

Women in Peacebuilding

An Account of the Niger Delta Women

by Thelma Ekiyor

Introduction

West African women like women all over Africa are faced with the dire reality of violent conflicts in the subregion. Atrocious wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone have resulted in scores of internally displaced persons and refugees, most of whom are women and children. Intermittent inter-communal violence disguised as religious continues to ravage the lives of women in Nigeria as well.

Peacebuilding initiatives in the subregion are growing and have only recently begun to realize the need to include and involve women in conflict transformation and Peacebuilding processes.

Women are rising to the occasion. They now actively participate in decisions that affect their lives in very encouraging ways. For instance, Sierra Leonean and Liberian women are increasingly been heard and seen demanding from political leaders and the international community their right to be included in processes that affect their lives and the lives of their children.

Although women and children are often the primary victims of violent conflicts, they are not recognised as major stakeholders in all the peace processes undertaken in West Africa. The effects of violence and conflicts women have suffered necessitated women's groups to take up the mantle to make women recognizable stakeholders in West Africa. Women groups like the Mano River Union Women, West Africa Women Association, and many other individual women across the subregion are making a difference.

This paper gives account of the plight of the people in the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It also briefly describes the role of women in peacebuilding within the social-cultural context of the Niger Delta. This follows a theoretical analysis and justification for women's natural and inherent peacebuilding role in African society and by extension the world. It concludes with concrete ways through which women we are seizing the opportunities that now present themselves to especially young women, like ourselves, who desire active participation in the process that make for justice, peace, and community building.

A Woman's Perspective of the Niger Delta Conflict (1999-2001)

I came to Nigeria to work in the field of conflict transformation in the Niger Delta region. I was excited and saw this job as a challenge as well as a homecoming. But nothing could have prepared me for what I saw or experienced in the Niger Delta.

Living abroad in the last few years, the stories and publicity of the Niger Delta in the news and in emails I received were not very flattering of the region. It seemed like there was constant mayhem and confusion and the people of the Niger Delta were mostly depicted as "troublemakers". My first week working in the region revealed to me that

whoever wrote those articles and sent those emails had not been to or seen the region recently.

The poverty in the Niger Delta is glaring. In the midst of beautiful waterways, mangroves, delicious seafood, rich languages and culture is abject poverty. I was there to 'teach' people in these poor communities how to manage and transform conflicts.... what a challenge!

I was part of a team conducting conflict transformation workshops in 15 communities in the region. One particular community stands out, Bomadi. The "overside" (shore where cars stop to cross in canoes), as they call it, is a 5-minute boat ride to the "otherside" where the Local Government Headquarters is located. During this short ride I saw people bathing in the river and others using it as toilets.

At the Bomadi workshop I asked the lady in charge of preparing lunch if the town had a well or pipe borne water and she said no. Then I asked where she had got the water to prepare our lunch and she answered, from the river. In my shock, I asked her if she knew that people bathe and toilet in the water and she said yes and that the whole village had been raised drinking the same river water. Shockingly, the oil company post not quite 20 minutes away from the community has clean drinking water for its personnel.

What I was encountering informally was one of the causes of conflicts in the Niger Delta. The indigenes of oil producing communities where the sole wealth of the nation is obtained do not have the basic amenities such as clean drinking water, good health services and electricity. The oil companies drilling and exploring oil and gas on their land have these amenities for their employees right in front of them. This causes resentment.

During the workshops the youths elaborated on the matter. They explained that the underdevelopment in their community was part of the cause for their agitation. Apparently, during the last military regime of Sani Abacha they attended a March in Abuja and saw the affluence and development and could not believe that their Bomadi, an oil producing community, did not have clean drinking water. The experience made them adamant in their demand for equal access to development programs—that communities in the Delta must receive the development that is their right. The "troublemakers" started looking very human to me. I asked myself what it would be like if clean water were a luxury? I am yet to answer the question.

As we continued our work in other communities, I became more and more in awe of the people. They had no wealth or no clear means of acquiring wealth. They live in violence-torn communities but their hospitality to us was first class. They were always ready to help us, feed us, and educate us on their culture and the reasons they are fighting. Perhaps it helped that they saw me as one of them. It was clear that they were suspicious of the motives of outsiders particularly foreigners who they associate with the multinational corporations they accuse of exploitation.

I realized that the conflicts in the Niger Delta are different, dynamic and multi-faceted. Here are some of the causes and types of conflicts I encountered in my travels and work in the region.

1. “Exploitation, Marginalization and Oppression!”

I heard this at all the workshops we organized. Even young boys, who do not fully comprehend the meaning of the words, cry them. The people believe that they have been exploited by oil companies, marginalized by the Government and oppressed by both the Government and multinational corporations. The sentiment is that previous successive Governments sold them away to be exploited by the oil companies. There is also the belief that past Governments have marginalized the people of the Niger Delta in terms of development and infrastructure. They expressed that the Government's only concern was for oil and gas revenues that make up between 95-98% of Nigeria's export earnings. They believe that the Government will do anything to protect the source of this revenue. Security forces are posted in the region. They alleged that security personnel treat them like “outcasts” in their own country. A recurring sentiment was that they hoped this democratically elected Government would be different. However, unfortunately, the Government's handling of the Odi incident (the deployment of security troops in the community leading to the destruction of the entire village) made old fears and suspicions re-surface.

2. Elders vs Youths

There is a social revolution-taking place in the Niger Delta. Traditionally the elders are the well respected, wise custodians of the community. This is changing and has changed in some communities, where the youths have become and are becoming the custodians of their respective communities. They accuse the elders of being too soft and slow in dealing with the oil companies and some youths even accuse the elders of being puppets of the Government and oil companies. The most common term I heard the youths use in reference to the elders is “benefit captors”.

The youths in the Niger Delta are also the soldiers in the violent conflict. A rumor that a group of youths are about to attack is taken seriously as I saw in Akassa when the rumour was that a group of Koluama youths were about to attack. This rumor held the entire community ransom and a curfew was imposed. Youths have also started holding powerful political positions reserved in the past for elders at the local level. For example, in Ogbolomabiri (Nembe), the Chairman of the Local Government Council is also the leader of the youths in the community. This is no doubt the trend for future politics. Organized activist youth movements such as the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) and the youth movement under the Mobilization Of the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) have gained the recognition, if not respect, of the Government and oil companies. To ensure the success of President Bill Clinton's visit to Nigeria, President Olusegu Obasanjo called on the IYC to maintain law and order. This displays the government's awareness of the influence these groups have.

Unfortunately, because of the deeds of some youth groups, such as sabotage and kidnappings, some people equate the word “youth” in the Delta as being synonymous with all that is unruly and deviant. My experience with the youth leaders who participated in the workshops we organized was that majority of them were hardworking unemployed men. How can they be hardworking and unemployed? Well, they were unemployed men working hard to fight for what they see as an injustice against them and their communities.

Because the youths have come to hold an important role in the present situation in the Niger Delta and the elders still the traditional figures of authority, any sustainable peace and development initiatives in the region needs to create avenues through which the two groups can work together.

3. Economics Among Brothers

In working in the region we found that there is unity in the plight of the people (i.e. the problems and grievances expressed in Warri are the same in Bonny, Akassa and Eleme to name a few). But in this unity we found intra and inter communal conflicts. The intra communal conflict center around the same themes mainly power struggle in the form of chieftaincy tussles (e.g. Eleme vs. Okrika, Akassa vs. Koluama). Closer inspection reveals that economics is at the center of these conflicts. The land the communities (I gave as examples) are in conflict over, are lands on which oil exploration and exploitation activities go on. These lands are commonly known as “host communities”. Whoever is deemed the owner of such lands receives the royalties accruing from them.

Poverty being a major factor in these communities, oil royalties are a very important requirement for sustenance. In many cases, the communities fighting over the land are historically brothers or have lived as neighbors for centuries. Some of these communities lay the responsibility of the intra and inter community conflicts at the feet of the oil companies and Government, stating that they have used “divide and rule tactics” between communities to keep them fighting while government and the oil companies exploit the resources.

4. The Environment

The obvious conflict in the Niger Delta is the conflict between economics and the environment. I wrote earlier about the beauty in the Niger Delta but this beauty is eroding fast. I saw destroyed forests and waterways with oil stains. The indigenes blame all this once again on the Government and the oil companies. The people of the Niger Delta are fishermen/women and farmers. They state that oil leaks from pipes destroy the land and pollute the water, at times the water communities drink from. They say this long-standing pollution may be the cause of the high infant mortality rate in some communities. They believe that if this environmental degradation is allowed to continue their source of livelihood will be destroyed forever. They also believe that if the oil and gas wells run dry in the Niger Delta, the multinationals will move out to other prospects, the Government will look for another source of its revenue and the people of the Niger Delta will be left with desolate land and polluted air and water. They insist that the Government should hold the oil companies to the same operational standards they use in other countries.

In conclusion, I set out to educate the people of the Niger Delta on how to manage and transform their conflicts but I was educated instead. The sum of my education in the region was best phrased by one of my participants there, “oil is the root of all evil in the Niger Delta”. My role as a conflict manager teaches that I remain neutral on a project but being neutral and being removed are not the same things. I have learned that any individual or organization interested in peace and development in the Niger Delta must understand the region, its people and their issues.

Addressing the conflicts in the region at first seemed a necessary step but we have realized that if the complex underlying factors such as poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, lack of awareness and environmental degradation are not addressed as well, the conflicts will recur. Because there are these diverse and complex issues in the Niger Delta, we know that the task does not belong to one individual or organization alone. True strength comes from partnerships and coalitions.

Description of Women's Social-Cultural Role in the Niger Delta

Women in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria are not unlike women in other parts of Nigeria. The traditional patriarchal culture of the country ensures that the girl child and women are second to boys and men. The complexities of the Niger Delta make the Niger Delta woman peculiar. She farms and fishes like her male counterparts. And in the conflicts, which have ravaged the Niger Delta, she plays the important role of rebuilders of home and community.

The roles women play in the Niger Delta conflicts are defined by their perceptions of conflicts in general. Men view conflicts as a "struggle or war" which needs to be won and in the process of winning there are casualties. Women on the other hand view conflicts as a necessary evil in communities, and the injured and dead in these conflicts are sons and husbands to them. So, unlike men, they focus on the cessation of violence and rehabilitation of their homes.

In rural communities when violent conflicts occur, the women are left at home to keep the family and community functioning. When the violence ends and fathers are killed, women have to assume the role of the head of the family. But in most cases, they remarry and become part of a polygamous family. When sons are killed in the violence, they have to bear the hurt of losing a child. They are not given enough time to grieve as they have to take care of other children. Because the male child is highly valued, in some cases, the women have to start rearing more sons even in cases where it may be dangerous to their health because of their ages.

In inter-communal violent conflicts where the two communities had lived either as good neighbors or kin for centuries prior to the violence, women play a useful role. An example of this was seen in Nembe, Bayelsa State. Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri are two communities which speak the same language and share the same ancestry. In recent times they have been in conflict over a variety of issues. The issues proliferated and resulted in violence. During the violence the bridge connecting the two villages was destroyed. The symbolism being that all things connecting the two communities had been severed. Over the years the two communities had intermarried and traded. Though the bridge had been destroyed, we found that women were ignoring the symbolic message and crossing to either side in canoes to trade and visit their families and in-laws. People who are enemies to the men on either side were in-laws to the women. Using our conflict management lens we saw that these women could easily be used as conciliators in the conflict and also to illustrate to both communities that they shared a closer bond that the conflict had temporarily overshadowed.

The conflicts in the Niger Delta are currently breeding a new kind of evil against women. Working with women and women groups, we have encountered a huge number of rape complaints and cases. Women are complaining of rural women being raped by multinational corporations' employees mostly expatriates (e.g. in Ogoni land). Women have also registered rape complaints against security forces sent to protect them and

their communities (e.g. in Choba). This influx of rape cases has raised another question, HIV and AIDS. Reproductive health awareness programs and facilities are scarce or non-existent in many of these communities; therefore, women are unprotected from all angles. The poverty in the region has worsened the situation, as there is now a large prostitution market in the Niger Delta with the expatriate community as the target clientele.

Theoretical Analysis of Women's Role in Peacebuilding

The conflicts in the Niger Delta thus have far reaching ramifications and implications for the Niger Delta woman. For this reason, women acting in their instinctive roles as nurturers, givers and builders of life, are the obvious candidates for peacebuilding. They are however being under utilized. Many women groups have empowered themselves and are educating women at the grassroots level, defending their fundamental human rights. These women and their groups are the unsung heroes in the bleak situation women in the Niger Delta find themselves in.

A Wider Perspective

The successes made by the women in the Niger Delta are not accidental. Both cultural and psycho-social perspectives explain women's peacebuilding roles in the Delta, and by extension , West Africa.

1. Cultural

In traditional West Africa, women are regarded as life-givers, life-sustainers and society-builders. Women are responsible for nurturing children, this includes taking care of their feeding, health and training. Most herbalists in West Africa are predominantly women.

There are two traditional institutions in countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, the Gambia, and Cote d'Ivoire—*Poro* and *Sande (Bondo)*. These institutions are responsible for the social and moral training most children obtain in these countries. A large number of ethnic groups in West Africa are members of these institutions. Each boy from these groups goes to the *Poro* bush school at the age of eight years. Elders, wise men and zoes (traditional priests) of the tribes provide basic training to the boys. Some of the skills the elders teach include hunting, soil testing and farming, house construction, wrestling and warring. The boys also take an oath to remain committed to the secrets, values, beliefs and practices of the tribes.

The girls attend the *Sande* bush school at the age of nine years. Female zoes and elders provide the basic training for girls. Girls are taught to care for their husbands and children as well as to keep the peace and harmony of their families and ethnic groups. They obtain skills in cooking, story-telling, singing, mid-wifery, fishing, gardening, and herbal training. Like their male counterparts, girls are placed under oath to remain committed to the secrets, values, beliefs and practices of the tribes. Both societies emphasize the respect for elders and women. Anyone who shows disrespect to a mother or an elder is cursed and regarded as a vagabond.

Traditionally, peace-making had been the role of women. In situation of war between ethnic groups, women were called on to initiate a ceasefire. The oldest woman in one of the towns (mostly from the losing side) would wear white chalk and walk in the middle of the warring parties. She would walk to the offensive party and lay an axe before them.

The axe would be laid on the ground or stuck to a tree. Automatically, the offensive party would cease to make war.

All of the parties were taught the rules of war in the *Poros* society. Women were taught the peace-making strategies in the *Sande* society. Most of the tribes believed that any party that went beyond the point of the axe to make war would be cursed by the spirits of the ancestors.

Conflict resolution, especially in the case of war, was conducted by the *zoes* of the tribes. *Zoes* are the priests of the traditional religion of the tribes. They are the leaders of the *Poros* and *Sande* societies. As priests, they are the intermediary between the ancestors' spirits and the tribes. Most West African ethnic groups believe that the ancestors intercede on their behalf to God and therefore possessed the powers to curse them when they violated God's laws. Some of the curses included poor harvest, diseases, evil spirits, etc.

A woman has the privilege to attend both the *Poros* and *Sande* societies. Most times, the chief *Zoe* of these societies is a woman who has been trained in the two schools. As a chief *Zoe*, she is responsible to arbitrate major crises like war. There is a moral and social commitment to these schools.

The cultural belief that women are the peacemakers of society and the respect for mothers, I believe, are vital cultural resources to draw on in order to assert ourselves on our male-dominated political societies.

2. Psychosocial

A study conducted by Zur, Monrism and Zaretsky on gender attitude differences towards war shows that men are more prone than women to justify war according to rational and legal criterion. Women find it more difficult than men to accept, condone, or justify any acts of violence, killing, and destruction during war. Men, more than women, accept stereotypical sex roles during war. For instance, men as warriors and protectors of women and women as care givers. Women will support war at least as enthusiastically as men, when an appeal is made based on empathy for oppressed and vulnerable human beings, or an emphasis is placed on group cohesion and intensification of interpersonal relationships in the country during war. This study highlights various attributes of women that lean towards peacemaking. One of such attributes is affection. Scholars have proven that "girls think more in terms of relationships than boys do, that they care more for other human beings, show more empathy, and think more about human and social consequences of acts (Brock-Utne, 1984; Deen, 1978; Spender, 1982; Tornes, 1985; Hute, 1972)."

His Holiness the Dalai Lama emphasized in his foreword to the book, *All Her Paths Are Peace*, that mothers are crucial to the affective development of all human beings. He points out that all of us receive our first lessons in peaceful living from our mothers. This lesson, he added, is the very foundation of human existence. He describes peaceful living as "trusting those on whom we depend and caring for those who depend on us."

The Dalai Lama indicated that both of these qualities were initially experienced in our relationships with our mothers. In any conflict situation, the fundamental conflict-perpetuating factor is the lack of trust. Without trust, parties conceal their needs, fears,

aspirations and cling to positions. They are blinded to the humanity in themselves and others. Such unconscious behavior inhibits transformation. Transformation, as described by Bush and Folger, is the recognition of the humanity of one self and others and being empowered to rise above fears, hatred and guilt to seek workable solutions. I am convinced that the presence of women who are naturally oriented towards humanity helps in stabilizing tensions in the Niger Delta, and in the subregion.

The second attribute is the women's concept of power. At the heart of any conflict is the issue of power. It is the manifestation of power that leads to the protection of positions. Feminist peacemakers argue that the dominant and competing form of power to which men are oriented is in actual sense powerlessness. Women maintain that the ultimate goal of any power should be happiness or "pleasure and felicity." Cooperation with nature; the willingness to be vulnerable; risk taking; empathy; listening; caring for humanity; and cooperating with even those we consider our enemies, is power in its highest existential understanding.

Conclusion

We have seen how the biological makeup and socialization process of women endow them with peacemaking qualities. Mahatma Gandhi expressed his faith in women's potential for peacemaking when he said that, "women are the only ones who could save the world." Anna Msekwa, former Agricultural Minister of Tanzania, describes women as the "missing link in the peacemaking chain." Women's nurturing qualities, now muted, must come out into the public light to "purify politics and to tip the balance to peace and decency."

An old African proverb sums up my argument: "When you educate a man you educate an individual, but when you educate a woman, you educate a nation."

We have decided to initiate a regional campaign to raise the profile of the few women engaged in peacebuilding and to increase our number to a critical mass in West Africa by 2005. A special consultation in November 2001 will:

- Brainstorm on the possibilities and modalities for the development of women in peacebuilding
- Examine training needs and prospects for women interested in peacebuilding
- Identify obstacles to the widespread participation of women in peacebuilding.

Research Opportunities

We still need to study and document all the cultural resources available to the woman peacebuilder in West Africa.

Issues that affect the promotion of healthy societies in West Africa, especially ones that affect women and their children are still relegated to the remnant of national budgets. They often come after military allocations, extravagant lifestyle of political leaders and other projects. We need to link the development of women to sub-regional development. This needs to be done with concrete empirical and credible studies and theoretical support.

Women networks in West Africa appear to be the most difficult coalition to forge with. They challenge all the argument of women being naturally cooperative. We need to

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understand what lies behind this resistance to cooperation and sharing amongst women in West Africa.

There is the need for us women to study, understand, and appreciate ourselves in West Africa.