and women are least recognized as owners of land and water resources. The women in the Niger Delta are victimized because of gender discriminatory practices. Furthermore, women have been victims of the economic crisis. This has induced greater women participation in the informal sector, as they struggle to absorb the deficits and scarcities in the family economies (Baniko-Wiwa, 1997).

Women and Agricultural Production

In developing countries like Nigeria, women contribute to both viable and subsistence agriculture, including livestock and fishing, as casual laborers and unpaid family workers. In crop production, both men and women participated fairly equally in site clearance, land preparation, sowing and planting, while women carried out most of the weeding, harvesting, transportation, threshing, processing and storage activities. Although there were no clear-cut women's participation in crops as might exist in some countries of the world, gender division of labor on the nature of the agricultural enterprise was in operation used in the production process. As a result, men were involved in mechanical land preparation, irrigation, spraying, mechanical harvesting, tractor-driving etc, while women were involved in more labor-intensive work. Thus, women broadcast seeds and fertilizers, hand-weed and harvest, pick fruits and vegetables by hand, and carry produce on their backs. Likewise, they spent much time in post-harvest activities. With some exceptions, women participated very little in land preparation; transportation and marketing of agricultural produce (FAO, 2018).

The role of women in crop production has been well documented by FAO (2018). Studies revealed that in countries such as Nigeria, Ethiopia and Sudan, women's participation in crop

production had increased as a result of male migration to urban areas to seek employment. Men and women were equally responsible for the production of potatoes, citrus, vines, greenhouse vegetables, pulses and deciduous fruit crops in Ethiopia, and women were responsible for planting, pruning, grafting, harvesting and processing grapes. In Turkey, Syria, Tunisia, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Mauritania, majority of the women were involved in all labor-intensive crop production activities such as sowing, thinning, weeding, harvesting, threshing and processing. In Iran and Mauritania, women's share of labor was greatest in rice cultivation. In Egypt and Sudan, women were active in all aspects of crop production. They were responsible for land clearing and preparation, seed treatment, sowing, transporting and pest control. In Morocco, women were responsible for 34.8% of the work associated with cereal, legume and fodder production, and studies showed that the overall percentage of women's participation was 41% in crop production. Women in Kenya spent significant amounts of time working and managing crops. Women alone managed 40 % of farms in Western Kenya. In East Africa, women spent up to 16 hours a day working in the fields, and were responsible for 60-80 % of all food grown. Women were responsible for at least 70 % of staple food production in Africa. They were also involved in other agricultural activities, including food processing and marketing, cash cropping and animal husbandry (FAO, 2016).

In different parts of the world, Livestock production plays a vital and imperative role in farming systems. Livestock rearing in nomadic, as well in semi-nomadic societies, was the main production activity and source of most, if not all economic output. In animal husbandry, women had a multiple role in livestock management, and their activities were wide ranging from care of animals, grazing, fodder collection, cleaning of animal sheds to processing milk and livestock production. In livestock management, women in 90% of families did indoor jobs like milking, feeding, cleaning, etc. Women's roles increase as farm sizes increase (to about 78 % of that of male farmers). Women help men to work so that dairy chores go smoothly every day. Oji (2002) examined women farmers' involvement in animal production in Afikpo South, Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Results showed that 77, 73, 25, and 19 % of the respondents were involved in domestic fowl, goat, duck, and sheep production, respectively. Most of the respondents were engaged in clearing (89 %) and livestock feeding (83 %), while involvement in livestock processing was only 12 %. Muhammad (2003) mentioned that women normally participated in all types of field activities, including catering of the livestock, crop sowing and management, crop harvesting and post-harvest activities. Females had a major role in decision

making for livestock raising and related activities. In a nutshell, except grazing, women were involved in almost all livestock-related activities starting from fodder cutting to milk processing. Muhammad (2003) also conducted a study to investigate milk production performance and inter-relationships among buffaloes in Peshawar. They concluded that in urban areas, the farmers were following 100% stall-feeding practice, in peri-urban areas 30.2% and in rural areas only 3.67% were using stall-feeding. A higher proportion of the farmers (89.9%) were growing their own fodder in rural areas as compared to urban areas (3.55%). A higher proportion of the farms in urban areas were in poor condition (47.3%) as compared to rural areas (16.2%). It was also concluded that buffaloes maintained in farms located in urban and semi-urban areas had better performance than those did in rural areas. They suggested that growing improved varieties of fodder crops would increase lactation yield in livestock and profit.

Effects of Environmental Degradation on Ogoni Women Farmers

The people of the Niger Delta region depends on land and sea resources for sustenance. The women play active socio-economic roles in the harsh Niger Delta environment and form the first line of social defense against socio-economic deprivations in the region (Amnesty International,2018). The women have benefitted least from employment in the oil companies, and have been excluded from minimal compensation arising from acquisition, pollution, and destruction of farmlands and fishing waters (Nwajah, 2003). Often, the women are custodians of resources such as food, water, and firewood used for cooking. For example, in Ogoni land, when a woman gets married, her husband will give her a piece of land to farm. It is from that farm that she feeds her family and grows food for sale to purchase other staples (Wiwa, 2010). This practice guaranteed the women a certain level of financial independence. Fishing and gathering of seafood, and farming in the forest areas represent the primary sources of financial livelihood for rural women in Ogoni land (Nwachukwu and Ekanem, 2016). As the resourcefulness of these women depended on the viability of their environment, they become susceptible to over exploitation of the remarkably slim resources and thus experience some of the harshest consequences of the prevailing conditions (Ihayere *et al*., 2013; Odoemene, 2011). Ogoni women in the Niger Delta region remain educationally disadvantaged, and the percentage of school enrollment significantly lags behind the median score (WBEE,2008). The lack of employment for many young men and women makes them an ongoing responsibility for their mothers long after they should have been independent (Wiwa, 2010). The constant

acquisition of new territory for oil exploitation and the resultant pollution have left the Ogoni women with no means to maintain or support their families, and this gives rise to tension in the home and community (Wiwa, 2010). The precarious nature of life of women caused by environmental degradation places the entire population of the region at risk. Security forces deployed by the government or petro-business to quell the insurgency in the area often beat, rape women, and commit other sexual criminal acts (Ajodo-Adebanjoko, 2017). Women victimized by a series of crises in the region lamented that:

The river they are polluting is both our life and death. We depend on it for everything. When this situation became unbearable, we decided to come together to protest. We insisted on dialogue with the oil companies, but the soldiers refused and started kicking us with their boots. They flogged us, they wounded us. As I am talking to you, three of our women are still missing. As we are disgraced this way, those of us remaining will go there and let them kill us. We don't want Shell, Chevron, Texaco or any other oil companies. (Olankunle, 2010).

In many instances, security forces invade private homes; terrorize residents, and gang rape girls (Naku, 2021). The implications of these actions on the well-being of families and communities of the victims can be quite severe. Some of the consequences include stigma and social exclusion that may lead to forced prostitution, fatherless children, child abandonment and neglect, prevalence of sexually-transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS (HIV, 2010), and homelessness (Obi, 2011; Odoemene, 2011). These trends indicate a breakdown of societal moral fiber and social values all for which indigenous Niger Delta communities were reputed and respected (Odoemene, 2011). Akiyode (2009) argued that women have a vital role to play in environmental management and development, and their active participation is necessary to achieve sustainable growth. Akiyode asserted that the rural woman is the last to be hired by oil companies; thus, she suffers a discrepant impoverishment thereby deflating her gender status especially relative to men.

Despite their roles in agricultural production, women face severe handicaps. They are in fact the largest group of landless labourers with little real security in case of break-up of the family owing to death or divorce. Inheritance laws and customs discriminate against them as land reform and settlement programmes usually give sole title and hence the security needed for obtaining production credits to the husband. Agricultural development programmes are usually planned by men and aimed at men. Mechanization, for example, alleviates the burden of tasks

that are traditionally men's responsibility, leaving women's burdens unrelieved or even increased. The excess burden of work on women ("the double day" of the farm work plus house work) also acts as a stimulus to have many children so that they can help out with chores from an early age. Extension workers almost exclusively aim their advice at men's activities and crops. In some regions, this bias may depress production of subsistence food crops (often women's crops) in favour of increased production of cash crops (often men's crops) so that family nutrition suffers.

CONCLUSION

It was revealed from the paper that oil exploration impacted negatively on crop productivity. This implied that farmers were still suffering locally on how to improve crop productivity.

There are negative impacts of livestock productivity. This is therefore a challenge to extension agents to increase farmers' knowledge and skill base on efficient use of inputs.

Oil exploration had negative impact on aquatic organism. It was evident that fish farming was one of the main stays of the area, therefore all hands should be on deck to improve the productivity of aquatic organism.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Extension agents should redesign a strategic plan to educate farmers and increase the knowledge and skill base of farmers, which are essential for effective use of inputs.

2. Oil companies should ensure proper trapping of gases, prevent the occurrence of oil spillage, and drilling should be done far away from the community settlement.

3. The management of the oil companies should ensure that enough compensation and utilities for comfort be promptly made available to community members and farmers.

5. Extension agents should be given refresher training to be able to curtail the damage of oil exploration on agriculture.

6. Community leaders should seek ways to compel the Federal government and oil companies to devote more resources to tackle environmental degradation.

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