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**The Impact of Women on the Growth and Development of the Niger
Delta, Nigeria**

Nutsukpo, Margaret Fafa, PhD

Department of English Studies

University of Port Harcourt

Port Harcourt, Nigeria

E-mail: margaret.nutsukpo@uniport.edu.ng

Abstract

Although women play very significant roles in various spheres of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria, their contributions to the growth of the region are, often, not acknowledged or encouraged. The objective of this paper, therefore, is to highlight their roles and areas where they have positively impacted the development of the Niger Delta, as well as the avenues through which they can raise the bar in their developmental efforts in the region. The following are, therefore, identified as key areas where women have excelled and, if granted more opportunities, could greatly impact further advancement in the Niger Delta and Nigeria as a whole: the family, the educational sector, the economic sector, the political sector, women groups, non-governmental organizations and activists, and the creative industry.

Key Words: Niger Delta, women, gender equality, development, empowerment

Introduction

Composed of nine states, namely Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Imo, Abia, Akwa Ibom, Cross River and Ondo States, the Niger Delta is a region regarded by many as a hotbed of controversy, dissent and conflict in Nigeria, despite its beautiful and intriguing topography, exciting history, and the rich diversity of its peoples and cultures. According to Chinyere Nwahunanya, the Niger Delta is “a symbol of ironic contradictions of the consequences of capitalist exploitation by multinational economic interests...” (xvi) and their local accomplices. Despite the region’s oil-wealth, it is steeped in poverty and its people deprived

of the rewards of their rich resources which, ironically, account for the largest share of the nation's wealth. This has led to the restiveness of youth in the region as they demand for what they believe should be rightfully theirs - the mandatory development of the Niger Delta.

To reduce the level of poverty and restore peace, several efforts and initiatives are now geared towards the development of the Niger Delta region. The question is, are women, who constitute a large percentage of the population of the region, key actors in the developmental process, and if so, what impact are they making? Poverty, evidently, has a stronger impact on women and places several difficult obstacles in the path of their progress and their impact on society. It, therefore, becomes mandatory to empower women for a faster progress in the reduction of poverty. How, then, are women being empowered to make a change in the Niger Delta? The answers to these questions are very relevant, considering the fact that there is growing evidence that although women are very proactive and participate actively in the socio-economic sphere of the region, their participation in state and nation-building is often unrecognized, unacknowledged, undervalued, unappreciated, and their successes often unrecorded and unrewarded. This stems from the ignorant perception (despite the gains of feminism and consciousness-raising) that women do not have much to offer in the public and political domain. However, as Helen Chukwuma observes, there can be no "meaningful and substantial development of Nigeria as a nation, indeed of any nation, without women... no nation can progress if half of her population is left behind, neglected...the missing link on the plane of human resources is the female factor..." (4). With this in mind, the various ways in which the woman could, and have been impacting the Niger Delta region shall be discussed in the succeeding segments of this paper with a view to revealing their roles in very significant spheres of society: the family, the educational sector, the economic and political sectors, women's groups and organizations, and the creative industry.

The Family

The significant place of the woman in the home and family cannot be disputed. Man may be the head of the family, but the woman is definitely its heart and lifeline. Without the woman, the family and, subsequently, the larger society, cannot function properly. Dora Chizea supports this notion with the following view of women:

[women are] the building blocks upon which the foundations of happy homes and families are built...The family, no doubt, is the unit on which communities are built. And the nation itself is built by communities. It follows, therefore, that if the building blocks, the mothers are poor, ignorant and unmotivated, the nation is likely to be poor, ignorant and unmotivated. For, how can a nation rise above the collective ignorance of its mothers? (10)

The roles of the woman in the family are diverse and as intriguing as the woman herself: wife, partner, confidant, mother, nurturer, provider, teacher, friend, counsellor, as well as the emotional and spiritual anchor. She is one who instils in her family, especially the children, moral and ethical standards, and does everything possible to ensure they are educated. She is

also their number one advocate, critic and encourager. She works diligently to support her husband in ensuring and sustaining the welfare, health and stability of the family day in day out. Sometimes, she is a single parent who plays the role of man and woman, father and mother; this, however, does not hinder her efforts to give of her best to her family. She also plays numerous significant roles outside the dynamics of the nuclear family. These efforts on the home front, though sometimes invisible to the public eye, sustain the welfare, health and stability of the region and, inevitably, its progress and development.

Unfortunately, due to gender inequality, the family is often a domain where many women are socially restricted, economically exploited, emotionally degraded and rendered politically passive and poor. This limits not only the woman but her entire family and community who would have benefitted from her resources. The following observation by the *United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women* (UN Women) places this issue in perspective: “[women’s poverty] results in deprivation in their own lives and losses for the broader society and economy, as women’s productivity is well-known as one of the greatest generators of economic dynamism” (“Women and Poverty”).

Should women’s subjugation in the family and society be totally eradicated and their power to create, nurture and transform fully and effectively harnessed, there is no limit to what women can contribute to the growth and transformation of the Niger Delta.

The Educational Sector

Without doubt, women of the Niger Delta have made giant strides in the area of education, one of the most powerful avenues through which women can be armed with knowledge, skills, the confidence required to be proactive, the capability to change the power-dynamics and relations in their environment and contribute actively to the developmental process in the region.

Among the women academics who have made great impact and still contribute their quota to the growth of the educational sector of the Niger Delta is Grace Alele-Williams (Professor of Mathematics, the first female Vice Chancellor of a Nigerian university), an academic of great repute. Her membership of, and contributions to several educational committees and boards, has left an indelible mark on the educational sector and the development of education in the region and nation as a whole. Today, tertiary institutions and the youths still benefit greatly from her zeal, candour and efforts. Among many other female academics who have followed in her footsteps, to name a few, are Bene Willie-Abbey (Professor of Nutritional Biochemistry and toxicology); Shirley Yul-Ifode (Professor of Basic and Applied Phonetics/Phonology); and Ini I. Uko (Professor of English). These women do not only play active roles in the development of the tertiary institutions where they impact young minds and develop human capital, but also serve the region in several other capacities, socio-economically and politically.

Seasoned female administrators, among them Victoria Aba Tekena, Matilda Nnodim, Dorcas Otto, Efua Koroye, Bridget Nzimiro and many others in the region work hand in hand with

women in academics to create avenues and opportunities, and equip the Niger Delta with the vital “manpower” required for the development of the various sectors of the region.

To sustain the impact of women in this sector and the region as a whole, state governments of the Niger Delta should invest in the future of their female children, by making female education a top priority on their agenda. They must establish good schools, as well as scholarship and health schemes that will encourage and support the positive development of the girl-child educationally. Professionally, she must be accepted and accommodated in the socio-economic and political sphere, and accorded the opportunity to contribute her quota to the region. Above all, her ambitions and accomplishments should be acknowledged, and strategies put in place to measure her participation in developmental efforts and reward her achievements. This will spur her on to give more of herself and her efforts and to accomplish greater goals to the benefit of the region and nation as a whole.

The Economic Sector

The Niger Delta is replete with women who are active participants at all levels of the national economy. From the fisherwoman in the creeks of the Niger Delta to the Chief Executive Officer in the urban areas, women have proved they are capable of being full and equal partners with men in the labour force. They play active roles in the developmental process as farmers, traders, teachers, nurses, doctors, engineers, administrators, business entrepreneurs to name but a few, significant contributors to the incomes of their households and the economy of their communities and region at large. Without their contributions, the economy of the Niger Delta will definitely be incomplete and worse for it. However, more often than not, labour is divided along gender lines, creating room for the marginalization of women in some spheres of the economy. This imbalance should be addressed and rectified. Also, in situations where women are limited in their economic activities due to poor access to resources, avenues should be created to expand their opportunities and enhance their participation.

Women who work in informal sectors for sustenance such as farmers and petty traders should be supported by the government and nongovernmental organizations, and provided with credit or loan facilities to enable them expand their businesses, and become major contributors to the economic development of the region and nation as a whole. Bearing in mind that women constitute half of most nations’ talents, knowledge and skills, their competence and resourcefulness should be a plus in the developmental process of the Niger Delta if properly and effectively tapped.

The Political Sector

Despite the great potentials of women, the fact remains that only few are mobilized and visible in the political arena of the nation. Surprisingly, however, women of the Niger Delta have carved a significant niche for themselves in this sector at the national and state levels, which does enhance the development of the region. Women such as Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (Former Minister of Finance), and Arunma Oteh, former Director General of the Securities

and Exchange Commission and, currently, the Vice President and Treasurer of the World Bank are key players in the political arena of the nation.

Also worthy of note is Florence Ita Giwa who represented the Cross River South Constituency in the National Assembly and served on several committees including the Committee on Women Affairs and the Committee on Niger Delta. She also served as a Special Adviser to President Olusegun Obasanjo on National Assembly Matters. Ita Giwa has remained an avid social activist whose commitment to the development of the Niger Delta and, especially, to the welfare of the indigenes of the Bakassi Local Government Area, has earned her several accolades.

Several others, among them Ipalibo Banigo (current Deputy Governor, Rivers State), are actively involved in various arms of government, holding vital positions in the executive, legislature, judiciary, and the civil service and making great contributions to the success of the federal and state governments. Without a doubt, their achievements, especially at the federal level, are a reflection of the potential success of the Niger Delta region.

State governments of the region should, therefore, tap into women's reservoir of talent and ensure their full participation in areas of governance such as policy-making and implementation. By encouraging and fully accommodating women in the political process of the region without intimidation, discrimination, and victimization, the political system will not only thrive, it will also be positively transformed for the betterment of all stakeholders in the region.

Women's Groups, Non-Governmental Organizations and Activists

The involvement of women's groups, women's non-governmental organizations, and women activists in the developmental process of the Niger Delta cannot be overlooked. Through consciousness-raising, several women's groups and societies have sprung up with the aim of sensitizing women, especially those in the rural areas, on issues such as family and healthcare, education and politics. Often, these groups have also empowered women through skill acquisition and training programmes, and provided them with soft loans and equipment to enable participants invest in small scale businesses.

Groups such as the Women in Nigeria, Women in Development and the National Council of Women Societies, with branches at the state levels, have also utilized their platforms to successfully mobilize and sensitize women. Others, such as The Niger Delta Women Initiative for Transparency and Social Justice (WITSOJ) and Delta Women, empower women for the transformation of families and communities in the Niger Delta and to actively fight for transparency, accountability and social justice by ensuring that "[they]...assume responsibilities in every sphere of social and political life and that they are given the opportunities to discharge these responsibilities in practice" (Uku 37).

Women activists also contribute their quota to the development of the region by raising awareness about the plight of the Niger Delta and its people to ensure that the region is not

left out of the development agenda of the federal government. Prominent among them are Annkio Briggs (spokesperson of the Ijaw Republican Assembly) and Jennifer Spiff (founder of WITSOJ) who advocate political and social justice in the Niger Delta - two indispensable assets without which development cannot be genuine and complete.

Of peculiar interest is book activist Koko Kalango, founder of the Rainbow Book Club who, inspired by the need to revive and sustain a reading culture in Niger Delta communities, established the Garden City Literary Festival, later renamed the Port Harcourt Book Festival. This Book Festival attained international repute and culminated in the city of Port Harcourt being named the UNESCO World Book Capital City for 2014, the first Sub-Saharan African city to be so honoured. Many talented budding authors in the region and nation-wide have been also been discovered, nurtured and published through workshops and symposia organized during the festival and interactions with renowned authors.

Evidently, the contributions of these groups of women are invaluable and should be recognized, encouraged and supported by the governments of the region through partnership programmes and financial contributions to their income generating projects. This will go a long way to boost the development of women and, subsequently, families, communities and in the region.

Women in the Creative Industry

Richard Florida aptly observes that “human creativity is the ultimate economic resource” (xiii). For this reason, the creative industry must be recognized and harnessed in the developmental process of any nation. Fortunately, the Niger Delta is replete with women playing active roles in the various fields of this industry. Several are writers, artists, designers, entertainers and communication experts in the mass media.

The first published Nigerian female writer, Flora Nwapa, whose iconic work, *Efuru* (1966), is a constant reference point in literature classrooms throughout the world, is from Oguta, Imo State, an economic hub of the Niger Delta. Nwapa blazed the trail that prompted African women writers to tell their own stories in their own ways, and advocated the need for women to shake off their passivity and speak against female oppression and represent the African woman in a new and positive light. For her, female writers must embrace the reality of the woman’s experience, project her power and affirm her being and becoming by making society aware of her “inherent vitality, independence of views, courage, self-confidence, and, of course, her desire for gain and high social status” (Nwapa 532). As Ernest N. Emenyonu significantly observes, one of the most appealing and enduring qualities of Nwapa as a writer and novelist is the realism of her themes (18).

In her works, therefore, Nwapa presents female characters that are resourceful, industrious and resilient - strong, independent and assertive women who strive to become highly successful and respected individuals; female protagonists such as *Efuru* (*Efuru*, 1966); *Idu* (*Idu*, 1970); *Amaka* (*One is Enough*, 1981) and *Rose, Agnes and Dora* (*Women are Different*,

1986) who recognize their self-worth and contribute in several ways to their personal, as well as the growth of their families, communities and societies.

Several other women writers of the Niger Delta have risen in Nwapa's wake, prominent among them, Buchi Emecheta, an indigene of Ibuza, Delta State. Regarded as one the most prolific African women writers, Emecheta is credited with critically acclaimed works such as *Second Class Citizen* (1974); *The Bride Price* (1976) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). Oike Machiko avers that Emecheta is a writer who is conscious of her role as an African woman writer and a representative of the African woman. Oike also identifies *The Joys of Motherhood* as a masterpiece which "brought Emecheta international fame as a writer who spoke to the world for African women oppressed by what was called 'third world tradition' (61). Central to Emecheta's works "is her depiction of the impact of sexism on the lives of women and the roles they play in society, and the challenges they face in the performance of these roles while struggling to defend their basic rights as human beings with equal dignity as men and...to develop positively and contribute their quota to the development of society" (Nutsukpo, "Marking Her Mark" 150).

Like Nwapa, Emecheta extols the virtues of the African woman, focusing on her character, strength, resilience, industry and her capacity to love unconditionally as is evident in Nnu-Ego, the protagonist in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Emecheta recognizes the patriarchal system as being replete with repressive structures that stand in the way of women's actualization, and urges women need to be conscious of these obstacles in order to overcome them.

Evidently, Nwapa and Emecheta recognize education as necessary precursors to women's positive development. They decry the economic exploitation of women and the denial of opportunities that would equip them to compete favourably with men in different spheres of society and to contribute more to the growth of society. They, therefore, advocate sisterhood as an avenue through which women can achieve consciousness-raising, self-awareness and assertiveness by supporting, encouraging and challenging each other for personal and societal development.

Currently building on the successes of the older generation of women writers of the Niger Delta are contemporary writers, among them, Sophia Obi-Apoko, author of two collections of poetry titled *Tears in a Basket* (2005) and *Floating Snags* (2009), and novelist, Kaine Agary, author of *Yellow-Yellow* (2006). These are women writers "...whose works are informed by an awareness of gender issues ... [and who] are establishing clearer definitions of, not only their identities, but those of their fellow women" in the region (Nutsukpo, "Literary Traditions" 136).

In *Tears in a Basket*, Obi-Apoko highlights the patriarchal nature of the African society and its influence on gender-relations. Through themes such as the subordination and marginalization of women, gender-intimidation, the impact of polygamy on women and families, among others, she voices her concerns about African women in an attempt to draw their attention to the need to shape new and more positive identities for themselves. However,

even more significant is Obi-Apoko's recognition of the degeneration of the Niger Delta as a result of the oil exploration efforts of government and multi-national companies which has had an adverse effect on the quality of life in the region. Thus, the persona in "Seared Conscience" (*Floating Snags*) indicts the Nigerian government:

Virus of corruption in the veins of Nigerian polity
 Contaminates its reasoning
 Sears conscience of the tiers of government
 Shuts hearts to the plight of the less privileged
 A nation built on corrosive ideas
 Creating monstrous rumbling in the bowels of the common
 man. (p. 16-17; lines 1-7)

In "Our Story" (*Floating Snags*), a desolate imagery of the Niger Delta is revealed:

The land cracks from loneliness
 The farms swallowed by bitter spills
 The rivers stagnated by oily curses
 Hearts shut against this monstrous reality
 Manning every home... (p. 22, lines 20-24)

Evident in the lines above is what Gabriel Okara notes as Obi-Apoko's "primary concern – the despoliation of the ecosystem, the flora and the fauna by the exploration and extraction of crude oil..." (7), in the region, a concern echoed by Agary through her protagonist, Zilayefa's first contact with oil spillage in her village:

I watched as the thick liquid spread out, covering more land and drowning small animals in its path. It just kept spreading and I wondered if it would stop, when it would stop, how far it would spread. Then there was the smell. I can't describe it but it was strong - so strong it made my head hurt and turned my stomach. I bent over, and retched so hard I became dizzy (4).

Agary further highlights her concern about the plight of the innocent young girls and women of the Niger Delta who are left at the mercy of expatriate oil workers who exploit them sexually and abandon them to their fate without acknowledging the products of their relationship – the "born troways" whose skins and lives are "coloured by the Filipinos, the

Chinese, the British, and the Americans who worked in the oil sector” (74) which impacts their self-worth and dignity negatively.

Like Nwapa and Emecheta, Obi-Apoko and Agary recognize the woman’s role in the development of, not only the Niger Delta, but Africa as a whole as “crucial for the survival of the race” (Nwapa 527). To enable women play this role effectively, all, writers especially, must create awareness of what the woman can do and, is capable of doing, and provide role models that inspire and empower women to contribute their quota to the development of society.

Through their literary works, women writers of the region promote the Niger Delta, its peoples, rich traditions and cultures, arts, as well as its inexhaustible potentials; this attracts tourists to the region, thus aiding its growth. Also, many of their voices are strident in drawing attention to the plight of the region and its people, and soliciting social change. Their efforts are, therefore, an important component of the collective contributions of women to the development of the Niger Delta.

Also making great impact in the developmental process are women artists and designers who showcase the culture of the region through their creative works. In this circle is the renowned artist and sculptor, Sokari Douglas Camp. Martha G. Anderson describes Douglas Camp and her work thus:

[Camp is]...an African woman who works with a traditionally “masculine” material - steel - and whose subjects sometimes venture into territory dominated by men... she continues to produce work that draws from and comments upon her African roots... (332).

Through her creative works, Douglas Camp promotes the tradition and culture of the Kalabari people of the Rivers State, comments on the ecological disasters that have assailed the Niger Delta as a result of the production of oil, and advocates change and total development of the region.

Many Niger Delta women in the creative arts are steadily working their way up the ladder, hoping to emulate the success of Douglas Camp on the international stage. This is usually evident during the showcase of indigenous female talents in the area of fashion and design during the annual Port Harcourt Fashion Week, an event established by the Rivers State Government in 2014 to empower the youth and promote trade and tourism. During this event, many female designers from the region successfully showcase African designs and motifs in their creations, seizing the opportunity to promote an integral aspect of the traditions and cultures of the Niger Delta.

Evidently, this is an arena where the contribution of women is evident and their success is replicated in the entertainment industry, especially music and film, where a great majority of the talents are products of the Niger Delta, and women. Through their creative efforts, they play a vital role in promoting the growth of the national economy and, subsequently, the

economy of the region. In addition, many also partner with governments of the region to participate in, and promote cultural events to enhance trade and tourism in the region. Events such as “*Carniriv*” in the Rivers State, and the “*Calabar Carnival*” of the Cross River State, readily come to mind.

Women in the mass media are also an integral part of the growth process in the Niger Delta. Bilikisu Yusuf observes of this sector:

The intellectual ammunition of a refined society is stored in its mass media... [which,] more than any other organ of communication, have the widest reach, influence the largest number, weaving the now shrinking world into an intricate information tapestry. Together they hold the world to ransom informing, educating, entertaining and initiating policies... (60).

The mass media establishes checks and balances in the socio-economic and political system of the region and nation. The contributions of women, especially, to the mainstream media in the region are massive, as they constitute a high percentage of its key players. Without their services, there will be a great chasm in the developmental process.

The creative industry supports cultural diversity and helps develop cultural markets through its services. This creates economic growth, employment opportunities and social development in the region. However, the following observation by Buchi Emecheta must be taken into consideration:

[The African woman] will have higher aspirations and achieve more when those cleverly structured artificial barriers are removed, when education is free and available to every child, male or female... and when we ourselves have the confidence to value our contribution to the world (557).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper will be incomplete if the role of the female youths in the growth and development of the Niger Delta is overlooked. Firstly, their access to the greatest avenue of empowerment – education – is a privilege which, not too long ago, the girl child was denied. Thanks to consciousness-raising, young women can now take full advantage of the opportunity to become enlightened. They must, therefore, be committed and honest in their endeavours and, on their part, contribute their quota, positively, to the socio-economic and political activities and development of their communities and, subsequently, the region. One avenue through which this can be accomplished is their full participation in youth organizations with positive agenda for their progress and that of the region. Above all, they must serve as role models and work together to develop the region, for The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) observes:

Long term sustainable development will only be possible when women and men enjoy equal opportunities to rise to their potentials ... If we can only erase...inequities

- and put women on equal footing with men – we know that we can unlock human potential on a transformational scale.... (“Gender Equality”)

In addition, women must be united in order to achieve their goals in the developmental agenda of the Niger Delta: they must support, encourage and be their sisters’ keepers. In so doing, they can effectively break the glass ceilings and overcome all other obstacles that stand in the way of the expression of their creative energies, through their full participation in the developmental process of the Niger Delta.

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