OUR MOTHERS' COURAGE SILENCED ALL GUNS: WOMEN AND CONFLICT IN THE NIGER DELTA

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ABSTRACT

Pacification of the Niger Delta seems to be a refrain of successive governments in Nigeria since the 1990s. Obviously, this is in response to years of local disaffection against multinational oil companies and government over poor social conditions and environmental degradation. A decade of violence led to the death and displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, destruction of livelihoods and decimation of the natural environment. In many communities in the Niger Delta, there is a widespread feeling that much has not changed with the new democratic government regarding state repression, as the military invasion and killings in the Ijaw town of Odi in November 1999 shows. In these conflicts, women suffered tremendously. Yet, it is wrong to assume, as it is widely done, that women are just passive victims of the conflicts, and mere auxiliaries in the struggles of their communities for justice. While it is true that male populations are major targets of state violence, it is perhaps as true that the role played by women in social provisioning for families and communities and direct participation in the struggles helped to determine the course and outcomes of the conflicts. That not withstanding, this role has not received the attention it deserves. This paper analyses the impact of prolonged conflict and state repression on Ogoni and Ijaw women. It analyses the various dimensions of abuses against women in the course of the conflicts, support networks for women, as well as how conflict experiences are changing the social position of women in these communities.

> *They came with Shell and cannons; They shelved all civility's canons; They were both Chevron and commissioned; Their guns and shells silenced all our men Then our mothers' courage silenced all guns*
> *--- For the Niger Delta (Anonymous)*

INTRODUCTION

During the 1990s, Nigeria's military rulers embarked on a policy of pacifying the Niger Delta, the oil-rich region populated by many ethnic minorities. Pacification was the military's response to demands by those ethnic minorities for social, economic and cultural rights in a country where years of practicing an unbalanced federal system grossly skewed resources and political power in favour of majority ethnic groups, notwithstanding that the bulk of the country's wealth came from petroleum extracted from the Niger Delta. For added measure, the petroleum industry profoundly undermined the fragile ecosystem of the Niger Delta, destroying in its wake local livelihoods. The response of ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta to state violence and pacification in the face of enduring threat to their livelihoods and security was to organise stiff opposition to the militarist state and *petrobusiness*. The cycle of violence that ensured saw the death and displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, including women, children and the aged.

Then came 1999 and enter an elected democratic government. Since May 1999 when the new democratic government led by President Obasanjo, himself a former army General, took over, all the hopes and fears of the years of military repression have been re-enacted in the Niger Delta. Initially, hopes were high that a democratic government would lend a listening ear to the groans and tears of the Niger Delta. Such hopes were quickly emptied in November 1999 when the new government sent a detachment of well-armed soldiers to sack the town of Odi in Bayelsa State. Countless lives and livelihoods were destroyed in the military expedition, remarkable by the pyromania and brutality exhibited by the soldiers. The invading army torched virtually all houses in Odi. To date, there has been no inquiry into activities of the soldiers that carried out the Odi operation to ascertain whether they followed the rules of engagement, suggesting that the civilian government was fully privy to the gory activities of the soldiers. In any case, around the time of the Odi expedition the President himself had issued an order with the omnibus clause that "trouble makers" should be shot at sight.

Without doubt, one social category that has suffered immensely from the enduring violence and conflicts in the Niger Delta is women. But because of the gendered nature of violence in a highly patriarchal society like Nigeria, accounts of women's experiences in the conflicts have been very rare.* That women are targets of violence during conflicts is well known and widely accepted. However, violence against women during conflicts is often portrayed as episodic or epiphenomenal, the inevitable by-product of conflict. This is inadequate because it fails to see the continuum of violence, both

* Apart from a few studies, for example my chapter in Turshen *et al* (2002) much of what exists are accounts in the popular press and NGO documents. Academic research into the experiences of women in the drawn-out conflict in the Niger Delta has not been very popular in Nigeria.

direct-objective and indirect-structural, against women in most patriarchal societies. In addition, an epiphenomenal portrayal of violence against women during conflicts tends to lead into a static conception of healing in the post-conflict situation. Since violence is seen as exclusively objective, healing is thought to occur when objective violence is eliminated and victims are recompensed materially. To the contrary, a structural approach to violence yields a holistic understanding of healing, which not only addresses the immediate physical and psychological impacts of violence, but also more structural issues like reconciliation, reintegration and long-term peace building. Such an approach to healing is not static but dynamic. It recognises that victims of violence may also have changed as a result of their experiences during the conflict. Consequently, the demands of healing may go further than mere restoration of pre-conflict conditions. This point is particularly relevant in addressing gender issues in the aftermath of conflicts. It is known that war-time experience of women sometimes serve as a harbinger for challenging structural gender inequalities in post-conflict situations. This has been reported in both the Biafra-Nigeria war and the liberation war in Zimbabwe. Thus, there is a dialectical relationship between healing and changing: healing must address change, and change must be a basis for healing (Ibeanu, 2002).

This paper draws from aspects of a larger project on women, children and conflict in the Niger Delta. The project is divided into two parts namely, research and advocacy. The research part is a study of conflict and aftermath experiences of women and children in the Niger Delta. It seeks to analyse how conflict and post-conflict experiences of women are contributing to shaping the identity and status of women in various communities of the in Niger Delta. The advocacy part of the project focuses on assisting NGOs working with women and women organisations to improve their work, especially in conflict management, counselling, entrepreneurial training and search for restitution. Much of the data reported derive from the experiences of the Ogoni and Ijaw ethnic groups since 1994. These two ethnic minorities have been among the main victims of state violence in the Niger Delta. The paper provides an overview of women's experiences in the Niger Delta conflicts and suggests ways of assisting women, not only to achieve acceptable closures to their traumatic experiences, but also to establish the framework for more equitable gender relations in the aftermath of the conflicts.

THE ODIUM OF PETROLEUM

Background to the Niger Delta Conflicts: The Niger Delta (Fig. 1) crisis reflects the very odious nature of petroleum production in Nigeria in the last decade. Indeed, the seeming unending capacity of petroleum to cause hate in Nigeria in that period has been unprecedented. Communities warred within

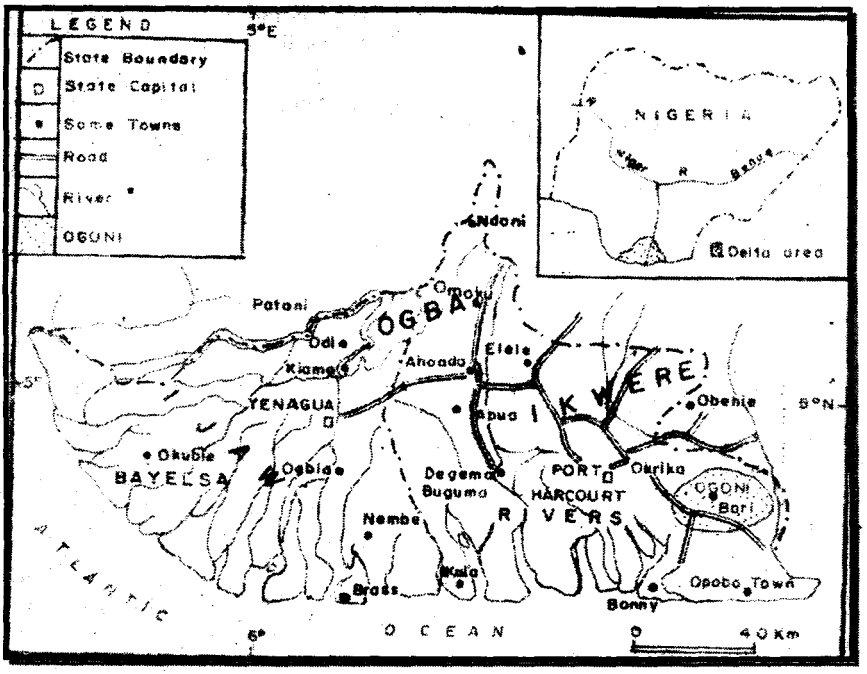

Fig. 1: Map of the Niger Delta

and among themselves, the state repressed ethnic communities and oil workers were taken hostage for ransom by youths who also re-invented tyrannicide by repeatedly killing their chiefs. However, why did the seeming Hobbesian Niger Delta manifest only in the last decade when oil production has been going on there for five decades? Observers have attributed it variously to the intensification of minority politics in Nigeria, structure of the Nigerian federation, growth in environmental consciousness and environmental politics, internal colonialism and increased international interest in domestic human rights conditions. Yet others speak rather cryptically of the character of the Nigerian state, impact of globalisation or the structure of the petroleum industry (See variously Osaghae, 1995, Naanen, 1995, Omoweh, 1998, IDEA, 2000 among others). While these are not necessarily wrong, we need to look more closely and specifically at the character of domestic politics of the last decade and its many dislocations and consequences. This is important because this domestic politics gave form and character to most contemporary explanations of the Niger Delta problem. While some of the explanatory factors like internal colonialism, the contested nature of the Nigerian federation, minority politics and structure of the petroleum industry have not changed fundamentally in the last forty years, other factors like globalisation and environmental politics are acquiring their

Nigerian specificity in the context of our domestic politics of the last decade. In short, in the Niger Delta of the last ten years, the environment of politics shaped the politics of the environment.

How do we characterise this environment of politics? Although its roots lie in the post-colonial or peripheral character of the Nigerian state, its immediate defining character is the rule of the *militariat*. The politics initiated by the *militariat*, including the transition to civil rule politicised the environment of the Niger Delta. By the *militariat* we refer to the dominant social category in Nigeria in the last decade. Although putatively displaced by the return to civilian (democratic?) rule in on 29 May 1999, the structures and weltanshuung bequeathed by the *militariat* are still very much with us. In short, Nigeria is yet to transcend the bulk of the materiality of the rule of the *militariat*. As we shall argue, it is this fact that explains the Odi invasion organised by the present civilian regime.

As a dominant social category, the *militariat* had a specific terrain of interests and drew its "membership" from various segments of society. This means that although the hegemony of the *militariat* was facilitated by the long period of military rule in Nigeria, the social category is not exclusively military. As a social category, the Nigerian *militariat* was composed of three strata, namely the business class, middle class and foreign capital. For the first two, their strongest defining interest was in the use of the state for accumulation through public works contracts. Consequently, they supported and still support the "strong" and economically interventionist state. Historically, the business and middle classes in Nigeria have used the state to serve personal and sectional interests, especially ethnic and other communal interests. The third stratum of the *militariat* was foreign capital, notably those investing in the petroleum sector. The bulk of foreign private investment in Nigeria is in that sector, involving most of the big names like Shell, Total, Mobil, Agip, Elf and Chevron.

From the above characterisation of the *militariat* we may deduce that its rule balanced on three props namely, military dictatorship, ethno-communalism and *petrobusiness*. These three respectively capture the major political, social and economic moments of the hegemony of the *militariat*. First, military dictatorship involves the continued military domination of the political space, limiting the democratic aspirations of the popular masses of Nigerians and the privatisation of violence and political power. This is achieved through the systematic use of state violence against individual opponents and targeted groups, which are defined as constituting a threat to state security. A necessary correlate of military dictatorship is the diffusion of a culture of militarism. Derived from the military organisation, this culture favours violence and force over persuasion; order over discussion and bargaining; exclusion over inclusion and coercion over conviction.

Second, communalism, especially in its ethnic form, is also a defining moment of the hegemony of the *militariat* in Nigeria. To be sure,

communalism, especially ethnicity, predates the *militariat*, being a constitutive element of Nigeria-type states as they emerged from colonialism. This is widely recognised in the literature, albeit differently formulated (cf. Nnoli, 1978; Ake, 1985; Mamdani, 1996). However, the rule of the *militariat* has maintained and deepened it. In the first place, in the absence of institutionalised means of political mobilisation under military dictatorship, communalism burgeoned as pan-ethnic organisations filled the space vacated by political parties and pressure groups. Furthermore, various factions of the military found in communalism a means of legitimising their seizure of power. Appeal to their co-ethnics for support against threats from other ethnic groups was a common strategy of successive military juntas. Finally, civilians also found in communalism a means of pursuing their interest under the military. On the one hand, military regimes gave access to economic resources to ethnic in-groups, that is, ethnic groups that supported or were assumed to support the military regime. On the other hand, ethnic out-groups found in ethnicity a means of mobilising their ethnic homeland against exclusion or *marginalisation* in the popular Nigerian parlance.

Third, while military dictatorship and communalism provided the political and social props of the hegemony of the *militariat*, *petrobusiness* bankrolled it. Petroleum exploration in Nigeria dates back to the first few years of this century. Organised marketing and distribution started around 1907 by a German Company, Nigerian Bitumen Corporation. In 1956, the Anglo-Dutch group Shell D'Archy discovered oil in commercial quantities at Oloibiri, a town in the Niger Delta. By February 1958, Nigeria became an oil exporter with a production level of 6,000 barrels per day. Other multi-national oil companies have since joined Shell (now Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria - SPDC), and at peak production in the 1970s, Nigeria's output was two million barrels of crude oil per day.

Today, crude oil is produced in nine States of the country namely, Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Imo, Abia, Akwa Ibom, Cross River and Ondo States. Most of the crude oil is found in the Niger Delta. Shell remains the largest producer in Nigeria. Recently, the company reported that in all it had 94 oil fields scattered over an area of 31,000 square kilometres in the Niger Delta from which nearly one million barrels of oil were produced daily (Shell, 1995: 1). Apart from crude oil production, there are many other upstream and downstream activities in the petroleum industry in Nigeria including refineries, oil services, liquefied petroleum gas and liquefied natural gas production and marketing. Although it contributes only 13% of Nigeria's GDP, *petrobusiness* provides over 80 % of government revenues every year. This fact made petroleum a very central force in the survival of the *militariat* as most public works contracts, with all the integral sharp practices, as well as the functioning of government agencies depended on it.

The single most important consequence of the rule of the *militariat* in the Niger Delta is the politicisation of the environment, a situation in

which local oil producing communities are pitted against state officials and *petrobusiness*. At issue in this environmental politics is the question of security. For state officials and *petrobusiness*, state security is precedent over everything else, environmental security inclusive. Consequently, security means an uninterrupted production of crude oil at "competitive" (read: low) prices in other to sustain state revenues. Informed by a pro-growth ideology, their concern is the production of petroleum to ensure economic growth (rents, royalties and profits). This is paramount irrespective of the impact on the local inhabitants and environment, or the economic irrationality of the process. For example, one of the paradoxes of oil exploitation in the Niger Delta is that renewable natural resources, such as arable land and aquifers, are destroyed for the extraction of a non-renewable, finite resource like crude oil.

On the part of local communities, security means the maintenance of the carrying capacity of the environment. It is the realisation that an unsustainable exploitation of petroleum, with its devastation of farm land and fishing waters, threatens resource flows and livelihoods. Local people therefore demand guaranteed access to resources, including oil revenues. In addition, they demand the protection of the environment as part of guaranteeing that access and protecting their physical existence. For instance, the negative environmental impact of crude oil mining and refining is very well known. Pollution arising from oil spillage destroys marine life and crops, makes water unsuitable for fishing and renders farmland unusable. Brine from oilfields contaminates water formations and streams, making them unfit as sources of drinking water. At the same time, gases flaring in the vicinity of human dwellings and high pressure oil pipelines that form a mesh across farmlands are conducive to acid rains, deforestation and destruction of wildlife. In addition, dumping of toxic, non-biodegradable by- products of oil refining is dangerous to both flora and fauna, including man. Metals that at high concentrations are known to cause metabolic malfunctions in human beings, such as cadmium, chromium, mercury and lead, are contained in refinery effluents constantly discharged into fresh water and farmland. They enter the food chain both by direct intake, for example through drinking water or indirectly through the consumption of seafood. Fish, for instance, is known to be able to store mercury in its brain without metabolising it, and man runs the risk of eating such contaminated fish.

These two perceptions of security, though contradictory, are not necessarily irreconcilable. The same issues are common in other parts of the world. But with the politicisation of the environment in the context of the rule of the *militariat*, consensus building is relegated in preference to regimentation through force and violence. State violence becomes the dominant means of "reconciling" the contradiction between the state, *petrobusiness* and local communities. State violence expresses the violence and aggression of the state against targeted groups. This aggression occurs in

the routine business of projecting power, carrying out policies without consultation or negotiation or spreading terror (Ake, et al, nd: 9). Often, state violence is used in support of the claims of one social group against those of others, rather than as part of the legitimate, institutional use of public coercion. State violence is a distinguishing feature of conflicts in the Niger Delta in the last decade because of the private appropriation of the state by various strata of the *militariat*. As a result, the coercive apparatuses of the state, which should be above the specific interests of oil producing communities or *petrobusiness*, is employed brazenly to aggress, repress and suppress local communities.

Apart from the social, economic and political consequences of the rule of the *militariat*, which hinged on security, there were tremendous environmental consequences as well. State violence fuels the inefficient exploitation of nature as groups that control the state use it to justify and perpetuate their unsustainable use of natural resources and degradation of the environment. For instance, oil companies with the backing of the state have engaged in some of the worst ecological practices in the world. Until recently, they did not conduct either environmental or social impact assessment before embarking on projects. Communities were seldom consulted. The oil companies often claimed that it was the responsibility of government to deal with the communities and that they satisfy all their statutory obligations. In the course of their activities, profound environmental damages, especially oil spills, were treated with the same levity. In 1970 about 30 million barrels of oil were spilled from Shell installations in Ogoniland. Between 1985 and 1993, there were 2,500 major and minor oil spills in Ogoniland, including a major one in which Shell dallied for forty days before patching a ruptured pipe (Earthaction, 1994). At Aleibiri in Ekeremor Council of Bayelsa State, a major oil spill on 18 March 1997 was left uncleaned by Shell for six months, prompting a demonstration by over 10,000 youths in August 1997 demanding an end to Shell activities in the Niger Delta. In January 1998, a massive oil spill from Mobil installations attracted over one million claims for compensation from individuals and communities. Out of these, only 106,000 claims were accepted by Mobil.

Apart from oil spills, there have been other environmental damages. For instance, Shell constructed a narrow road through the Ogoni town of Dere to link its oil wells. This completely destroyed the drainage system of the town leading to sever flooding. To date, the community is still seeking compensation for thirty-nine years of suffering. In Gbaran, Shell also constructed a road to link its installations with a major road from Yenagoa to Mbiama. As a result, water flow to a large section of timberland was cut off. As a result, 1,000 acres of forest simply atrophied and died (Mitee, 1997: 6-9). In addition, gas flaring by major oil companies like Shell, Agip, Mobil and Elf is said to release 35 million tonnes of carbon dioxide and 12 million tonnes of methane into the atmosphere annually. In November 1983 alone,

Shell flared over 483 million cubic metres of gas from its oil wells at temperatures up to 1,400 °C. Such tremendous ecological damage has led ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta such as the Ogoni, Ogba, Ijaw and Ikwerre to accuse petroleum companies of genocide.

Another important consequence of the rule of the *militariat* is that state violence makes environmental conflicts intractable and difficult to resolve. State violence leads to resistance by targeted groups, which leads to more violence and more resistance. For instance, in spite of heavy repression by the state the Ogoni conflict has been on for nine years. All activities of Shell have been grounded in the area for six years and there are yet no indications that they would resume in the near future. In Bayelsa State, the conflict between the state and Ijaw youths remains in a stalemate. Oil companies operating in the area continue to express fears for the safety of their staff. Among the oil producing communities, conflicts have become recurrent and endemic. The Ijaw and Itsekiri, Itsekiri and Urhobo, Ijaw and Ilaje, Kalabari and Nembe, Okpoma and Brass, among others continue to simmer.

The problem is that the rule of the *militariat* makes mediation, bargaining, negotiation, consensus building and reciprocal concessions, which are desiderata for peaceful conflict management, very difficult. By substituting state violence for peaceful conflict management, the *militariat* creates a situation of an unending cycle of conflict and violence in the Niger Delta. The inability of Nigeria's military controlled state to manage conflicts in the Niger Delta has to do with a general privatisation of the state. Rather than everybody's state that stands above social antagonisms to hold them in order, the Nigerian state under the *militariat* is 'parcelled out' to various private and regional interests. Consequently, the state is embroiled in conflicts, not as an arbiter, but as an active party canvassing the interests of some groups against others. In effect, the state has become essentially a repertory of violence used against specific groups, instead of a repository of all the interests of the people-nation. Two such groups stand out in the Niger Delta namely, the Ogoni and Ijaw

The Ogoni Conflicts: The Ogoni struggles against the Nigerian state and Shell began with the formation of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in the early 1990s by Ogoni intellectuals, professionals and youths. The emergence of MOSOP focused the Ogoni struggle and made it easier for the mass of ordinary Ogoni people to mobilize against their conditions. At the same time however, the existence of MOSOP also focused state violence on the Ogoni, as anxieties grew in government circles about the possibility of a mass uprising in the Niger Delta. State violence against the Ogoni took four major forms. First, it took the form of harassment of Ogoni leaders through surveillance, arrests and detention. From 1991 when the Ogoni struggle began in earnest, their leaders became regular victims of the

state's security and intelligence agencies. On many occasions, the then leaders of MOSOP like G. B. Leton, Kobani and Saro-Wiwa were detained and questioned. In January, 1993, they were arrested in Lagos. In April of the same year, Saro-Wiwa was arrested twice. On June 21, 1993, he was arrested again with two other MOSOP activists, N. Dube and K. Nwile. On July 13, criminal charges were brought against them (Ibeanu, 1999; Human Rights Watch, 1995). In December 1993, Ledum Mitee, another MOSOP leader was arrested and detained without charge. Between May and June, 1994, following the murders of four Ogoni leaders, several hundreds of people were arrested in Ogoniland (Human Rights Watch, 1995).

Second, state violence was used against the Ogoni by encouraging violent conflicts between the Ogoni and their neighbours, and using that as a pretext to repress the Ogoni. The government readily proclaimed such clashes to be ethnic clashes. But the frequency of the clashes (among erstwhile peaceful neighbours), the extent of devastation and the sophistication of weapons employed convinced many independent observers that ". . . broader forces might have been interested in perhaps putting the Ogonis under pressure, probably to derail their agenda" (Claude Ake, quoted in Human Rights Watch, 1995: 12). Between July, 1993 and April, 1994, there were at least three such conflicts between the Ogoni and their neighbours, involving the destruction of many villages, loss of life and refugees. Among these were the Andoni in July, 1993, the Okrika in December, 1993 and the Ndoki in April, 1994. In each case, the Ogoni were blamed by the security forces.

Third, state violence against the Ogoni involved setting the Ogoni against themselves. From early 1993, it had become clear that the military government sought to divide the Ogoni and set them against one another. The obvious target was MOSOP because of its popular appeal and effectiveness. The Ogoni people themselves knew this. Persistent disagreement among the leadership was music in the ears of the military regimes. Finally, when internal divisions within MOSOP led to death of four prominent Ogoni sons on 21 May 1994, the military saw a perfect opportunity to solve the Ogoni problem conclusively. As we shall see, the unprecedented repression and execution of the leaders of MOSOP consequent on this incident, sounded the death knell for MOSOP.

Finally, state violence also took the form of direct repression using the armed forces and police. Extra-judicial killings, flogging, torture, rapes, looting and extortion by the security forces against the Ogoni have been widely reported. In fact, following the situation in Ogoniland, the Rivers State government established an Internal Security Task Force under one Major (later Lt. Col.) Okuntimo. His job was the systematic use of violence against the Ogoni. Indeed, Okuntimo had bragged on prime time national television that the army taught him 204 ways of killing people, but he had only used three the Ogoni. Between May 1994 when the four prominent Ogoni personalities died in the town of Giokoo, Gokana and early 1995, at

least fifty Ogonis were executed summarily by security forces. Earlier in April 1993, in what has become known as the Wilbros Affair at least eleven Ogonis, among a woman, were shot at Biafra by a detachment of the 2nd Amphibious Brigade based in Bori. They were protesting the laying of a pipeline from Rumuekpe to Bori by Shell contractors Wilbros. Major U. Braimah of the Brigade claimed that his men were carrying out duties directed by the military government.

On their part, the Ogoni responded to state violence by increased mobilization and media campaign against the state and oil companies, locally and internationally, sometimes through violent demonstrations spearheaded by the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). Shell was particularly targeted in this very successful campaign. All over the world, demonstrations against Shell became common, and in some countries, Shell products were boycotted.

MOSOP raised huge sums of money through its "one Naira per Ogoni person" campaign in 1993. At the same time, Ken Saro Wiwa used his local and international contacts as a member of the literary profession to publicize the struggle and embarrass the military government. As he once put it, "by the time I finish, Nigeria is going to be ashamed standing before the council of the world" (Ibeanu, 1999: 21). In 1993, the international community recognized the Ogoni as an indigenous people. MOSOP also joined the informal international group representing the "unrepresented people of the world". These international contacts gave their struggle an added advantage by providing platforms that are more visible for pushing the Ogoni demands on the Nigerian state. Internationalisation soon yielded political fruits. For instance, the United States, European Community and the Commonwealth imposed sanctions on the military governments. On 6 May 1994, the Congressional Human Rights Caucus of the U.S. House of Representatives wrote to General Sani Abacha informing him of their concerns about human rights violations in Ogoniland. The Caucus also asked him to do everything to end such violations.

Another strategy adopted by MOSOP was to widen the conflict terrain by sensitising neighbouring communities and ethnic groups suffering the same conditions as the Ogoni. As early as 1990, the Ogoni struggle had already become the touchstone for other communities. The nightmare scenario for the military was the entire Niger Delta exploding in an anti-state, anti-oil company confrontation. Consequently, the Ogoni struggle had to be contained by violence and other communities tempted to follow the Ogoni example would be similarly dealt with. For instance, the Umuechem case in which over twenty persons were murdered in 1990 after Shell Officials called in the para-military Mobile police force to deal with demonstrating villagers, is already well publicized. More recently, Human Rights Watch/Africa has documented the cases of a number of other communities in the Niger delta including Obagi, Brass, Nembe Creek and Rumuobiokani (Human Rights

Watch, 1999). Still, the violence did not deter MOSOP and its leadership in trying to forge an alliance of the people of the Niger Delta against the military-controlled state and oil companies. In April 1993, Saro Wiwa was in Warri, Delta State to address the National Association of Itsekiri Students. The Itsekiri are another oil-rich, minority ethnic group in the Niger Delta. On arrival, 20-armed policemen apprehended him, temporarily detained him and later took him to the Patani Bridge that links Delta and Rivers States. He was sternly advised not to return to Delta State. The reason for this illegal act by the police was that the authorities feared that his address would incite the students into action.

The Ijaw Egbesu Wars: It does seem that the Ogoni passed the mantle of leading the struggle of the people of the Niger Delta to the Ijaw. Since the implosion of MOSOP Ijaw youths have increasingly taken the centre stage. In August 1997, over 10,000 youths from across the Delta demonstrated at Aleibiri in Ekeremor Local Area of Bayelsa State to demand an end to all Shell activities in the Niger Delta. Aleibiri was chosen as the focus of the demonstration because, according to the youths, Shell has refused to clear an oil spill that occurred there on 18 March 1997. Even at the time, evidence clearly pointed to more conflicts between the state, oil companies and Ijaw youths, in spite of repeated claims by government that peace had returned to the area. Speaking at the Aleibiri gathering, a community leader and retired Navy Lieutenant, Chief Augustine Anthony, clearly stated that Ijaw youths would fight until there is freedom in the Niger Delta because "we have been exploited for so long".

Within one year, Ijawland exploded again. Between mid-1998 and January 1999, Bayelsa State was in turmoil. The Ijaw inhabit Bayelsa, one of the main petroleum producing States in Nigeria. What became known as the first *Egbesu* war began when an Ijaw youth leader was arrested and detained by the military Governor of the State during the rule of General Abacha. He was held without trial in the Government House (the military Governor's official residence) for distributing "seditious" documents questioning the financial probity of the Governor one Navy Captain Olu Bolade. In reaction, a group of youths said to be members of an Ijaw cult, the *Egbesu*, stormed the Government House in Yenagoa, disarmed the guards and released their leader. Many residents of Yenagoa that we spoke to, including policemen and soldiers, believe that members of the cult were able to break into the well-guarded Government House because they wore charms that made them impervious to bullets. The success of the first *Egbesu* war obviously enhanced the profile of the youths and the cult, and encouraged more young people, many of whom were unemployed (youth unemployment in Bayelsa State is very high), to join the protests. In a matter of weeks, the invincibility of the *Egbesu* had spread throughout Ijawland and beyond. The success of the *Egbesu* youth in the "first war" also fed into wider demands by the Ijaw

for more petroleum revenues. Prior to the *Egbesu*, the Ijaw National Council and the Movement for the Survival of Ijaw Ethnic Nationality (MOSIEN) had made vociferous demands for more petroleum revenues to be allocated to the Ijaw. The formation of MOSIEN was largely influenced by MOSOP, the Ogoni organisation.

The death of the dictator Abacha in June 1998 and improvements in human rights and expansion of the political space made it possible for Ijaw demands to become more openly articulated and massively pursued. The first *Egbesu* war had guaranteed a central role for the youth in this new dispensation. This became clear in late 1998 following a spate of hijacks of oil installations by Ijaw youths. This phase of resistance, as the youths called it, culminated in a grand Convention of Ijaw ~~youths~~ in Kaiama town. The meeting issued a document addressed to the government and oil companies requesting more local control of oil revenues and better environmental practices. The *Kaiama Declaration* also gave the government until 31st December 1998 to respond positively to their demands. The government upped the ante with a spate of condemnations and threats to use force against the youths. In his new year/budget broadcast on 01 January 1999, the Head of State General Abubakar, gave indications of a military action against the youths. Since early December 1998, there had been massive military build-up in Bayelsa State by the government, including the positioning of frigates in the Gulf of Guinea. Throughout December 1998 and early January 1999, Bayelsa State was virtually in siege and the atmosphere was tense. The second *Egbesu* war was inevitable. It started when military men in Yenagoa, the capital of Bayelsa State, confronted Ijaw youths participating in a cultural festival. In the ensuing violence, which lasted for over one week, many Ijaw youths lost their lives in Yenagoa and Kaiama, property worth millions of Naira was destroyed and scores of people were displaced.

The military invasion of the town of Odi in Kolokuma-Opokuma Local Government Area of Bayelsa State in 1999 by the new civilian government seemed to confirm the fears of the human rights community that it will take some time before the vestiges of the rule of the *militariat* in Nigeria are eliminated. Odi is the second largest town in Bayelsa State, after the capital Yenagoa. Trouble began in mid-November 1999 when some Odi youths took some policemen hostage and later tortured them to death. The team of policemen had gone to the town to investigate rumours of renewed Egbesu mobilisation, this time to storm Lagos. This was thought to be a reprisal for attacks a month earlier on Ijaws in Lagos by the ethnic Yoruba youth group called the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC). It was widely believed that the OPC attacks on Ijaw residents of the Lagos suburb of Ajegunle was a carryover from the conflicts in the State of Ondo between the Ijaw and Ilaje, a Yoruba clan. The government interpreted the killing of the policemen as renewed Egbesu challenge to the state. However, it is known that one leader of the youths that murdered the policemen at Odi was in fact a

member of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the party of both President Obasanjo and Governor Diepreye Alamieyeseigha of Bayelsa State. This youth leader is known to be very influential among Ijaw youths and mobilised them to support the PDP in the gubernatorial elections of January 1999. In response to the death of the policemen, President Obasanjo ordered Governor Alamieyeseigha to produce the culprits. When this failed, he ordered in the army.

The consequences were chilling: over one hundred inhabitants dead, many more missing, thousands forced to flee and virtually no house standing at Odi today. As if this was not enough, the President in a televised interview ordered security forces to shoot rioters at sight. These draconian measures have been widely criticised in Nigeria, but the government continues to defend its actions. The excessive display of military force at Odi against a civilian population is unprecedented for a democratic government. A very useful reflection of the psychology of the soldiers that led the invasion are captured in the many graffiti they left behind (ERA, 1999). Scratched on walls with charcoal and hard objects, many of them probably give an insight into the rules of engagement given to the soldiers by their political and military superiors. Table 1 is a presentation of a selection of the graffiti.

ANALYSIS AND PROJECTIONS

Wartime experiences of Ogoni and Odi women: The pioneering volume on the wartime experiences of African women edited by Turshen and Twagiramariya (1998) provides a very useful framework for understanding women and the conflict in the Niger Delta. Essentially, the experiences of African women in situations of generalised conflicts are identical. The gendered nature of violence expressed in rape, prostitution, widowhood and displacement is common knowledge. At the same time, the devaluation of the positive contributions of women in the struggles for justice by their communities is commonplace, as is the tendency to conceal the participation of some women, usually as agents of authoritarian states, in perpetrating war horrors. However, the most important point is the transformation in gender relations in the aftermath of conflicts. As Turshen correctly puts it, "war also destroys the patriarchal strictures of society that confine and degrade women. In the very breakdown of morals, traditions, customs, and community, war also opens up and creates new beginnings" (Turshen, 1998:20).

Tables 1 and 2 show that Ogoni and Odi women suffered all 19 forms of violence which we indicated to them. In both cases, the most severe abuses were verbal abuse, sexual harassment, unlawful detention and destruction of property. However, while verbal abuse was the most serious form in Ogoniland, in Odi it was destruction of property. The explanation for this seems to lie in the different doctrines behind the military's invasion of

Table 1: Forms of violence against Ogoni women and their perpetrators

Forms of Violence against Ogoni Women	Main Perpetrators of Violence against Ogoni Women (%)						
	Security Agents	Community Leaders	Husbands/ Relations	Women Organisations	Government Officials	Other Communities	Percentage Average (Row Total ÷ 600)X100
Verbal abuse	66	30	0	1	51	57	34.17
Harassment and intimidation	90	9	0	3	62	30	32.33
Imprisonment or detention	82	23	1	0	64	23	32.17
Destruction of property	89	16	0	0	41	32	29.67
Denial of access to resources	62	5	0	0	72	34	28.83
Shooting and killing	92	1	0	0	28	27	24.67
Dispossession of property	68	2	0	0	36	37	23.83
Discrimination by social institutions	43	19	0	3	55	20	23.33
Denial of education	35	6	1	1	75	17	22.50
Beating and flogging	91	0	3	0	24	6	20.67
Sexual slavery	73	1	0	0	7	18	16.50
Systematic rape	71	1	0	0	21	5	16.33
Abandonment	27	6	20	1	35	2	15.17
Forced pregnancy	70	0	0	0	13	8	15.17
Forced labour	64	1	0	1	19	4	14.83
Rejection of women victims of rape	17	18	36	1	11	3	14.33
Forced prostitution	49	1	0	0	22	3	12.50
Betrothal for economic reasons	17	4	7	0	16	7	8.50
Forced marriage of widows by husband's relations	6	8	26	0	0	3	7.17
COLUMN TOTALS	1112	151	94	11	652	336	
PERCENTAGE AVERAGE (Column Totals ÷ 1900)x100	58.53	7.95	4.95	0.58	34.32	17.68	

Ogoni and Odi. In the former, it was designed to be a prolonged occupation to protect oil installations and intimidate Ogoni communities into abandoning their struggle. In the Odi case, on the other hand, the reasoning was to sack

Table 2: Forms of violence against Odi women and their perpetrators

Forms Of Violence Against Odi (Ijaw) Women	Main Perpetrators Of Violence Against Odi (Ijaw) Women (%)						
	Security Agents	Community Leaders	Husbands/ Relations	Women Organisations	Government Officials	Other Communities	Percentage Average (Row Total ÷ 600) X 100
Verbal abuse	80	10	0	0	55	0	24.17
Harassment and intimidation	100	5	2	0	40	10	26.17
Imprisonment or detention	90	0	1	0	60	5	26.00
Destruction of property	100	0	0	0	70	10	30.00
Denial of access to resources	70	10	5	3	65	20	28.83
Shooting and killing	100	0	0	0	15	10	20.83
Dispossession of property	60	2	0	0	50	20	22.00
Discrimination by social institutions	30	20	10	20	30	5	19.17
Denial of education	40	2	10	2	50	5	18.17
Beating and flogging	95	0	2	0	40	15	25.33
Sexual slavery	60	2	1	0	5	10	13.00
Systematic rape	80	0	0	0	30	5	19.17
Abandonment	15	4	30	0	5	0	9.00
Forced pregnancy	40	0	0	0	5	0	7.50
Forced labour	85	0	0	0	10	7	17.00
Rejection of women victims of rape	10	5	24	4	0	0	7.17
Forced prostitution	70	1	0	0	15	7	15.50
Betrothal for economic reasons	12	7	30	0	18	5	12.00
Forced marriage of widows by husband's relations	2	15	10	0	0	8	5.83
COLUMN TOTALS	1139	83	125	29	563	142	
PERCENTAGE AVERAGE (Column Totals ÷ 1900) x 100	59.95	4.37	6.58	1.53	29.63	7.47	

and destroy the community and flush out the Egbesu boys, who were said to have found sanctuary in Odi. Thus, while Ogoni was fully occupied for years, the Odi expedition was meant to sow terror and dissuade the people from supporting a simmering third Egbesu war. In both Ogoni and Odi, the chief perpetrators of violence were security forces. In six times out of ten, respondents to our questionnaire identified security forces as the main purveyors of violence against women. There was however other clear differences between the two communities. First, the role of community leaders in violence against women was more pronounced in Ogoni than Odi. The reason lies in the division in Ogoni at the time between supporters of the MOSOP-led uprising and the so-called Dere (Ogoni word for vulture), who supported or were purported to support the military occupation. In fact, the latter group welcomed the presence of the security forces as a source of protection against the perceived militancy of NYCOP. In the case of Odi, there was far more unity. Moreover, the Odi invasion was unexpected and it affected the entire community equally. In addition, the role of neighbouring communities, expectedly, was more in the Ogoni case than in the Odi case. This was because, as we have already pointed out, neighbouring communities were used repeatedly by the militarist state and security forces against the Ogoni. Figures 2, 3 and 4 summarise and compare the experiences of the two communities. What is clear is the parsimony between the ways the two separate groups of respondents perceived violence against women.

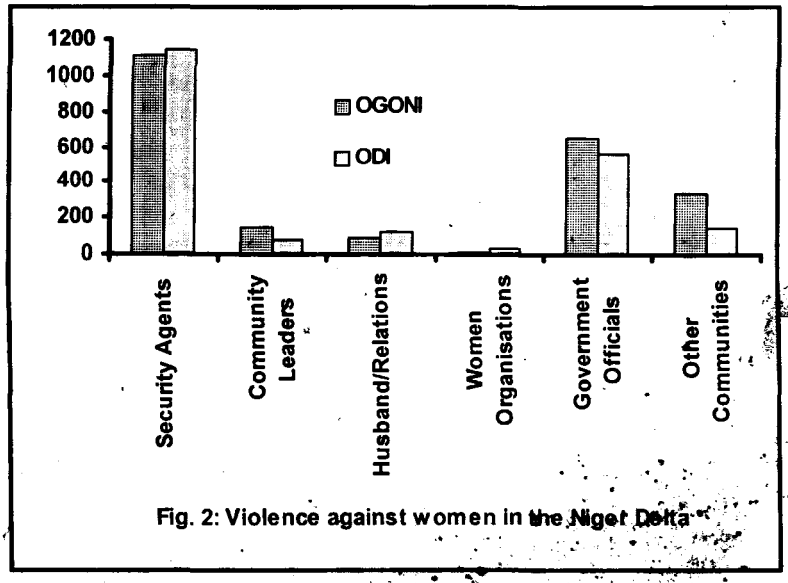

Fig. 2: Violence against women in the Niger Delta

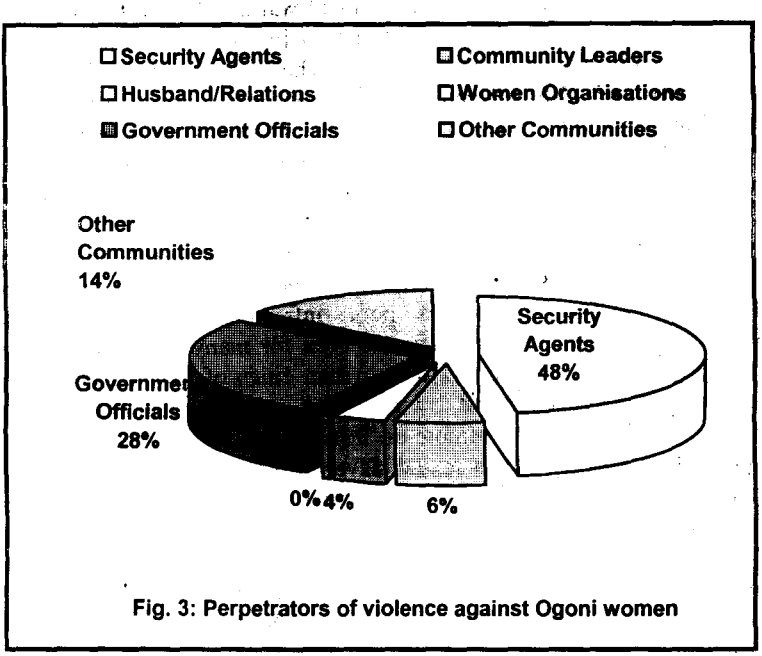

Fig. 3: Perpetrators of violence against Ogoni women

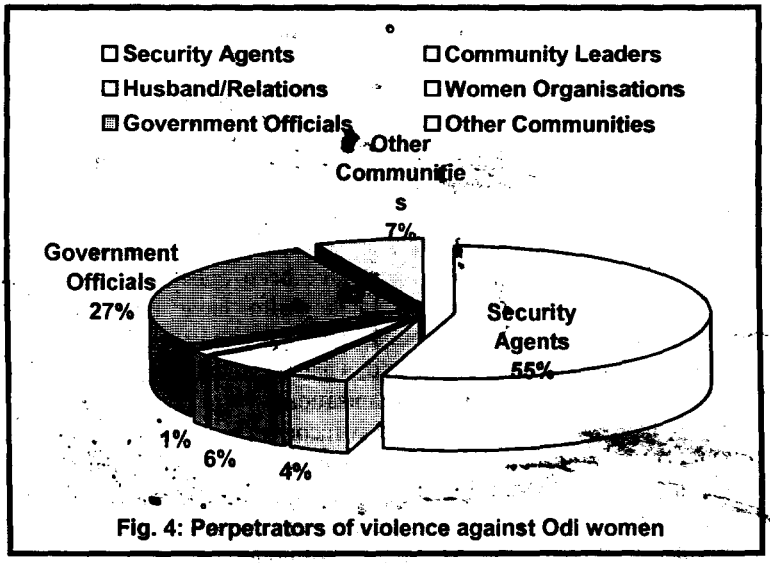

Fig. 4: Perpetrators of violence against Odi women

It should be remembered that the two communities are at least one hundred kilometres apart and the conflicts occurred four years apart. This strongly

suggests how identical women's experiences of war are. It also suggests that the militarist approach to solving the situation in the Niger Delta has not changed, even with the return to civilian rule. The Niger Delta conflicts have affected Ogoni and Odi women in many negative ways. Apart from widespread human right abuses that they suffered, such as rape, beating and flogging and death, the conflicts brought economic ruin, especially through destruction of personal property and denial of access to economic opportunities. This was particularly tough for Ogoni women seen as supporting MOSOP. Perhaps, one important form of violence against Niger Delta women is forced prostitution. Because these rural communities are increasingly uninhabitable due to poor infrastructure, environmental degradation and conflict, the tendency has been for many young women to take to prostitution. Many migrate to the urban cities of Port Harcourt and Yenagoa, sometimes encouraged by male sex entrepreneurs, to go into prostitution. Others migrate to remote oil installations, where predominantly white oil workers take them into sexual slavery. In fact, there is virtually no oil installation in remote Niger Delta that does not have an adjacent "sex village" occupied by young female prostitutes. This must count as one of the most serious long-term consequences of conflict and poverty in the Niger Delta. There is now a very high incidence of HIV/AIDS in the Delta affecting both mothers and young children, and because these young women have sparse education, their children get little schooling and job opportunities.

The bulk of assistance to women victims of conflicts in the Niger Delta has been borne by individual, families, traditional social networks and voluntary agencies (see Fig. 5). Governments and oil companies have generally featured very little. In Odi, there were series of promises by both the Federal and State governments to rebuild the community. The Bayelsa government also promised to locate 500 of its share of a Federal Government housing project in Odi. However, little has been done. Except for initial relief materials and temporary shelter for the displaced people provided by the Bayelsa State government after the military invasion, assistance to Odi has been mired in controversy. In fact, there have been questions about huge sums of money that government officials claim have been spent in rehabilitation programmes. On the ground, there has been very little by way of rehabilitation or reconstruction beyond what the local people are doing with the intermittent help of voluntary organisations.

As we have already mentioned, it is incorrect to assume that women are mere victims of conflicts. Neither is it correct to reason that gender relations remain static through conflicts. To the contrary, there is evidence of far reaching transformations in the identity of women. Some of such transformations challenge long-standing traditions of our patriarchal societies. Thus, among the Ogoni is widely felt by both men and women that the crisis raised the profile of the Ogoni woman (Ibeanu, 2002). Her positive contributions to the Ogoni struggle, including laying down her life in some

cases, are widely praised. Respondents to our questionnaire in Ogoni confirm this. We asked a number of questions to assess how the position of women may have changed as a result of the conflicts. First, 63% agreed that the conflicts enhanced the position of women in Ogoni communities. Second, 82% of respondents think that the conflicts increased women's confidence in dealing with issues confronting them in the community. Third, 61% said that the conflicts contributed to reducing traditional and cultural discrimination against women in your community.

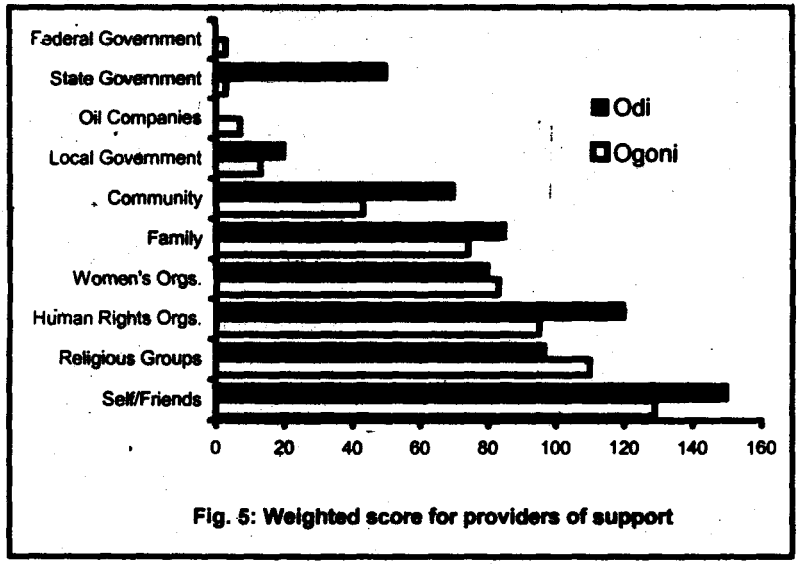

Fig. 5: Weighted score for providers of support

CONCLUSION

This paper is a preliminary report of a project evaluating the conflict experiences of women in the Niger Delta. We have traced the history of the conflicts of the last ten years and tried to demonstrate the experiences of Ogoni and Odi women in the conflicts. Of particular significance is the level of violence and violations that women suffered in the conflicts. This is in line with findings on other parts of Africa. It calls for more concerted effort to protect women in wartime, especially in generalised domestic violence, which may not attract the prolonged attention of the international community.

It is also significant that women have not been mere passive victims in these conflicts. To the contrary, in spite of horrid experiences the conflicts may have equipped women to negotiate new gender relations in their communities. There is need for NGOs and governments at the federal, state

and local levels to build on the enhanced image of women and to support more equitable gender relations in the communities of the Niger Delta.

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