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Maryse Helbert

Transitions in the Niger Delta: Oil, Poverty, and Environmental Degradation

Energy transitions are long and protracted affairs. Women in the Niger Delta in Nigeria have been caught up in the transition since the first tanker full of oil left Port Harcourt, the industrial oil capital of Nigeria, for the European market in 1953. The development of the oil industry has profoundly and negatively shaped women's prospects for emancipation in the region.

Between July 2002 and September 2003, hundreds of women occupied eight oil facilities that belonged to the transnational oil companies (TOCs) Chevron/Texaco and Shell Petroleum. During the protests, six hundred Itsekiri women threatened to expose their bare bodies to shame male officials. This is the "curse of nakedness," a cultural practice only used in extreme and life-threatening situations. In this situation, their bodily protest was aimed at imposing "social death" on male oil-company dealers. The women wanted jobs for the male members of their families and Chevron agreed to hire more than two dozen villagers and build schools, water systems, and other amenities. The protest was the culmination of decades of oil activities that had dispossessed the local population. TOCs and the government were accused of illegally appropriating land, breaking economic development contracts, and illegally spilling oil and flaring gas.

The struggle for the control of natural resources in the Niger Delta is not new. In the fifteenth century, the increasing need for natural resources to feed emergent capitalism pushed western countries towards new resource frontiers. European explorers, missionaries, slavers, and colonial mandarins made their way to areas never before explored, such as the Niger Delta, to search for wealth and energy resources. The British rulers colonised the Delta, initially extracting slaves as energy resources to fuel the industrial development of western countries, and subsequently contributing to the development of fossil fuel extraction. While German oil companies had spotted oil seepage in 1905, the oil industry was only developed fifty years later under British rule. The extraction of oil in the Delta required technology and capital that only large, integrated TOCs, such as the Royal Dutch/Shell, could provide.

From its inception, the discovery of a large source of fossil fuel was promoted as a once-in-a-lifetime economic opportunity to massively increase Nigeria's wealth, thereby liberating the population from poverty. However, rather than being a tool for the emancipation for the local population, oil exploitation might be more accurately described as a curse. The power relationships between the different forces struggling for the control of the natural resources in the region have been highly unequal. The imbalance of power was in favour of TOCs and the government provided them with the means to impose political, economic, social, and environmental conditions on the local population to maintain access to cheap oil. The impacts of these conditions depend on factors of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and location.

Women have been the "battleground" in the violent struggle between forces for the control of natural resources. The triple alliance between the Nigerian state, the TOCs, and the local elites that replaced the colonial rulers has perpetuated the tight control of oil zones to allow the uninterrupted flow of oil. To secure the oil zones, the population were dispossessed of their land to leave room for the industry, protests were violently crushed, villages destroyed, and thousands of locals intimidated, killed, and displaced. Various forms of sexual violence were used as an instrument of intimidation, and the first victims here were women.

While women have been at the receiving end of the triple alliance's violent control of the oil flow, they have not even benefited from the oil industry's job creation; overall, the oil industry does not hire many people, as it is based on capital-intensive technologies. The TOCs are also notorious for being highly discriminatory against women because of the masculine culture of the industry. In 2015, women made up only 15 percent of the oil industry's workforce in Nigeria. This poor representation is due to gender biases: TOCs believe that jobs in its industry should be based on values of toughness, competitiveness, self-interest, self-reliance, and aggression. According to TOCs, these values are in contradiction with the values that the TOCs attribute to women, which are values of care, empathy, kindness, and support to women.¹ This contradiction then explains the discrimination.

¹ Ghana started exploiting offshore oil in 2008. When the Network for Women's Rights in Ghana asked for better job opportunities in the emerging oil industry, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Energy and Mines and lead geologist of the Ghana National Petroleum Corporation asked women to forget about looking for jobs in the oil sector as they (women) were "unsuited for the rigours of the job." He added, "You are talking about big, big tractors, and you're going to detonate things like bombs that make a huge noise that drowns your ears, and you have to work in massive jungles with safety boots. When you look at it, it's really very masculine." Ghanaweb, 28 October 2010, available at: <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Women-unsuited-for-work-in-oil-sector-Asaga-196202>.

The economic conditions that were set up by the triple alliance have limited women's economic opportunities as the oil wealth has been siphoned off the Niger Delta region for illegal appropriation. According to Transparency International, Nigeria is one of the most corrupt countries on the planet. As a legacy of the colonial era, all aspects of Nigerian society, public affairs, and private businesses are disrupted by corrupt practices. Between 2005 and 2015, the illegal flight of capital out of Nigeria was estimated at 8.6 billion U.S. dollars. This private and illegal appropriation of oil wealth dispossesses the population: this wealth cannot be redistributed to the population or provided through social services as benefits such as for education and health.

The negative impacts of the economic conditions were reinforced by the environmental impacts of decades of oil extraction. From the time of the first exploration to the time oil is pumped into an oil tanker, environmental damage occurs. Over time, oil exploitation in Nigeria has brought the Niger Delta ecosystems to "a near collapse."² Deficient environmental governance has facilitated the ecological disaster. While there are environmental laws in the country, they lack systemic monitoring and enforcement. The failure to have proper mechanisms in place to minimise environmental degradation and its impacts is due to the overwhelming power that the TOCs yield, which provides them with the leverage to prioritise the protection of their capital over the protection of nature when negotiating environmental regulation with the host country.

Environmental degradation has more profound negative impacts on women, as they are traditionally the food providers for their families. Food is sourced through subsistence farming: oil spills and acid rain destroy crops and jeopardise local communities' means of living. Contamination from oil spills and acid rain is also absorbed through breathing polluted air or ingesting polluted food, and has dire consequences for the health of the local population. For instance, it has been shown that oil spills have doubled the risk of neonatal mortality in the Niger Delta.³

Dispossession, corruption, discrimination, and environmental degradation are conditions that have all contributed to women's increased vulnerability in the Niger Delta. It has pushed women to remain in unsafe environments and abusive relationships due to the

2 Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas, *Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights, and Oil in the Niger Delta*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Book, 2001, 2.

3 Anna Bruederle and Roland Hodler, "The Effects of Oil Spills on Infant Mortality: Evidence from Nigeria," *Cesifo Working Paper Series*, no. 6653 (September 2017).

fear of having to survive without their own income, forcing young women and children especially into illicit and dangerous occupations like prostitution. Lastly, this poverty, vulnerability, greed, and violence has contributed to the increased human trafficking in oil-producing regions—particularly as the masculine culture of the oil industry patronises prostitution.⁴

However, as the huge protest and the curse of nakedness show us, women in the Niger Delta have not been passive victims of the oil industry. Rather, they have tried with varying degrees of success to reshape the development agenda associated with the oil industry. They have fought, protested, and negotiated with the TOCs. It is worth noticing the Abuja Declaration for Energy Sovereignty initiated by women in the Niger Delta. A conference was organised in Abuja in Nigeria by communities, Friends of the Earth International from 51 countries, and other international and national civil society groups and journalists. At the end of the conference, a model for the democratic control of natural resources was proposed as an alternative to neoliberalism. This conference put the Niger Delta women's struggles on the international scene.

My paper contributes a brief sketch of the experiences of women in the Niger Delta during the energy transition in European countries. Women in the Niger Delta have had to fight powerful forces to fulfil their most basic needs. In this struggle, the government and TOCs have used their overwhelming power to ensure access to cheap oil, and this has thwarted women's access to their means of living and harmed their prospects for emancipation. These social and environmental injustices are lessons to keep in mind as the world moves towards the next energy transition to a post-carbon society.

4 See Scott, "Fly-in crime," *Arena Magazine* 124, no. 44 (2013); Mayes Pini and Kate Boyer, "'Scary' Heterosexualities in a Rural Australian Mining Town," *Journal of Rural Studies* 32 (2013): 168–76.

Further Reading

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