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Women, Climate Conflict and Environmental Peacebuilding: Lessons from The Niger Delta

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ABSTRACT: The resource-rich Niger Delta is home to crude oil, which is the major export source, accounting for over eighty per cent of Nigeria's revenue, but remains one of the most environmentally polluted and conflict-ridden zones in sub-Saharan Africa. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the intersection of gender, climate-induced conflict, and environmental peacebuilding in the region, focusing on the contributions of women to development and conflict transformation. Using data from secondary sources and field reports, the study's findings revealed that far from being passive victims, women in the Niger Delta are active agents who mobilise creativity, respond to environmental and livelihood challenges, and also shape peacebuilding processes. This role notwithstanding, they are often excluded from participating in formal decision-making processes. This study underscores the need for a genuinely gender-responsive approach that integrates women's knowledge systems, leadership roles, and lived experiences into the broader frameworks of environmental and climate governance. The study further revealed that ensuring women's participation in climate policy and action is essential for fostering a more resilient and equal society. It is in this regard that it is recommended that policy efforts must prioritise the empowerment of women and also focus on institutional reforms that promote gender equity in environmental policymaking and collaborative partnerships among civil society, government actors, and international development stakeholders.

KEYWORDS: Climate change, Conflict, Environment, Women, Niger-Delta.

INTRODUCTION

The Delta region of Nigeria remains one of the resource-rich areas in the world, yet it is plagued by environmental pollution and the most conflict-prone zones in sub-Saharan Africa (Obi, 2010). The interplay between environmental degradation, climate-induced conflict, and the marginalisation of vulnerable populations, particularly women, has significantly shaped the socio-political dynamics of the region. Gender perspectives and dimensions play a crucial role in the understanding of the poly-crisis challenges. This is a result of the way society has been culturally structured, especially in rural settlements. Women and men do not have the same rights, equal availability of resources and decision-making authorities; therefore, it will appear as a distortion if gender issues are not properly projected from the right perspectives. However, women are more resilient in the face of this crisis despite being the most affected gender. Indeed, baseline data revealed that there is widespread evidence that climate change poses serious challenges to marginalised people, of which women are at the forefront (Agrawal and Perrin, 2008).

Women depend more on agriculture and natural resources than men. Therefore, they are more affected by the disruption of their supply from agriculture and the environment than men. Hence, the impact of climate change on agriculture affects women and children more (Akinbami, 2021). Although the effects of climate change are universal, some groups are more adversely affected than others, according to Akinbami. UN Women Watch (2024) pointed out that women are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than men in many contexts because they make up the majority of the world's poor and rely more on natural resources that are threatened by climate change for their livelihood. In addition, women face socioeconomic and political barriers that limit their ability to cope.

Due to their heavy reliance on local natural resources for their livelihood, women in rural developing nations are particularly susceptible. The biggest obstacles are faced by those tasked with protecting food, fuel for cooking, and water (Commission on the Status of Women 2008). Put differently, women seem to be the most effective actors or agents of change in terms of both mitigation and adaptation methods, in addition to being the most susceptible in the face of migration and climate change. Changes in politics, society, and the environment are significantly influenced by women farmers. To increase local capacities to adapt to climate change, women farmers worldwide are leading the way in implementing crops and various conservation and diversification methods (Ihialainen and Busnett, 2024).

According to UN Women (2015), underlying gender-related inequality factors put women at higher risk and burden from the effects of climate change. Again, UNFCCC (2019b), when it comes to addressing the effects of climate change and environmental issues, men and women show different vulnerabilities as well as different priorities and capacities. Miles (2018) asserts that the effects of climate change, including droughts, floods, and extreme weather events, increasingly harm women.

They also have a critical role in combating climate change, but need to be best represented at all levels of decision-making. Neumayer et al (2007) report that data obtained from 141 countries from 1981 to 2002 showed that, on average, both climate change-related hazards and environmental disasters, and their subsequent impact, result in higher mortality rates for women than men. WHO (2014) reports that 90% of the victims of the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh were women. In the same line of thought, Goh (2012) maintained that the explanations for these differences are not a biological predisposition, such as physical strength, but rather a consequence of our socially constructed roles and norms that determine the behaviour and actions of women in many developing countries.

Against the above background, this paper examined how climate-induced environmental changes intersect with gendered vulnerabilities and the role of women in fostering environmental peacebuilding in the Niger Delta. It challenges the prevailing narratives that depict women solely as victims of environmental and violent conflict, but focuses on the contributions of women to sustainable development and conflict transformation in the Niger Delta.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since concepts in the Social sciences are always interpreted differently depending on the analyst's ideological orientation and leaning, it is essential to begin this section by explaining the basic concepts used in this paper. Climate change, Conflict, and Environmental peacebuilding are examples of the fundamental concepts that need to be clarified in this study. Climate change could be defined as long-standing changes in temperatures and weather patterns caused by both human and natural factors. Such human factors include activities like the burning of industrial operations, fossil fuels. These operations raise the atmospheric absorption of greenhouse gases, which in turn causes rising sea levels, unpredictable weather patterns, biological disturbances, and an increase in global temperatures. The vulnerable group that is often disproportionately affected by climate change is women, which also has implications for their livelihoods and health (IPCC, 2023).

Conflict, on the other hand, is a disagreement between people, groups, or nations which, in most cases, have incompatible goals. This may be caused by personal interest, identity politics, struggle for limited resources, or old grievances. Conflict risk can be exacerbated by environmental changes associated with climate variability, such as droughts, floods, and decreased agricultural output, which increase competition for limited resources like land and water (Ide, 2020). The negative impact of climate change may serve as a threat multiplier in areas already affected by political unrest or economic marginalization, such as the Niger Delta. This explains ever-increasing tensions that have led to armed conflicts or other types of violence in Delta region.

Environmental peacebuilding is a new lexicon that recognises how environmental cooperation can promote stability and peace. Implicit in this definition is the fact that it explains how restoring polluted areas and managing the environment together can help groups involved in conflict to collaborate and build trust with the common goal of achieving environmental security and to foster cooperation and sustainable development. This strategy no doubt integrates natural resource governance into peacebuilding processes (Conca and Dabelko, 2018).

This study adopts Feminist Environmentalism theory in explaining the intersection of gender, climate-induced conflict, and environmental peacebuilding in the Delta region, focusing on how women contribute to development processes and conflict transformation. According to this theory, as developed by Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari Maathai, gender and the environment are inextricably intertwined because of socially created roles, knowledge systems, and access to resources (Rocheleau et al., 1996). Environmental activities such as farming, harvesting fuelwood, collecting water, and practising ecological stewardship, women, particularly in the Global South, maintain close ties with natural ecosystems. Given this situation, women are negatively impacted by environmental degradation, which also provides them with special knowledge about ecological management. This narrative explains how women's socioeconomic positions in the Niger Delta expose them to the undesirable consequences of climate while also providing them with hands-on experience to mitigate these impacts (Shiva, 1988). However, because of their traditional knowledge and expertise in managing natural resources, women are uniquely positioned to contribute to environmental peacebuilding initiatives. The region's destructive extractivism, which is primarily caused by pollution and oil production, has a significant impact on women's livelihoods, health, and well-being.

The Feminist Environmentalism theory also critiques patriarchal and post-colonial structures that deliberately exclude women from environmental governance and decision-making processes (Shiva, 1988). Women in the Niger Delta are making important contributions to environmental peace-building by using their knowledge and experience to develop practical solutions to environmental degradation, but these have not been recognised by policymakers. Through their community-based initiatives, women are advocating for environmental justice, restoring degraded environments, and promoting sustainable livelihoods (Okonta & Oronto, 2001). Their activism is vital in holding governments and corporations accountable for their actions and demanding policy changes to protect the environment.

In the Niger Delta, women's views and expertise are frequently disregarded due to their exclusion from decision-making forums. In order to value women's contributions to environmental peacebuilding, it is imperative that these systems be challenged and that inclusive decision-making procedures be encouraged. We may strive toward more practical and long-lasting solutions to the environmental pollution in the region by appreciating the contributions and expertise of women in environmental management. To create policies and practices that put environmental justice and human rights first, women must be involved in environmental governance and decision-making processes (Rocheleau et al., 1996). In the end, feminist environmentalism provides a useful paradigm for comprehending the vital role that women play in advancing environmental peacebuilding in the region and for creating better and inclusive environmental management strategies.

THE NIGER DELTA'S ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The Nigerian state faces a myriad of environmental issues, which have been widely investigated and reported in the literature. It ranges from pollution, oil spillage, flooding, drought, desertification, and coastal land submergence, among others, some of which are made worse by the incessant effects of climate change. According to Edet and Etim (2014), the pollution of soil by oil extractivism in the Niger Delta's sediments and swamp land has been widely reported in literature, with most of the pollution coming from oil operation. For instance, in Nsisioken Ogale, Eleme LGA of Rivers State, there are several cases of groundwater contamination. At 8 a.m., a layer of refined oil was floating on the community's groundwater.

It is pertinent to note that in taking oil from the soil, in oil host communities of the Niger Delta, as elsewhere, the oil industry uses dangerous chemicals, including barium, which is a chemical element that contaminates the soil. UNEP (2011) reports that the environmental damage done to the oil-producing host communities in the region, with greater reference to the people, ranges from air pollution, water pollution, loss of aquatic life, and so on. This virtually represents the ordeal of typical oil-producing host communities in the region. In this regard, the foregoing that UNEP (2011) concluded that a significant environmental restoration effort is required for the full recovery of the Niger Delta region, with specific reference to Ogoni land, may require as many as 30-50 years for completion. Consequently, Eze and Alabi (2024) report that the precarious situation hoisted by oil companies will worsen from the 2030s to the 2040s as the 100s are now fleeing the shores of Nigeria in the guise of divestment. The question here is whether international companies which has the technical and financial capacity to clean up the environment they have damaged over the years, or is it a local oil company with limited technical and financial capabilities that will be committed to cleaning an environment it did not pollute? Indeed, the future of the environment in Nigeria's Niger Delta looms in nefarious uncertainties. This will, in turn, reverse the little gains recorded in sustainable development in Nigeria. According to Giving Compass (2022), environmental challenges are seen as the harm that human activity does to the planet and its ecological systems.

Pollution, inadequate sanitation, ozone layer depletion, desertification, flooding, erosion, wildfire, deforestation, and soil contamination are among Nigeria's environmental problems, according to Ibrahim et al. (2020). According to Dopheide (2019), Nigeria's air quality is among the worst in the world, with 150 deaths per 100,000 due to air pollution in 2016. According to Onuoha et al. (2022), flooding is another serious environmental issue in Nigeria, with over 70% of its states at risk of flooding due to the country's yearly occurrence of both natural and man-made flood disasters. Drought and desertification have hampered environmental sustainability in northern Nigeria. Indeed, climate change is a global phenomenon; therefore, it is more convenient to adduce its existence in Nigeria, especially in the Niger Delta, where this study was carried out.

WOMEN AND CLIMATE CHANGE-INDUCED MIGRATION CHALLENGES IN THE NIGER DELTA

Over the years, Nigeria has faced migration challenges, especially people from rural communities who depend heavily on the environment and its ecological resources. Nigerian rural communities are particularly affected by the socioeconomic realities of poverty and have limited access to health and education services, according to IOM (2019). In Nigeria, economic factors, primarily those related to employment or occupation, are the primary cause of internal migration. According to UNCTAD (2018), 81 per cent of women migrate domestically compared to 19 per cent who migrate abroad, whereas 72 per cent of Nigerian male migrants migrate domestically and 28 per cent migrate abroad.

Internal migration is indeed a response to both addressing socioeconomic demands and adapting to ecological instability. Environmental deterioration and related environmental conflicts around the nation are notable sources of internal migration, as they have resulted in numerous internal displacements. As of 2018, the Boko Haram insurgency alone was responsible for nearly 2.2 million internal displacements in Nigeria, according to IOM (2019). Furthermore, in 2019 alone, disasters caused the displacement of about 613,000 people. The northeast and north central regions of Nigeria are experiencing a more severe migration crisis. About 802 schools are still closed, and 497 classrooms have been destroyed, according to UNHCR (2019).

Indeed, the incidence of migration in Nigeria is widespread, especially for rural dwellers. In the Niger Delta, it occurs as a natural response to challenges associated with climate change and environmental degradation.

According to WHO (2018), social and environmental elements of health, such as access to clean water and air, food security, safe housing, and sanitation, are expected to suffer as a result of climate change and its aftereffects, such as droughts or sea level rise. WHO also stated that it is anticipated that the effects of climate change will result in over 250,000 deaths per year from heat stress,

diarrhea, malaria, and malnutrition between 2030 and 2050. According to Bradshaw and Fordham (2015), the Niger Delta's environmental problems and climate change vulnerabilities make women more susceptible to many ailments, particularly during pregnancy and the postpartum period. Additionally, because pregnant women are highly attractive to mosquitoes, women are far more likely to contract malaria, according to WHO. UNFCCC (2022) explain the complex interplay of socioeconomic determinants that put women and marginalised groups at greater risk of experiencing the detrimental effects of climate change over a lengthy period.

Women appear to be at the crossroads whenever critical socio-economic issues are raised, especially in a cultural power setting like Africa. Every problem that arises in human society is always pushed back on women. Drought conditions in parts of sub-Saharan Africa have heightened competition for resources, according to George-Genyi (2024). As resource scarcity worsens, women who are in charge of gathering fuelwood and water are more vulnerable to gender-based violence.

Women are mostly affected by the poly-crisis phenomenon globally. Nigeria's case appears to be one of the worst examples. A large number of persons displaced by climate change in the Nigr Delta region puts women at risk of the dangers of an emerging humanitarian crisis. According to Despite the fact that climate change affects everyone, some groups are more severely impacted than others, which has caused alarm around the world (Akinbami, 2021).

According to Adeola et al. (2023), women in Africa frequently experience less chances and disadvantages than men, especially when it comes to access to essential services and gender disparities in the workforce. Indeed, recent studies reveal that women face more challenges and vulnerabilities in the presence of polycrisis. According to Roa et al. (2019), climate change has a negative impact on both men and women, but the effects are felt differently by each gender due to differences in access to resources, gender roles, and decision-making authority. Social position, gender role disparities, and cultural standards have further marginalized women's attempts to develop resilience in the face of adversity.

The awareness of these dynamics differs between men and women in Africa, where climate change has increased the frequency of floods, droughts, and higher temperatures (McOmber, 2020). The emerging poly-crisis is exacerbating pre-existing problems of gender inequality and women's marginalization.

WOMEN AS AGENTS OF ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING

Given the challenges of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta, which have spanned over seven decades, the people of the Niger Delta have been resilient. The structural barriers notwithstanding, women in the Niger Delta cannot be described as mere passive victims but very active participants in grassroots peacebuilding. The women in the Delta use indigenous knowledge systems, informal group networks, and associations to mediate community disputes, advocate for environmental justice, and bring to the fore creative solutions to tackle climate change, migration, gender, and environmental challenges in the region. First on the list of this creativity is the use of sandbags for planting. This allows women in coastal communities in the Niger Delta to grow plants in wet areas since they cannot go to their farmland because of flooding, coastal erosion, and climate crisis. The switching of farming seasons is yet another demonstration of community creativity by women. There are established planting calendars which farmers across the world rely on for their farming activities. However, the unpredictability brought by climate change has made it difficult to keep to these established patterns. Women in the Delta have creatively constructed new calendars for their planting and harvesting seasons. Other points worthy of mention are sea piping: These are shore protections constructed by community members to protect buildings, farmland, and other infrastructure from damage arising from coastal erosion and constantly rising sea levels.

It is also important to mention that Women's groups in the Delta region have initiated various forms of reforestation activities, mangrove regeneration, and organic farming to restore degraded lands in the Niger Delta (Chukwuemeka & Aghamelu, 2019). These efforts by women in the region have not only contributed to climate adaptation but have also built cooperation and minimised dependence on conflict-prone resources. Furthermore, women have devised alternative livelihood systems including aquaculture, eco-tourism, and green entrepreneurship (Eze, 2020). These efforts provide income security while reducing environmental stress, thereby serving as informal peacebuilding mechanisms. Women leaders have played critical roles in advocating for environmental justice and political reform. However, their formal inclusion in state-led environmental governance remains limited. Where present, it is often symbolic rather than substantive (Agbiboa, 2013).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Environmental peacebuilding, which emphasizes how environmental cooperation can promote stability and peace, cannot be successfully achieved in the Niger Delta cannot without the involvement of women. From the foregoing, the resilience of women in the Niger Delta, their experience, and their indigenous knowledge constitute invaluable assets for post-conflict recovery and climate adaptation. The need for their genuine inclusion cannot be over-emphasized. This will require a fundamental shift in both policy and practice—one that sees women not just as mere victims but recognises women as both stakeholders and co-creators of peace and sustainability. As the climate crisis in the Niger Delta exacerbates, centring gender justice in environmental governance is needed. In this regard, it is recommended, among other things, to focus on institutional reforms that promote gender equity in environmental policymaking and collaborative partnerships among civil society, government actors, and international development

stakeholders. Additionally, women's organisations should be supported with technical training, funding, and legal recognition to scale their peacebuilding and ecological initiatives. There is also a need to provide gender quotas in local and regional environmental governance bodies and investment in gender-disaggregated data collection to inform policy and measure impact.

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