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## Contents

Quality Assurance in Teacher Production in Nigeria <b>-Dr. Jane A. E. Onyeachu and Asso. Prof. Byron U. Maduewesi</b>	1 – 10
An Electronic Indicator for Instant Quality Assessment of Honey <b>-M. D. Oladipupo; B. Ndanusa and M. T. Tsepav</b>	11 – 15
Perceptions of Agricultural Officers and Farmers on Agricultural Credit in Oyo State: Implications for Policies on Agricultural Credit <b>-Solomon V.A.; A. Ayandiji and O .K. Salami</b>	16 – 21
The Analysis of Nitrate Content and Determination of Physicochemical Parameters in Ground Water of Mubi North Local Government Area of Adamawa State- <b>Abubakar Ahmed Hamid and Ibrahim Mohammed</b>	22 - 29
Design of Wall Thickness and Prevention of Collapse of Serviceable Large Diameter Pipelines - <b>Lucksyn Avuwaha Omidih and Godspower O.I Edafeadhe</b>	30 – 35
Antimicrobial Activity of <i>Moringa Oleifera</i> Lam. Seeds Extract <b>-A. Yabaya; O. Bimbo and A. Bitrus</b>	36 – 39
Evaluation of the Level of Urban Pollution Caused by Automobile Exhaust Gases in Three Major Towns of Benue State <b>-J. S. Ibrahim; E. I. Kucha and J. Ukwenya</b>	40 – 48
Consonant and Vowel Elision in Ògbahù Dialect of Ìgbò <b>-Dr. Georgina Obiamaka Maduagwu</b>	49 – 53
Empowering Women as an Alternative Mechanism in Resolving Crisis: The Niger Delta Experience- <b>Chinonye Okafor (Ph.D)</b>	54 – 61

# EMPOWERING WOMEN AS AN ALTERNATIVE MECHANISM IN RESOLVING CRISIS: THE NIGER DELTA EXPERIENCE

*Chinonye Okafor (Ph.D)*

## Abstract

Crisis which usually results to poverty has been recorded to affect women more than other groups. The poverty level in crisis zone is exacerbated by the high cost of living in most of their rural and urban areas where women dwell. However, women play significant role in the economic development of their nation, the incidence of poverty especially in the crisis region has constrained them to live below the standard of living. This has adversely affected their businesses and hence their contributions to the economic development of the country. Based on this, the researcher decided to carry out this study to examine how empowerment programmes can serve as an alternative mechanism in resolving crisis situation in places like Niger Delta in Nigeria. The study is theoretically based and the findings revealed that the involvement of women in decision making process can act as an alternative mechanism for crisis resolution. Among other things, provision of microfinance, training and development programmes, formulation of policies that will enhance women's participation in political, social and economic decision making process were recommended as the best way for empowering women in crisis regions like Niger Delta in Nigeria.

## Introduction

The Niger Delta States include Abia, Imo, Bayelsa, Rivers, Edo, Ondo, Akwa-Ibom, and Delta States. They have the largest wetland in Africa and the third largest in the world (UNDP, 2006). The ecological condition of the region in terms of rivers, creeks, estuaries and swamp areas which have been estimated to be over 8600 square kilometers has subjected the citizenry of these states to adverse economic conditions culminating in abject poverty, unemployment and other social vices. The natural resources such as oil and gas from the Niger Delta account for about 97% of the Nation's total mineral exploration and exportation (Iyayi, 2004). Availability of oil and other mineral resources in these regions attracted several oil and gas multinationals such as Shell, Chevron, Halliburton etc. in some of the major cities such as Warri, Port Harcourt, Bayelsa, Ogoni and so many others (Awosika, 1995).

The activities of these companies have over the years caused some environmental and ecological degradation in these communities. Hence, the region has emerged as one of the most ecologically sensitive regions in Nigeria. This had led to what seems to be unending crisis and conflict in the Niger Delta region since late 90's till date. Crisis has left the region worse off due to the withdrawal of many oil and gas companies from the crisis zone hence resulting to poverty, unemployment, social, and environmental problems. The situation has affected virtually everybody and everything including the economic development of the nation. It is now the common thing in this region to hear the incidences of armed robbery, assassination, raping, fire out breaks (without an identified cause), kidnapping, missing of equipments and machines, legalized sex working, students unrest to mention but a few and this has negative implications on the concerned states and the nation in general. It was upon this premise that this study is being carried out to examine the best way of using women empowerment as an alternative mechanism for resolving crisis in Nigeria. The paper is structured in such a way that it has five sections; section one is the introduction, section two is the



Niger Delta dilemma and the Multinationals, the concept of empowerment and why women empowerment, section three is the different perspectives of empowerment; section four centers on ways of empowering women for crisis resolution, while section five is the conclusion and recommendations.

### **Niger Delta Dilemma and the Multinationals**

The operation of the multinationals in the Niger Delta today has been described as a curse rather than a blessing (Turner & Brownhill, 2004). This is largely due to socio-political upheaval arising from the reaction of the inhabitants of the area against the activities of the multinational operations in the region. Generally, opinions do not differ about the factors behind the surge of violence and civil conflicts in the Niger Delta. Iyayi, (2004) identified an acute scarcity of resources, land degradation, water pollution, and creation of oil-related infrastructure like refineries, fertilizer and petrochemical industries as a result of the increasing expansion of oil production activity in Niger Delta. Aside from the intermeddling of the multinationals with the people's traditional and social life, most devastating is the environmental hazard caused by oil pollution (oil spillage and gas flaring). This has disrupted and destroyed natural resources central to local livelihoods and as a result, economic diversification of natural resources has proved difficult. Agriculture that employed majority of the indigenes has suffered many set backs due to the degradation of the environment; this results in unemployment, underemployment, poverty and other social vices among women especially.

**Table 1 Incidence of Poverty in the Niger Delta, 1980 -2004**

<b>Year</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1992</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>2004</b>
Nigeria	28.1	46.3	42.7	65.6	54.4
Edo/Delta	19.8	52.4	33.9	56.1	Delta 45.35; Edo 33.09
Cross River	10.2	41.9	45.5	66.9	41.61
Imo/Abia	14.4	33.1	49.9	56.2	Imo 27.39; Abia 22.27
Ondo	24.9	47.3	46.6	71.6	41.15
Rivers/Bayelsa	7.2	44.4	43.4	44.3	Rivers 29.09; Bayelsa 19.98

*Source:* National Bureau of Statistics (2004).

Table I shows that the incidence of poverty in the Niger Delta has drastically been on the increase since 1980 after the oil boom till date in all the States under review and a large percentage of poor people in most of the crisis areas are women (Turner & Brownhill, 2004). As Adindu (2002) opined, the number of women living in poverty in the last two decades has outdistanced the men. To confirm this, Table 2 and 3 show that in 1991, the ratio of male to female population is 49.5%:50.5%, meaning that female population is more than men by 1%. Going by the trend of the population ratio of the States under review, the population of women is higher than that of men in 1991. Since poverty rate increases with population growth rate (Adindu, 2002), it means that the poverty rate in the Niger Delta region especially among women has been on the increase since 1991, no wonder the crisis in this region has never improved.

**Table 2 Sex Distribution of Population, 1991 ( %)**

State	Male	Female
Abia	48.2	51.8
Akwa Ibom	48.5	51.5
Bayelsa	52.1	47.9
Cross River	50.0	50.0
Delta	49.1	50.9
Edo	50.0	50.0
Imo	46.9	53.1
Ondo	49.9	48.1
Rivers	51.9	48.1
<b>Niger Delta</b>	<b>49.5</b>	<b>50.5</b>

*Source:* National Population Census 1991; World Survey, (1994).

**Table 3 Population of Niger Delta States, 1991**

States	Land area (Kms <sup>2</sup> )	Total	Male	Female
Abia	4,877	2,333,567	1,123,754	1,210,013
Akwa Ibom	6,806	2,409,613	1,167,829	1,241,784
Bayelsa	11,007	1,121,693	584,117	537,576
Cross River	21,930	1,911,295	956,136	955,159
Delta	17,163	2,590,491	1,271,932	1,318,569
Edo	19,698	2,172,005	1,085,156	1,086,849
Imo	5,165	2,485,636	1,166,448	1,319,187
Ondo	15,086	2,249,548	1,121,898	1,127,650
Rivers	10,378	3,187,864	1,655,441	1,532,423
Niger Delta	112,110	10,329,200	10,132,711	10,329,200

*Source:* World Survey, (1994); CEPD, 2003

### **The Concept of Empowerment**

Empowerment is a word coined from the word 'empower' which means to invest with power (economic, political, social and legal). It also means to equip or supply with an ability or official authority. Empowerment according to Oxford dictionary is the ability to attain development for economic performance. It is a social process that promotes participation of people, organization and communities towards the goals to increase individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of life and social justice (Wallerstein, 1992).

### **Women Empowerment**

Applying the word empowerment to gender, it relates to social placement of power on the female gender to exercise and maximize her God's given potential for positive contribution to the development of the nation. Women empowerment means to give women impetus to function at a maximal capacity. This could be attained through different measures like gender equality; economic empowerment; enfranchisement; removal of all social, tradition and religious constraints that have hindered them from participating fully in social, economic, legal, political and family decision making.

### **Why Women Empowerment?**

Empowerment of women results from the fact that women account over 50% of the Nigerian population (Aderinwale, 2002) and in spite of their different roles in the society (wives, daughters, mothers and economic drivers) their participation in business, politics, social and economic decision making is still very low (Adelaja, 2003). As Thomson (2002) argued, without empowerment, women timid and natural activities will be worsened off because majority of Nigerian women are illiterate, live in economic deprivation and in poor rural areas. High illiteracy leads to their marginalization and exclusion from participation in most decision making processes (personal, political, religious, social and economical) which affect their lives. As a result, they are often the victims of individual harassment, national conflicts, dictatorship and corruption (Aderinwale, 2002). According to Aderinwale (2002) empowering women will give them the opportunity to: (i) develop the capacity to participate effectively in political debates and development issues; (ii) promote civic education, literacy, skill training and human resource development among women; (iii) shake off of lethargy and traditional beliefs that are impediments to development, especially the customs and cultural practices that undermine the status of women in their environment; (iv) create networks and collaborative relationships among women organizations.

### **Different Perspectives of Women Empowerment**

While several explanations exist for women's social standing in a society and political system. This paper shall focus on three perspective themes that are more relevant to this study. These according to Amy (2007) include; the human development, the strength of civil society and the institutional perspectives.

#### **(i) Human Development Perspective**

The human development perspective outlines an emancipative sequence of social modernization that gives rise to a culture in which human autonomy and choice are highly valued (Inglehart & Welzel 2005; Welzel 2003 cited in Amy 2007). This perspective is based on the fact that increase in human resources reduces constraints to human autonomy and choice in individual's everyday lives. The implication of this is that environment gives room for self expression, assertiveness, encourages effective communication skills. Removal of all constraints to self expression across gender will definitely give rise to emancipative orientation among the female gender. This theory identifies social changes such as increase in the level of literacy, increase in women's participation in economic and political activities for enhancement of their family earnings.

#### **(ii) Strength of Women's Civil Society**

This theme focuses on how the emergence, formation and preoccupation activities of women's civil society and their impact in empowering women in the society. Researchers under this perspective are concerned with the strength of women's civil society, role of political institutions and elites with respect to women's empowerment ( Weldon 2002; Howell & Mulligan, 2005). As Amy (2007) rightly observed, most scholars under this perspective are concerned with the processes that enhance women formal representation in the political system. They act as mediators for women; to effect positive change in their social and political lives by improving their access to educational and physical resources so as to increase their chances of involvement in professional issues, political and economical development (Wallerstein, 1992; Weldon, 2002; Tripp, 2005).

**(iii) Institutional Perspective**

This theme focuses on the impact of cultural historical legacies and social institutions on women empowerment. Researchers highlight the relevance of characteristics of political institutions and elites as factors for empowering women (Wallerstein, 1992; Amy, 2007). In other words, the variation in institutional and elite characteristics mediates mass support for women's empowerment and the pool of women eligibility for political office (in a way) either enables or constrains women's attainment of political leadership. Three aspects of the political system namely, political parties, electoral system and gender electoral quotas system are identified as important variables for women empowerment (Amy, 2007).

**Ways of Empowering Women for Resolving Crisis**

Promotion of women empowerment and gender equality has been viewed by many researchers as an alternative mechanism for combating poverty, hunger, disease, crisis and stimulating sustainable development ( Floro, 2001; Iheduru, 2002). Emphasizing on the different ways of empowering women, Kardan (1991); Sylvester (1994); Narayan (2002); Tichareva (2003); Aderinwale (2002) & Adelaja (2005) have identified the following as relevant in conflict resolution. (i) Provision of Micro credits/ microfinance to Women in Business. Women microfinance empowerment programmes have their objectives mainly on meeting women needs; to increase the participation of grassroots' women in bank activities; to institutionalize a gender perspective in bank projects and programmes; to increase bank investment in women's health, education, agriculture, land ownership, employment, and financial services; and to increase the number in management position in different endeavours of life. (ii) Integration of women in management and decision making position: Data obtained from the Division of the Advancement of Women (DAW) shows that the ratio of women to men in administration and management position is less than 18% for every 100 men (World Survey, 1994) and the role of women in development had been identified as predominantly low in most less developed countries. Women's integration in policy making process will help to improve their role in development issues. (iii) Investing in the education of women as a long term conflict mechanism strategy. As was rightly observed by Omotayo (2005), education is a human right and an essential tool for achieving gender equality, development and peace. (iv) Encouraging of women's peace movement in Crisis State. Women should be encouraged to form pressure groups so as to make their voice to be heard. In most cases, war and conflict offer no solution to issues of life. The women movement for peace has been known all over the world as the best mechanism that make people live side by side without war. (v) Development of human capital among women. Women's skills and managerial styles often change the dynamics of a workplace. However, this can only be possible when adequate time has been taken to ensure that they are well empowered through training, development, provision of resources and capacity building.

**Conclusion**

This paper has explored extensively how empowering women can be an alternative mechanism in resolving crisis. Different perspectives of empowerment were reviewed. There is no doubt that conflicts and crisis have caused much obstruction on the development of some States such as Niger Delta region. Achieving a sustainable development in crisis region therefore cannot be left alone in the hands of the government, traditional rulers, international agencies and men. The role of women in peace keeping and conflict resolution in countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan and other warring factions should be appreciated. Suggestions and opinions of the women's peace

movement and other feminine associations can also be very useful in finding ever lasting solution in the crisis states.

### **Recommendations**

To achieve a lasting crisis resolution in the Niger Delta region, the following recommendations are suggested by this study;

- (i) The government should put in place conflict management processes and techniques by creating enabling institutional framework that gives women the opportunity for being involved in conflict resolution (Omotayo, 2005).
- (ii) Effective gender mainstreaming and development strategies must be embedded in concrete actions and programmes which are clearly defined as working strategies for governments. Such concrete strategies and programmes must be in the areas such as, agriculture, health, education, economy, industry and policies (Adindu, 2002).
- (iii) Women should be willing to participate in political and social activities. This will help in projecting their interests in the culture of peace movement.
- (iv) Non-governmental organizations such Forum for African Women Educationists (FAWE), National Associations of University Women (NAUW), Women in Development (WID), Third World Organization for Women in Science (TWOWS) and others should be more involved in championing women issues. This will help to monitor the peace movement issues especially in the crisis regions like Niger Delta.
- (v) Women should be given equal opportunity with men for full participation in political and leadership positions in Nigeria at all levels. This can also help to improve their access to resources and public services.

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*Empowering Women As An Alternative Mechanism In Resolving Crisis: The Niger Delta Experience*

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