

# ***Engendering civil society: oil, women groups and resource conflicts in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria***

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## ABSTRACT

Civil society has been an active mobilisational and agitational force in the resource conflicts of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. The paper examines the gender segment of civil society and its character, forms and roles in these conflicts. The central argument is that marginality can be a basis of gendered movements and their engagement in struggles for justice, accommodation and fair access to benefits. Utilising secondary data and primary data elicited from oral interviews, the study identifies and categorises women groupings and identifies their roles and engagements in the oil economy. It finds that community women organisations (CWOs), with the support of numerous grass-roots women organisations, are the most active and frequently engaged in the local oil economies, where they have constructed and appropriated traditional women protests as an instrument of engagement. The paper notes the implications of women protest engagements and particularly their exasperation with previous engagements, the depth of their commitments, and the extension of the struggle beyond the threshold of normal social behaviour.

## INTRODUCTION

Youth, communal, ethnic, civil and environmental rights and other civil groups have been engaged in the generalised restiveness, confrontation, violence and crisis that pervades the oil rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Studies have focused on communal agitation, civil groups and youth activities in the region (Ikelegbe 2001b, 2004). The place of women and women groupings, however, has not until recent times received much scholarly attention. Increased attention has resulted first from the growing

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The author acknowledges the United States Institute of Peace, Washington, for grant aiding research on the Niger Delta (2001–3), and the Centre of Advanced Social Science, Port Harcourt, Nigeria for research consultation on Women and Peace Building in the Niger Delta (2003).

awareness of the deeper impact of the oil economy on the women who constitute a large proportion of subsistence farmers, fisher-women and the informal sector in the region. There is increasing awareness of the marginalisation of women in the 'trickle down' of benefits from the multinational oil companies (MNCs). As a result, some MNCs such as Shell have begun capacity building programmes for women (SPDC 2002). Second, women who have been intermittently active in the struggle have recently begun to assert their role, among the Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo ethnic groups, in peaceful mass actions against the oil companies in the region. Third, recent efforts at constructing and strengthening peace-building capacity in relation to the resolution of the conflict by both the MNCs and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have begun to focus on the roles that adequately equipped women and women groupings can play in the resolution of the complex, multilevel and multifaceted conflicts and crises in the region (*ibid.*). These conditions and developments have alerted the oil companies, the state, civil society, scholars and activists to the role of women and their groupings in the struggle and in its resolution.

The integration of women into the analysis of the Niger Delta conflict and its movement towards resolution raises numerous questions. How have women emerged to articulate gender-related issues and mobilise themselves? Through what means and structures are women mobilised to address perceived grievances in the oil economy? Do women have associational voices in the economy of oil at the community, ethnic, pan ethnic, state and regional levels? What kinds of women civil and community groups exist and at what level? Are women grass-root community organisations making any impact on the oil economy? What are the characteristics of local women groups? What factors inhibit women group activism and impact in the oil economy? In particular, what are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and potentials of the women groups? Are there linkages, networks or organisational frameworks within and beyond the community women groups?

The central argument of this paper is that in resource-rich regions, usually characterised by struggles over benefits, marginality can be a basis of gendered movements. In the Niger Delta region, women who have become impoverished, marginalised and aggrieved in the oil economy have begun to engage in struggles for justice, accommodation and fair access to benefits through associational forms. Women groupings have not only become an active part of the civil challenge and popular struggles, but have begun to appropriate traditional forms of resistance. Moreover, women groupings relate not only to struggles for benefits, but also to the management of the conflict.

Data for the research was obtained from both primary and secondary sources. The primary source was oral interview. Five local leaders were interviewed in three local government areas of Delta state. The central concern of the interviews was to elicit information on communal women group roles in the oil economy. The secondary data sources were newspapers, magazines, reports and documents.

#### THE CONCEPT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society refers to an essentially participatory, broad-based and self-governing formation engaged in shaping public affairs, public policy and governance. It is a formation that is voluntarily constituted, non-state, fairly autonomous, largely self-generating and self-supporting, and is concerned with civil and public purposes (Bratton 1992; Ikelegbe 2003; Oyovbaire 2002). Its activities are largely articulative, mobilisational and contestative, and its engagements usually have to do with struggles, protests and mass actions (Ikelegbe 2001a). It is generally regarded as a popular formation, because of its situation and constitution as the realm of the popular classes, the movement from below, of autonomous social forces, of a participant citizenry and as independent organisations of protest (Cox 1999: 10). As to the constituents of the civil society, these comprise the organised social life of communities, groups and individuals, and more specifically the mosaic of the associational life of the citizenry, that is organised for particular concerns outside the structure of the state. In the African context, civil society acquires a broad outlook that comprises the social, rural, peasant, communal, ethnic, cultural, sub-national, secret society, religious, agricultural and development associations which are quite useful to the citizenry as vehicles of mobilisation and action (Ekeh 1992; Ikelegbe 2001c, 2003).

Civil society is, however, more than a formation. It is a site, a realm, a theatre and an instrument (Ikelegbe 2003). It is the realm of organised social life and the network of institutions by which citizens represent themselves. It is a realm of associational solidarity, activism and engagement (Shaw 1994: 647). It is the private realm of the citizenry, in juxtaposition with the state and the corporate realm. As a site, civil society is an intermediate formation between the private realm of the family and the state. It is a layer, outside the state, where the citizenry organise materially, organisationally and ideologically in relation to their problems, interests and needs. It is a site of collective civic and public action, beyond the family but beneath the state (Bratton 1992: 56–9; Harbeson 1992: 287; Keane 1988: 5). It is therefore separate and distinct from the state, but relates to it.

Civil society is also a theatre. It is a theatre of discourse, of interest articulation and aggregation, of deliberation of common affairs and of exchange between the civil society formation and other forces. It is also a context where citizen organisations relate and interact with the state, to influence, moderate and cooperate or to oppose, resist, challenge and struggle against it. It can be regarded as an arena where self-organised and autonomous groups engage the state in hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggles for domination, accommodation and opposition (Abutudu 1997; Adejumbi 2001; Chazan 1994; Shaw 1994). Finally, civil society is an instrument, a means by which the citizens engage the state, in different struggles, challenges and contestations.

The very nature of the relations between civil society as citizen organisations and the state defines civil society. The relationship is identified as that which is able to prevent, balance off, restrain, limit and check state abuses and depredations of power (Bayart 1986; Gellner 1995; Hall 1995). The relations are said to be under-girt by opposition, confrontation, counter action, struggle, challenge and contestation, revolt, mass action and protests (Bayart 1986; Bratton 1992: 59; Harbeson 1992; Ikelegbe 2003). But they can also be complementary, supportive and collaborative in specific instances. It is the state by its very nature that usually induces the oppositional relationship. The important defining thing however is the possession of the potential of contending with and opposing the state when the need arises.

One major weakness in civil society and gender studies is the neglect of the local, communal and grass-root associational fabric, usually in informal, small and autonomous forms, which constitutes the vehicle by which the local people mobilise collective efforts, in the struggle for voices in communal affairs and in relation to resources, environment and existence. The local associational formation is a rallying organisational and mobilisational platform by which local people are empowered to articulate and pursue collective concerns. Second, civil society studies have been largely gender blind because they have ignored specificities of women group engagements, responses and roles in the numerous socio-economic, political, environmental and resource struggles in Africa (Mama 1999: 29). This is manifested not just in the examination of roles, but in the focus on effects of the political, economic, environmental and resource crises on women and their associational formation. Some scholars have alleged that civil society conceptions are 'inequitably gendered and exclusionary' (Mama 1999).

That women groups exist and constitute a significant segment of civil society is indicated by the roles which they play and are playing, and their

increasing proliferation and involvement in socio-economic and political struggles. Such groups are the main facilitating vehicles in women's struggle for access to resources and empowerment such as the facilitation of access to credit, technology, inputs and skills (Soetan 1995).

In relation to women at the communal and local levels, the associational fabric is the means by which the space for socio-political agitation and participation in local politics and struggles are created and widened (Soetan 1995: 231). Women's indigenous cultural, socio-economic, development, mutual support and informal sector groupings are important associational formations that are vital in local governance, economic empowerment, local participation and social cushions in the community.

We have to note that both in rural communities and in urban areas, there is increasing awareness, participation and associational involvement among women. Women organisations and women participation in these organisations have been on the increase particularly in the areas of the informal sector, market associations, cooperatives and informal credit (Trager & Osinulu 1991; Tripp 1994). This has arisen from the realisation that associational forms constitute an effective collective structure for confronting increasing scarcities, creating support and relating to needs in the context of persisting crises of the economy, development and governance. The proliferation and increased roles of associations and women participation in them, is transforming the terrain of women status, autonomy and collective roles in the local and urban communities. Tripp (2000: 233–9) identified the transformation that has resulted in Uganda. This enabled women to mobilise in organisational forms of their choosing, and gain greater autonomy to challenge the status quo and hold leaders accountable. It also meant that they could define their own interests and set their own agendas.

#### CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE NIGER DELTA

There is a rich associational texture, activism and solidarity in the Niger Delta. This can be attributed to several factors. First is the strong communal and ethnic identity and the flowering of identity-based groups which dates back to the colonial period. In response to the disarticulation of migrants and settlers occasioned by colonialism and the challenges of self-help, support and development, communal and ethnic associations emerged early and still pervade the Niger Delta today. Second, governments in the post-colonial era have promoted self-help community development as a strategy. Different development programmes as recent as the Food, Roads and Infrastructures programme, the Better Life programme

and the Family Support programme of the Babangida and Abacha administrations respectively have encouraged the formation of community development associations, cooperatives and women associations.

The traditional governance systems have comprised associations of chiefs, secret cults, age grades and women groupings. Numerous groups have emerged in relation to exigencies, challenges and potentialities of business, politics and culture. Persisting state weakness, abuse of power, corruption, repression, hegemonic domination and partiality have combined with the twisted and inconsistent transitions of the Babangida and Abacha administrations, and the consequent frustrations have also generated a flowering of civil groups in Nigeria and in this case, the Niger Delta, since the mid-1980s.

Finally, the exacerbation of the Niger Delta condition indicated by increased poverty, deepening socio-economic disruption, decline of local economies, mass unemployment and the persisting neglect of the region have generated growing disenchantment with the multinational oil companies and the state, and have heightened restiveness and anger. These have generated reactions in the formation of groups that have been intent on a challenge to the status quo.

The emergent associational texture is variegated and complex. Three clear vertical categories can be delineated. First are local groupings within the communities of youths, women, age grades, chieftaincy groups and the socio-economic based thrift, welfare and support-based small groupings of local women, youths and men. There is a very rich associational formation at this level. The central characteristic of this category is that they are small, community-based but sometimes linked to community members in the urban centres. They relate most closely to the ordinary community members at either the level of community governance or that of mutual support and welfare.

The second vertical category is that of community, clan and ethnic-wide associations. These can be divided into two groups. The first are the apex community, clan and ethnic associations such as the all inclusive community development associations. The second comprises community/clan and ethnic-based associations that relate to the social, cultural, economic and political interests and aspirations, and that are formed in response to circumstances and challenges. Some of these groups are youth and women associations, while others are culturally, developmentally and politically inclined.

The ethnic groupings, which are quite numerous and are still proliferating, include the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Egbema National Congress, Movement for the Reparation of Ogbia,

Isoko Community Oil Producing Forum, the Urhobo Political Stakeholders Forum, and the Ndokwa Aborigines Rights Protection Council. Others are the Movement for the Survival and Advancement of Ekpeye Ethnic Nationality, Oron National Forum, Old Ahoada Joint Consultative Forum, Egi Ethnic Coalition, Ijaw Elders Forum, Elimotu Movement, Izon National Development and Welfare Association, Ibibio National Coalition for Self Determination, Akpabuyo Bakassi Green Movement, and Isoko Positive Agenda. There are also numerous apex groupings among communities and ethnic groups. Apex groups of the Urhobo, Isoko and Ijaw ethnic nationalities respectively are the Urhobo Progress Union, Isoko Development Union and Ijaw National Congress.

The third category are pan-ethnic, regional and nationwide groups that relate to either regional or national issues, and to a wide expanse of social, political, environmental and democratic issues. Into this category fall advocacy, pro-democracy, environmental rights, civil rights, political and semi-political opinion and influence-based groups, and numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Some of these associations are recent and have emerged in response to the exigencies and circumstances of the Niger Delta. The opinion and influence-based groups have been involved in the resource politics of the region, while the NGOs relate to political, socio-economic and environmental issues.

The pan-ethnic and region-wide groupings include the Organisation for the Restoration of Actual Rights of Oil Communities, Southern Minorities Forum, Conference of Traditional Rulers of Oil Producing States, Ethnic Minority Rights Organisation of Nigeria, Association of Minority Oil States, Niger Delta Peace Project Committee, and Niger Delta Peace and Development Forum. Others are the Committee on Vital Environmental Resources, Movement for the Protection and Survival of Oil Mineral and Natural Gas Producing Communities of Nigeria, Niger Delta Professionals, Niger Delta Professionals for Development, Niger Delta Patriots and South South Empowerment Front. The most prominent of these groups are the South South Peoples Conference and the Union of Niger Delta.

Ethnic youth groups in the region include, among others, the Movement for the Survival of Ijaw Ethnic Nationality (MOSIEND), Movement for the Survival of Itsekiri Ethnic Nationality (MOSIEN), Isoko National Youth Movement (INYM), Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), and Egi Youth Federation. Others include the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities, Ikwere Youth Movement, Urhobo Youth Movement, Niger Delta Volunteer Force, Ijaw Council for Human Rights and Ilaje Youth Movement. Pan-ethnic youth groups have mainly been formed since the 1990s, and include the Concerned Youths of Oil Producing States, Pan Niger Delta

Revolutionary Militia, CHICOCO Movement, Students of Oil Mineral Producing Areas and Niger Delta Youth Coalition.

Non-governmental organisations are of regional, national and international hues. These include the Environmental Rights Action, Oil Watch Group, Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law and Niger Delta Human and Environmental Rescue Organisation. International NGOs such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Pro-National International are also active in the region.

Civil groups have been involved at different levels and with different methods (Ikelegbe 2001b). The communal and grass root groups have been involved with development issues in the struggles with the oil companies and oil servicing companies. They have also been involved in local mass actions against oil installations. Ethnic and pan-ethnic groups have been more involved in political issues, and in the search for dialogue and negotiations towards the fundamental resolution of the problems. This has particularly been the concern of the opinion, influence seeking and politically inclined groups.

The youth groups have been vociferous, militant and violent in their methods, and radical in the articulation of the issues. They have been behind the extensive and highly mobilised direct actions and insurrection in the region. The NGOs have been concerned with the monitoring of environmental and human rights abuses, and in the social, political and economic empowerment of the people and groupings in the region. The nature, roles, methods and content of women groups in the struggle have often been neglected or overlooked.

Whatever the type by categorisation, there are certain commonalities about civil society in the region (Ikelegbe 2001a). First, there is a persisting flowering of associational life in response to the oil economy and the ensuing politics, struggles and agitation. Groups of differing hues are growing by the day. Second, there is a common concern at different levels with the oil economy. Even the very grass-roots, traditionally and culturally based groups as well as student groups are in different ways concerned and relate to issues as stakeholders. The Niger Delta problem has been a major project, on which the region's civil society has been constructed, inter-linked and directed. As Ikelegbe (2001a) notes, civil society in the region and in relation to the oil economy has become a solid and broad platform, with considerable linkages, solidarity and coordination.

The third thing to note is that civil society has become the basis for mobilisation, articulation and struggle in the region. The struggle is conducted by groups which, as an attestation to the level of mobilisation, comprise the major opinion leaders, and traditional, business, professional

and political elites, as well as different segments such as women, youth and elders. Civil groups in the region have changed the tempo and direction of the Niger Delta struggle. They have heightened the level of mobilisation and participation, and in so doing, transformed the scale and volatility of civil challenges and turned the region into a melting pot of protests and mass actions. They have also broadened and redirected the issues in contest from disparate development-based demands to a political programme that comprises state reforms, self-determination and resource control.

#### CIVIL SOCIETY: THE GENDER DIMENSION IN NIGERIA

Women organisations, movements and groupings preceded colonialism. In African traditional societies, vestiges of which still exist, particularly at the community levels, women organisations were part of traditional governance systems. They were part of the rich associational texture, which apart from being platforms for cooperative roles and activities, presented citizen voices and interactions with traditional African states, and particularly constituted avenues for moderating or even restraining them.

The disarticulation consequent on colonialism, particularly with the emergence of colonies of migrants, settlers, workers and artisans in different communities and regions, led to the emergence of modern groupings. The initial flowering of modern civil society during the decolonisation period also affected women in terms of mobilisation and associational expressions. But women were usually subordinate members of these groupings, of which even women wings emerged quite late. Formal and modern women groupings are therefore a relatively recent development. Few associations were noticeable enough to be documented and reported, among them being the Abeokuta Women's Union, Nwabiola Movement and Southern Ngwa Women's Association (Mba 1982). In the period following independence, local women cooperatives, socio-economic groupings and cultural associations continued to flower, as regional and state government promoted self-development, community associations, cooperatives and socio-economic development associations as part of rural and economic development programmes.

The period from the 1980s has been identified as the second flowering of civil society in Nigeria, as citizens responded in associational forms to economic crisis, economic and political reforms, transitions, collapsing social services and infrastructure, and the military dictatorship and state abuses during the Babangida and Abacha regimes. Women organisations proliferated, as did other civil society groups (Mama 1999: 32–3). Particularly, gender non-governmental organisations have been part of the NGO

industry that has become a feature of Nigerian socio-political life since the 1990s.

Certain gendered programmes of the military governments also led to the proliferation of women groupings. The Better Life for Rural Women programme and Family Support programme established and led by Mrs M. Babangida and Mrs M. Abacha respectively, and the wives of governors and top members of the Babangida and Abacha administrations, led to the proliferation of women community-based socio-economic groups and cooperatives. These were in some cases merely responses to the opportunities presented by the programmes for women cooperatives and mutual support groups to register and become recipients of loans for small-scale economic projects.

Women associations can be categorised. First, there are local community women groups situated in the traditional governance structures. Most communities have such organisations, by which women are not just organised but relate to community governance. Second are a variety of thrift, mutual support, cooperative, kinship, religious and cultural associations of women at the level of the communities and clans. Beyond the communities are the ethnic cultural, socio-political and influence-seeking groupings of women. These groupings are largely parochial, indigenous, cultural and mutual support based.

There are also middle-level organisations that relate to socio-economic occupations, the professions, religions, interest groups, socio-economic sectors and socio-development. These groups are less primordial, more related to socio-economic conditions, and more pan-ethnic and regional. Though these groups have existed since the colonial period, they have particularly flowered since the 1970s, as women have increasingly mobilised in different sectors and activities for mutual support and influence. These groups have tended to be concerned with members' interests and women concerns within the specific sectors, professions and socio-economic activities. However, women associations with regional and national spread are few and largely comprise professional groupings.

There is also the NGO sector, comprising activist, advocacy, women rights, research, and economic empowerment associations that have also particularly flowered since the 1990s. This category has mostly related to gender issues and services, and has tended to be mobilisational and knowledge and awareness-based. The list of these groups is getting longer by the day, but includes Gender and Development Action (GADA), Forum for Women in Politics, and Women's Empowerment Movement. Other gender NGOs include Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre, Women's Aid Collective, Rural Women Empowerment

Network, and Gender Grassroot Development Association. Some of these groups have been opportunity driven and are part of the NGO industry.

Finally, there are regional and in some cases apex national women organisations, to which are affiliated some of the middle-level, interest, occupational, professional, religious and development organisations. These include the moribund Nigerian Women's Union and Federation of Nigeria Women Societies, the existing National Council of Women Societies, and the more recent Women in Nigeria. These groupings have been criticised as being to varying extents, state sponsored, funded, state aligned and compromised (Mama 1999: 35; Pereira 1997: 8–12). But they have constituted crucial voices in respect of women interests, problems and issues.

#### WOMEN GROUPINGS IN THE NIGER DELTA

The women segment of the Niger Delta has been part of the rich associational texture and associational flowering of the past two decades. Their associational life can be categorised into, first, the local groups of traditional organisations and the local socio-economic, thrift, welfare and support groups. Second, are the community, clan and ethnic associations, and third, the pan-ethnic and regional associations.

In most traditional communities, women have traditional organisations concerned with governance, through which they relate to their welfare and the community. Among the Isoko and Urhobo communities of the region, for example, there is the *ewhe eya* (married women) of the community, headed by the Okpako eya. In the Ijaw communities, this is called the *eyorotu-ogele*, and is headed by the Amanana-ere. The *ewhe eya* comprises two groups, the *ewhe eya* itself and a subgroup, the *emete*, which is for non-indigenous women married to community indigenes. It is headed by the Okpako-emete. The *ewhe eya* and *emete* are the basic community units of women organisation (int. 2003, Otu Jeremi). Their duty is the environmental maintenance of the community, the governance of women affairs and the articulation and aggregation of women interests. These groups play prominent roles in village ceremonies and festivals. Their leaders receive grievances, which are channelled to the community council of which they have representatives as members.

These groups are the vehicle of women protests at the local level against laws and activities of the traditional governance structure and systems, and particularly against unjust and unfair practices. They may protest against crime, unruly youths, and community, government and MNC decisions. This occurs through the adoption of motions in their meetings, and

processions with bells and drums to community squares and leaders in order to present their grievances.

When the women feel strongly about the issues and there is no satisfactory resolution, they may threaten to relocate outside the communities in protest, and may as an extreme reaction, particularly where it concerns injustice against them, threaten to march or process naked. Incidences of crime and intercommunal feuds have led to such threats. The women groups also intervene to mediate conflicts, and have been known to liaise with other community women groups to react and resolve common problems such as sea piracy, youth violence, crime and low school enrolment.

The second set of grassroots organisations of women at the community level are the self-help associations usually called progressive associations and meetings. Most women belong to such associations, which relate generally to thrift, mutual support and welfare. These are the socio-economic groupings by which women mutually support and cushion themselves against the vagaries of a crisis-ridden and poor society.

The clan and ethnic women organisations are larger, more modern and sophisticated associations, comprising more enlightened women who are employed, engaged in trading or in the informal sector. There are two categories of associational presence here. The first are cultural and socio-economic meetings and clubs of clan and ethnic solidarity and mutual support and welfare. In Delta state, for example, such associations include the Twenty Sisters and Women Socialites in Ughelli South local government, and the Utagba Women Organisation, Emu Women Forum, Otu Ofu Obi, Otu Njonu Women Organisation in Ndokwa West local government area. In Isoko North and South local government areas, there are the Omamiovo Women Group, Uyoyo Women Club and Eyodoma Edherie Women Meeting. The second category, the socio-politically inclined groups, are larger and relate to broad issues. They include the Isoko Women Forum, Ndokwa Women in Politics, Ndokwa Ladies Organisation, Ndokwa Women Welfare Association, Utagba Ogbe Women Forum, and Urukpe Urhobo Women Association, Eruwvie Urhobo Social Club, Itsekiri Women Association, Izon Ladies Association, Federation of Ogoni Women Association, Egi Women Movement, Daughters of Kalabari Union, Oron Women Action Group, and Warri Women Consultative Assembly.

There are few pan-ethnic and region-wide groups. These include the Niger Delta Women Forum for Peace, Niger Delta Women for Justice, and Voice of Niger Delta Women. There are also environmental, rights and development based NGOs such as the Gender and Development Action, and Women's Aid Collective. There is in addition considerable

women associational activity in male-dominated associations at different levels in the region. Most community and ethnic associations have women wings. For example, there is a women wing of the Isoko Development Union. The Federation of Ogoni Women Association is an affiliate of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People. In addition there are national women groups such as the National Council of Women Societies.

#### WOMEN AND THE OIL ECONOMY OF THE NIGER DELTA

The severe economic crisis of the last 15 years has had severe disruptive and dis-locative effects on Nigerian society. The crisis has been manifested in unemployment, retrenchment, hyperinflation, and consequent decline of living standards. The economic crisis has been translated into several sectors. Thus, the crisis is a food crisis, accompanied by spiralling food bills, malnutrition and starvation. It is also a social crisis, as the spectacle of dwindling and impoverished health, educational, welfare and other social services attest. Social restiveness, manifested in crime and violence and consequent on the polarisation between the few rich and the poor majority, is now pervasive. There is no doubt that Nigerian society has been in the throes of a crisis of unprecedented dimensions.

In the Niger Delta, the prolonged economic crisis has been accentuated by increased exploitation of oil and gas resources occasioned by the state's search for greater revenues, and the multinational oil companies' bid for higher profits. The consequence has been disastrous as the region has suffered massive pollution of land, water, flora and fauna, which has decimated the resources on which the region survives. Precious land has been taken up by exploration and the pipeline network, and destroyed by frequent oil spillage. The rivers and streams have been polluted. The result has been a total decimation and destruction of the local economy, which has aggravated poverty, unemployment and hunger, and fuelled a regime of anger, bitterness and frustration. The region, whose difficult terrain, scanty land, swamp and creeks has been recognised as requiring special attention even by the Willinck Commission of 1958, and was then described as poor, backward and neglected, has been prostrated by the combination of oil-based degradation and deepening economic decline and crisis. The Niger Delta region has become one of growing immiseration. Unemployment and poverty are quite high and have become more frustrating, because they exist side by side with abundantly endowed oil company workers and the oil company residential quarters that are enclaves of abundance.

Women in the Niger Delta are traditionally very hard-working income earners as they are required to feed their families. The men while supplementing family living expenses undertake projects such as the education of the children and housing provision. The women eke out vital family living incomes through subsistence farming, fishing, petty trading and activities in the informal sector. The women have benefited least from employment in the oil companies. They have also been excluded from the token compensation arising from acquisition, pollution and devastation of farmlands and fishing waters. Compensation claims are made by traditional rulers and local elites, and women are least recognised as owners of land and water resources.

The women in the Niger Delta are victims first of general gender-based discriminatory practices and disadvantages. There is generally disproportionate representation of women in every strategic sector in the region. Women are underrepresented in the strategic heights of politics, government, the economy, educational institutions and employed labour. Most women are peasants and housewives, who have been marginalised in the process of production and distribution. Second, women have been victims of the economic crisis. This has induced greater women participation in the informal sector, as they struggle to absorb the deficits and scarcities in the family economies. Women have also borne the greater consequences of the social disruption and disarticulation arising from the economic crisis.

In the Niger Delta, women have borne the brunt of the adverse effects of the oil economy. First, they are more sedentary and constitute the greater proportion of subsistence farmers. Second, they have suffered most from the adverse effects of soil degradation and pollution. They have suffered serious losses of farmlands and fishing waters. As subsistence fisherwomen, they have suffered from the pollution of the creeks and rivers and the decline in fish stocks. Women are therefore disproportionately dispossessed by oil exploitation. Their economic activities are paralysed. In Uzere, Delta state, for instance, the women were driven from fishing by gas flaring (Nwajah 2003). Women and their children are also most affected by the pollution of communal ponds and rivers that provide drinking water. The health hazards from toxic waste and the pollution of drinking water are borne mostly by women and their children. Women have been victims of other consequences of the social economy of oil. With thousands of MNC workers, most of them separated from their families by the exigencies of work, young girls in the region have been lured and deceived to respond to oil workers' lusts. The incidence of female

prostitution, teenage mothers and broken homes has become more pervasive.

Women have also been victims of MNC and state harassment and repression. Since the mass repression and military expeditions in the towns and villages of the region, ranging from the Umuechem and Ogoni region in the early 1990s, to Yenagoa, Kaiama and Odi in Bayelsa, Choba in Rivers state and the Warri region in Delta state since the late 1990s, women have been beaten, raped, maimed and killed (Ikhariale 2000; Semenakiri & Ekeinde 1999). It is claimed that over 238 Ijaw women had been raped in four major crackdowns on Ijaw resistance in Kaiama, Yenagoa, Warri and Odi (Onwuemeodo 1999a).

#### WOMEN GROUP ROLES IN THE RESOURCE CONFLICTS

There are basically three types of women group role in the Niger Delta conflict. The first relates directly to the MNCs and the state in terms of complaints, petitions, representations, protests and disruptions. The second relates to the entire gamut of stakeholders: the state, MNCs, traditional rulers, elders and opinion leaders, political leaders and appointees, youths and other groups. In this category, the women act as moderators in the conduct of other stakeholders in terms of appeals, advice and suggestions. The third role is in the reactions to the excesses, perversions and the socially disruptive consequences of the agitations and protests. The most indicated are violence, crime and insecurity.

The most active groupings in the oil economy are the local community traditional women associations (CWOs), which have undertaken the earliest and more consistent protests, production disruptions and facility occupations. Being directly affected by the oil economy and its dislocations, the communal women associations are aware, interested and concerned. They relate to issues of direct concern such as poverty, neglect, local development issues, employment and economic empowerment, and seek benefits and address issues that relate directly to their local environments.

However, community women organisations include a myriad of age grades, thrift, welfare and mutual support groups. These help in the facilitation of information exchange, interest articulation and mobilisation. Quite important too are the urban-based groupings of women, which are usually the women wing of community development associations and mutual welfare and support groups. These are linked or relate to community women associations. Being better informed, enlightened, confident and empowered, they facilitate the mobilisation and enlightenment of the CWOs.

Apart from the CWOs, several women groupings have emerged in the communities and ethnic groups to relate to and intervene in resource conflicts within and between lineage groups, communities and clans. In Rivers state, there are the Ekunuga Women's Association and Ogbakiri in the Ekunuga community, and the Ikwere ethnic group respectively, which emerged to relate to oil-based inter-communal conflicts in terms of peaceful resolution. Such groups are voluntarily formed by concerned women (Oruwari 2003: 4–11).

There is also evidence that ethnic women groupings, particularly the cultural and socio-politically inclined groups, do motivate, encourage and support women protests. During the several women protests in Delta State's Warri region, the Warri Women Consultative Assembly obviously in support of Itsekiri women protests, gave a seven-day ultimatum to the MNCs to resolve the issues raised by the Itsekiri women protesters. It threatened to seal off all oil wells in the Niger Delta (Abati 2002: 12).

Apart from supporting women agitation, ethnic women groups have also been directly involved. In the Ogoni protests, women were quite active, through the Federation of Ogoni Women Associations. The women participated with their male counterparts in the shut down of Shell oil production facilities. They organised a large-scale protest on the first Ogoni day on 4 January 1993. In late April 1993, Ogoni farms could not be bulldozed by oil servicing companies because a large crowd of angry Ogoni women stood before the bulldozers. Ogoni women organised themselves as a group at the first commemoration of the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others. The Federation of Ogoni Women Association stood with MOSOP in its demands and non-violent mass actions.

The pan ethnic women groups have been advocacy and activist based. They have been at the forefront of articulation of the region's demands, the material conditions of women and the effects of the oil economy on women. These groups have also been active in the defence of women and citizen rights against the backdrop of massive state repression and violent encounters. They have advocated demilitarisation, respect for rights and negotiated solutions between the region's groupings and the state and oil companies. As noted above, they have been prepared to engage the state in respect of repression, harassment and mistreatment of women, children and the entire citizenry, and the devastation attendant on state military operations.

The Niger Delta Women for Justice (NDWJ) in conjunction with the Ijaw Youth Council, organised about 1,000 women in a protest march

in Port Harcourt on 11 January 1999, and delivered a letter to the military administrator at the Rivers State Government House, protesting against the military occupation, human rights abuses and the rape and assault of women in Bayelsa State. No fewer than 34 women were apprehended by the soldiers, stripped and beaten in the open (HRW 1999). The NDWJ has also been active in Yenagoa, Bayelsa state. In 1999 about 1,000 women in Yenagoa, Bayelsa protested to the visiting Senate delegation to Odi, the community which was devastated by Nigeria soldiers following confrontation with youth militants (Onwuemeodo 1999b: 1). The women led by Mrs Jennifer Pere, the president of NDJW, called for the immediate release of over 2000 women and children and 1,000 Ijaw youths locked up in Ebele Barracks and Bori Camp in Port Harcourt.

The gender NGOs and women national associations such as the National Council for Women Societies (NCWS) have been active in the empowerment of women through training and the articulation of women conditions and interests. The NCWS was involved in brokering peace between the Itsekiri and Ijaw women protesters who sealed up some oil flow stations in the Warri region of Delta state. The president, Dr (Mrs) Ketebu Nwakeofor, sought to rally traditional and opinion leaders in the region to prevail on the women protesters (Ogbodo 2002: 18–19). The Women Aid Collective has been engaged in the articulation of material women conditions and economic empowerment programmes. Gender NGOs also attempt to provide support and solidarity. The Women of Nigeria international led by Alice Ukoko extended solidarity to the Ijaw women protests of August 2002 (*ibid.*). As Table 1 indicates, gender NGOs are also engaged in the defence of women rights and the advocacy of peace and negotiated but peaceful solutions to the conflicts between the region and the state and oil companies.

At Table 1 indicates, women groups relate to the oil economy in different ways. The traditional women groups are the front-line battle groups. However in terms of mobilisation, activism and leadership, numerous local women groupings overlap with, reinforce and strengthen the traditional groupings. The cultural and socio-politically inclined communal, clan and ethnic groups are involved at the level of articulation of women grievances and in the support of communal women groups. Regional women groupings have been involved at a broad level, in terms of reacting to the neglect, environmental abuses and state repression and harassment in the region. In terms of objects of engagement, the CWOs engage the community based objects of marginalisation and discomfort in the oil economy and communal governance. The ethnic and pan ethnic/regional groupings and NGOs engage the state, oil companies

TABLE I  
Women group roles in the Niger Delta conflict

Group	Grievances	Objectives	Mode of agitation	Object of agitation
Community Women Groupings	Neglect, unemployment, poverty, absence of facilities/amenities	Benefits: development, employment of husbands and youths, economic empowerment	Petitions, representations, protests	Oil companies, communal leaderships and groupings
Ethnic Women Groupings	Neglect, unemployment	Peace-building Development, economic empowerment	Petitions, press statements, support of GWAs	Oil companies, the Nigerian state, groups/communities active in conflict
Pan Niger Delta Groups	Neglect, militarisation, harassment and rights abuses, environmental degradation	Peace-building Environmental remediation, demilitarisation, development, resource control Defence of women rights Peace-building	Petitions, press statements, protests	The Nigerian state, oil companies, groups/communities active in conflict
Gender NGOs	Environmental degradation, state repression, under-development, conflict management	Economic empowerment, healthy environment Defence of women rights Peace-building	Petitions, conferences/training, peace intervention	The Nigerian state, oil companies, groups/communities active in conflict

and the groupings and communities involved or indicated in the resource conflicts.

THE DYNAMICS OF COMMUNAL WOMEN GROUP ENGAGEMENT IN  
THE NIGER DELTA CONFLICTS

We have noted that, first, women have been active in the communities and as part of communal and ethnic group associations in the ND conflict. Most community actions against the oil companies have had women participation or support. Second, the most consistent and active segment of women groupings are the CWOs. This was a most neglected segment of women group struggles until the very visible and widely reported women protests of 2002. We also note that there are frequent and ongoing struggles and engagements of CWOs which are not usually reported. Our interviews were quite revealing in relation to the dynamics of CWO struggles in the local oil economy.

The women challenge usually begins by the articulation of concerns, fears, grievances and interests. The local groupings within the CWO are quite active. Three types of engagement are common here. The first concerns obtaining a fair due in the benefits derivable from the oil economy. The second is the moderation of the actions and behaviour of the traditional governance structures and elite behaviour in the oil economy. The third is informal peacekeeping and mediation in oil-related conflicts. The grievances are presented through CWO leaderships to traditional governance structures and leaderships. Where grievances relate to oil companies, the women may contact the MNC Community Liaison Officers. The grievances and interests relating to other groupings in the community and oil economy, such as youths and elders, are usually transmitted to their leaders and activists. These engagements are informal, persuasive and dialogic. Ordinarily, most problems are resolved through representations, meetings and consensus.

But when the women feel strongly about the problems and when they are not satisfactorily resolved, the protest option is undertaken. Women protests are very seriously regarded in African societies. Traditionally and socially, women are regarded as the embodiment of sanctity, dignity, morality and purity. The women folk are regarded as the most patient, respectful and morally compelling segment of the community. Therefore women protests traditionally push issues beyond the threshold of normal behaviour. The most extreme form of women protests is that of partial or complete nudity. This signifies a complete exasperation at the failure of other efforts. It is also a statement of extreme oppression,

neglect and feelings of marginality and inaction in relation to issues pertaining to a weak but presumably protected segment. Finally, the readiness of women to expose nudity is a statement of shame and a curse to society.

Local women protests usually begin from the *ewhe eya* (Isoko/Urhobo) or the Ogele's (Ijaw) residence or the village square. There is first a procession through the community to alert community members and groupings. This may go on for several days. The next stage is direct engagement of objects of grievance, such as oil company facilities, communal governance structures, local elites or groupings such as youths. In the case of the latter, women protesters may peacefully visit the houses, palaces and meeting places of communal leaderships. The CWOs may then engage the objects of agitation directly, which in the case of the oil companies may involve occupations and disruptions. The final and most extreme form is the deployment of partial or total nudity in the processions and protests.

Instances from our investigation of CWO engagements are numerous. In the Ughelli South local government area of Delta state, for example, there have been several direct mass women actions against Shell facilities and the Utologun Gas Plant at Otu Jeremy (int. 2003, Otu Jeremy). The local women organised by their local groupings on several occasions blocked the entry to the gas plant and disrupted operations. They sometimes threatened to march naked into the Shell oil facilities. Because of persistent women group activism and agitation, the women now have representatives of the *ewhe eya* and *emete* (Mrs Arugbo Otuama and Mrs Kehinde Obeatarhe) in the community's executive committee, which is the intermediary and liaison with the oil companies. By that achievement, the women have ensured their place in a regime which had hitherto excluded them from the benefits accruing from the oil economy. Women activism and agitation in the community have resulted in the establishment of economic empowerment programmes for women, which include a skills centre, fish pond, poultry and cassava cuttings projects.

In many instances, women volunteered following the failure of their men folks to constitute the frontline of peaceful action during social protests and riots. Sometimes they constituted informal peacekeeping groups and served as mediators at the community level. The women groupings in the communities constitute a restraint on the traditional governance structures and elite behaviour even in the economy of oil. Some communal women groups in the Ughelli South and the Ijaw communities in Delta state, for example, have protested against violence and insecurity in their communities and the waterways (*ibid.*). In the case of Ughelli South, the *ehwe eya* and *emete* communal women groups in Otu Jeremy protested

the tensions and insecurity that arose over inter-ethnic feuds between July and August 2003 by threatening to emigrate *en masse*. The threat of women mass action compelled the community to undertake a temporary communal vigilante system. Some communal women groups in the Ijaw communities in Burutu and Bomadi local governments protested against insecurity in their communities and sea piracy in their waterways (int. 2003, Bomadi).

The situation in the Ughiewven communities of local women group activism, mobilisation and mass actions in the political economy of oil is commonplace among the communities in the Niger Delta. Most of the activities of local women groups are unsung, except when they become extensive or occupy important oil facilities, or when there are casualties from their actions. But there have also been larger-scale local women group direct actions in the region.

In 1990, at Umuechem, an Etche village in Rivers state, the community women group worried over the neglect of the community by Shell, and pervasive conflict between youths and elders/chiefs over youth allegations of compromise and betrayal by the latter; the women after their monthly general meeting decided to embark on a peaceful demonstration. This followed the failure to get audience for discussion from Shell management. They marched peacefully, carrying leaves, along the road leading to the Shell facility on the outskirts of the village. But Shell called in the anti-riot police, who attacked, shot and killed one of the women. The men and youths came to the rescue by counter-attacking the police squad. The police reinforced, razed down, burnt properties and killed several villagers (Oruwari 2003).

There was a larger and more frequent dimension of communal women group direct mass action against the oil companies in 2002, when a series of protests took place in several ethnic groups in Delta and Bayelsa states. First to engage the company were communal women groups (CWO) of the Itsekiri ethnic group communities in Delta state. About 200 women took over the Escravos Tank farm, thus making the operations of Chevron in the territory impossible in July 2002 (Fiakpa 2003). The action of the Itsekiri women was quickly followed up by the Ijaw CWOs. The rampaging Ijaw women invaded four of the company's flow stations located in the Niger Delta swamp. The demonstrations disrupted the company's operations, and company staff were trapped in the occupied facilities. The siege, which lasted for about 11 days, resulted in a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between Chevron and the women (*Thisday* 8.8.2002). In the first week of August 2003, Shell's Amukpe and Sapele West oil flow stations were shut following communal women protests (Oduniyi 2003).

TABLE 2  
Examples of women group protests in the Niger Delta

Women Group	Community	Ethnic Group/State	Leadership	Actions	Grievances	Demands	Oil Company	Outcomes	Response of oil company	Date
1 CWGs	Six communities: Ugborodo, Ogidigben, Ayedigbe, Imaghali, Madofoho & Iyala	Isokri/Delta	Mrs Dorothy Ejwja & others	Takeover of Chevron Texaco Escravos Tank Farm. Held hostage 700 workers for several days	Destruction of means of livelihood, relocation of Ugborodo, lack of development	Employment and scholarships for their youths and children	Chevron/Texaco	Invitation of state security agents; harassment, scuffle with women resulting in death.	An end to degradation. Promise of scholarships jobs & economic empowerment	July 2002
2 CWGs	Tebu, Igboko Ugborodo, Makaraba	Isokri/Delta	Mrs Elizabeth Ediga & others	Disruption of Shell & Texaco operations. Scaled off gates, placed mock coffin at Shell's gate	Lack of development, poverty, unemployment	Stopping of degradation scholarships & jobs, economic empowerment	Shell, Chevron/Texaco	Invitation of state security agents; harassment, scuffle with women resulting in death.	An end to degradation. Promise of scholarships jobs & economic empowerment	July 2002
3 CWGs	Charamatu & Egbena Communities	Ijaw/Delta 15-25 July 2002	Fanny Goodness, Beauty Warriyal, Madam Olaje Chief Josephine Ogoba	Siege of Chevron's Abiye oil flowstation	Joblessness, neglect, lack of facilities, Degradation Non-implementation of MOU.	Meaningful development, reclamation, facilities & services	Chevron	Memorandum of understanding	Memorandum of understanding signed on 24/07/02	July 15 2002
4 CWG	Ekpan	Urhobo, Delta. 30 July 2002.	—	Scaled up Chevron's operational base, corporate office.	Marginalisation of Ekpan in benefits/employment by Chevron.	Jobs for Ekpan people	Chevron	—	Invitation of state security. The harassment resulted in the death of one woman	

5 CWGs	Several communities of different ethnic groups in the Warri region	Jjaw Isekiri Iaje, Dela, August 2002	Lucky Letkumo	Storming of western headquarters of Shell and Chevron Texasco	Pollution, neglect, poverty unemployment	Stopping pollution, economic reparations, development, employment	Shell, Chevron Texasco	Invitation of state security agents, harassment, killing of 2 women; some concessions obtained from MNC	Invitation of state security who chased and whipped the women, two of whom died. Some concessions obtained by the women	August 2002
6 CWG	Ikebiri community	Jjaw/ Bayelsa. Sept 2003	Miss Dumotete Aaron	Take over of oil rig of Fawasole Drilling, contracting firm to NAOC (AGIP)	Lack of meaningful development after 38 yrs of Agip's operation. Non-implementation of MOU	Provision of social amenities and employment opportunities	Nigeria Agip Oil Company	Bayelsa state government brokered peace	Bayelsa state brokered peace	Sept 2003

The CWO protests are reactions to local conditions of poverty, unemployment and absence of social facilities and services. The women groups are specifically reacting to two issues: the disruptions and dislocations of the local economies and economic livelihoods occasioned by oil-based environmental degradation, and the inadequate compensation and benefits from the oil companies and the oil economy. CWO demands have thus related largely to the provision of employment, social facilities and economic empowerment.

The women group protests are also loud, as those that have occasioned production disruptions have been highlighted in the press and media commentaries. They have been perceived as exceptional and indicative of the deteriorated conditions and deep grievances of the region. The CWOs and other women group activities have raised quite pungently the need for urgent resolution of the issues and problems that undergird the Niger Delta conflict. Partly as a result, the CWO protests have been more effective in achieving results from the MNCs.

WOMEN GROUPINGS AND THE NIGER DELTA RESOURCE CONFLICT:  
EMERGING PATTERNS, TRENDS AND PROBLEMS

We can point out certain characteristic traits of the women group relations to the resource struggle in the region. The women agitation is a product of increasing marginality, neglect and impoverishment in the oil economy. The women are frustrated over the declining agricultural output and incomes arising from the oil-based loss of viable farmland and water systems. Women being active in subsistence agriculture have suffered most from oil-based environment degradation as it relates to potable water, firewood collection, subsistence farming and subsistence fishing. The decline in output and incomes has meant the accentuation of poverty and hardship. Furthermore, increasing unemployment and poverty of family members has severely affected women economies, as they have had to work and suffer more in catering for their families. Thus the objective conditions of women consequent on oil-based degradation and dislocation have generated bitterness, frustration and anger.

More specifically, women groupings are reacting to their marginalisation in the benefits from the oil economy. Many of the negotiated deals and compensation from the MNCs do not impact on or trickle down to the populace, particularly the women. The women have scanty access to the community liaison officers of the MNCs, and have limited opportunities to utilise the community development structures to facilitate their preferred projects. The exclusion and marginalisation of women in the oil

economy has led in part to the women agitations and activism, and particularly the mobilisation of CWOs and other women groupings. Thus the mobilisation and resistance of women groups is the result of growing frustration and militancy.

We note that women involvement in the oil economy is not new. But the involvement until the 1990s was largely through participation in community protests and civil groups, and support of ethnic and regional and youth leaders group engagements, rather than their own organisations. The women have been involved by their 'encouragement of their husbands and children to fight'. They are sometimes the custodians of the weapons in the militant struggles. Women have been supportive even in the militant movements and militias in the region (int. 2003, Bomadi). What has emerged that is different is concerted, associational activism and struggle.

Women group involvement in the conflict has been prompted mainly because the existing conditions have become extreme, and the existing structures for mediation have failed. The current struggle has been prompted by the failure of the community leadership structure and the elites to attract appropriate benefits, and the appropriation of existing benefits to the detriment of women. The concern of enlightened and politically aware women in the region's struggle is also a factor. This also underlines the growing NGO activism. Women have constituted NGOs to carve a niche, particularly in tune with increasing global sensitivity and interest in gender. There is also the infection of the growing militancy and popular violence in the region. Women group activism is also occurring because of the perceptions of corruption and compromises by community and ethnic leaders, and the excesses of the youth groups. Finally, women group proliferation, activism and greater roles, particularly at the ethnic, regional and national levels and in civil rights groups, are a result not just of the general interests and mobilisation of the region, but also of concern about the deep impacts of the oil economy and state and MNC activities on women.

The base level for the activism and agitation is the communities where the traditional governance women groupings have become the main associational voice and vehicle of mobilisation. Quite supportive and emerging as an instrument of agitation are ethnic women cultural and influence seeking groups, usually comprising women based in the urban areas with a sprinkling of influential local women. Then there are the few pan-ethnic and regional groupings and the gender NGOs.

In relation to women protest engagements, the women have deployed their traditional social collective power, situated in their being symbols of

dignity, virtue and motherhood. The women often process and threaten to deploy the curse of nakedness in extreme cases. But we should note that the collective social power has been deployed not only against the MNCs, but also as an interventionist instrument against excesses of groups and the traditional rulership structures such as youth violence and sea piracy in the Niger Delta. At the level of the ethnic and regional women groupings, protests have been deployed against the state as a potent instrument of engagement on behalf of the region's citizenry who have been harassed and brutalised by state repression.

Generally, the protests are characterised by non-violence and little destruction. The women are not usually armed and often merely carry leaves. They usually occupy facilities and disrupt production. The CWOs are tenacious and have sometimes occupied facilities for as long as 11 days. The reaction of the MNCs and the state security agencies has usually been violent. Their strategy has been to invite the security agencies, which disperse the women with differing degrees of force. Only in a few cases, however, such as that of the Itsekiri women protests, have there been brutal suppression and killings. State violence and brutality has been less than in confrontations with youth and community protests.

The grassroots women associational base of activism in the oil economy has had limitations. First, the awareness, interest and consequent mobilisation has been local or community-based, and relates mainly to local demands for development, employment, and economic empowerment. Local women groupings have not agitated at the level of broad, region-wide demands such as resource control, derivation and political restructuring. The limitation in the scope and range of agitation is further compounded by the poverty, limited education and exposure, and limitations in the resources of the local groupings and their leadership. These attributes underlie a low consciousness and the difficulty of mobilisation for causes that are not cultural and communal.

The weak resources of the grassroots groupings also limit their potential in the struggle and the degree of agitation and impact. That is not to say that the CWOs are so limited as to undermine their impact. In fact, the women grassroots protests have been more successful than their male counterparts in relation to the reaching of MOUs with the communities and the elicitation of economic empowerment programmes. Their activism is redressing the marginalisation of women in the Niger Delta struggle and the oil economy.

But the women groups have had some strengths. The CWOs and community-based groups, being traditionally based, are informal, flexible and easily mobilised. Their leaderships are structured and respected.

Their roles in the communities and the power of agitation are culturally based. The CWOs and the women groupings at the communities have accommodated the more enlightened and activist women members of communal women groups, and notable and influential women in the communities. As our study of the Ughiewven communities indicates, some of these women are utilised in seeking access to and negotiating with the MNC community liaison officers, and constitute the women representatives in the community liaison committees.

The increasing involvement of ethnic and regional women groupings and gender NGOs has raised the profile of women and women concerns in the region's resources struggle. These groups have highlighted the abuses of women rights and the accentuating decline in women's incomes and conditions. They have further enabled specific women responses to their conditions, rights and claims. The regional and gender groups have also been able to relate to international civil society and assistance agencies, and have been part of the solicitation and execution of funding and programmatic assistance to the region. Finally, they have placed the issues of women enlightenment and empowerment in the forefront of state and corporate concerns. As a result of the youth problematic and the growing realisation of women roles and activities, the Niger Delta Development Commission has established a Women and Youth Directorate.

There is a fair level of cooperation and joint action among CWOs in contiguous communities that are similarly affected or plagued by the oil economy. Some protests have been jointly undertaken by CWOs of different communities within clans, across clans and even across different ethnic groupings. CWOs of the Itsekiri, Ijaw and Ilaje have been able to construct platforms for joint action against MNCs whose operations span their territories, despite inter-ethnic differences and conflicts. However, our investigations also reveal poor networking or the non-existence of pan-organisational frameworks of activism and action between the women groupings. The vertical linkages between regional ethnic and gender groupings and the grassroots community groupings are weak.



Women group engagement in the resource struggle and conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has often been considered as non-existent and inactive, partly because this engagement has been neglected in the analysis of civil groups in the region. Our analysis situates women groupings in the region as an organised formation in rural communities, through which women have related to society by way of interests and grievance

claims. In the modern sector, women groupings have flowered as a formation for the defence of women rights, articulation of claims and grievances, and as the vehicle for the empowerment of women, engaging the state, MNCs and other groupings in the region's resource struggle. The links between cultural and socio-politically inclined women ethnic and regional groups and gendered NGOs with the CWOs, the concert of actions by some CWOs, and the linkages and solidarity of ethnic and regional women groupings with other civil groups, point to an emergent gendered civil society in the region's struggle.

At both levels, women group activism and engagement has heightened in relation to protest against marginalisation in the economy of oil, corporate misgovernance, state abuse, the behaviour of other groupings, the pervading insecurity and violence, and in pursuance of stronger voices, participation, empowerment and a better and safer society and environment. As for instruments of engagement, women groupings have constructed a regime of peaceful complaints, representations, moderation and accommodation in relation to the objects of struggle: the MNCs, the state and local actors such as communal governance and leaderships, local elites, and youths.

But pervading insensitivity, non-responsiveness and poor results have compelled periodic protests as instruments of engagement by CWOs and ethnic and regional groupings since 1984. Such incidents have occurred at Ogharefe, Ekpan, Umuechem, Ajelola, Yenagoa, Port Harcourt, the Warri region and numerous other communities in the region (Oruwari 2003; Turner *et al.* 1999). The phenomenon of intense, prolonged, large and disruptive protests was particularly heightened in 2002, but numerous incidents continue to occur and are often not reported.

The women protests are an abundant manifestation that the threshold or limit has been reached in the region's struggle. It denotes the limitation and exasperation with existing strategies and engagement by other groupings. Women protest is the traditional last resort in the expression of grievances. As Madam Beauty Ware Juowei, an Ijaw CWO leader in one of the protesting communities said, 'our men have been fighting without success' (Ogbodo 2002). The construction of protests by women groupings also indicates the predicament, strength of claims and level of commitment and participation of women in the struggle for inclusion and improvements in the oil economy. Particularly significant has been the readiness of CWOs to deploy the ultimate arsenal of African women in struggles against injustice, inequity, wrong-doing, abuse and misgovernance: the shame and curse of nakedness.

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### *Newspapers* (all published in Lagos)

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### *Interviews*

The names of five community women leaders and activists interviewed by the author are withheld for security reasons; these were at Otu Jeremy (2), Ughelli South LGA, July 2003; Bomadi (2), Bomadi LGA, August 2003; and Kwale (1), Ndokwa West LGA, August 2003, all in Delta state.