

First hand account of organizing women in Nigeria

Beverly Bell | Nov. 23, 2009



Emem Okon, in the center of the photo, leads a march, clapping her hands. (Inyene Benedicta)

Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope. Part 1 of 12

By Emem Okon

Port Harcourt, Niger Delta, Ningeria -- I am a community mobilizer with a passion for mobilizing women for action, for peace, and for their rights. I work with Kebetkache Women Development & Resource Centre in oil-impacted towns and villages -- that is, in areas where oil companies are drilling -- in the Niger Delta.

Here we have Shell, we have Chevron, we have ExxonMobil, among others. Two problems are neglect of the region in terms of development and also the degradation of the environment by the oil companies. There are serious cases of oil spills and gas flaring -- horribly toxic for the environment and the people. We're not getting anywhere in getting the oil companies to clean up.

The whole fight for resource control has led to the eruption and escalation of all manner of conflict and violence in the Niger Delta. It's all about power and control in light of oil revenue. It's all about oil politics. In all the dimensions of conflict, the culprit is the oil companies. They play divide and rule, so that communities are fighting among themselves and gangs are fighting among them selves. The government and its security forces collaborate with the oil companies, and whole communities are disrupted violently by the military. In May, for example, the military invaded some communities in the Delta [resulting in 200 people killed and about 20,000 displaced]. This has happened before, like the Umuechem massacre in 1990 [in which police killed about 80 people in the face of protests against Shell] and the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other anti-oil activists in 1995. We also have violence as result of the activities of gangs of youth and men for whom politicians bought arms with money that's circulating from the oil industry. Most of them are unemployed and are being used by certain people against their enemies.

Women suffer most when violence and conflict erupts as it has in the Niger Delta. A lot of women have died, a lot of women have been raped, and a lot of girl children have had to stop going to school because of the violence. Women are also exposed to strong violence by the culture and traditions that subject them to inhuman and degrading treatment.

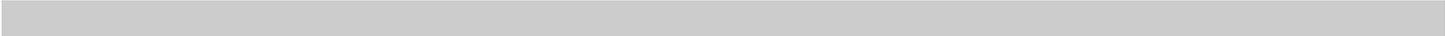
Because the society is patriarchal in nature, women have not been involved in decision-making or governance. But now women have had to sit up and talk about human rights abuses and also the uncomfortable situation of the violence they're experiencing.

The women's group I work with has mobilized women for peace marches. We have called on the boys and men in the gangs to drop their weapons of violence and called on the government to do something to reduce violence in the region. After the peace marches, when we saw women's interests and their desire to act, we started training women, building their capacity in conflict management and peace-building. Right now the women are carrying out peace education in secondary schools and with community youth groups. We are working with 30 youths in each school, and then the youths will go back and start the training for others. The women have been on radio talking about peace and calling on policymakers to enjoin the violence in the Niger Delta. In terms of domestic violence, we have been trying to put through a law outlawing it, as has already been passed in some other states in Nigeria.

And we are causing the violence to go down. We believe that women, as mothers and wives and lovers, are in a better position to talk to the men who are perpetuating the acts of violence. Since 2007, we have gotten a lot of boys and young men to surrender their weapons and to make the decisions not to be involved in violence. More than 1,600 boys have turned in their weapons, handing them over to the police. A lot of them have withdrawn from gangs, no longer part of them. We're trying to negotiate with the police so they don't arrest those who turn in their weapons. We are calling for a general amnesty for gang members, for government to rehabilitate the youth and reintegrate them back into the society.

If there is a solution at this moment between the oil companies and the government -- because they are collaborators -- women will still not benefit because they don't participate in decision-making. There is a need to integrate gender into all levels of power to enable women to participate and become full beneficiaries of the oil revenue. That's why we're advocating for women to be part of government and part of whatever bodies are set up to address the issues of the Niger Delta. More and more women are getting involved in this campaign for increased participation. We are doing a lot to challenge patriarchal programs, to educate community leadership on the need for women's decision-making.

The future depends on whether women can change the story of the Niger Delta and bring about peace. We believe it has to happen. The women will not relent until this happens.



About the "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope" series

Among income inequality, seemingly endless wars, and debilitating climate change, it is difficult for many to imagine a path to a better way. In fact, throughout the industrialized North and the global South, solutions to these great challenges are in various stages of construction -- and much of the lifting is being done by women. Grass-roots women's movements -- progressing often almost without money or access or institutional power -- are emerging and offering alternative and empowering visions.

The above is part of a series, titled "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope," which will appear in NCR by writer and organizer Beverly Bell, coordinator of [Other Worlds](#) [1]. She features empowered women who offer alternative visions as they birth a new and more just world order.

Seven of the articles in this series are available in a 2010 Lenten booklet, *Cry Justice! Cry Hope!* with additional reflections by Sister Joan Chittister. [Click here to order.](#) [2]

All the stories from the "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope" series

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