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WOMEN, ENVIRONMENT AND FOOD PRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGE OF THE NIGER DELTA

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempt to appraise the contributions of rural women to food production and the various challenges encountered in maximizing their potentials in the Niger Delta. It acknowledges the fact that despite women's roles as natural home-makers, care-givers and cradle rockers, their place in food production cannot be over-looked. Their activities range from vegetable farming of all kinds to cassava and rice production. The women not only produce but also process, market and distribute farm produce to consumers either on a small, medium or large scale. Despite their huge presence and enormous contributions to the food sector, the poverty level of the rural women in the Niger Delta region is worrisome and calls for concern. The article adopts the political economy approach as a theoretical framework. It demonstrates that social, cultural, and physical environmental factors are major obstacles to women. The paper demonstrates that due to certain socio-cultural inhibitions, women do not have access to land and credit facilities to enhance their maximum participation in food security thus the struggle continues. These environmental factors coupled with oil exploration activities in the region pose serious threats for food production and sustainability in the near future. The paper recommends strategies for overcoming the obstacles including the removal of socio-cultural inhibitions, new environmental laws to protect the rights of women and the active involvement of women in designing and implementing policies that directly affect them.

Key words: Women, Environment, Food production, Niger Delta

INTRODUCTION

The argument that scholars have overlooked the contributions of women is no longer tenable. This is attested to by the number and quality of works already available on women. Adepoju and Oppong (1994) posit that "globally, there is an increasing recognition of women's contribution in all spheres of life. That issues related to women are now top priorities of policy and research agendas". To my mind, this is a fortunate development.

One aspect of women's activities which has attracted an exciting study is their role in agriculture. The women of the Niger Delta have in the past and at present contributed meaningfully to agricultural development. In terms of food production, processing and marketing, the women's role cannot be overlooked. It is indeed worrisome that despite such huge contributions to the viable sector of the economy, there exists a wide gap in the level of income and consequent impoverishment of the women.

The Niger Delta is a prominent region of the southern part of Nigeria covering about 70,000 square kilometers comprises of seven 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 unique because it is the home of Nigeria's oil industry, the highest revenue earner of the country's economy till date.

Since the discovery of crude oil in Oloibiri – Bayelsa State South east of Nigeria in 1956, over fifty years ago, oil exploration and exploitation in this region has raised a number of issues such as land degradation, deforestation, oil spillage, coastal and riverbank erosion, flooding, sewage and waste water which pose great challenge to women's agricultural activities. Recently, crises in this oil rich region have taken another dimension in form of violent clashes, killings, hostage taken and kidnapping of expatriate oil workers by aggrieved citizens in protest for marginalization of oil resource in abundant quantity in the area. In spite of the crises that have engulfed the region in recent time, it is still acknowledged as the 'wealth base' of the nation.

It is against this background that this paper tries to examine the contributions of the women in this region to food production and discuss some of the environmental and non-environmental problems often encountered by this vulnerable group in the quest to contribute their quota to this viable sector of the Nigerian economy. The paper is anchored on the political economy theory.

The Political Economy Theory

This theory has been found to be very useful in explaining the realities of the specific political, economic and social matrix of colonial and post-colonial Africa. The theory exposes the interaction between indigenous social framework and foreign political and economic institutions which generated many changes within the social structure of African Society. The theory of political economy derive its origin from the Marxist hypothesis – "economy determines political attitudes". Thus, this theory gives primacy to the material conditions, particularly economic factors in the explanation of social life.

It assumes a dialectical relationship between and among different elements of social life including economic, social, and political structure and the belief system.

Broadly as a macro structural theory of economic, political and social structures, it has successfully provided the conceptual framework for explaining different structures of exploitations and dominations exemplified in gender relations in most part of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Theorists argue that the rise in economic inequality is accompanied by political relations of domination and subordination which are often achieved by the development of institutionalized repression necessary to control the demand of the economically disadvantaged for redistribution (Afonja 1979, Ladipo, 1981)

Adherents of political economy perspective believe that the inter-connections between and among various elements of the society, economics, politics, ideology and other institutional factors of change must be thoroughly understood for women to be adequately integrated into development (Afonja, 1981)

The African political economy can be seen in the light of feminist studies which incorporate both the achievements made by women through history, and ways of overcoming the oppression that developed during the capitalist era. As Mueller (1987) stated, far from liberating women in the Third World, development efforts continue to foster the international capitalist order, thereby contributing to the maintenance of the same oppressive order. The above theoretical perspective is no doubt useful in explaining the situation of African women especially those involved in food production in the Niger Delta beyond patriarchy, environmental issues to include the global exploitation of men and women within the capitalist system

Women's contribution to food stability: Cultural and legal Inhibitions

Women contribute significantly to ensure availability of food supply for the teeming population of the Niger Delta ushered in by oil production activities. According to Wuraola (2001:109), food production is the traditional role of women in Nigeria: in the East while men plant yams, women plant cassava, maize, pepper, leaf vegetables (spinach, onion), fruit vegetables (okro, garden egg, melon). 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. Niger Delta being a predominantly riverine community, the people depend to a large extent on sea foods and fishes.

World Bank (1994) report 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 spite of the huge presence of women in the food sector, one expects this category of people to be better for it. However, the rate of squalor, poverty and gross income inequality is no doubt alarming and worrisome.

Land, the principal resource for food production is neither owned nor controlled by the women. 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 agriculture is threatened by various environmental and man-made hazards perpetuated by oil exploration activities in the region. Again, the women have no say in these issues which directly affect their total wellbeing. Wanyela (2003) captures this when he states, the woman 'do not have the exclusive right to produce what she desires without the due permission from her husband, son, brother and / or male relations because, she neither owns nor inherit land Co-ownership of land causes

difficulties especially where a wife may have different priorities from her husband. Consequently, women are handicapped in making decisions on the acquisition, use and disposal of very important piece of real estate. (Igube, 2007).

Lack of ownership rights has tended to compromise women's access to credit facilities due to lack of required collateral usually (land/real estate) often required by banks for granting such credits.

The 1978, land Act of Nigeria gave access to all Nigerians (male and female) to own land after obtaining Certificate of Occupancy (C of O) from authorized persons or constituted authority. The extent to which this provision of the law has been adhered to is questionable especially when one considers the marginalization of women in land issues and the flagrant discrimination encountered by this disadvantaged group in the region.

In his contribution on "women and property in a male dominated society, Alliyu (2007:6) notes, the greater the access, of both sexes, to property equitably in the society, the more they are likely to contribute to development almost equitably. He stressed that any imbalance in access to property by either sex would definitely lead to power imbalance, imbalance relations and less contribution to development from the less powerful. This no doubt is the lot of women in the food sector of the Niger Delta.

Despite legal provisions, smaller families and improved educational employment opportunities over the last century or so, marked inequalities remain between the social and economic roles of men and women. (Oakley, 1974).

It is no gainsaying that arable land for agricultural purposes are grossly inadequate and oil exploration activities has continually pose some great challenges in this region .

Similarly, the bulk of land in the Niger Delta is under customary land holding under the custodian of the community leaders or the traditional rulers thus, the women have no rights of ownership since they are perceived as dependants and pieces of property who are themselves, liable to inheritance.

The legal system in a given society ought to ensure the supremacy and sovereignty of the constitution, equity and fairness. In cases where a will is available to dictate the rights of the woman on land ownership, the culture of the people overtakes the legal provision thus rendering the legal system subservient. This vulnerable group of the society are not only unjustly treated but are rendered penniless in most cases.

The challenge of an enabling environment

This section is sub-divided into environmental and Non-environmental concerns militating against women's contribution to agricultural economy in the Niger Delta. This section focuses on environmental problems and agricultural output of women.

Environment as used in this context refers to both the physical, natural and man-made surrounding such as the natural vegetation, land for farming and seas or rivers for fishing.

Oil exploration activities and consequent emission of gaseous, liquid and solid wastes are common environmental issues confronting women's involvement in agriculture.

The Niger Delta is under serious environmental threat owing to the various oil exploration activities in the region. Effluent discharges and gas flaring found poisonous to the inhabitants is emitted into the atmosphere on a daily basis. Water from various sources (rivers and seas) needed for the survival of fishes and other sea foods or other uses are not spared by poisonous

discharges. While lamenting the extent of environmental hazards in the Niger Delta, Uhor (1993) opined that, communities in the Niger Delta groan under the perennial destruction of their property and environment by oil spillages, which have immediate degradation effect on the ecosystem. One critical perspective in which environmental problems are pronounced in recent times relate to women who suffer double negatives due to exploration activities.

Gabriel (1998:5) states, women not only endure the most of environmental degradation, but also plays vital role in environmental management. However, women in the Niger Delta still have to grapple with environmental issues that challenge their activities.

The role and importance of women in relation to the environment and development especially food production in the Niger Delta cannot be over-emphasized. This is crucial because women depend on the environment for their daily needs such as water, food, fuel etc. consequently, the various environmental concerns such as: land degradation, oil spillage, pollution etc are serious challenges because; they reduce the quality of life of women, children and the entire population of the region. Basically, the threat to the resource base and existence of the Niger Delta as well as economic activities of women is of both local and international concern. In this regard, it underscores the Agenda 21 of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. Barely 14years after this historic conference and several other conferences and awareness campaigns on the environment, achieving lasting solution in the Niger Delta seem to be a mirage.

- **Women's access to credit : Some issues and concerns**

Land, the principal resource for farming activities and food production is a major challenge to the Niger Delta woman. They neither own nor have direct access to this scarce commodity. At best, they rent farmlands and this is largely determined by their financial base and the extent to which the men are ready / willing to lease the land. In a statement by Nwogu (1995), "The rural farmer especially the woman has no access to credit, because government officials do not trust her, ostensibly for having next to nothing as collaterals".

FAO (1985) reported that women contribute 60-70% of domestic economy in Nigerian rural communities yet; their access to certain inputs is extremely limited. The financial institutions in the country are not helping matter. High inflationary trend, increasing interest rates/bank charges and extremely complex collateral often demanded before loans are granted makes it practically impossible for women to access loans in most cases. This account for why women of the Niger Delta engage in other economic ventures in addition to farming implying that only the few women who have access to land can engage actively in food production.

- **Agric Extension services and Utilization by women**

Several definitions of Agricultural Extension exist in literature. Adams (1982) stated that it means assistance to farmers to help them identify and analyze their production, problems and become aware of the opportunities for improvement. For Nagel (1997), Agricultural Extension (AE) is the organized exchange of information and the purposive transfer of skills. Essentially, the purpose of AE is to change the behaviour of the rural people especially farmers in terms of their obsolete knowledge base in the practice of food production. It utilizes the application of scientific research and new knowledge to

agricultural practices through farmers education. The personnel are found throughout the world working for government agencies. In developing countries Agricultural Extension agencies have received large amount of support from international developing organizations such as the World Bank and the food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations.

The situation faced by farmers especially women in the Niger Delta is particularly worrisome because extension officers to teach new skills, methods or techniques for improved yield are not readily available. The use of obsolete fishing and farming equipments is still prevalent among the Niger Delta women who cannot afford new equipment. Beyond certain environmental and non-environmental challenges, hostage taking, armed robbery and general insecurity of lives and property in the Niger Delta have of recent contributed to the dearth of these experts in the region. In cases where the extension personnel are available, the financial cost of hiring their services often create a big wall between rural farmers and these needed experts

Recommendations/Policy Implications

The challenge of compensatory measure and the question of patriarchy must be addressed urgently. Because women do not own land, they are usually left out of compensatory discuss. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) research found out that strengthening women's rights to property and other assets has a positive effect on agricultural productivity, household welfare, and women's decision –making power (IFPRI, 2006)

- Women Empowerment, Equity and Justice will be a giant step in remedying the current situation in the Niger Delta. Research and experience have shown however, that investing in women brings enormous pay-offs for families, communities and nations. When women have extra dollar a day, they send their children to school, put food on the table and help break the circle of poverty. More disposable income for the mother reaps much benefit for the next generation. (Sharma, 2005)
- Government should vigorously pursue land reforms geared towards women's access to land. There is a need to re-visit the various land laws and policies that dis-empower women from land ownership and access. The question of patriarchy must be addressed from the on-set otherwise achieving gender equity in the Niger Delta will remain a mirage.
- Government through the Central Bank should formulate and implement financial/credit policy which will compel financial institutions to extend certain percentage of loans to women involved in food production.
- Periodic workshops/seminars and conferences to acquaint women with environmental and non-environmental issues that infringe upon their economic activities are crucial. In this way, government efforts and other Non- governmental agencies will be complimented.
- Intensification of aggressive public enlightenment programmes to create awareness on the roles of women in food production and the need to compliment women's efforts will yield much results.

Conclusion

Women constitute seventy (70) percent of the world's poorest people who live on \$1.00 a day or less. Women form majority of the world's agricultural labour, but often do not own the land they farm as in the case of Niger Delta examined in this work. They have little or no access to credit. In Africa, where eighty (80) percent of farmers are women, less than ten (10) percent credit meant for small farmers reaches women. Such discrimination and the work of caring for their families, mean that women earn 20-50 percent less than men. (Sharma, 2005) Although women constitute a critical element of food production in the rural economy, women's access to land in the Niger Delta is severely constrained. According to Power, (2006:2) only land of one's own gives access to the means of production. In the face of the various challenges encountered by women in agricultural activities and food security for the Niger Delta zone, the women must not fold their arms and do nothing. The time is now for women to rise up to the challenge, take positive steps to correct the situation. Active roles of women in environmental and non-environmental issues that confront them must begin with drastic steps on how to find lasting solutions. Complaining, grumbling and folding of hands will not yield any result, active participation of women in redressing issues that inhibit them in terms of maximizing their potentials in the food sector must be taken as a priority by the various women groups in and outside the Niger Delta

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