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How Violent Conflicts Impact Women in Oil-Producing Niger Delta Communities: A Policy Perspective

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Government agencies responsible for supporting women organizations,** community-based associations, and civil society organizations (CSOs) should organize enlightenment campaigns to combat the social stigma that women face because of sexual violence committed against them during armed conflict. Such campaigns should also include information that the use of rape as a weapon during conflicts is a crime and law enforcement and security operatives should be counseled and sensitized on their role in protecting women's rights.
- **Survivors of rape should be provided with adequate social support,** trauma counseling, health services, and rehabilitation. Such interventions should also systematically address the extensive physical and psychological consequences of sexual violence. More studies aimed at providing input into policies that address conditions associated with gender-based violence should be commissioned at all levels.
- **Special laws and policies targeted against domestic violence** in post-conflict communities should be more rigorously enforced. The Ministries of Justice, Women's, and Humanitarian Affairs, and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) should produce a comprehensive program for transforming patriarchal traditions and practices that discriminate against women with respect to land and property. Also, discriminatory laws should be abolished or amended to conform to international best practices and international human rights law.

This policy brief focuses on how women are affected by violent conflicts in the oil-producing Niger Delta region of Nigeria, including the coping mechanisms women victims adopt in conflict-affected communities. It draws on the findings of field-based research on the experiences of women in the aftermath of the military invasions of Odi¹ and Gbaramatu,² the leadership tussle in Rumuekpe,³ communal/intra-ethnic conflict in K-Dere and B-Dere,⁴ communal conflict with a multinational oil corporation in Ewwreni,⁵ and electoral violence in Imiringi. This brief also makes recommendations for addressing gender-based violence in the region.

THE IMPACT OF VIOLENT CONFLICT ON WOMEN IN THE NIGER DELTA

The Niger Delta has been embroiled in episodic outbreaks of complex violence since the late 1980s.⁶ These have ranged from intra- and inter-communal conflicts over land, conflicts between oil-producing communities and oil multinationals, attacks on oil installations and security operatives by ethnic minority militia, crime, state repression of community protests, and domestic violence. Women have largely borne the brunt of gender and sexual-based violence in a highly volatile context.

Several of the respondents reported experiencing some form of trauma. According to one respondent, *"as a result of the rape I suffered, the effects of running from my community to another community where we were treated badly, I and several people from my community were traumatized..."*⁷ In cases where they have been subjected to sexual violence, victims report that their trauma has been exacerbated by the stigmatization they face from members of their family and community.

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Violence against the bodies of women by violent actors often leaves the victims highly traumatized because of psychological torment resulting in insomnia, loss of self-esteem, loss of property, shame, and bodily injuries. Other sources of stress included loss of homes, farmlands, internal displacement, and infection with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The situation has been worse for widows as they face challenges with land-grabbing, particularly by male relatives of their late husband's family and, in some cases, neighbors. The expropriation of their late husband's land and property often draws on patriarchal customs to usurp the rights of women to such properties.

Women who have experienced violence have developed coping strategies/mechanisms. Such women often lack access to justice and receive unsatisfactory support from Internally Displaced Peoples (IDP) and resettlement programs. They have adopted coping strategies to survive and take care of themselves. Survivors of sexual violence reported adopting silence as a coping mechanism, rather than facing the condemnation of family and community – *"I was raped during the crisis. At that time, I was 21 years old. I decided to keep quiet because of fear of the soldiers... and because I was scared that the community will look down on me if I mentioned it."*⁸ In other cases, victims of abuse relocate from their communities to avoid stigma and rejection.⁹ While others have sought refuge in religion, some have embraced livelihoods in the informal sector as farmers, petty-traders or vendors, laborers, and commercial sex workers.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

The study found that women victims of gender-based violence or conflict often lack access to justice, adequate healthcare, and rehabilitation by the authorities. More importantly, our research showed that the coping strategies they adopt are either largely inadequate or unsustainable. The situation of such women in conflict-affected oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta calls for the revisiting of existing policy interventions and actions.

¹ Human Rights Watch (1999) The Destruction of Odi and Rape in Choba. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/report/1999/12/22/destruction-odi-and-rape-choba/december-22-1999>

² Okafor, Chido (2016). 'Troops Invade Gbaramatu, Ransack Four Communities, The Guardian Newspapers, 13th November. Available at www.guardian.ng/news/troops-invade-gbaramatu-ransack-four-communities/

³ Stakeholders Democracy Network (2016) Rumuekpe: A Study in Disempowerment, Conflict, and Peacebuilding. Available at <https://www.stakeholderdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/22.9.15-Rumuekpe-Human-Impact-of-Conflict.pdf>.

⁴ Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (2013). WATCHING US DIE ON CNN, Report on the study of Community-level Conflict Management

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- Survivors of rape should be provided with adequate social support, trauma counseling, health services, and rehabilitation. Such interventions should also systematically address the extensive physical and psychological consequences of sexual violence. More studies aimed at providing input into policies that address conditions associated with gender-based violence should be commissioned at all levels.
- Special laws and policies targeted against domestic violence in post-conflict communities should be more rigorously enforced. The Ministries of Justice, Women's, and Humanitarian Affairs, and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) should produce a comprehensive program for transforming patriarchal traditions and practices that discriminate against women with respect to land and property. Also, discriminatory laws should be abolished or amended to conform to international best practices and international human rights law.

Mechanisms in the Niger Delta, Middle Belt and North East zones of Nigeria

⁵ Delta Community on Fire, Sunnewsonline, 28th November, 2020. Available at sunnewsonline.com/delta-community-on-fire.

⁶ Obi, Cyril (2009). Nigeria's Niger Delta: Understanding the Complex Drivers of Violent Oil-related Conflict, Africa Development, Vol. XXXIV, No. 2, 2009, pp. 103–128.

⁷ Excerpt from in-depth Interview with female, 32 years old, survivor of sexual violence, Rumuekpe, Rivers State.

⁸ Excerpt from in-depth interview with female, 41 years old, Odi town, Bayelsa State.

⁹ From findings of the field research.

¹⁰ From the findings of the field research.