

# TOO POOR FOR PEACE: WOMEN IN NIGERIA'S NIGER DELTA AMNESTY PROGRAMME

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## Introduction

The Niger Delta region is one of Africa's conflict spots. The resource-based conflict, which began in the 1950s as an ideological struggle challenging the rights of the Nigerian state over the resources of the region and the basis for the distribution of the oil-generating wealth, later became existentialist due to negligence on the part of the oil companies, decline in derivation revenue, and environmental devaluation from oil pollution (Okonofua 2016). Unlike the earlier resistance that was intellectually led targeting the state and multinational oil companies, the later agitation had as its front burner militia and cult groups whose targets were not limited to foreign companies and the Nigerian state, but other groups and persons perceived as threats to their interests.

In response to their modes of operation which include: pipeline vandalism, bunkering activities, kidnapping of expatriate oil workers, and a host of so many others, the Nigerian government resorted to military measures. Rather than quelling the crisis, militarization turned the region into what

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Ikelegbe and Umukoro (2016) call 'a melting pot of violence and insurgency' — a development that drastically affected the Nigerian economy, particularly in the second half of the first decade of the Twenty-First Century. Realizing that excessive force was ineffectual in engendering the clement environment needed for oil exploration in the region, the government, under President Umaru Musa Yar Adua, charted a new course for peace by adopting the Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Disintegration (DDR) mode of peace-building, hence, the Niger Delta Amnesty Program (NDAP) also known as the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP). NDAP was loudly acclaimed for having reduced, significantly, violence in the region (Ajibola 2015).

However, in the last six years, militancy has once again become a common occurrence in the area, resurrecting activities like oil bunkering, kidnapping, and attacks on oil facilities (Ebeide, Langer and Tosun 2020). It is partly for this reason that NDAP has been criticized. One major point from which the program is faulted is its exclusivity, especially the invisibility of the female gender (Umejesi 2014). This paper aims to examine the basis of women's exclusion in the DDR program in the Niger Delta. Does women's exclusion in the Niger Delta variant conform to the common grounds for women's exclusion in the DDR program? This question is pertinent given the uniqueness of NDAP as a locally planned, sponsored, and implemented program. The paper is divided into four sections, in addition to the introduction and conclusion. The first section examined the general grounds for women's exclusion in DDR; the imperative for the inclusion of women in the NDAP was projected in the second section. Section three made a critique of the NDAP using a gender lens, and the last section provided some explanations for women's exclusion in the NDAP.

## Women's Exclusion in DDR

DDR, as a post-conflict mechanism geared towards durable peace, aims at the collection of arms, neutralization, and *reintegration* of former combatants and conflict-affected civilians into society. It is located within a broader view of conflict transformation which, according to Lederach (2003), aims at building peace desirable by all stakeholders. Its goal is to produce life-giving opportunities that will bring about the change necessary to minimize violence, increase justice, and promote human rights. DDR is both short and long-term.

In the short term, it is directed towards reduction or end to violence. The main targets in this phase are combatants who are disarmed and demobilized. As a long-term process, it moves beyond the demobilization and rehabilitation of ex-combatants to the reintegration of both the ex-combatants and the victims, and the promotion of human rights, justice, and economic development. Muggah (2009) affirms this duality noting that the overall goal of any DDR program, as a peacebuilding model, is a continuum that extends from its narrow and minimalist phase (security) to a broad and maximalist level (development) where human rights, justice, development and democracy are ensured.

In recognition of this duality, the United Nations DDR Resource Center (2006) recommends that issues of human rights, justice, and development should form an integral part of DDR. However, believing that the aims are not the same, most actors are not in favor of engaging the two together in post-conflict reconstruction. Yet, a clear separation of the two at the conceptualization phase of the DDR program has remained a hard nut to crack. The enthusiasm that accompanies the idea of DDR is often killed at the implementation stage, where the theoretical frame begins to stagger. In most cases, the weak and the vulnerable are at the receiving end of its poor implementation which, more often than not, ends in exclusion.

One of the pillars upon which the NDAP is faulted as an instrument of durable peace is its lack of inclusiveness, especially among the female gender (Folami 2016). The question of women's inclusion in peace processes has formed a topical issue since 1325 (Paffenholz, Prentice and Buchanan 2015). Other global and regional frameworks have emphasized the imperative for women's engagement in post-conflict integration (African Union 2025). Peace process, Ariño (2020) argues, requires not only women's presence but also a 'negotiation agenda that integrates gender if substantive debate and transformation are to take place'.

The imperative for women in post-conflict integration is anchored on three grounds. (1) War affects women in ways different from men, and in most cases, women bear the brunt of war. Therefore, unless gender is mainstreamed in postwar peace programs, the impacts of conflict on women cannot be adequately discussed and addressed. (2) Contrary to the patriarchal notion that women are soft and not suitable actors in conflict situations,

women play vital roles as conflict drivers. (3) Women are naturally imbued with enormous potential for the peace process<sup>4</sup>.

Unfortunately, DDR seems to be one of the post-conflict peacebuilding measures that have significantly recorded the underrepresentation of women. Of the 14,000 demobilized in Burundi in 2005, only 438 (3%) women were involved (Mazurana and Cole 2012). Though no track of gender constituents of the reintegration of former combatants exists in Congo in the July to November program of 2002, the subsequent October to February 2005 program which enrolled 8884 ex-combatants had only 297 (3%) women. A similar programme that came shortly after in March took care of 444 ex-combatants of which 7 (1.6%) were women; the Rwanda programme of 2005 involved 54, 159 ex-combatants with only 334 (0.6%) female<sup>5</sup>. The Sierra Leone program often applauded for its inclusivity had only 8% of women and girls (Mackenzie 2009).

Exclusion of women in DDR programs, as underscored in literature, may be by policy design, by choice to avoid risk, and for personal safety and reputation. The policy-informed invisibility in most internationally-led programs is anchored on the conceptualization of ex-combatants. A narrow definition and understanding of what ex-combatant implies has coloured most DDR programs. Men are prioritized in most cases as ex-combatants leading to the exclusion of women who are relegated to the status of victims (Shekhawat and Pathak 2015). Women, as Knight (2008) notes, are often refused eligibility for disarmament and demobilization because they are not accorded recognition as part of the combat having been projected as 'trophy wives, cooks or information gatherers'.

Feminist literature further emphasizes this, arguing that women are excluded from DDR programs because they are in most cases reconstructed by officials of such programs as 'supporters', 'dependents', 'camp followers', 'bush wives', or 'sex slaves' (Specht 2006; Mackenzie 2012). Even when female ex-combatants are included, UN-led officials tend to reproduce gendered inequalities against women. A study of 11 conflicts by Coulter *et al.* (2008) estimated that about 6.5% of all registered DDR programs were women, and the primary reason for this was that women were not identified as ex-combatants.

4 According to feminist theories, women are incapable of violent action unlike men viewed as violent beings. Feminists also link women's inclination toward peace to their role as mothers-caregivers and nurturers. In other words, women's socialization in the role is antithetical to violence (Hooks 1999).

5 The Rwanda DDR program came in phases. The 2005 program was one of the phases.

Furthermore, the bogus and vague conceptualization of DDR accounts for women's exclusion. Without explicit exclusion at the conceptualization stage, DDR may appear to have accommodated women. This is not often the case at the implementation stage where programmes are narrowed to the detriment of the female gender. Poor and weak communication is another explanation for the invisibility of women. With poor communication, women often believe they are not eligible for DDR (Steenbergen 2020).

Finally, funding and cash payment are equally emphasized. To meet the donor's capacity, the number of those enrolled in DDR programs is often reduced *ab initio*. Where underestimation appears to be the case, the total number enrolled is cut to meet the budget; and women, as found in Rwanda and some other places, are often the most affected (Small Arms Survey 2007). Cash payments have been featured in past programs as incentives to male combatants with women treated as secondary beneficiaries. According to Farr (2003), there is evidence in some areas where the male beneficiaries did not share the monetized incentive with their descendants. It is for this reason that alternative approaches that will pay attention to education and food assistance are being advocated.

The literature further underscores the fact that women do not often feel comfortable presenting themselves as combatants. This, Boutet (2019) argues, may be informed by stigmatization associated with such inclusion, especially in a context where women are traditionally relegated to the private sphere. The fact that most DDR camps often lack facilities for the female gender accounts for women's reluctance to take part in such programs. Most women who found themselves in DDR camps leave before the end of the program due to a lack of health care and protection against harassment (Mazurana and Cole 2012). Not being able to access the demobilization stage, women are denied the most needed resources of reintegration, required for healing and survival.

## The imperative for women's inclusion in NDAP

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is Africa's largest wetland, richly endowed with natural resources that account for 70 percent of Nigeria's revenue and foreign exchange reserve. Unfortunately, the region is noted to have suffered marginalization in participation in the oil economy and its benefits (Thompson 2010). Beginning in the 1950s, grievances framed around this issue formed a driving force for regional agitations for development attention

and resource control. Increase in exploration activities of oil companies, environmental pollution, land degradation, and decline in revenue derivation to the Niger Delta states, all together generated a new wave of agitations in the 1970s and 1980s. Anchored on mobilizations at the community and ethnic levels, the new agitations internationalized the struggle, especially with the active involvement of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in the 1990s, and the eventual execution of its leaders<sup>6</sup>. By the end of the last decade of the Twentieth Century, what started as a demand for development attention and inclusion had turned into a youth-driven militant agitation for revenue control.

Since then, the Niger Delta has remained a theatre of violent conflict involving the militant youths and their communities, the government, and oil-producing companies. Between 2000 and 2009, insurgency in its varied forms including pipeline vandalism, illegal bunkering, gun duel with security agents, abduction and kidnapping of oil workers especially expatriates, and a host of many others, left the region devastated more than ever with overall adverse effects on the national economy.

Government response to the crisis in the region has taken various forms among which were: the setting up of commissions of inquiry<sup>7</sup>, the establishment of the Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC), The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), the Ministry of Niger Delta and a host of many others<sup>8</sup>. Unfortunately, none of these has tackled adequately the issues of pollution, rights, and equitable distribution of oil wealth, which are at the centre of these agitations. Moreover, government interventions more often than not ended in the hands of community leaders and politicians proximate to the state, with little or no impact on the most affected population.

The government's decision to adopt military measures against insurgency added another twist to the crisis. Rather than the desired end, arguably, it emboldened the insurgents to develop multiple strategies for depriving the

<sup>6</sup> Ken Saro Wiwa and the other Ogoni activists were executed by the Nigerian Government in 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Sir Willink Commission was set up in 1958 to inquire into the minority agitation. Among its recommendations was the need for the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Board to address the problem of underdevelopment in the region.

<sup>8</sup> A series of conferences and dialogues were equally convened to address the Niger Delta issues. For instance, the former President Obasanjo called for dialogue with the Niger Delta People in 2007. Following his acknowledgement of the deplorable state of the region, he set up the Council for Social and Economic Development of Coastal States to oversee the challenges of the region.

Nigerian state of a good chunk of revenue from its oil economy. By 2007 for instance, oil production had dropped from 2.3 million barrels per day (bpd) to 7 hundred thousand bpd (Obi and Rustad 2011). Realizing that militarisation had escalated the conflict further, the government charted a new course in 2009 along the lines of DDR to grant amnesty and pursue a reintegration program in the region.

Contrary to the patriarchal view of women *vis-à-vis* conflict, the Niger Delta women are conspicuously visible in all the stages of the conflict as victims, agents, and drivers of the phenomenon, but also as precursors of peace. As victims, women are most affected by environmental pollution and land degradation. Given that the majority of them are uneducated, their main source of survival is found in the agricultural sector. It is therefore not surprising that women constitute about 70 percent of the region's labour force. Oil spills, gas flaring, and other oil-related activities that severely affect the region destroy the basis of the local economy on which the female gender depends for survival. Appropriation of land for oil pipelines further creates an acute shortage of land for agriculture (Ihayere *et al.* 2014).

Women of the Niger Delta are victims of sexual violence orchestrated by the crisis. Cases of rape by government security agents and militiamen abound. For instance, in 1999, security men allegedly raped Ikwerre women from Choba who were protesting against what they believed was an injustice to their community by a US-based oil company — Wilbros<sup>9</sup>. Also, a 2008 report published by the Centre for Democracy and Development revealed some cases of rape in the region. In addition to rape, the presence of affluent oil workers in impoverished communities of the Niger Delta provides a space for a thriving commercial sex market in the region. As rightly captured by Jeroma (2003), the multinational oil workers displayed their unchecked sexual tendencies to the fullest by taking advantage of poor, hungry, and illiterate young girls, making them victims of lust forcefully.

The biting poverty in the area, Akoda (2010) observes, equally compelled married women to respond to the lustful demands of oil workers with the futile hope of finding an end to their challenges. These views affirm Turner and Brownhill's (2007) observation that there are some areas in the Niger Delta where nine out of every ten women have been violated through this means. It was for this reason that the Association for the Niger Delta Women for Justice was formed in 1999 to give protection to women (Manby 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Report of Choba women to the Human Right Violations Investigation Commission, the Oputa Panel, revealed cases of rape and other sexual assaults by the security agents.



The conflict in the Niger Delta has further claimed the lives of a good number of women, leaving others physically and psychologically battered. About 801 women sustained injuries from police attempts to disperse the Itsekiri and Ilaje women protesting against Shell Petroleum Development Company in Warri in 2002. The crisis in Isoko South over the sale of the community rights to Agip Oil by its leaders claimed the lives of some women. Also, twelve passengers, including a pregnant woman, were killed in the Joint Task Force's (JTF) raid of a Transport speed boat in Bayelsa in 2008. Furthermore, women were victims of hostage-taking in the region. Among those affected were Folake Coker who was abducted on 3rd July 2006 with a 50 million Naira demand for ransom, and Augustina Ekeowei abducted in June 2008 for 2 million Naira ransom. Although it cannot be claimed that these attacks were specifically directed against women, as Akubor (2011) argues, they have, willingly and unwillingly, become targets because they are either used as 'shields in time of crisis or as ransom-seeking implements'.

Evidence of women's participation in militant agitations against injustice and impoverishment abound. In this context, women served as spiritualists, spies, emissaries, and fighters even to the extent of engaging security men in gun duels (Babatunde 2018). Where they were not actively engaged as militants, they provided various kinds of support to them. Women were also part of the illegal bunkering activities which have affected the nation's economy. According to Ekwe Ndanike, several women seen around Oguta Lake loading and offloading fuel in drums and jerry cans were agents of militants from the neighboring towns across the lake, especially Rivers State<sup>10</sup>. This affirms Umejesi's (2014) observation concerning women of unfamiliar faces seen around Oguta and Ohaji Egbema arranging and negotiating for the sale of oil. Interactions with the locals, according to him, linked them to militant leaders from the Niger Delta.

Women are prominently featured in the use of protests against environmental pollution and poor corporate social responsibility from the oil companies. Ukiwo (2007) has convincingly argued that mass community protests against oil companies in the Niger Delta began in 1984 with the Oghale women's protest against the US Pan Ocean. Since then, a series of other protests and demonstrations have been staged by the Niger Delta women with which they have persistently demanded improved environmental and social conditions of rural communities and the provision of social amenities. Between 1990 and 2007, about 67 protests were organized by women to fight environmental and human rights abuses (Ekine 2007). Indeed, their

10 Interview with Ekwe Ndanike, A fisherman at Oguta Lake, 12 January 2019.



support in this regard contributed significantly to the willingness of militant groups to embark on the canalization of oil installations. Militants, Ukiwo (2007) observes, often hijacked peaceful demonstrations organized by women to attack oil companies.

Several attempts have been made by governmental and non-governmental bodies in the direction of peace in the region. Women's efforts are not missing in this line. Such initiatives were mostly at the grassroots where they empower rural women and girls to defend their rights. The Niger Delta Women for Justice (NDWJ) and the Kebekache Women were among the women advocacy groups that have worked in several communities helping to build capacity for peace. For instance, the latter was involved in mobilizing women for peace matches in Emobua, Ogoni, Ogbakiri, and Terema communities (Osah and Odedina 2017). The NDWJ was at a point in time publishing abuses meted out on women.

Other channels of peace deployed by the women in pursuit of an end to the conflict include appeals to community leaders, multinational corporations (MNCs), husbands, and sons for dialogue. The women of Ugborodo, for example, used appeals and dialogue to draw the attention of Chevron to the devastating effect of oil exploration on their environment (WANEP 2020). With all these, one cannot but submit that women constituted a major channel of peacebuilding in the Niger Delta before the Amnesty Programme of 2009.

Having established from a tripod stand, the imperative for women's inclusion in post conflict reconstruction in Niger Delta, the remaining section of this work will examine the Amnesty Programme of 2009 using a gender lens. It will establish the extent of women's involvement in NDAP and the basis for their exclusion. The study relies on field-based primary sources — In-person In-depth oral interviews and Semi-structured interviews, electronic and print media, government documents, and extant literature for data collection in qualitative research. It adopts both descriptive and analytical methods in data presentation and interpretation. Data was analysed using appropriate coding methods to project emerging themes within the content analysis frame.

## **NDAP through a gender lens**

The Niger Delta Amnesty Programme was announced by President Umaru Musa Yar Adua following a realization that military measures were

inadequate in dealing with insurgency in the Niger Delta. The programme was initiated as part of the recommendations of the Niger Delta Technical Committee inaugurated on the 8th of September 2008 to review government responses to the conflict right from 1958 (Technical Committee on the Niger Delta 2008).

Adopting part of the committee's report, the Federal Government established the Presidential Panel on Amnesty and Disarmament of Militants in the Niger Delta to carry out the task of overseeing the presidential pardon. Under section 175 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the presidential pardon granted amnesty to militants who were willing to surrender their weapons with a renunciation of arms struggle within 60 days (August 4th – October 4th, 2009). The government acknowledged in the amnesty document, the inadequacies of previous steps in addressing the issues underlying the conflict, and emphasized the need for integrated peacebuilding in the region (Amnesty Proclamation under Section 175 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 2009).

As in all DDR programs, NDAP was three-dimensional, encompassing: disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. By the end of its first phase, 20192 militants had surrendered their weapons which included: 2760 assorted kinds of arms, 287445 ammunition, 3155 magazines, 1090 dynamite caps, 763 dynamite sticks, 18 gunboats, and several other military accessories to Presidential Amnesty Committee (NTA News Broadcast 2009; Amnesty News 2013). Another 6166 later joined the programme raising the number of enlisted persons to 26358.

Under demobilization, disarmed militants were first quartered in camps in designated areas before they were eventually moved to two main camps at Obubra and Aluu in Rivers State. Ex-militants were placed on monthly pay of 65000 Naira per month<sup>11</sup>. Although there was an initial delay in the implementation stage, by the end of 2010, rehabilitation had fully commenced. Reintegration was pursued through entrepreneurship, vocation, and formal training within and outside Nigeria.

The training program, which ranged from six months to five years was meant to integrate ex-militants in their communities. Provisions were made for experts and consultants to assist in ensuring that the demobilized acquired needed skills opted for in the program. Among the countries where

<sup>11</sup> In addition to this, the arrangement was further made for a daily payment of 3000 during the reintegration process. The demobilization of militant leaders took a different dimension. Included in the program was a separate arrangement to pay these leaders huge sums of money to hand over their weapons.

some of the demobilized militants were sent for skill acquisition included: Ghana, the United Arab Emirates, Poland, Cyprus, India, Israel, Trinidad and Tobago, and the Philippines<sup>12</sup>. The Nigerian Government devoted a substantial amount of its resources to the program. In 2009, the government estimate for the program was USD 360 million. Between 2011 and 2017, the yearly budget was USD 2,714 billion<sup>13</sup>.

The DDR program is generally preceded by a negotiation process involving major stakeholders or their representatives, during which, issues in the conflict are analysed to identify the interests and needs of the conflict parties. In the case of the NDAP, a series of such meetings with representatives from the region were arranged. Women were almost invisible in these meetings. The most crucial of such meetings was between the government representatives and sixteen major militant leaders, led by Chief Government Ekpemepolo (Tompolo). The engagement of militants for peace in the region with the exclusion or under-representation of other stakeholders especially women speaks volumes on the nature of peace that was negotiated and the potential of such peace to address or alter, positively, the basis of the conflict. Although women's presence is not a guarantee that gender issues will be addressed, or that decisions will be taken in favour of the female gender (Ariño 2020), it, however, helps to raise consciousness about the need for negotiation agenda and outcomes that integrate gender.

The outcome of the negotiation meeting informed the conceptualization of the amnesty program as the return of arms and disbanding of armed groups<sup>14</sup>. By implication, only militants who were able to present arms to the panel were recognized and integrated. Based on the concept, 20,192 militants that embraced the program in 2009 surrendered their weapons. Of these, only 133 (0.66 percent) were female. The break-down according to Timi Alaibe, the then Special Adviser to the President on Amnesty Programme, is as follows:

State	N° of Male	N° of Female	Registration
Akwa Ibom	155	8	163
Bayelsa	6900	61	6961
Cross River	159	1	160

<sup>12</sup>About 7,556 of these ex-militants were placed in 33 locations in Nigeria for skill acquisition.

<sup>13</sup>The program was said to be more extensive than most internationally-managed DDR (Giustozzi 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Oviogbere, a women leader in Ogborodu Kingdom, 21 July 2018.

Delta	3361	-	3361
Edo	450	-	450
Imo	297	3	300
Ondo	1198	2	1200
Rivers	6958	39	6997
NDDC	571	19	600
Total	20049	133	20192

Source: Okonofua 2016, 10.

According to Eboigbe, the ex-combatants who submitted arms were 20,049 men. The need to create a little space to accommodate women in the program explains the inclusion of 133 women later<sup>15</sup>. Whatever criteria were used in involving women in the program constitute in the words of Chinwike<sup>16</sup>:

An under-representation of women militants in the struggle, the number of women militants in Rivers alone was much more than 0.66 percent, unless they want to tell us that militancy when it concerns women in a rehabilitation program, are those who are connected to politicians and friends of male militant leaders.

Conceptualized as a long-term solution capable of surviving any administration in Nigeria, one remains in doubt about the potency of NDAP as an instrument of conflict transformation and peacebuilding without a substantial number of women's involvement. With disarmament skewed in favor of the male gender, demobilization, and reintegration packages reflected similar gender blindness. Oghenetega observes that out of 645 ex-militants who were receiving training in foreign countries at a time, only 2 were female<sup>17</sup>. Provisions of facilities at the camps were indications that planners did not nurture the idea of rehabilitating women *ab initio*<sup>18</sup>.

Regarding reintegration, government conceptualization was rather ambiguous. The limit of reintegration was not clear. Given the socio-econo-

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Eboigbe, a former worker at one of the demobilization centers, 7 July 7, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Chinwike, a woman activist from Ikwerre, 14 July 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Oghenetega, a Niger Delta militant, 24 July 2018.

<sup>18</sup> According to two informants who wished to remain anonymous, there was no indication in the two camps in Rivers State that women were expected to be rehabilitated. All the facilities include toilets and the sleeping apartments had no demarcation at the beginning.

mic background of the Niger Delta, a macro reintegration model that would have addressed, considerably, the region's challenges was needed. Unfortunately, the micro approach that ignored the wide context of the conflict was adopted. In this context, the government's post-conflict reconstruction plan further excluded women who were designated more to the blanket position of victims and non-combatants. The point is that even if women were not qualified at the level of disarmament and demobilization, reintegration as a concept provides a wider space for them. This, however, was never the case with NDAP. Women were excluded from the financial compensation associated with disarmament and demobilization, and blocked from relief a proper reintegration process would have engendered. The payment of 65000 can be viewed as a government move to compensate ex-militants for losing their weapons to the amnesty programme, 99 percent of this monetary compensation went to the males leaving women out.

The Niger Delta conflict as discussed above is known to have unleashed gender violence on the women folk. Interestingly, militants who perhaps were involved in rapes, murder, and kidnapping of women were granted pardons and compensated while their victims were left without justice. Thus, even without the resurgence of militancy and violence in post amnesty Niger Delta, it will be difficult to think of a peaceful and truly healed society in that region. Supposing the reintegration of ex-militants was fully successful, the return of some of them, especially the notorious ones without addressing issues that border on victimhood, would have triggered tension and insecurity in those communities. Nilsson (2005) has shown how difficult it is for ex-combatants who unleashed terror in their communities to reconcile with such communities afterward.

Restricting amnesty to only those who could submit arms to the government is limiting. In addition to ammunition, intelligence gatherings, procurement of armoury, and other logistics needed for militancy are all categories of weapons of war. Moreover, other physical weapons such as stones, sticks, clubs, and so on abound. After all, the biblical Philistine warrior, Goliath, was mowed down neither by Saul's army nor his armoury but by a simple pebble on a string. The Aba women of 1929 fought their way out of the imposition of the Warrant Chief System not with European cannons and gunpowder but with sticks and pestles. The Niger Delta women demonstrated enough courage and strength in the Niger Delta struggle, hence their exclusion from the DDR Program makes a poor copy of the desired peace.

## Explaining women exclusion

As in other African societies, women of the Niger Delta are tied to certain traditional functions, located mostly in the corridor of domestic affairs. Cultural repressions in the forms of invisibility of women's financial contributions in the family, private sphere for women, bride price, silence of women's voice, and so on, are dominant ways of life for women in the region (Folami 2016). All these portray women as partial members of society not qualified to play certain roles. This background informed the conceptualization of NDAP. In the first place, the definition of combatants as those in possession of arms was skewed against women who culturally were not associated with arms. Combatants in the program implied men who traditionally were assigned the role of warriors. Affirming this, Onyoma argues that the program was not introduced for women:

The amnesty program was meant for militants who paralyzed activities in this part of Nigeria before 2009...Men such as Tom Ateke, Asari Dokubo, Tompolo. The Government was aware that when such men were caged through juicy offers, there would be peace in the region. It is surely not for women<sup>19</sup>.

Even the 133 women included are believed to be mainly friends of militants and politicians, rather than those who played a key role in the struggle before the amnesty program. Commenting on their inclusion, Odogu notes:

Anybody can get arms. The government does not care how you have acquired what you are presenting. Those who are connected obtained such weapons through their connections, others searched for what to present to be categorized as combatant militant.... A month's stipend from the program will be enough to offset the cost of such a weapon<sup>20</sup>.

Reacting to her exclusion from the program, a female ex-militant states:

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<sup>19</sup> Interview (via Skype) with Onyoma, a member of the Amnesty Committee, 18 February 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Odogu, an Urhobo woman activist, 7 July 2018.

... I cannot tell the criteria that the so-called Amnesty Committee used. They must have picked their girlfriends and relatives to benefit from the program while those of us who have suffered from this conflict are left behind. God will judge them<sup>21</sup>.

Furthermore, some women who were actively involved in militancy were reluctant to take part in the program due to the social stigma attached to militancy in the traditional setting. A number of them who got involved in the struggle as militants did so without the knowledge and consent of their families. In an expression that revealed the nature of her involvement, Gladys states:

...my husband is late. To my children, parents, and neighbors, I was supplying fuel and spirits to our neighboring villages and towns. But I did more than that.... I could not come out openly as a militant when the amnesty program was announced. How would I have explained that to my children, my mother, and my husband's relatives?<sup>22</sup>

Another cultural twist upon which women's exclusion in the program is anchored is the view that women's damages are subsumed in their husband's claims. By implication, compensation to a male militant is compensation to his entire family. The question is: how many active women in the struggle had their husbands on the list of disarmed combatants? Some women who qualified as combatants were widows who lost their husbands before their involvement in the struggle<sup>23</sup>. Three out of five Odi Women interviewed in the course of this research linked their interest and eventual engagement in the struggle to the loss of their marital partners<sup>24</sup>. Moreover, men's demands are, in most cases, different from those of women. The demands of the male gender in the post-conflict Niger Delta, according to Harsch (2005), centre around resource-sharing formula, self-determination, location of oil installations, delineation of local governments, and so on, which indeed are not primary needs of the women from the region. The exclusion of women implies the exclusion of their families — a development known to have hindered successful reintegration programs in other climes (Rubio-Marin 2012). In a post-conflict environment of monetized settlement

21 Interview with a female ex-militant who wished to remain anonymous, 26 July 2018.

22 Interview with Lady G, a female ex-militant, 6 July 2018.

23 Some women claimed they joined the struggle in their quest for justice for their slain husbands, sons, and relatives, and for the destruction of their houses.

24 Assorted interview, 16 August 2018.



in which the construction of losses was materially based on the loss of arms and ammunition that women are culturally forbidden to bear, the female gender, arguably, is not part of the agenda for peace.

The second explanation for women's exclusion in the amnesty program stems from the fact that NDAP was meant to focus on immediate peace and security. Although the integration aspect was envisioned as both short and long-term processes, the focus at the implementation stage was on its short-term achievement. NDAP was geared towards achieving a peace settlement needed to keep a society racked by insurgency from relapsing. By paying attention to a short-term goal rather than the wider context of the conflict — indiscriminate oil exploration, pollution, land degradation, and poor corporate responsibility which in the first place bred militancy in the region, it excluded the larger population of the region, especially women mostly affected by these anomalies. One implication of this development is that amnesty in the region did little or nothing to preclude the resurgence of militancy. From 2016, attacks on oil facilities and general insecurity resurged, paralysing the normal flow of activities in the oil sector and beyond. For instance, the Niger Delta Avengers, a group of militants that emerged after the Amnesty Proclamation, attacked offshore pipelines of deep waters off the Nigerian coast in 2016. Similarly, the Niger Delta, Greenland Movement, equally formed amidst the Amnesty Programme, has continued to vandalize oil pipelines and other facilities since 2016<sup>25</sup>.

Women's exclusion can also be explained by the need to reduce or manage the number of participants in the program. Women combatants may not pose the same level of threat as their male counterparts. Without the activities of men such as Dokubo, Ateke, and Tompolo, perhaps insurgency in the Niger Delta may not have posed the kind of threat that shook the national economy on the eve of the program. Therefore, settling those men was paramount in the government's plan package<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, a loose blanket of combatant militants would have expanded the number beyond the capacity of the government's budget. A popular view among some respondents is that some female names included in the program were later removed<sup>27</sup>. This is not peculiar to NDAP. Exclusion of women from disarmament due to an

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25 These recently created militant groups demanded inclusion in the Amnesty Program, especially in the payment of stipends. Attacks from these groups intensified following government moves to end the program. To date, the Amnesty program is yet to be terminated for fear that it will destabilize completely the region.

26 A huge amount of money was paid to former militant leaders to protect pipelines they previously vandalized.

27 Assorted Interviews.

unexpected hike in the number of participants has been the norm. In Rwanda for instance, the number was reduced from 58,000 to about 26 000 to meet the donor's capacity, and those dropped were mostly women. A similar development was recorded in Sierra Leone where a DDR program, as found in the Niger Delta, was carried out without support from external donors.

In addition, women were not visible when the criteria for political processes leading to the NDAP were created. As noted earlier, the meetings were between government representatives and leaders of major militant groups who were all men. It was in these meetings that the narrow definition of combatants and the modalities for participating in NDAP were adopted. In the words of Rukewe:

... nobody consulted us when they were planning to negotiate peace with Niger Delta. We only heard that the government was about granting amnesty to the region and we were filled with the hope of what it held in store for us.... Then later, we heard that government amnesty was for men who were ready to submit their weapons. If women were involved in the negotiation, they must be those of "Abuja connection" and for political reasons<sup>28</sup>.

Her view was equally echoed by a group of women of Ahoda who referred to the program as a 'government arrangement with top militant gangs'<sup>29</sup>. By restricting the pre-amnesty negotiations to the male gender, the amnesty package which was anchored on the outcome of this negotiation was, without doubt, gender-blind. This affirms Ekine's (2007) earlier observation that men have been the main beneficiaries of memorialization, amnesty, and reintegration in the Niger Delta<sup>30</sup>.

Furthermore, the DDR program, like all liberal peace models, is top-down in approach, and as a result, often carried out without inputs from the local population. This explains why its success, in most cases, is limited to the short term. Although NDAP was carried out without the participation of international actors, its conceptualization and implementation are not different from the general guidelines and principles of DDR. Like the post-civil war peace package which was imposed on Nigerians in 1970, NDAP was more or less a calculated and selective peace package that was imposed by the Nigerian government from above with the construction of a success narrative within a few months. As a top-down model, it failed to link up with

28 Interview with Rukewe, a women leader and an activist, 12 July 2018.

29 Interview with a group of Ahoda women, 17 August 2018.

30 Assorted Interviews.

women who operate mostly at the grassroots. The promise of expanding it to the level where its impact will be felt through reintegration was not actualized due to its selectivity and ambiguity surrounding its conceptualization.

Finally, corruption played a unique role in women's exclusion from the program. Nigeria is a country where a culture of corruption thrives. The amnesty program was not insulated from this national malady. Part of the huge sum of money budgeted for the program found its way into private accounts. Fictitious names and programs, uncompleted projects, and fake contracts were all avenues of siphoning the resources meant for the program. For example, private companies and consultants were often given contracts by the reintegration department to organize training or source suitable institutions for ex-militants. These contractors were paid according to the number of participants trained or placed at training centres. Through this medium, contractors, both real and fake, seemed to have inflated the number of trainees on their lists. In some cases, payments were made for training without any proof of such training<sup>31</sup>. For example, a youth development consultancy firm — The Foundation for Youth Development, established by one of the Nigerian politicians was, according to Daniel (2016), paid the sum of 5.6 billion Naira for a training program in Malaysia that never took effect. About the nature of the training and required commitment, the expression of one of the trainees is revealing.

Our trainers were not committed at all. Sometimes we do not see them for one week. They will tell you they will be holding a training session tomorrow, but you won't see anybody. Even when they come, they do not spend up to 30 minutes. Most of them did not care whether you understood what they were saying. I can say they were simply after the amount of money the government allocated to them through the program, no more, no less<sup>32</sup>.

The point being emphasized is that the resources that would have been used to expand the programme to the point its impact would be felt by the larger population were channelled to personal accounts. Paul Boro, the coordinator of the programme in 2016, remarked that the main challenge NDAP faced since its inception was inadequate funding which placed

<sup>31</sup> This was revealed to us in the course of the fieldwork by one of those who worked at the Obubra rehabilitation center in 2011; see also Punch 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Interview (via phone) with one of the beneficiaries of the Amnesty program who wished to remain anonymous, 25 September, 2020.

a serious limitation on its capacity to expand and empower its beneficiaries<sup>33</sup>. Such financial constraints, according to him, explained the termination of 1,770 participants from vocational training before the completion of their training.

## Conclusion

Post-conflict peacebuilding packages in Africa in the last three decades are generally associated with two distinct features — international dominance and under-representation of the female gender. Interestingly, the Niger Delta variant was conceptualized, adopted, sponsored, and implemented as a locally-owned program devoid of international influence. Sequel to this, NDAP generated lively hopes and expectations about its potential to transcend some of the hitches associated with internationally managed and sponsored DDR especially as it concerns women. Though in a complicated manner, NDAP was conceptualized as a program that will encompass both short and long-term activities for a peaceful Niger Delta. Its implementation, however, derailed from the initial conceptualization focusing narrowly on combatants with weapons to hand over to the Nigerian state (short-term).

In the sociocultural milieu where women are traditionally banned from carrying such arms, this stood as a barricade to the female gender from benefiting from this post-conflict reconstruction package. Coupled with the above problem were the issues of corruption, ambiguity, poor funding, drive for quick success story, and the top-down approach of DDR which hindered the full implementation of the program and inclusivity. Given that most of these challenges associated with women's exclusion in the Niger Delta program were common in places like Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and others with high dose of international influence, the Niger Delta Amnesty Program supports the position that the underlying currents in women's exclusion in locally-managed DDR in Africa may not differ considerably from those of internationally-sponsored programs.

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<sup>33</sup>Channels TV News, (2016) 26th April.

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## ABSTRACT

Unlike most Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Disintegration (DDR) programs, the Niger Delta Amnesty Programme (NDAP) was locally planned, sponsored, and implemented. This raised hopes about its potential to address, considerably, the

problem in the region, especially at the grassroots. Irrespective of the enormous literature that appeared a few years after its adoption applauding the success of the program in restoring peace to the region, the crisis is too far from being over. Among the explanations for the limitations of the program is its lack of inclusiveness, especially about the female gender. This paper using historical and analytic methods examines the basis of women's exclusion in the programme. It supports the position that the underlying currents in women's exclusion in locally planned DDR programs in Africa may not differ considerably from what is obtainable in internationally-owned programs.

## KEYWORDS

DDR. Women. Niger Delta. Nigeria.

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