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Women's Bodies, Battle Ground and Commodities: Violence against Women in Niger Delta, Nigeria

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Abstract

The Niger Delta, which is the mainstay of Nigeria economy, has a hidden epidemic of sexual violence against women. In other word, the Niger Delta crisis is gendered. Rape, sexual slavery and forced prostitution are all the vices perpetrated against women in the region. All these have physical, psychological and social consequences on the womenfolk and there is little or nothing the federal government of Nigeria is doing to stop these abuses and bring perpetrators to book. Violence against women remained pervasive, including domestic violence, rape and other forms of sexual violence by state

officials and private individuals. The authorities in Nigeria have not been able to curb these excesses, leading to an entrenched culture of impunity. This paper therefore, examines the state insecurity for women and the role of the agencies providing humanitarian aid in the Niger Delta region.

Key word: Violence, Rape, Women, Insecurity, Humanitarian aid, Niger Delta Region

Introduction

The right to be free from all forms of violence has been recognized as a human right in several international human rights conventions and treaties. The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) asserts that violence against women is a manifestation of power relations and is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men. A number of forms of gender based violence specifically target women and girls because of their sex. These are referred to as ‘violence against women’ such violence, including rape, domestic violence, murder, and sexual abuse, is a significant cause of female mortality and a leading cause of injury for women aged 15 to 44 years (UNIFEM, 2007). The severe impact of violence against women has prompted the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to describe it as ‘a universal problem of epidemic proportions.

Critically examining issues around violence against women, one can say that the commission of this act by perpetrators is always situational. In a situation of armed violence, perpetration of violence against women is done by armed military men deployed into warring zones to maintain peace.

According to Peller (2007), sexual violence on the part of a militarized police force is a tactic used not only to terrorize women, but also to make a point among men-by raping ‘their’ women they were damaging those men’s property, and in the case of Niger Delta, the act of occupying an oil rich state/space, a space previously occupied by the occupying women’s bodies through sexual violence. Thus women’s bodies become the political and symbolic battle ground. These have physical, psychological and social consequences on the women folk and there is little or nothing the federal government of Nigeria is doing to stop these abuses and bring perpetrators to book. The authorities consistently failed to exercise due diligence in preventing and addressing sexual violence by both state and non-state actors, leading to an entrenched culture of impunity. This paper therefore examines

the state of insecurity for women and the role of the agencies providing humanitarian aid in the Niger Delta region.

Analyzing the Niger Delta Crisis

Nigeria is the largest producer of crude oil in Africa and the eighth largest producers in the World. The Niger Delta region is the main oil producing area and thereby account for 98% of the nation's crude oil production which has made them the main revenue-generating region in the country. The Niger Delta region comprises of nine states (as shown in the map below) with more than a population of 45 million people.

Fig 1: Map of Nigeria showing conflicting communities in the Niger Delta



Map of Nigeria numerically showing states typically considered part of the Niger Delta region: 1. Abia, 2. Akwa Ibom, 3. Bayelsa, 4. Cross River, 5. Delta, 6. Edo, 7. Imo, 8. Ondo, 9. Rivers

Niger Delta is Nigeria's least developed region at below \$280 despite its high population. The people live on less than \$1 dollar per day which is a measure of absolute poverty. They are living in abject poverty because the cumulative effects of the destruction of the ecological system through oil spills and air pollution from noxious gases have greatly affected their environmental resources which invariably affect the inhabitants' livelihood.

The Niger Delta conflict started in the early 1990s because of tensions between foreign oil corporations and a number of the Niger Delta's minority

groups who felt they were being exploited, particularly the ogoni and Ijaw. In Ogoniland, Viable petroleum was discovered in 1957, a year after the discovery of Nigeria's first commercial petroleum deposit. The government backed by the 1979 constitution started forcing them out of their lands with little or no compensation and they distribute the land to oil companies as it deemed fit (Human Right Watch,1999). All these government actions led to the formation of the movement for the survival of the Ogoni people (MOSOP) in 1992. This became the major organization representing the interest of the Ogoni people and it was led by an ogoni playwright and author, Ken Saro-Wiwa.

In May 1994, Ken-Saro Wiwa and other eight activist know as the "Ogoni Nine" were arrested and accused of incitement to murder following the deaths of four Ogoni elders. According to Mathiason (2009), the Ogoni Nine were denied due process by the specially convened tribunal by the Head of State, General Sani Abacha, on 10th November 1995. Consequent upon this, they were hanged by the Nigerian state.

The Ijaw people on the other hand were also having high conflict with the Nigerian Federal Government which led the military to carry out the Odi Massacre Killing hundreds of Ijaws. With the transition to democratic rule in 1999, President Olusegun Obasanjo established the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) with a focus on developing social and physical infrastructures, ecological/environmental remediation and human development. Between 2003 and 2004, the ethnic conflict and unrest led to the militarization of the Niger Delta.

Militarization of the Niger Delta

Militarization according to Wikipedia is the process by which a society organizes itself for military conflict and violence. It is related to militarism, which is an ideology that reflects the level of militarization of a State. Militarization consists of the use of threat of violence to settle political conflicts, the legitimization of State violence, the curtailment of freedom of opinion, the domination of military values over civilian life, the violation of human rights, extrajudicial killings and the gross repression of the people (Chunakara, 1994). The Niger Delta is a region of Nigeria that has been subjected to excessive militarization for the past 13 years, where violence is used as an instrument of governance to force the people into total submission (Okonta and Douglas, 2001; Na Allah, 1998).

With more than 50 years of oil exploration and \$450 billion net profit from the Niger Delta Oil States, the people lack basic fundamental development. This criminal neglect coupled with the ethnic unrest/conflicts and the availability of arms and other weapons led increasingly to the emergence of many militant groups. The militia is violent, kidnapping victims and hostage taking and committing armed robbery. In response to all these, the Nigerian Military was dispatched to the region in 2003 which led increasingly to the militarization of the region where they use excessive and deadly force to quell the unrest.

Feminization of the Niger Delta Crisis

Militarization makes its mark not only on political and legal system, but also on social behaviour. Its impacts range from the loss of legal protection to kidnapping, the undermining of civilian policing to the lack of respect for women. These impacts are invariably detrimental to the protection and promotion of human rights. Militarized environments expose women to serious forms of dehumanization. According to Odoemene (2011), acts of violence and repression including various forms of sexual violence are instruments to intimidate the people and ultimately contain the Niger Delta insurgency prevails there. On the roads and checkpoints in the Niger Delta, women are often humiliated by vulgar language and behaviour. The atmosphere is one of male domination, with the corresponding images of uniformed men enhancing their power with guns.

Rape is a common feature of the Niger Delta. The military allows a permissive atmosphere where sexual adventures are the order of the day among the armed forces. Sexual violence according to Solhjell (2009), is an umbrella term for coercive sexual abuse including, rape, mutilation of genital to destroy reproductive capacity, and forced prostitution. Sexual violence in the Niger Delta is a form of direct violence. Direct violence is categorized by its visible, destructive and willingness to harm aspects. It is essentially the intent to harm, injure or kill (Ejibunu, 2008). According to Marshall (2004), sexual violence as a tool of war has left hundreds of thousands of women raped, brutalized, impregnated and infected with HIV/AIDS.

Women's bodies are the political battle ground of the Niger Delta crisis. Rape is a cheap effective and easy weapon used by the military deployed into the area. Rape, sexual slavery and forced prostitution by the military are all acts of violence and demonstrations of power used in times of war and

conflict. Rape serves to gratify the soldiers, feeding their hatred of the enemy while also being used as an effective weapon of war (Turshen and Twagiranmariya, 1998). In this instance, forced prostitution has an economic dimension as the military deployed into Niger Delta are using women bodies as commodities to be sold and bought. Recreational sex according to Enole (2000:117) is argued by military officials to happen when soldiers are not sufficiently supplied with sexual partners. This type of sexual violence is often linked to prostitution. Sexual violence this represents a form of “economic rape”. The genitals of the Military men are the weapons of war while women’s bodies are their battle grounds and commodities.

Consequences of Sexual Violence on Women in the Niger Delta

The act of rape as a weapon of war has not only severely harmed the victims themselves as individuals but also their families, communities and the nation at large. The widespread systematic use of rape as a weapon of war has led to a multiple of physical, psychological, socio-economic and socio-cultural effects. The simplest and most direct way in which rape exerts control over communities is through its impacts on population demographics (Amnesty International, 1994). Women have the role of reproduction. They are assaulted and prevented from this. They are sometimes mass raped and beaten to death.

Infection, illnesses and injuries such as HIV, hepatitis, and their sexually transmitted Diseases are also some of the effect of using rape as a weapon of war in the Niger Delta.

Psychologically, women who have been raped are traumatized and may become substance addicts Castle (2010) reported that socially, a woman who has been raped is victimized two times. She is considered as an adulterer, and if she is not abandoned by her husband, she can be neglected or asked to pay fine.

Socio-economic consequences of rape in the Niger Delta has contributed to the infiltration of the social and economic fabric of the communities women are seen as “commodities” to be sold and bought which is giving another meaning to sexuality. It is a human rights violation that has a lot to do with the body politics of women.

Insecurity for Women in the Niger Delta

Insecurity according to Wikipedia is a feeling of general unease or nervousness that may be triggered by perceiving oneself to be vulnerable in some way, or a sense of vulnerability or instability which threatens one's self-image, ego, dignity, self-worth, etc.

The concept of human security will consider democratization, internationalization and socialization as its key aspects (Mochizuki, 2004). He argued that the State's governmental power must be strong enough to overwhelm any other domestic groups to protest the rights of people.

According to Abraham Maslow's proposition the only definition of security that is satisfactory is of the catalogue type. In this sense, he described an insecure person as a person that "perceives the world as a threatening jungle and most human beings as dangerous and selfish; feels rejected and isolated, anxious and hostile, is generally pessimistic and unhappy; shows signs of tensions and conflict, tends to turn inward; is trouble by guilt-feelings, has one or another disturbance of self-esteem, tends to be neurotic, and is generally egocentric and selfish" (Maslow, 1942, pp. 35). He viewed in every insecure person as continual, never dying longing for security.

Women in the Niger Delta region are unsecured and they lack confidence in the State's governmental power, lack trust in themselves and others. The 1999 constitution specifically states in chapter 12, section 14(20) (Fundamental objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy) that:

"The security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government".

This is not the case for women in the Niger Delta who have been physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually torn apart by the military who are to ensure peace and security in the warring zones.

Conclusion/recommendations

Sexual violence in form of rape is a war within war. Humanitarian aid is a response to conflict among others which resulted into huge death tolls, displacement and dehumanization. The primary objective of humanization aid maintains human dignity (Wikipedia). The general aim of humanization aid is to help people in the third world countries, particularly the most

vulnerable among them and as a priority those in developing countries (EUAID Website).

Humanitarian aid is expected to have an impact on the level of insecurity that women in Niger Delta are facing and it is suggested that:

1. Long term support should be given for as long as the military are present in their communities.
2. A human rights-based approach should be applied.
3. Protection and safety nets should be incorporated into all the response programs.
4. The military should be educated on the implications of their actions on these women.
5. A better way of negotiating should be employed.

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