

# Gender and Economy in the Niger Delta: An Examination of the Role of Women in Sustaining a Region in Conflict

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## Abstract

The discourse on the structure of the economy and the drivers of growth in different African societies is underlined by patriarchy. The dominant view is often that men are at the heart of the productive and profitable sectors of the society, hence the skewed power relations and visibility of men in all organs of the society. While this framework seems to typify patriarchal societies in different African nations, it overshadows the tenacity of women in conflict-ridden societies where men focus mainly on the execution of war and combat roles rather than on the economic survival of their families and society. In the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria, years of grassroots struggle against the state and mining companies over oil wealth and the environment have shifted economic relations hitherto dominated by men, and created a platform where women have become visible participants in the economy. This paper looks at the role of women in the economy of local communities of the Niger Delta. Analyses of the decades-old conflict have often been limited to male-led military, political and environmental struggles between major actors in the conflict, with little attention paid to the role of women in the economic survival of the region. The paper uses both ethnographic and secondary data collected from Egbema community and its neighbours in the northern Niger Delta region.

**Keywords:** Niger Delta; conflict; amnesty; women; patriarchy; gender

## Introduction

The role of women, especially in the economies of different African societies, has often been contested, not for want of visibility, but because of age-old denialism inherent in patriarchal societies all over the world (Mazibuko and Umejesei 2015; Okonjo 1976). This denialist *old perspective* which tends to ignore the agency of women in the local economy has been tested in the Niger Delta region with the emergence of grassroots



resistance to what the local communities see as corporatist destruction of the pristine ecology. This resistance strikes at the base of social marginalisation, impoverishment and destruction of the ecology of the Niger Delta region by the oil economy (Ikelegbe 2001; Ogon 2006; Watts 2008). With the destruction of the ecology by multinational oil companies through their unguarded operational practices, and mediated by an indifferent state, the local agrarian economy (mainly fishing and farming) suffered, thus freeing up able-bodied men, who found expression in the new resistance enterprise (Azaiki 2003; Okonta and Douglas 2003). With men (mainly youth and the not-so-old) engaged in what they see as “resistance against the state and oil companies,”<sup>1</sup> they have become literally disengaged from their familial responsibilities and created a space for women to occupy (Turner and Brownhill 2004; Umejesi 2014).

In the Niger Delta region, women occupy prominent positions as drivers of the local economy and major providers for their families. It is therefore pertinent to look more closely into the nature of women’s role in the sustenance of this conflict-affected region, and more especially, the effects of restraining cultural practices mediated by institutionalised patriarchy on the roles women play in their communities and families. The study asks the following questions: a) What is the place of gender in the determination of economic roles in the Niger Delta? b) How do women contribute to the economy of the Niger Delta in its period of conflict? c) What are the constraining factors to the female gender as a participant in the economic landscape of the Niger Delta? As already noted, the article uses qualitative data in its analysis. It focuses on Egbema community and its neighbours. Egbema is an Igbo community in Imo State, Southeast Nigeria. It is a relatively “inland” community, and it shares sociocultural, ecological and economic affinities with riverine peoples of the Niger Delta.

## **Operationalising Patriarchy and the Local Economy in the Niger Delta**

The socio-economic situation created in the Niger Delta by the grassroots resistance against the oil economy has raised pertinent questions regarding the old perception of women in this area as “subservient,” dependent on their husbands, and unable to determine the course of their lives. Colonial-era anthropologists such as George T. Basden, Sylvia Leith-Ross, Margaret Green and Northcote Thomas (see Okonjo 1976, 46) painted a fatalistic picture of Igbo women and their riverine neighbours (Niger Deltans). For instance, Basden (1966, 88), writing about women in this region, noted that “[w]omen have but few rights in any circumstances, and can only hold such property as their lords permit. There is no grumbling against their lot; they accept the situation as their grandmothers did before them and, taking affairs philosophically they manage to live fairly contentedly.” Such notions, Okonjo (1976, 46) argues, extolled sexist Victorian values, typically that a woman’s place is in the kitchen—a value that

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<sup>1</sup> Militants pilfer oil pipelines, kidnap oil companies’ staff, and use robbery, war, etc. as instruments of war against the state and oil-producing companies.

limited women from participating in politics, the economy and religious activities. For Okonjo (1976), the disinterest of Igbo women in assertive visibility during the colonial era was as a result of the way the colonial regime constructed women (in the Victorian model), rather than their nature. She contends that Igbo women were “political animals” in precolonial times (Okonjo 1976, 46–47). In a similar opinion, Chuku (2005) argued that gender relations in Igbo society were flexible and symmetrical rather than rigidly asymmetrical as argued by colonial-era anthropologists. In detail, Chuku (2005, 6–7) noted that “Igbo society was in most cases a dual-sex symmetrical system where individuals were valued for their social duties and responsibilities, and where though roles were gendered, females were not defined in antithesis to males. A male could assume a role and status of a female and vice versa a female.”

The “dual-sex symmetry” that Chuku (2005) alluded to relates to the emphatic role women play in both the micro and macro economies of the families and societies respectively. This “duality” does not substantially extend to other spheres of social and economic participation, such as property inheritance and landownership. Hence, while women have historically participated in every aspect of the economic space, they are restricted from sharing in the ownership and management of the prime resource in the agrarian mode of production—land (Talbot 1937). It should, therefore, be emphasised that although the old perception of women from the colonial-era Eastern Nigeria as “subservient” ignored their visibility in the economic space, the assumption of a “dual-sex symmetric system” equally ignored their limitation in property/land ownership and how this limitation restricts the full utilisation of women’s potential in this region.

The property ownership structure in the Niger Delta region, as in most communities of Southern Nigeria, is institutionalised within its patriarchal context. As agrarian communities, the most important resource is land and land-based resources, such as farms, domestic animals, economic trees, and forest resources (timber, game). While women are not “excluded” in the management of these resources, ownership and the “right of allocation” belong to men (Agukoronye 2001; Amnesty International 2009, 72; Talbot 1937). Since women are expected to get married someday, they are not entitled to inherit land from their natal families. Even when for certain reasons they do not get married,<sup>2</sup> some form of mechanism is traditionally allowable in which case the woman raises male children at home who will inherit her paternal resources (Ezeigbo 1996). In this situation, although the woman is not married, it is only the male children she raises at home who are entitled to inherit and own those properties; ownership is not hers (Ezeigbo 1996). A look into the landownership framework of communities in this region will give more insights into the state of women in the economic space of the Niger Delta region.

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<sup>2</sup> Such reasons may include when their fathers do not have male children and they remain at home to have male children.

In Southern Nigeria, landownership generally does not reside with one individual; rather, it resides with the male members of the community. Talbot (1937, 680) notes that “throughout the whole of Southern Nigeria the land is ... communal and belongs to the people generally.” As an illustration of the practice of communal ownership of land in Southern Nigeria, Uchendu (1979, 63) describes the prevailing land tenure system in Southern Nigeria as a “bundle of rights ... a series of relationships among individuals and social groups with regard to the many uses to which land may be put.” Explaining further, Uchendu cites C. Lloyd who defines the interconnectedness of individual rights in the indigenous land tenure system as follows: “A right is not held in land but against another person; thus one holds a number of rights against various people in respect of a plot of land” (Uchendu 1979, 63; see also Adedipe et al. 1997; Ezigbalike, Rakai, and Williamson 1996). The interconnectedness of responsibilities in landownership ensures that right-holders do not abuse the right bestowed on them by society, either by wilful alienation of the land or by engaging in practices the community considers as abusive to land and the ecology in general. In other words, joint ownership leads to joint responsibility and regulation of use. It is important to note that women do not feature anywhere in this frame of ownership. Access to land and the right to alienate land belongs to the select group of male heads of the families that make up a kindred or a community. This is the dominant landownership system in much of Southern Nigeria including the Niger Delta. This system of ownership hinders access to women, who ordinarily have no right to inherit land on their own. Their access to land, therefore, is moderated by the extent to which their husbands, or fathers, or brothers, or sons themselves have access to land and its resources. Everything connected to land is patriarchal, even when a woman has in one way or another invested in the land.

In its contribution on compensation and gender exclusion in the Niger Delta, Amnesty International’s 2009 report on Nigeria suggests that compensation administration in oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta discriminates against women in the way it is implemented. Women are often excluded from the negotiation process by the predominantly male community leaders and oil company officials, even when women’s personal properties such as farms are damaged by oil companies. According to the report (Amnesty International 2009, 72), the

compensation system can place women at a particular disadvantage. Most negotiations are carried out by chiefs and youths, who are almost always male, even when women’s activities in agriculture and fisheries are affected by oil industry damage.

The practice is usually that a woman’s personal damages are treated as those of her husband or disregarded entirely because she may not be allowed representation by the male-dominated society. Where her personal properties are treated as those of her husband and compensation is paid to her husband, she may not receive the compensation money from her husband. It is not clear why the state and multinational oil companies adapted this *traditional view* of ownership in their compensation policies and practices

in the oil-rich region. However, this framework demonstrates the level to which institutionalised patriarchy scuttles a gender-sensitive economy in Nigeria.

## **Patriarchy, Role Description and Entitlement: A Conceptual Framework**

For a better understanding of the place of women in the economic space of the Niger Delta and the dynamics that frame it, this chapter draws on the concept of patriarchy and role description. Lim (1983, 76) defines patriarchy as “a system of male domination and female subordination in economy, society and culture.” For Walby (1989, 214), patriarchy is “a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women.” Putting patriarchy into a historical context, Walby (1989, 214) notes that patriarchy “both predates and postdates capitalism, hence it cannot be considered to be derivative of it.” In the same manner, Lerner (1986, 17) notes that patriarchal domination means female subordination. Patriarchy is institutionalised by role description for males and females. In different cultural contexts, women perform specific roles that are characteristically domestic, involved in services and subservient. On the other hand, men perform the more assertive, controlling and economically rewarding jobs. Their position is also enhanced by their privileged rights of ownership of traditional economic infrastructure such as land and the rights of inheritance. Since the roles that women play are not “very visible” to the society in terms of economic rewards, the value placed on their roles, such as domestic and natal responsibilities, is diminished or misjudged as lower than those of men.

For men, whose visibility is more assertive and economically rewarding, the society’s growth mechanisms, such as easier access to education, enhances their growth path, while for women, who are disadvantaged, the institutionalised order restrains and denies them the avenue for growth, and thereby maintains a set historical order (Lerner 1986). Lerner (1986, 17–18) has noted that proponents of this notion of “natural order” use it to justify the “definition of women through their natural role and exclusion from economic and educational opportunities as serving the best interests of species survival.”

The division of labour between different sexes, and the definition of *value* based on frontline economic roles, therefore, has become in itself an institutionalised framework of patriarchy. It is this very pattern that is often represented by socially accepted clichés such as “men are bread-winners, women are home-makers.” In the part of the Niger Delta where this study is situated, proverbs such as “the beauty of the woman is seen through the eyes of her husband” have become normative. Similarly, the values of a wife are not independent of the values her husband holds; moreover, the dislikes of a husband are imposed on the wife—hence, a wife has no worldviews or ideas, except those which are expressed by her husband. By diffusing the *identity* of the woman in these constructs, she becomes infused or subsumed in her husband.

The division of labour and role performance based on this *ascriptive* model are more common in developing countries, especially in societies where *culture* and *tradition* are the dominant agencies in the organisation of work and role description (Ezeigbo 1990). For instance, there are particular jobs in different African countries that are perceived as “essentially feminine” and others as masculine. The domestic workspace in South Africa, for example, is mainly a female sphere. It is rare to find male domestic workers. The absence of men in this profession has no relationship with its baseline wage. It largely depends on social constructions of “domestics” as *feminine*. Hence, the society believes that those who do domestic services must be women. It must be noted that some exceptions exist in these gendered roles. In parts of the Niger Delta, such as the Cross River and Akwa Ibom states, certain jobs have a thin line of separation between genders. In these two states, it is common to find men who work as cooks and also engage in other domestic services.

On the contrary, in Western countries where emphasis is placed on achievement rather than gender, the boundaries of *traditionality* are less rigid. Patriarchy is not often the basis of role description and value recognition (Lim 1983). In such societies, liberalism, driven by universal access to education, equality and the justice system, has narrowed the borders of gender roles and perceptions of individual abilities. The liberalist socio-economic system in the West, therefore, results in more rights for women to do any job they are qualified to do, own properties, and develop identities that are not infused into patriarchal personalities (husband, father, brother and son). This enables them to participate in every aspect of social life. This concept will shed light on gender relations in the economy of the Niger Delta as explored in this paper.

## **The Niger Delta Region, the Study Community and Peoples: A Background**

In order to have a fuller perspective of the underlying factors in the Niger Delta conflict, its gender and economic dynamics, it is important to unpack the region called Niger Delta. The Niger Delta region, ordinarily, connotes the geographical area through which the River Niger emptied into the Atlantic Ocean through several creeks. However, the Niger Delta has come to mean different things to different peoples. Alagoa (1976) graded ethnic groups in the Niger Delta based on their locations. To him, the Eastern, Central and Western Ijaw communities, and their neighbours—the Itsekiris and the Urhobo of the Western Niger Delta—constitute the core people living in the Niger Delta. Those living on what he termed “delta periphery” are the following: Andoni, Ogoni, Ndoki, Oduval, Ogbia, Engenni and the Igbo. Those who live “farther to the east” are the “Ibibio and the Efik state of Calabar ... on the Cross River estuary” (Alagoa 1976, 331). The implication of Alagoa’s definition is that it is only the Ijaw communities that belong to the Niger Delta on the eastern and central coasts. While on the western coast, the Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo also belong to the Niger Delta. Certainly, not many of the people described here as on the “periphery” or “farther to the east” in relation to the Niger Delta would accept Alagoa’s classifications. He also did not reveal the

parameters of his classifications according to “core,” “periphery” and “farther to the east.”

On his part, Azaiki (2003) identified several yardsticks for classifying areas that constitute the Niger Delta. These include climate, geology, geomorphology, stratigraphy and finally politics. His analysis was based on some reports of environmental studies that were carried out by commissioned environmental bodies. Geologically, Azaiki (2003, 41) noted that the Niger Delta has “its remote beginnings south of Onitsha” on the eastern bank of the River Niger. The implication of this definition is that much of Anambra State (Southeastern Nigeria) qualifies for inclusion in the nine statutorily recognised Niger Delta states. On the other hand, the geomorphologic range of the Niger Delta legitimately includes all the territories extending from “the River Benin on the west of River Niger to the Calabar-Royal River estuary” on the east of the Niger (see Azaiki 2003, 46). The implication of this geomorphologic classification is that the Calabar-Ibibio land axis is not excluded from the Niger Delta—a sharp contrast from Alagoa (1976). In terms of a political definition of who falls within Niger Delta, Azaiki (2003, 47) stated that the “major states” of the Niger Delta are “Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta.” In other words, in terms of politics, Azaiki agrees with the spectrum put forward by Alagoa (1976); however, he made a breakdown of the original colonial-era divisions that constitute the “political Niger Delta.” These include “old Ahoada, Degema, Opobo, Ogoni, Brass, Western Ijaw and Warri Divisions” (2003, 47). It is instructive to mention that by this definition Egbema in Imo State is a legitimate community in the Niger Delta, having been a part of the colonial era Ahoada District Council of Rivers Province (see Umezurike 2007, 3). In his personal conception of areas that qualify for inclusion in the Niger Delta, Azaiki (2003, 49; emphasis added) stated the following:

It is our understanding that the Niger Delta, as a matter of truth, historically and cartographically is the present Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta states. But the geographical *proximity* and the gross *neglect* of Akwa Ibom could earn it a place in the proposed Niger Delta Commission.

Here Azaiki introduces a new dimension of inclusion of states or communities in the Niger Delta based on proximity and neglect. In other words, Akwa Ibom State is co-opted into the Niger Delta on those two grounds, not because the state is qualified to be included on any other ground listed above. It is not clear how Azaiki measured “proximity” and “neglect” as indices of inclusion and exclusion in his analysis. In terms of proximity to Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta states, Egbema and communities around it (or Imo State as a whole) would qualify as part of Niger Delta rather than Akwa Ibom State (Imo State is closer to the three states of the so-called *core* Niger Delta). In terms of environmental challenges, communities in Imo State, such as Egbema, have consistently produced oil and gas since 1958 and have not been immune from environmental neglect. This same conceptualisation would apply to a western state such as Ondo, a major oil-producing state with equally disastrous environmental

consequences, but which does not feature in Alagoa and Azaiki's definitions of the "Niger Delta."

The official body charged with development intervention in the region—the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC)—has followed the same path of limiting the Niger Delta to the southern minority states (or South-South region). According to its mapping of the Niger Delta region, the Commission stated the following (NDDC 2006, 2; see also Ebeku 2004):

At the beginning, the area referred to as the Niger Delta was limited to the geo-political zone occupied mainly by the minorities of Southern Nigeria which currently comprises six states of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers.

At the time referred to in the above passage, all the communities in the former Ahoada District, such as Egbema, were part of Rivers Province which again was not entirely occupied by minorities. Dike (1956) had in the 1950s (when oil was not an issue in Nigeria) given a very broad definition of the Niger Delta based on records of colonial geographers, cartographers and ethnographers. He (Dike 1956, 19) stated that

[f]rom Lagos to the Cameroons lies the low country of the Nigerian coastal plains. The Niger Delta occupies the greater part of this low-land belt and may be described as the region bounded by the Benin river on the west and the Cross river in the east, including the coastal area where Cameroon mountains dip into the sea. It covers an area of some 270 miles [432 kilometres] along the Atlantic coast and is 120 miles [192 kilometres] in depth.

Anyone with a good knowledge of the geography of Southern Nigeria will agree that this description did not limit its spectrum to the three states of Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta, or the six southern minority states which include Akwa Ibom, Edo, Cross River, Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta. This definition agrees with the nineteenth century descriptive map of the Niger Delta by Harold Bindloss in *In the Niger Country* (1898). In the map, the Oguta,<sup>3</sup> an oil-producing community in Imo State and a neighbouring community to Egbema, with its water courses—Oguta Lake and Orashi River—was broadly identified as a part of the Niger Delta.

To Umezurike (2007, 9), the new concept of the Niger Delta is being created around exclusionist politics in which the Southeast states, and perhaps the Southwest, are officially excised from the definition of the Niger Delta area. This line of thought configures the Niger Delta around the South-South geopolitical zone. Umezurike (2007, 9) described the areas that constitute the Niger Delta this way:

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<sup>3</sup> Oguta is a more popular community than Egbema. These two are the major oil-producing communities in Imo State. They were once in the same Ohaji/Egbema/Oguta Local Government Area (LGA) before they were split into Ohaji/Egbema and Oguta LGAs.



The lower Niger Delta embraces Imo State, Rivers State, Bayelsa State, Delta State. Abia State is in the Imo River catchment area; Akwa Ibom State is within the Qua-Iboe River catchment; Cross River State is in the middle/lower basin of the Cross River; and Edo State is within the Benin River drainage zone with Ondo State.

One noticeable fact from these definitions is that there is yet no consensus as to which communities actually constitute the Niger Delta region or which paradigm (political, geological, geopolitical zones, oil producing, among others) should be adopted in classifying communities that belong to the Niger Delta region.

The classifications have often followed the path of the person responsible for them. In other words, the interest being represented rather than an objective assessment of the geography of communities is often a significant factor, hence yielding to political colouration rather than geographical reality. For example, while an Ijaw person would more or less limit the Niger Delta region to Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta (states where Ijaw people are found), for communities in Imo or Cross River states such classification will be seen as marginalisation, especially if those communities produce oil and experience similar environmental challenges as those of Rivers, Delta and Bayelsa states.

For this paper, the “Niger Delta region” is loosely a mosaic of different ethnic groupings and communities in Southern Nigeria where crude oil and gas are produced. In the Southern Niger Delta (or “riverine” areas), the major ethnic groups include the Ijaw, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Kalabari, Isoko, Ibibio, and Efik, among other closely related groups. In the northern fringes of the Niger Delta are the Igboid communities, such as Egbema, Oguta, Ohaji, and Western Igbo communities such as the Ikwerre, Opobo, Omoku, Ndoni, Onitsha, among others. In the westernmost part of the Niger Delta are the Ijaw, Ilaje and Yoruba communities of Ondo State. Broadly speaking, all the communities in the nine states officially recognised in the NDDC Act of 2003 are referred to as the Niger Delta in this paper. It is important to note that although these areas of the Niger Delta are not socioculturally homogenous, they are endowed with certain degrees of oil and gas deposits; they suffer similar socio-ecologic risks, and share similar sociocultural, economic and ecological practices. These include land use practices, dress codes, marriage practices, burial rites, indigenous political organisations, power relations between genders and religious beliefs.

The economy of the Niger Delta communities, as in most indigenous regions around the world, is tied to the geophysical nature of their region—mainly its network of hundreds of creeks, rich agricultural lands, swamps and forest resources. Over the years, men and women have evolved a relationship with their environment based on gender roles. For instance, agriculture as an economy enjoyed the dual patronage of both sexes, although roles within this sector were shared. Where intensive labour was involved, such as lumbering and clearing of dense forests, hunting and wine-tapping, men took a more visible role. This, however, does not in any way diminish the role of women, who with their male counterparts tilled the land, tended the farms, harvested and traded the harvest. Apart from agriculture, fishing is also another major occupation of the Niger

Delta people. More people fish in the Niger Delta than anywhere in Nigeria. This is a result of the network of rivers and lagoons that crisscross the region. Men and women have for a long time made careers in fishing, processing of their haul and marketing. The empirical account of the various occupations below gives a clearer perspective on the role of women in the economy of the Niger Delta. The field data used in this paper was collected from Egbema, a community in Ohaji/Egbema Local Government Area (LGA) of Imo State. Egbema has been an oil-producing community since 1958 when “Egbema Well 1” was drilled by the then Shell D’Arcy. The community has a network of rivers and dense swamps which connects it to other communities in Rivers State.

## **A Note on Methodology**

This article draws on a wider study on oil-related conflict and post-conflict programmes in Nigeria. The data used in this article draws on primary data collected from the oil-producing communities of Ohaji/Egbema Local Government Area of Imo State and their neighbouring communities in Rivers State from 2007 to 2015. Empirical data was collected using oral interviews and observation. Respondents were drawn from adult members of the community with informed knowledge of community history, resource-related issues and the local ecology. Respondents were mixed to reflect different age and gender groups in the community. The paper also draws on secondary literature from scholarly and official sources. These secondary sources were critically analysed.

## **Field Findings**

As already noted, the position of women in the Niger Delta region is relatively complex. On the economic front, women play a mainstream role in sustaining their families and communities. Socially, women battle age-old institutionalised restrictions imposed by a patriarchal system that restricts their participation in ownership of land and inheritance of properties. This section presents the empirical findings in Egbema and neighbouring communities where the fieldwork was conducted.

### **Trading Is Part of Our Life: The Narratives of Women on Trade in the Niger Delta**

During my fieldwork in Egbema, I discovered that women play a major role in the economy of this oil-producing community, and one of the main channels through which they participate is trade. A 60-year-old female respondent at the Location Market,<sup>4</sup> opposite Egbema Production Centre (EPC), summarised their role in trade as follows:

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<sup>4</sup> Location is a bustling road junction in Egbema that connects important towns of Port Harcourt, Oguta and Owerri. It is the operational area of Shell Petroleum Developing Company (SPDC) with major facilities, such as the historic Egbema Well 1 (drilled in 1958, among other wells in the vicinity), Egbema Production Centre (EPC—an office complex and residential complex), Egbema oil-flow station and a military station inside the EPC guarding Shell’s installations. There are several shanty restaurants, shops, open markets and bars dealing in locally brewed gin (or *kai kai* in Igbo

From the days of our ancestors to this day, women have played and continue to play significant roles in trade which in turn produces a direct bearing in their families and the community in general. Call it petty trading, wholesale, middle-woman, or whatever you may call it, women are often the first and the last in the chain. Women have always been involved all the way.

The suggestion that “women are often the first and the last in the chain” of trading in Egbema is certainly one that many men in this patriarchal society will contest. However, what is incontestable is the fact that a closer observation of trading activities in this major market reveals that while there are male traders, a conservative estimate of 75% are women. My research assistant, whose mother was the leader of the Market Women’s Association in the 1980s in Egbema, noted the following:

Go to all the markets in this community and beyond, you will find women selling *utaba* [tobacco snuff], *etere* [used for wrapping local delicacies and recently used in modern fast food restaurants], packaged *agidi*, *moimoi* and *ukwa*, pepper, salt, mats, household items of all sorts, farming implements, food materials, and so on. They [women] own restaurants and bars in this community.

While men dominate the fishing profession in Egbema, trading in fish is dominated by women. It provides a major source of income for different families. One of the male interviewees, a middle-aged primary school male teacher from Mmahu village acknowledged that, “[i]ndeed, women own the fish trade which is a major income generator for different families. It is like in a division of labour, men catch the fish, women process and sell the fish. The truth is that women make more money from this trade.”

Corroborating this view, another respondent, a women’s leader in her late 60s, noted that she was herself a fish trader:

We used to go as far as Amasoma and Bonny [islands in the southernmost Niger Delta] to buy fish to complement with the ones we catch from our rivers and swamps. We buy them fresh, dry them at home and then take them to upland towns such as Enugu, Owerri, Abakaliki and Afikpo, where dry fish is always part of their menu. Even now when militants and Nigerian army men harass everyone in the creeks, our women still take that risk to go there to buy fish.

Continuing, this women’s leader noted that,

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language), “guest houses” (a common name for brothels that serve oil company workers and clients), motor park and makeshift petrol vendors, known in the Niger Delta as “Asari fuel stations.”

We do not only source our fishes from fishermen in the Ijaw areas [southern Delta], and from fishermen in Egbema, but also from our neighbouring communities such as Omoku, Oguta, Onitsha, Aboh and Ebeocha [Port Harcourt].

The trade with inland communities is not a one-way traffic; after the sale of their fish, these women also buy household goods from the towns for sale in Egbema, thus ensuring that they do not travel back with cash. As my research assistant told me, it is important that the traders do not come back with cash because of the high incidence of robbery, especially since the emergence of militancy in the Niger Delta. It is interesting to note that this age-old trade still constitutes a major source of income for women and their families in the study community.

Apart from trade in fish, I found that these women traders also buy and sell *bells* (bundles) of imported stockfish,<sup>5</sup> fresh tomatoes, clothes, shoes, kitchen utensils, plastic containers, and palm wine. They also operate small kiosks for selling household articles, restaurants and guest houses. In a criticism of enterprising women in the community, a male respondent noted his frustration that “these guesthouses destroy the moral fabric of our community. They provide oil company staff with prostitutes.” This respondent made the following observation:

While I commend the industry of our women in this community, it is important I mention that they also contribute to the destruction of our young girls who work as prostitutes at night in these guesthouses. This is killing the values we so cherish in Egbema.

It is not known why this respondent singled out women owners of guesthouses. It was later discovered during my fieldwork that most of the guesthouses in Egbema and neighbouring communities are actually owned and operated by men. However, the view that the guesthouses provide sex workers for oil company workers seems to be factual. Oil company workers in the Niger Delta region are seen as rich, and they live above the subsistence level of the general population of non-oil workers. It is this view that has often made them a target of ransom-seeking kidnapers.

In my interview with a middle-aged female nurse and an indigene of Egbema, I wanted to understand her views around women’s role in the economy of her community. She noted that, since her childhood, she has heard proverbs and allusions to the fact that women are the bedrock of economic sustenance of families in her community. According to her,

[m]y grandmother used to say, “women farmed, men hunted.” The fact is that when you consider the profit made from farming and the profit made from hunting, you will agree

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<sup>5</sup> Dried codfish imported from Norway. It is very popular in Southeastern Nigeria.

with me that farming yielded more money. That is, if my grandmother was correct in her assessment.

The analysis of this respondent seemed to me like a feminist narrative intended to counter the patriarchal ownership of the economic space in this community. The nurse insisted that “men with objective mind” in the community subscribe to her view. In another interview with a trader in “Asari fuel,”<sup>6</sup> he did not completely dispute the veracity of the dominant role of women in running the economy of the local community; however, he opined that the dynamic is fast changing:

Since the 1990s, the major business in this community is selling *Asari fuel*. The people who dominate this business are militants, and these are men; they are not women. I agree that our women are good farmers and long distant traders, but the land has been polluted by oil and gas production since 1958 and does not yield as much as it used to. Fishing is also dying out, that is why this fuel business is growing more than any other one.

For this respondent, the role of women in the economic space in Egbema and in the Niger Delta generally is diminishing because of the environmental effects of oil exploitation and the emergence of a new economy in stolen and adulterated petroleum products. In his words, Egbema women are “creative, and they have discovered other sources of income, such as operating telephone kiosks, selling mobile telephone recharge cards, local gins, cigarettes and similar items.”

The debate on the role of women in the economy of Egbema is deeply divided along gender lines. While the male respondents interviewed did not deny the prominent role of women in running the economy of their community, they would not accept that women play the dominant role in the economy. On the other hand, female respondents think otherwise. They point to their domination of the retail trade, fish market and distant trading. Such division in this debate could be found between a married couple I interviewed on their cassava farm in Obiakpu village, close to Shell’s Egbema Production Centre (EPC). When I asked the couple to describe the role of women in the economy of Egbema, the man stated that “[w]omen do a lot to contribute to the living standard of their families in Egbema. They are our helpers and that is what God has made them to be.” His wife did not take kindly to the word “helpers.” She interrupted her husband:

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<sup>6</sup> The “Asari fuel business” is a booming trade in tapped semi-refined fuel. This trade is personified by one of the notable faces of modern-day insurgency, Asari-Dokubo, leader of the Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force (NDPVF) (see Ghazvinian 2005, 12). “Asari fuel” is a semi-refined petroleum product still undergoing crystallisation processes. The crude oil from which it is made is obtained by the youths who cut oil company pipelines in the swamps and siphon the products from these pipes and then hurriedly “refine” it in makeshift refineries hidden in the Niger Delta swamps. The product is stored in drums and gallons and sold to the public as “Asari fuel.”

No, these days men are actually our helpers. Tell me, how many men travel to Aba and Onitsha to buy goods and sell in this community? How many men go to Bonny to buy fish and sell? How many men who are there fighting in the creeks in Ijaw are taking care of their families right now?

The overall narratives of the respondents acknowledge the important roles that women play in different facets of the local economy. These roles are symmetrical to those of men. However, women are visible in farming, retail trading, fishing and selling, among other sectors, while men have a dominant presence in the trade in “Asari fuel.” There is no consensus on the degree of participation of women in these sectors. What is clear, however, is that there is an underlying agreement that women are strongly involved in the economic space and even take a leading role in areas such as distant trading and in the fish business.

### **Women and the Local Economy: An Ethnographic Observation**

In this section, I outline my empirical observations on the place of women in the economic space of the study community and the Niger Delta in general. This section complements the preceding section which dwells on the narratives of some of the respondents interviewed during the course of my study.

In Egbema, I found that the “fish economy” has a strong gender characterisation. For example, both women and men are involved in different but complementary ways in what local people call “pond fishing” (*Agbo* or *Mkpu*). While women provide logistical support in the making of ponds, such as cooking for the men who do the physical labour, the men are the ones who dig and construct the fish ponds. These ponds are dug on the banks of rivers. During the rainy season when the rivers overflow their banks, fish from the rivers abide in the ponds. Thereafter, those that could not escape back into the rivers when the water recedes are trapped in the pond. While men harvest the ponds when their water level is high, women are allowed to fish in the ponds when the water recedes. When I highlighted this immense contribution of women to fishing and the fish economy generally to a 38-year-old male respondent, he said “[s]ince pond fishing is a seasonal occupation it cannot qualify women as fisherwomen. It is not their major occupation and they cannot do it like us [men].” While this respondent does not see women as “fisherwomen,” their major role in pond fishing cannot be diminished.

In relation to farming, I also found that women’s roles are as critical as those of men. However, customary practices in landownership do not privilege women as much as they privilege men. As in other communities in the Niger Delta, ownership of land in Egbema is either communal or on family basis. A woman is not entitled to inherit land. Land inheritance is reserved exclusively for men. However, while this strict patriarchal practice is still in force, I found that women could *lease* land for farming for a farming season after which it is left to fallow for the owners. Does the right to lease land imply equal opportunity with the men? Certainly not. Field observation and local narratives reveal that a female lessee still needs to be guaranteed by closely related men. Without

a guarantor, the land will not be released to the female lessee even if she is capable of meeting all other financial and material obligations associated with the lease. Failure to find a suitable guarantor denies the woman access to the land. It is pertinent to know that while men are also required to provide a guarantor when they lease land, the conditions set for them are much more relaxed than they are for women.

There is role-sharing in farming between men and women. Once a family maps out a fallowed land, the man clears it by himself. He could do the clearing either alone, or with hired labourers, or with friends. If with friends, he is obliged to reciprocate their labour at some point in the future. He reciprocates by working on their farms for a commensurate period. In most cases, the man tills the cleared land and prepares mounds for planting, while the role of planting (sowing of seeds), first and second weeding is largely the responsibility of the woman. This is usually the practice with yam and cassava farming. During the harvesting season, men and women also share responsibilities. Men usually dig up (harvest) the tubers and prepare the barns for storage. On the other hand, women usually sell the farm produce in the market. While these role assignments are not strict, I found in the Location Market that women dominated the farm produce section of the market, with a sprinkle of male sellers. Much of what they sold was farm harvests from Egbema, such as yams, cassava, palm oil, and vegetables, among others. My research assistant pointed out that the overwhelming presence of female sellers does not imply they “owned” what they sold, but the produce belongs to their families. According to him,

[t]his is another example of role-sharing. It is customary in our community that the woman must sell farm produce harvested from family farms, while men sell other things like palm wine.

Apart from the major crops such as yam and cassava, women are also involved in planting other types of food crops—vegetables, potatoes, pumpkin, cocoyams, and the storage of seeds for upcoming farming seasons. In addition, women also transverse forests, bushes and swamps in search of snails, *okassi* leaves, mushrooms, and firewood, among other things. These are sold to complement the family income.

From the above narrative, it is clear that women’s roles in the economic space of Egbema are equally as prominent as those of their male counterparts. While cultural hindrances such as lack of landownership rights limit the unmarried woman from inheriting or purchasing land, the family or communal landownership system provides a pool of land from which she may access land. For the married woman, the husband’s right to land provides her with easy access to land as well, albeit her contributions and industry are encapsulated within the marriage. She is not entirely visible.

### **Beyond Egbema, Niger Delta Women in Men’s Economic Territory**

The conflict in the Niger Delta has thrown up different socio-economic dynamics in various communities (Ekine 2008). For instance, a trade that is male-dominated in one

area of the Niger Delta may be viewed differently in another area of the region. One of those areas where the picture of participation varies from community to community is in the trade in “Asari fuel.” In the deep creeks of the Niger Delta where much of this product is sourced, armed operatives, usually men, control the space, which entails the pilfering of pipelines, ownership and operation of makeshift refineries, and the operation of river barges to transport the product along the waterways.

It is pertinent to point out that while the militants dominate this trade at the source, the vending process in the network is shared between men and some daring women. During my fieldwork in Egbema and its neighbouring communities, I encountered how this network operated, as well as its gender constituents. In January of 2008, my research assistant and I encountered a group of five women on bicycles whose ages ranged from about 30 to 45 years. Looking at their faces, they appeared tired from their journey. When I enquired who they were from my research assistant, he told me,

[t]hey are the ones who supply *Asari fuel* to this part of the Niger Delta. They are Ijaw women from Bayelsa State [in the Southern Niger Delta]. They use barges to come up to this part of the Niger Delta area through Oguta Lake and then use their bicycles to move from community to community contacting their customers.

Continuing, my assistant noted that

[t]hese women are mostly the wives of the militants who fight in the creeks. So, when their husbands bunker [cut into, or pilfer] petroleum pipes, they load it in barges or in big containers which their wives market in different parts of the Niger Delta and beyond. The men cannot do this as freely as the women. The JTF<sup>7</sup> treat women more kindly than they treat the men. They simply collect bribes from the women and let them go freely. This is how the women sustain their families.

Two days later, we encountered one of these women at Location Market. The meeting provided an opportunity to interview her. After a moment of hesitation, she reluctantly agreed to my interview request. She thought I was a state agent. I asked her why she was selling “Asari fuel” with all the risks involved in the business. She described their activity in English interspersed with Pidgin English:

We all suffer [environmental degradation] as they take oil from our land. No ground to plant food again, no water to fish again. We go die? We do it because we no get anything to do again. Our ground dey smell fuel; we get pipes everywhere. So we take de thing we see inside pipe to help ourselves. It is not bad thing. Our husbands no dey for house. Army de pursue them. That is the only way we can take care of our children.

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<sup>7</sup> Joint Task Force. This is a joint task force of all the units of the Nigerian armed forces, the police and the intelligence services set up to defeat insurgency in the Niger Delta region.



As this woman responded to my question, I felt a sense of responsibility in her—the responsibility towards her family and her community. She deconstructed the notion that those who cut pipes and take oil from the pipes are “thieves.” She answered rhetorically when I asked her to respond to the government’s view which portrays them as “economic saboteurs.” According to her, “[i]f dey say we be saboteurs, then what are they? They are the thieves; they steal our oil and they kill our land. Na dem bi the thieves.”

My encounter with these women from Southern Niger Delta and their stories gave me deeper insights into the role women play in the economic sustenance of their families and communities in a period of conflict. The risks these women accept in the process of their trade shows the extent to which they have adjusted and adapted to the roles and trades they were, ordinarily, not used to.

## **Discussion**

The view which suggests that women from the Niger Delta region are subservient to their husbands (see Basden 1966; Okonjo 1976) ignores the fact of the resilience that underlines their everyday realities. The notion of cultural subjugation anywhere in the world is not static; societies transform and reform from one stage to another (Scott 2008). In the Niger Delta region, the socio-economic transformation resulting from environmental activism, mass poverty and exploitation by the oil and gas economy has led to the deconstruction of “gender roles.” This has marked a departure from the view held by colonial-era anthropologists regarding women from this region of Nigeria (see Okonjo 1976). While gender roles were once tied to the historical or “natural order” of ascription (Lerner 1986, 17–18), present realities have shifted the borders of gender roles from strictly mapped and assigned activities for each gender, to a relatively level playing space—where anyone can participate. This present reality does not dispute the fact that patriarchy still presents a challenge on different socio-economic fronts.

As we have seen from the above analysis, institutionalised landownership and inheritance practices have become bulwarks against the full participation of women in the economy of the Niger Delta region. The field data reveals that women have increased their visibility in different areas of the local economy hitherto dominated by men. In Egbema, women dominate distant trading, a key component of the local economy. In addition, they play an important role in farming and the basic hospitality industry as well. As the leader of the Market Women’s Association in Egbema pointed out in an interview, “[t]here is no area of business activities in this community we [women] do not participate in. It is no more like in the olden days when our mothers were confined at home. If you choose to remain at home these days, you will die of hunger.”

This view highlights the differentiated realities between the “olden days” when subsistence was the basic challenge of the Niger Delta communities. In the present

dispensation, needs have become more varied and resources more limited, especially with the environmental devastation caused by oil exploration and exploitation.

## Conclusion

Finally, as the study has shown, women play a critical role in the economic sustenance of their communities and families in the Niger Delta. It would have been problematic for the region if women had not risen to the challenge presented by the emergency situation in the region. While their full potential is hampered by existing patriarchal landownership practices, women have increased their visibility in trade, the fish economy and farming. By sustaining the local economy, they are able to fend for their families, albeit in very difficult circumstances. It is important to note here that the existing customary framework which restricts women's access to landownership rights is mediated by the uncomfortable silence of the state with regard to changing the existing status quo. The state must re-examine customary laws of inheritance and entitlements in the Niger Delta communities, promote women's access to micro credit facilities and soft loans, promulgate equal opportunity laws and also safeguard against gender abuses. For a region in conflict, more access to land for women, especially in the study community, would alleviate the wider economic difficulties brought about by the environmental effects of oil and gas exploitation.

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