

NIGERIAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW

Vol. 3 Nos. 1 & 2

ISSN 1596 - 6151

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A SPECIAL EDITION OF NSS JOURNAL ON: THE NIGER DELTA

THE SILENT ONES: WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION, WHAT WAY FORWARD?

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Introduction

The acknowledged silent positions of women in all spheres of political, social, and economic life is not new in the literature of Gender and Development. Over the years, extensive research has been carried out by scholars to ascertain the causes and possible solutions to address the problem. As a way forward, several new policies have emerged to replace existing ones. Both government and Non-governmental Organizations (NGO's) daily seek new options to address existing problems of women in development: discrimination, Inequality, violence against women, etc. The major argument put forward in this work bothers on the hidden position of women who in spite of their large number account for the highest poverty rates in the Niger Delta. Similarly, their low-representation in all spheres of economy attests to their silence and invisibility. In terms of policy formulation and implementation, the average woman (rural or urban) still occupies a back position. One striking feature of women in the Niger Delta is their contribution to the food sector which cannot be undermined. Tuyizere (2007:326) noted that in "most societies, women do agricultural work, yet they have no money and because they are not educated and do not receive vocational training, they have no access to productive resources". Despite the fact that women are predominantly food producers, majority of them are food insecure. The worst hit are the ones breastfeeding and pregnant women whose protein and energy intake fall below daily requirements.

The World Food Body, Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) in 1985 reported that women contribute between sixty (60) to seventy (70) percent of domestic economy in Nigerian rural communities, and their access to certain inputs such as land- the principal resource for food production is largely hindered by certain socio-cultural factors. In addition, women's access to credit facilities, improved seedlings as well as extension officers required to teach new skills and modern farming techniques for maximum yield remain an uphill task for the average rural farmer (women) in the Niger Delta. Precisely ten years after FAO's report, Oyekanmi (1995) reports that, "over seventy (70) percent of the country's populations reside in the rural areas". Food crops for sustaining the growing population in both rural and urban centers are derived from agricultural activities and farm units of the rural geo-political zones. Besides, food crops, fiber and raw materials for local and international factories are supplied mainly by farmers residing in the rural areas

majority of who are women. The vantage position and roles of women in the Niger Delta has been attributed to several factors: education, social, cultural, economic and political. In this paper, the contribution of women in the Niger Delta region in terms of food production and food security and the obvious neglect of this vital group is critically examined with a view to highlighting the way forward.

Theoretical Framework

The current state of underdevelopment in the Niger Delta area no doubt has brought about several agitations which has taken various dimensions. The region is confronted by farmers especially the rural women who engage in agricultural practices yet, cannot afford a good meal per day. This calls for concern and a revisit to women studies. In spite of women's enormous contribution to development, several militating factors tend to hinder steady supply of food crops for local consumption and cash crops for export. It however, calls for a rational thinking with a view to lighten the burden of this disadvantaged group of people. There is need however for a 'give and take' approach. If women give so much, they deserve so much in return. Adopting the social exchange theory, it buttress how we feel about a relationship with other persons depending on our perception of fairness. The social exchange theory is a social psychological and sociological perspective that explains social change and stability as a process of negotiated exchange. The social exchange theory becomes a useful tool in explaining and finding answers to the current marginalized positions of women in the Niger Delta where they have little or no representation in formulating and implementing policies which directly affect them. They remain invisible and silent in developmental issues with the exception of a few. In the words of Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Prime Minister of Norway and Head World Health Organization (WHO),

“Experience shows that investing in women is one of the most cost effective ways of promoting development. As mothers, as producers or suppliers of food, fuel and water, as traders and manufacturers, as political and community leaders, women are at the center of the process of change”

Because women are central to development, they need not be silent and invisible in developmental issues even though there is a call for new reforms that will enhance productivity and sustainable development which addresses the needs of women and children as well as other vulnerable groups in the Niger Delta and beyond.

The Region Called Niger Delta

The Niger Delta is a prominent region of the southern part of Nigeria covering about 70,000 square kilometers. It comprises of nine states: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Edo, Imo, Delta, Ondo and Rivers States and with about one third of it made up of wetlands, swamps and mangrove forests. It is Africa's largest Delta and the third largest world mangrove (Gabriel, 1998:1)

The Niger Delta is popularly referred to as the 'wealth base of the nation'. Since the discovery of crude oil at Oloibiri oil fields in Bayelsa State, in 1956, over 50 years ago, other viable sectors such as Agriculture and mining has been obviously neglected, for instance, in 1990, Nigeria had about 43 percent of her total population working in Agriculture. The World Bank projected that the number will fall by year 2010. Since the discovery of Oil in Nigeria till date, the country's economy has been heavily dependent on crude oil which accounts for 95 percent of government revenue. The main ethnic groups of the Niger Delta are: the Ijaws (who are the largest ethnic group in the area), the Itsekiris, Isokos, Yorubas, Efiks, Ibibios and other smaller ethnic groups. A World Bank report in the 1950s indicated that the Niger Delta had tremendous agricultural potential enough to produce crops for itself and for export. But now, with a rapidly declining agricultural industry, Nigeria must import many of the crops it used to export, such as groundnuts, palm oil and cocoa. On the other hand food crops that are meant for local consumptions are not readily available. Even when available, affordability becomes another issue as prices are no longer within the reach of many especially women, the main producers of the food crops in the region who are perpetually ravaged with hunger, poverty and diseases.

Women and Development: A Brief Discourse

Several researches have been conducted on women and development. The strategic role of women in development remains very crucial. Unfortunately, a good number of women are often excluded from economic, political and educational opportunities in the development process. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2004) described the status of women worldwide:

1. Of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty globally, 70 percent are women.
2. Among the world's 6 billion people, women outnumber men by two to one.
3. Adult women suffer more than men from malnutrition. Of adults suffering from iron deficiency, 458 million are women and 238 million are men. Of those stunted due to protein deficiency, 450 million are women while 400 million are men.
4. Each year, at least half a million die of complications caused by pregnancy. In almost all poor countries, pregnancy complications are the largest single cause of death among women in their reproductive years.
5. Although women represent 41 percent of all workers in under-developed countries, their wages are 30-40 percent less than those of men for comparable work.
6. Women constitute less than one-seventh of administrators and managers in developing countries
7. Women hold only 10 percent of seats in the world's parliaments and 6 percent in national cabinets.

The above data by UNFPA (2004) is no doubt worrisome and calls for a new gender and development policy committed to actions that will meet women's immediate needs and address the underlying causes of women's failure to benefit equally from development. This is because, the strategic roles of women in development cannot longer be undermined. Besides, their multiple roles in reproduction and production, women constitute a critical segment in most African societies especially in the Niger Delta. According to Spore (1993), "despite slight improvement in recent years, development often fail take into account the role and importance of women. Yet, women account for seventy (70) percent of agricultural workers, eighty (80) percent of food producers, one hundred percent (100) of those who process basic foodstuffs and they undertake sixty (60) to ninety (90) percent of the marketing". Ironically, (Kuye, 2004) states "the role of women in these activities, so important economically has for many years remained in obscurity essentially because women never play any part in political activities or decision making process". The low representation of women in politics at various levels of government (local, state and national) in the past and at present by most developing nations such as Nigeria and specifically the Niger Delta attest to Kuye's (2004) assertion.

Women and Food Security

The strategic role of women in food production and security is now widely recognized. Many studies suggest that this has become even more important as a result of men's increased migration to the cities and towns (FAO, 1992; Palmer, 1992).

Unlike most part of Northern Nigeria where the men are responsible for food production and food processing of all kinds, the average rural Niger Delta women make significant contributions to food production, processing and marketing of food stuffs. However, they still face formidable obstacles to their potential role as a major economic and social force in the development of the agricultural sector (Rahman & Haruna, 1999). The position of women in meeting the challenges of agricultural development and food security, cannot be over-emphasized. The primacy of women in food production and processing must be recognized. (Rahman et al, 2004)

As women are the backbones of the agricultural sector, accounting for 60-80 percent of agricultural labour and being responsible for 80percent of food production. (Ngur, 1987; Kabeer, 1984; Ingawa,1999; Mgbada, 2000), it is important to bridge actual potential productivity gap and enhance the overall economic development of the populace.

Women contribute significantly to ensure availability of food supply for the teeming population of the Niger Delta ushered in by oil production activities. The women are involved in practically all aspects of agriculture from rice, cassava, plantain and fish farming to snail rearing and animal husbandry although on a small scale. It is acknowledged that while the men concentrate on cash crops such as rubber, palm kernel etc for both local

consumption and export, the women are involved in the cultivation of food crops of all kinds (cassava, rice, plantain, fruits, vegetables etc). These are seasonal and perishable crops meant for immediate consumption or processed for other long term usage. Suffice to add that the women not only produce, but are also directly involved in the processing and market distribution of the various farm produce. Indeed, this segment of the population depends heavily on agricultural activities for their livelihood. World Bank, (1992) reports that "women in Africa are prominent in agricultural activities especially food processing and marketing, cash crops and animal husbandry". The agricultural input of women in the Niger Delta no doubt replicates the above World Bank report. In a similar vein, (Oppong, 1988:50) states:

"in some parts of Nigeria especially in the east, women have been and continue to be responsible for much of the demanding agricultural work, especially weeding and harvesting. They are also responsible for the energy sapping and time consuming tasks of food processing, food preparation, and marketing of farm produce, conveyed to periodic markets over considerable distances".

In spite of the huge presence of women in the food sector, one expects this category of people to be better for it in terms of improvement in their total quality of life. However, the rate of squalor, poverty and gross income inequality of the average rural Niger Delta woman, is no doubt very alarming and worrisome. According to the World Bank, around 80percent of oil revenue accrues to just 1percent of the population. It is very saddening to note that more than 70percent of Nigerians live in extreme poverty on less than \$1 a day making Nigeria one of the poorest nations of the World. A closer examination of the Niger Delta region shows that poverty is evident among its population especially the women and children. The abundant oil and mineral resources of the region notwithstanding, the rate of underdevelopment of the oil rich region is rather pathetic. A United Nations report from the Niger Delta asserts that the prostitution of young women from poor villages into the wealthier oil regions had raised the incidence of HIV/ AIDS in that part of the country. The report adds that the highest rate in this region is among women and girls, especially those between 15 and 24years.

In recent time, the commitment of women to food security and food stability of their communities seem to have been watered down as most women who ought to be in the farm contributing their quota prefer other cheaper source of income. These days, farming is no longer attractive. In some quarters, it is considered as "old fashioned". Prostitution, child trafficking, kidnapping and other social vices are popular means of making quick money. Prostitutes/commercial sex workers are patronized by oil rich workers (expatriates and the locals). The danger here is, abandoning agricultural practices in the hands of very few ignorant of modern farm techniques obviously mean low and poor farm yields and consequent increase in the demand for the limited products. This partly explains the reason

for the current price hike of food stuffs and other essentials in the Niger Delta when compared to other parts of the nation. Other militating factors include:

1. Land Ownership

According to Gabriel (1998), Land the principal resource for farming activities and food production is neither owned nor controlled by the women. At best, they rent farmlands and this is largely determined by their financial base and the extent to which the men are ready and willing to lease the land. The patriarchal society in which the women found themselves further contributes to this discrimination. Consequently, the women have no direct access to land for agricultural purposes as they do not own the land they till. At best, women co-own land with their husbands but lack credit facilities to boost their effort in maximizing their potentials. The available land is negotiated with foreign-based oil companies by the powers that be for oil exploration activities while the left-over for agricultural activities are threatened by various environmental and man-made hazards perpetuated by oil exploration activities in the region. There are reported cases of women protest against harmful activities (environmental pollution and degradation) from oil activities in the Niger Delta.

2. Access to Credit Facilities

In spite of the enormous contributions of women to the development process in terms of ensuring food availability both for local consumption and commercial purposes, access to credit facilities remains a major constraint. Most women lack education and property and therefore do not qualify for credit.

3. Lack of Information

Another obstacle to women's participation in the development process is lack of information about women and their contribution to development. As a result, there is a tendency to ignore women which is currently the plight of women in every level of governance. The development planners often see women as passive beneficiaries of essential social services. Women are seen as consumers and never as contributors. No wonder, women's domestic and reproductive roles are neither acknowledged nor included in development planning process. Lack of vital information, data and statistics on women's contribution to food production, processing, marketing and supply makes their enormous contribution invisible for planning and recognition.

4. Patriarchal Attitudes

The status of women has through the ages been a cause for great concern in every culture and in every clime. In some parts of the world, it has passed the stage of aggressive feminism to radical feminism. Nigeria is a highly patriarchal society where men dominate all sphere of women's lives. Women are in a subordinate position (particularly at the community and household levels). According to Aliyu (2007:1), a patriarchal society cannot but produce

people with patriarchal orientation, attitude, beliefs ideas and so on” In such a society, while males are socialized into a position of superiority, females are socialized into a position of subordination, which, of course may not be challenged because such positions must have been ideologically taken as natural. The relation of male superiority and female subordination has been taken for granted, over the years, it has remained unnoticed, unchallenged and defined as natural thus the rural Niger Delta woman remains the silent one, she is denied access to land, the principal resource for food production and much more, credit in the form of loan facilities to enhance maximum yield.

5. Culture and Tradition

The Niger Delta women like their counterparts in third world countries are constrained by multiple internal and external factors which has implications for their contribution towards development. Specifically, “culture is popularly defined as the totality of the people's way of life and any other capabilities acquired by man for living as a member of the society” (Taylor : 1891), as well as other societal tradition remain a clog in the wheel of progress or development. For instance, Moser (1993) observes that “in many countries, women are entitled to own land, but local customs prevent them from assuming ownership”. As previously noted, this prevents them from obtaining loan because they have no property for collateral, and it keeps them from receiving extension training required for maximum yield.

Other gender based socio-cultural practices which inhibit the development process include all forms of domestic violence against women: obnoxious widowhood practices, female genital mutilation (FGM), early or forced marriage, wife battering etc. These restrictions created by socio-cultural practices can be blamed for the poor participation of women in politics and decision making process (Aina, 2007:2)

Recommendations

The relative neglect of women as key players in the provision of food for the increasing population of the Niger Delta and beyond has major repercussions for families, the communities and overall development of society. It is recommended that if women are to provide better food and nutrition to their families, “they must be assured access to land and credit, as well as training and appropriate woman-friendly technology to make their work easier, more productive and less time-consuming” (Goldschmidt, 1987; 1994).

Women's major drawback in development is lack of education thus their inability to maximize potentials. Oppong (1997) contends that “illiteracy is especially acute among women. Not only do fewer girls than boys attend school, but far more drop out because of early marriage and teenage pregnancy”. However, a number of studies show that investing

in women's education is the single investment that yields the highest returns. Education is an essential tool for achieving equality and development. Education enables people to take charge of change and shape their own destiny. Education leads to higher incomes, opportunities and it remains the primary means of strengthening women's position. There's therefore the need for both Government and Non-governmental agencies within and outside the Niger Delta to ensure that women have more access to higher education and vocational training in order to close the existing gap. There is a need to encourage development of women's abilities and self-reliance through increase income earning from agriculture and related economic activities. Similarly, women should be trained to involve in savings, investment, owning of assets (fixed/ liquid) and managing finance than the current situation. Beyond these recommendations, women themselves must seek out ways of challenging and changing their situation. As Moser, (1995) noted, numerous cases show that rural women are capable of being agents of their own development.

Conclusion

The task of this paper was to evaluate the Niger Delta women as the silent ones in development and to identify factors hindering their maximum potential in the food sector. The paper noted that, in spite of the enormous contributions of women to food security for local and export use via their inputs into agriculture, the women themselves lack food. Women in the Niger Delta like their counterparts in other parts of Africa have remained the fillers of the food baskets yet their invaluable contributions notwithstanding, findings from literature reveals that women are largely marginalized and excluded in the formulation of policies which directly affect them. In addition, their contribution to development is hampered by several other militating factors: lack of education, credit facilities, land, improved seedlings and extension officers, culture/traditions and environmental degradation etc.

According to UNDP Report (2004) "development that is not engendered is endangered" therefore engendering national development is to ensure that both men and women are free to develop their full potentials, and to make choices without restrictive gender role. "It thus follows therefore, that women and men's needs and interests are to be equally valued and protected if we are to achieve sustainable development" (Aina, 2007:2). As a way forward, it is the responsibility of women themselves, government, Non governmental organizations and other stakeholders to as a matter of urgency, fashion out lasting solutions to make women's contributions especially in the food sector more visible by removing all obstacles to women in development.

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