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The stereotyping of women in traditional Africa as passive, physically weak, only connected to domestic affairs and politically irrelevant has been challenged in the post-colonial era due to circumstances that have turned community women in the Niger Delta region into actively playing the role that were hitherto, exclusively reserved for men. At the heart of women's participation in the Niger Delta conflicts are the environmental degradation, neglect and marginalization of the people in the oil-producing areas of the region from benefiting politically and economically from the oil that has been the bane of Nigeria's development, its political importance in world politics, and the enrichment of the ethnically dominant political elite (Obi, 2005; Ukeje, 2004; Ikelegbe, 2001: 440; Okonta and Douglas, 2001; Douglas et al, 2003). Apart from triggering militancy in men, these challenges have also prompted some groups of women to mobilize themselves at the community levels into social movements in order to reverse the negative trends. Has the role of women's participation in the public sphere deconstructed 'gender' definition? Is the phenomenon of women forming social movements in the Niger Delta region in order to contest their deprivations new? In what context are these movements formed in the Niger Delta region? How have women been able to mobilize themselves through these groups? Are the community-based movements autonomous from other women civil society groups? What are the challenges faced by community women social movements in engendering development and security in the region and what are the prospects for their communities' development? With the aid of the Social movement theory (Kitschelt, 1991: 30-51), this paper highlights on concepts such as gender and civil society groups to explore the factors responsible for the emergence of women's movements in the region. To achieve its objectives, the study utilizes a combination of library/archival and fieldwork methods of research. For the fieldwork approach, the study uses data collected through face-to-face interviews and focused group discussions from Kokodiagbene and Okerenkoko (Warri South West Local Government Area) in Delta State, and Okoroba (Nembe Local Government) and Ogboloma (Yenagoa Local Government) in Bayelsa State as part of a broad study on women and violence in the Niger Delta region.

From a study of these areas, findings reveal that mobilization for social movements by women in the Niger Delta region is not a new phenomenon. Though the genesis of women's movements can be traced to the Nigeria's pre-colonial period, it became very glaring during the colonial period when women had to coagulate in order to protest against colonial policies from 1929. Second, findings show that women actualize these protests goals through three types of movements. First, there are the local groups of traditional associations, local socio-economic, thrift, welfare and support groups. Second, there are community, clan and ethnic associations and third, there are the pan-ethnic and regional associations. But the most important grouping is the community women groups formed in almost all the communities in the region as the basis to discuss issues of interests and to serve as the bane for the struggles there. Another major finding of the research is that though women are at the forefront of the struggle in the Niger Delta region as struggles over oil exploitation started with women social movements in the 1980s, their militant role has not impeded on their basic traditional role of house wives and home makers.

In relation to the factors responsible for women’s groupings resulting to protests in the region, findings reveal that women are responsible for the economic survival of family members, which are basically farming and fishing. In spite of the fact that women sustain families and themselves from their own subsistence produce from farms and fish ponds, their access to land is largely dependent on their attachment to men as wives and children. The result is that they suffer double violence because as subsistence farmers, they suffer great and serious socio-economic losses on their farmlands as a result of pollution and gas flaring on land and
rivers during oil exploration and exploitation by oil companies. Second, though they bore the impact of oil pollution and gas flares, benefits do not accrue to them in terms of compensation. Rather, men (especially the Chiefs and elders) corner compensations given to pollution victims, including women. All these problems have triggered women's protests in the region. Interestingly, women groups have different forms of resistance in showing their discontentment with oil companies. In spite of the successes recorded after protests, women are still marginalized in the economy of oil politically, socially and economically. Except these challenges are turned into opportunities for women in form of economic and political empowerment, as well as building bridges of development in the oil-rich areas, more militant women social movements may emerge in the region.

References


