

# Women's Responses to State Violence in the Niger Delta

Sokari Ekine

This paper will discuss the ways in which the women of the Niger Delta have responded to acts of violence by the Nigerian State and its allies, the multinational oil companies. I first briefly outline the background to the crises in the Niger Delta and then discuss the responses and resistance of the women.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Nigeria, for the past 39 years, has been a militarised state even when so-called civilian governments, including the present one, have been in power. Militarisation consists of the use of the threat of violence to settle political conflicts, the legitimisation of state violence, the curtailment of freedom of opinion, the domination of military values over civilian life, the violation of human rights, extra judicial killings and the gross repression of the people (Chunakara, 1994). Turshen describes the militarised state as one in which “violence becomes a crisis of everyday life, is disenfranchising and politically, physically and economically debilitating” (Turshen, 1988: 7). The Niger Delta is a region of Nigeria that has been subjected to excessive militarisation for the past 13 years, where violence is used as an instrument of governance to force the people into total submission (Okonta & Douglas, 2001; Na’Allah, 1998). It is where, by far, the majority of the people live in abject poverty and where women are the poorest of the poor (Human Rights Watch, 2002; 2004; 2007). This region has little or no development, no electricity, no water, no communications, no health facilities, little and poor education. In contrast, the region generated an estimated over US \$30 billion in oil revenues, over a 38-year period, through in the form of rents for the government and profit for the multinational oil companies (Rowell, 1996).

The multinational oil companies, mainly Shell, Chevron/Texaco, and Elf, have treated both the people and the environment with total disdain and hostility (Okonta & Douglas, 2001). They have worked hand in hand with a succession of brutal and corrupt regimes to protect their exploitation of the

land and people by providing the Nigerian military and police with weapons, transport, logistical support and finance. In return the Nigerian government has allowed the oil companies a free hand to operate without any monitoring. In fact, the oil companies in the Niger Delta have one of the worst environmental records in the world.<sup>2</sup>

## Destruction of the Ecological System

The Niger Delta has become an ecological disaster zone, a place where rusty pipelines run through farms and in front of houses (Rowell, 1996). Day and night huge gas fires rage in massive pits and towers, spewing noxious gases and filth into people's homes and farms. Oil spills and fires are a regular occurrence, often causing the death of local people as well as the destruction of wildlife and property. Michael Fleshman, of the New York-based Africa Fund, describes what he saw at the site of one oil spill:

The impact of the spill on the community has been devastating, as the oil has poisoned their water supply and fishing ponds, and is steadily killing the raffia palms that are the community's economic mainstay. Lacking any other alternative, the people of the village have been forced to drink polluted water for over a year, and the community leaders told us that many people had become ill in recent months and that some had died. The sight that greeted us when we finally arrived at the spill was horrendous. A thick brownish film of crude oil stained the entire area, collecting in clumps along the shoreline and covering the surface of the still water. The humid air was thick with oil fumes. (Fleshman, 1999)

Often, the spillages lead to raging fires as in the case of the Jesse fire (17th October, 1998<sup>3</sup>) when over a thousand people were killed and thousands more horrifically burned and left homeless. To date, not a single person has received compensation. Indeed, in a region where medical care is scarce and only available to the rich, it is easy to envision the fate of these people. Ponds, creeks, rivers and land are soaked with thick layers of oil. Terisa Turner, co-director of the United Nations NGO, International Oil Working Group (IOWG), describes one particular oil spill that she personally witnessed as follows:

150,000 residents of the community of Ogbodo battled a massive petroleum spill from a Shell pipeline, which burst on 24 June, churning crude into the surrounding waterways for 18 days until Shell clamped the pipe on 12 July. Severe environmental damage and threat to life by Shell's neglect is the other side of the 'corporate rule' coin of ever-expanding

neo-liberal license. The dangers to human life, human rights and the environment were dramatically experienced by Ogbodo community members in Nigeria's 'Shell-Shocked' oil belt. (Turner, 2001: 11)

This scene is typical. The common response of the oil companies to such spills however, has been to blame the villagers for sabotage. The question is, why would the villagers commit acts of sabotage that will only worsen the environmental damage and pollution of their land and prevent them from engaging in their livelihoods, namely farming, fishing and trading? In this particular case, the pipeline in question was buried 6 feet deep (many pipelines in the region are built above ground, running through farm land and through villages), and split underneath the ground (Turner, 2001). In addition to air and water pollution and other kinds of environmental degradation, lands have been expropriated and personal property damaged. The people have received only very little compensation for the land taken or damages from oil spillage and fires. Indeed, efforts at compensation have been “case(s) of broken promises, development programmes that are abandoned halfway, poor quality facilities that break down and simply rust away as soon as they are installed” (Okonta & Douglas, 2001: 106).

## Militarisation

As the dispossessed communities demand corporate responsibility, environmental, economic and social justice and proper compensation, their protests have been met with violence including extrajudicial killings and mass murder, torture, rape, the burning of homes and property, and increased military presence. As such, the Niger Delta has become completely militarised and “secured” by unrestrained and unaccountable Nigerian military personnel. The report by Human Rights Watch, “No Democratic Dividend”, notes that violence in the region continues despite the change from military to civilian rule (Human Rights Watch, 2002).

The Niger Delta is a particularly extreme example of a culture of violence that is woven into the fabric of a society ruled by military dictators. Former President Olusegun Obasanjo was a key player in no less than three successive military regimes. He was a senior officer under General Gowon and participated in the 1975 *coup d'état* that overthrew General Gowon. He then served as the Deputy Supreme Commander under Brigadier General Murtala Mohammed until the latter's assassination in the 1976 coup. General Obasanjo then took over as Supreme Commander until he handed power to the second civilian

government of Shehu Shagari in 1979. Four more military regimes followed this brief interregnum, including the particularly brutal regime of General Sani Abacha between 1993 and 1998. It was during this period that Ogoni activists, including Ken Saro-Wiwa, were murdered. Despite the fact that the Obasanjo government, which ruled from 1999 until 2007, was viewed as a transition to civilian rule, the level of violence in the region continued to escalate. Examples of this escalation include: intensification of the military option to control the oil fields and pipelines - through the specially created Nigerian Military Task Force for the Niger Delta with specific orders to “shoot-to-kill” protesting indigenes, Obasanjo demonstrated his propensity to use brute force to compel silence and acquiescence<sup>4</sup>; invasion of Odi Town on the direct orders of Obasanjo in retaliation for the murder of 12 policemen by youths in the town in 1999; brutal rapes of women and young girls by Nigerian Army personnel in Choba; gunning down of unarmed youths who protested against unemployment in Bonny Island; ravaging of communities in Ke-Dere in Rivers State for protesting unwanted and forceful return of Shell Oil to Ogoniland; killings of women and children, burning and looting of property in Oleh town in Isokoland; and the massacre on 17 October 2000 of 15 youth protesters in Tebidaba in Bayelsa State (INAA, 2000).

The government of the newly elected President of Nigeria, Umaru Yar'Adua, continues the policy of militarisation of the region in response to the increased militancy of local people.

## Forms of Resistance

Resistance can take many forms, some of which are explicit in their actions and consequences and others less so. Despite the intangible nature that resistance can sometimes take, any forms of resistance are nonetheless worthy of recognition and can be just as powerful as overt acts. Women experience oppression in the domestic sphere, within the context of the community, cultural and traditional roles and mores, as well as through formal organisations and social institutions controlled by men (Hill Collins, 1990). Often women experience all three simultaneously and may engage in acts of resistance that challenge all three levels of oppression either singularly or simultaneously.

In *Gender Violence in Africa*, December Green uses a schema developed by Jane Everett, Ellen Charlton, and Kathleen Staudt to illustrate the efforts of women to protect themselves and their interests in areas where they have little formal power as “strategies of disengagement” (Green, 1999). This schema is a

useful framework to analyse the acts of resistance of women of the Niger Delta. As Green (1999: 154) states, the schema is not rigid and one or more strategies may be used at any given time. It also allows for the inclusion of a broad range of actions and forms of resistance. The schema consists of four categories:

“The *management of suffering* occurs when women living under imposed hardships seek out survival or coping mechanisms. Although survival requires active pursuit, this activism is often regarded as passive. *Insulation* consists of a turning inward to family and kin as an alternative way of gaining recognition, power, and resources. In *collective action*, women as a group, confront authority in order to resist its growth or to demand adherence to norms of behaviour. *Escape*, the fourth type of resistance, is often taken as a last resort and is perhaps the most extreme, escape is often ventured under only the most dire circumstances” (Green, 1999: 154).

The ways in which women engage in acts of resistance range from everyday simple acts, which when maintained over a period of time, can become transformational and extreme, leading to organised and confrontational acts (Green, 1999). Women in the Niger Delta have used and continue to use a variety of forms of resistance such as dancing and singing, collective action including demonstrations and strikes, testimonies, silence, and the use of culturally specific responses such as stripping naked. They have also refused to alter work routines and habits such as opening up market stalls, collecting water, participating in women’s meetings and they have struggled to maintain their daily routines amidst the chaos and violence that surrounds them. These acts of resistance are bound within local cultures as well as with the socio-economic and political context.

## Resistance and Responses to State-Sponsored Violence

One of the most common forms of violence is destruction of property: burning homes and shops, looting and stealing money. Communities often respond to these attacks by fleeing either to a nearby village or to a hiding place in the bush (forest). In Green’s (1999) schema, escape is considered to be the most extreme form of resistance as it is usually ventured only in the direst circumstances.

During the invasion of Odi town in 1999, many townsfolk escaped, leaving behind their meagre possessions accumulated over a lifetime, often losing family members during the escape, and eventually returning to find other family members killed, their homes burnt to the ground, and

property looted. For women, this was particularly difficult as the following interviewees explain:

"I left everything to run for my dear life and pleaded with people to let me in their canoe with my children.... I pleaded with people to take my children. I don't even know the destination they were, where they ran to. I started to trace my children.... As God would have it none of them died and at the end all of us came here. When I saw my house I cried.... People were hugging me. We will survive this thing with God." (Charity, Odi Woman)

"When the soldiers came we were in our various houses, we only heard that soldiers have come and surrounded everywhere. Since the soldiers were coming we were all afraid. Everyone started packing and running away, we were not able to stand soldiers. We carried a few things and we left. When we came back we saw all our houses, food had been burned down, all burned down money that we left in our houses. Since then we have been trying to manage with nothing again. We are lying on the ground nothing to sleep on." (Amasin, primary school teacher, Odi).

"We ran to a nearby village called Odoni. We were crying our houses are finished. We also heard the gunshots and knew people were being killed. Others ran to the bush. Those who could not get boats ran to the bush.... Women, not men, only women, the men were dead. One woman was captured, she came out with her children because they couldn't stand it (the bush) so the army were feeding her with gari (cassava). The soldiers did that – gave people burnt gari to drink and burnt yams to eat." (Imegebele, school teacher, Odi Town).

During this invasion, however, many of the elderly women refused to run with their families and therefore witnessed the horror of shooting, burning, and looting by soldiers, including those of their own homes. One elderly woman explained how soldiers broke the doors of her house and started packing her personal property to steal. They came with a big lorry to pack all the things they looted. According to her, some of them even slept in her house. However, these women were protected from physical violence by their status as elderly women and mothers/grandmothers. In some instances, the soldiers ended up giving them food, albeit very meagre amounts. These elderly women were able to command sufficient respect to protect them from the abuse of the soldiers.

The testimonies in *Blood and Oil* (Ekine, 2000) and in other interviews conducted by activists and researchers in the region, are all examples of

women speaking out about their personal and community experiences of violence. Women narrated their stories of rape, beatings, sexual harassment, burning of their property, arrest and murder of their husbands, sons, fathers and brothers. They spoke of the loss of their fishing ponds and farmlands to pollution, and the poverty of their lives. They also mentioned the lack of employment opportunities for the male family members, the harassment of their young sons by police and army personnel. Moreover, these women talked about both the support and, in most cases, the lack of support they received from their husbands and traditional elders in their activism. They discussed their decisions to take action and the consequences of those actions.

### Silence as Resistance

Closely related to the act of speaking out is the act of silent resistance, by which I mean not speaking and choosing to do nothing. The question of whether silence constitutes resistance, an exercise of choice, is worth exploring.

Before undertaking fieldwork for *Blood and Oil*,<sup>5</sup> I had never considered silence as an act of resistance. However, during the interviews with groups of women, I observed that there would often be some women who did not speak or spoke very little. As a researcher and observer, although “listening to their silence” was difficult, I was very conscious of the need to respect it. I became aware of the power of these silent voices. I saw their silence as an act of defiance and strength and also a way to manage the pain in their lives. Traci West (1999) states that resistance includes any coping mechanism used for survival, including silence when it is used as an aid to the survival and healing of the individual. Building on this, Mamphela Ramphele includes as part of women’s coping mechanisms “the decision not to act as a powerful act in itself” (cited in Green, 1999: 153). In other words, what may appear as doing nothing is, in effect, making a choice not to do anything. In local parlance, this kind of deliberate inaction is referred to as “sitting on oneself.”

One example of silent resistance took place in the small town of Kaiama in Western Ijaw. Here, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of December 1998, representatives of over 40 Ijaw clans issued a communiqué known as the Kaiama Declaration and created the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) to administer the affairs of the Ijaw youth. The communiqué called for an end to 40 years of environmental damage and underdevelopment in the region and asserted the right to ownership of resources and land by the indigenous people. In response, the Nigerian government created a Naval Special Task Force and, on the 29th of

December, sent 1500 federal troops to the nearby state capital at Yenagoa and occupied it and the surrounding area. Following a massacre, rape and burning of properties in Yenagoa on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1999, the army invaded the town of Kaiama on 2nd January. On the 4<sup>th</sup> January, using Chevron helicopters and boats, the army invaded seven other Ijaw towns.

During interviews with women, one woman stood out because she was not interested in speaking. We learned that her son had been killed on the day of the invasion. Whereas most people had fled upon hearing that the soldiers were coming, he had run back to the house to collect an item he had forgotten and was fatally shot in his stomach. Standing face to face with her silence was an overpowering experience which conveyed her profound grief and loss at least as effectively as speech. In this case, a woman had survived by a silence that allowed her to disengage herself from her surroundings and she continued to live and hold herself with a dignity that denied her violators any sense of victory. Given that Kaiama is still under occupation today, she lives a situation in which she has to face her son's murderers everyday, possibly even having to sell them foodstuffs from the stall she runs in order to earn a living to support her surviving children. Her silence, her stance and her body language thus serve her well in an inescapable situation, that many other women living under occupation share.

## **Responses to Sexual Violence**

Rape, sexual slavery, and forced prostitution by the military are all acts of violence and demonstrations of power used in times of war and conflict. Rape serves to gratify the soldiers, feeding their hatred of the enemy whilst also being used as an effective weapon of war, especially to spread terror amongst the people (Turshen & Twagiramariya, 1998). In this instance, rape also has an ethnic dimension as the military and police deployed in the Niger Delta are not indigenous to the region with many of them coming from the North of the country.

In the Niger Delta, rape and other forms of sexual violence such as forced prostitution, have taken place repeatedly in communities that have been invaded by the Nigerian army, where paramilitary forces have been used to quell demonstrations, or simply to make a particular town or village an "example" of what would happen should the people assert their human rights.

Blessing, one of my interviewees, explained that the soldiers and police often forced girls to "befriend" them. If they refused, they were threatened

with rape and beatings. She had managed to avoid being “befriended” by her lack of fear and sheer stubbornness. She explained that at first she had tried to make friends for protection and was bought drinks following which the soldiers attempted to force her into having sex with them. She said, “the pressure was terrible and most girls just gave in.”<sup>6</sup> Another woman reported seeing a soldier walking into the bush with a girl of about 12 years. After the abuse (the woman did not know what actually took place) they came out and the soldier gave money to the child.

The responses to rape have varied from community to community. Several factors explain the varying responses of the women, the male members of their families, and their wider community. Using two different incidents of rape in two different ethnic groups, I will examine the different responses.

The town of Choba is an Ikwerre community in Rivers State and the headquarters of a pipeline construction company called Wilbros Nigeria Ltd. (a subsidiary of Wilbros Group, an US company). Community relations between Wilbros and the people of Choba were poor mainly because of two reasons. The company demonstrated disdain and disinterest in Choba and its people and they failed to employ local people, even at lower unskilled levels. This led to a number of demonstrations against Wilbros. In June 1999 the youth of Choba began a series of demonstrations and sit-ins outside the company gates. The youth demanded that Wilbros replace 600 of their employees with Choba residents. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, the mobile police – a paramilitary group – invaded Choba and once again, unleashed murder, destruction of property and rape on the people of the town. The rapes of women by soldiers were captured on film by a journalist and published in the Nigerian daily press. President Obasanjo’s response was to declare the photographs a fake, asserting that *his* soldiers would never do such a thing. The response of the women of Choba was one of insulation, turning inward towards their community. These women not only had to cope with the trauma of being publicly raped but also with the shame that they and their community felt when the photographs were published in the newspaper. Some months later, a local journalist spoke anonymously to some of the rape survivors.

“It is a taboo to rape a married woman... (now) these women cannot sleep with their husbands and cannot cook for them. It is our tradition and we have to respect it, not just for the sake of respecting our custom but because there are grave implications for disobedience....”

“At the time, we rallied our women to protest to the wife of the governor so

that she can help us to push the case but we were arrested and detained for four days. It took the intervention of well-meaning elders before we were released.... We, the women of Choba, appeal to those behind the ugly event to come and do the necessary things to appease the gods. ....This is important to us because without this, these women are as good as divorced."

The community did not judge the women survivors totally negatively. On the contrary, they acknowledged the women's pain and suffering. The women supported each other and organised themselves according to traditional ways. They sought help from their village elders and the governor's wife. Their response was part of their healing process and, seemingly, of the community, so they could all move past the trauma to some kind of normalcy in their lives.

The responses of rape victims and their families in Ogoniland were very different from those of Choba. The Ogoni Bill of Rights (OBR) was launched on the 26<sup>th</sup> August 1990. The OBR, like the declarations and communiqués of other ethnic groups, articulated the basis of a struggle for ethnic autonomy and self-determination for the Ogoni peoples and challenged both the Nigerian government and Shell's legitimacy to determine the economic and political affairs of the Ogoni people and the entire Niger Delta communities (Ekiné, 2000). The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni peoples (MOSOP) was to become the mechanism to carry out the objectives of OBR along with the Federation of Ogoni Women's Organisations (FOWA) (Turner, 2001).

The troubles in Ogoniland came to a head in November 1993 when the Nigerian military government began a three-year campaign of violence, murder, rape, burning, looting, beatings and torture, against the Ogoni people.<sup>7</sup> For the Ogoni women, resistance was a daily norm as they faced both the impact of Shell's destruction of their environment and the presence of the Nigerian army and mobile police everyday. Women were harassed on the way to their farms, on the way to their markets, in their villages minding their homes, and at night when they were asleep.

In interviews with members of FOWA, woman after woman stood up, said their names, and described in graphic detail the rapes and other types of sexual violence they had been subjected to.

"They started beating the women, dragging them into the bush. And they started losing their cloth and raping them...my mate was with pregnancy. One army man just used his leg and hit her stomach and she miscarry. That was the beginning of suffering in Nyo Khana." <sup>8</sup>

Comfort Aluzim

"They started beating us; all that we were carrying to the market to sell, they took. They took our things, our bags. They asked us to raise our hands and jump like frogs. There was an old woman with us that could not jump. What the army man did was to use his double barrel gun to beat the old woman's back and she fell down." Mercy Nkwagha

"One day we were demonstrating. We sang as we moved from our town to Ken Khana. Singing near the main road we met face to face with the army... they asked us to lie down on the road. After using the koboko (whip) on us they started kicking us with their foot. They dragged some of the women into the bush. We were naked, our dresses were torn, our wrapper were being loosed by a man who is not your husband. They tore our pants and began raping us in the bush. The raping wasn't secret because about two people are raping you there. They are raping you in front of your sister. They are raping your sister in front of your mother. It was like a market." Mrs Kawayorko

Unlike in Choba, the Ogoni women were able to stand up and publicly speak about the violence they had suffered. Through the actions of FOWA and MOSOP, the women became highly politicised and engaged actively with elders and youth in the struggle against Shell's activities and for the political autonomy of their land. Together with the youth branch of MOSOP, FOWA was given "unprecedented power within a democratic configuration...a steering committee was created in which each of the nine constituent organisations had three votes" (Turner, 1997). Thus, FOWA was able to use a strategy of collective action as an act of resistance in their struggle and coordinate their activities with men in the community. Another strategy of the Ogoni women was to use their position and status as mothers to work with the youths who were, in effect, their sons or the age of their sons:

"During the period, the women of Tai kingdom suffered a lot... Many of the women were beaten; many of the houses destroyed. At that time the women decided that come dead or alive they would still hold their meetings. FOWA women had their meetings in the bush. We arranged with the youth wing of the movement, the youth of Tai dug a very big pit in the ground and we the women entered the pit and the youth used bushes to cover us." Ogoni woman farmer

Women were not ostracised or excluded because they had been raped, as explained by a FOWA member:

"Our men just take it as what happen because they know their wives did

not just go out like that but it was forceful. Also the other women took it the same way." Ogoni woman

FOWA, in opposition to some local politically motivated traditional leaders, actively advocated the boycott of the 1993 presidential elections. Diana Barikor-Wiwa explains:

"Of course they spoke with their men – if that is translated into English, it's a bit like 'bedroom talk'. They tried to work on that within the home. But besides that they had a lot of strife with their children, especially their sons. It was most effective with their sons, and of course, somebody's husband is another woman's son. And so it was, there was always that bond. It's a traditional thing. You were a great man if you could respect your mother. So they did that." (Barikor-Wiwa, 1996)

The women became agents of change by using culturally specific methods and their position as mothers to persuade their husbands and sons, thereby MOSOP, to take the decision to boycott the election.

FOWA's response to violence was a combination of collective action, individual courage and sheer defiance in the face of military aggression and environmental destruction. More recently, women of the Niger Delta have used both collective action and traditional methods in response to the complete neglect of their ecosystem: natural environment, health, education, infrastructure, employment and general underdevelopment by the government and multinationals.

## Mass Protests

Between June and August 2002, thousands of women occupied no less than eight oil facilities belonging to Chevron Texaco and Shell Petroleum including Chevron's main oil terminal at Escravos in Delta State. This series of direct action by women in the Niger Delta was unprecedented for a number of reasons.

First, never before had so many women taken a series of actions against an oil company within such a short period of time. Second, the actions, in particular the initial occupation of Escravos oil terminal, were highly organised. The women divided themselves into seven groups, each occupying a different strategic area of the complex, including the main office building (Okon, 2001). Third, because the actions taken by the women – all mothers and grandmothers whose age ranged from 30 to 90 – had been organised collectively in the interest of the community at large, they had the complete support of their communities including their husbands, the youth, elders and chiefs. Finally, and

most important, although in the first instance the actions were taken separately by women from three different ethnic nationalities, in the final occupation, for the first time women from three different ethnic nationalities, Ijaw, Itsekiri, and Ilaje, came together in a united action against corporate irresponsibility, putting aside previous inter-ethnic hostilities and grievances.

One of the strategies used by both the multinational oil companies and successive Nigerian governments has been to deliberately exploit existing tensions between the various ethnic nationalities in the region and also, to encourage antagonisms between youth and women, elders and youth, and elders and women in towns and villages. Therefore, the importance of the solidarity between women in this instance is indeed major. This solidarity across different ethnic divides was forged because the situation had become so desperate that many women realised that such cooperation was essential for their success. Their political awareness of the divide-and-rule tactics encouraged them to put aside previous hostilities and fight the common enemy together.

The women occupied the operational headquarters of Chevron-Texaco and Shell Petroleum, singing songs of solidarity to protest years of plunder of their rural environment by the oil companies (Okon, 2001). In this particular siege, about 800 women were injured during a particularly brutal encounter with security forces belonging to the oil companies. The voices of the women speak of their coming together and their grievances:

"The rivers they are polluting is our life and death. We depend on it for everything.... When this situation is unbearable, we decided to come together to protest. Ijaw, Itsekiri and Ilaje we are one, we are brothers and sisters, it is only people who do not understand that think we are fighting ourselves. Our common enemies are the oil companies and their backers". Mrs Bmipe Ebi (Ilaje)

"We don't want Shell, Chevron, Texaco or any other oil companies again. They should leave us alone. We don't have guns, and we don't have any weapon to fight them. Since they have treated us like this. We are prepared to die." Mrs Rose Miebi (Ijaw)

"If Chevron no keep the promises, next time I ready to go naked." Mrs Funke Tunjor (Ilaje)

The women were relentless in their protest and demands. In a final act of defiance, they confronted the oil companies with one ingenious and powerful weapon: they threatened to remove all their clothes in what is known as "the

Curse of Nakedness”. The stripping off of clothes, particularly by married and elderly women, is a way of shaming men, some of whom believe that if they see the naked bodies they will go mad or suffer great harm.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the types of violence and violent situations to which women in the Niger Delta are subjected and I have commented upon some of their responses. It is indeed necessary to look beyond one’s own expectations and preconceptions about resistance to violence to avoid the risk of neglecting the entire range and variety of women’s responses in different cultural and political contexts. What may appear initially as passive inaction may actually be a show of strength. For example, “sitting on one’s self,” that is, to stand silently with dignity as a mature woman, is a response that becomes a very powerful act. Individual acts such as these are ways of managing suffering on a personal level by turning inwards for strength.

Women in the Niger Delta resorted to using the “curse of nakedness” as a weapon after they had failed to have their demands met through more conventional protest actions. Though greatly feared and rarely used, nakedness as a form of protest is legitimate within the cultural context of the Niger Delta. In this instance, it was one of the few occasions when women were able to manoeuvre themselves into a position of power. Also, because it is used only under extreme provocation, it has remained a powerful weapon of women’s collective resistance. It is also critical to note that while the scale of destruction and violence within the Delta is overwhelming, at a day to day level women continue not just to survive but also to put up resistance within the territories, using the means at their disposal: *If Chevron no keep the promises, next time I ready to go naked.*

## References

- Alidou, O. and Turshen, M. 2000. “Africa: Women in the Aftermath of Civil War”, *Race and Class* 41(4): 81.
- Ashton-Jones, N. 1988. *The ERA Handbook to the Niger Delta: The Human Ecosystems of the Niger Delta*. London: Environmental Rights Action.
- Barikor-Wiwa, Diana. (not dated) “An interview with Diana Wiwa, International Representative of MOSOP and FOWA”, Guelph Ontario: Ontario Public Interest Research Group, University of Guelph.
- Chunakara, M. G. 1994. *The Militarisation of Politics and Society: Southern Asia*

*Experience*. Hong Kong: Daga Press

- Davies, M. ed. 1994. *Women and Violence: Realities and Responses Worldwide*. London: Zed Books.
- Drew, A. 1995. "Female Consciousness and Feminism in Africa," *Theory and Society* 24(1): 1–33.
- Dumont, J.P. 1992. "Ideas on Philippine Violence: Assertions, Negations, and Narrations," in Nordstrom, C. and Martin, J. eds. *The Paths to Domination, Resistance and Terror*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ekine, S. 2000. *Blood and Oil: Testimonies of Violence from Women of the Niger Delta*. London: Centre for Democracy and Development.
- Ekineh, A. 2001. *Tears and Weeping of the Niger Delta*. London: Southern Solidarity Press, London.
- Fleshman, M. 1999. "Report on the Crisis in Nigeria". New York: The Africa Fund. Available at: <http://www.prairienet.org/acas/alerts/nigeria/nigeria1.html>.
- Green, D. 1999. *Gender Violence in Africa: African Women's Responses*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Hill Collins, P. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Human Rights Watch. March 2002. "Nigeria: No Democratic Dividend for Oil Delta". Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/nigeria3>
- Human Rights Watch Overview. January 2004. "Nigeria". Available at: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/01/21/nigeri6976.htm>.
- Human Rights Watch. 2007. *Audio report on Nigeria*. Available at: <http://hrw.org/audio/2007/english/nigeria01/nigeri15204.htm>.
- Ijaw National Alliance of the Americas. November 20, 2000. "Odi Massacre: One Year On." Available at: [http://www.ijaw-naa.org/archives/inna\\_arch3.htm](http://www.ijaw-naa.org/archives/inna_arch3.htm).
- Jacobs, S., Jacobson, R. and Marchbank, J. eds. 2000. *States of Conflict: Gender Violence and Resistance*. London: Zed Books.
- Lobe, J. 2002. "People versus Big Oil: Rights of Nigerian Indigenous People Recognized". Foreign Policy in Focus Global Affairs Commentary May 5. Available at: <http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2002/0207nigeria.html>.
- Maynard, M. and Purvis, J. eds. 1994. *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*. New York: Taylor and Francis.
- Na'Allah, A. ed. 1998. *Ogoni's Agonies: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Crisis in Nigeria*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Niger Delta Women for Justice. <http://www.ndwj/kabissa.org>.
- Nordstrom, C. and Martin, J. 1992. "The Culture of Conflict: Field Reality and Theory" in Nordstrom, C. ed. *The Paths to Domination Resistance and Terror*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Nordstrom, C. 1997. *A Different Kind of War Story*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Okon, E. 2002, August. *Report of the Niger Delta Women for Justice (NDWJ) on the Delta Women's Seige on the American Oil Company, Chevron-Texaco in Delta State, Nigeria*. Available from Niger Delta Women for Justice: <http://www.ndwj.kabissa.org>.
- Okonta, I. and Douglas, O. 2001. *Where Vultures Feast*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Rowell, A. 1996. *Green Backlash: Global Subversion of the Environment Movement*. New York: Routledge.
- Stamatopoulou, E. 1995. "Women's Rights and the United Nations" in Peters, J. and Wolpher, A. eds. *Women's Rights Human Rights: International Feminist Perspectives*. New York: Routledge.
- Turner, T. E. and Oshare, M. 1993. *Women's Uprisings against the Nigerian Oil Industry in the 1980s*." Revised paper presented at Canadian African Studies Association, Montreal, May 1992.
- Turner, T. E. 1997. "Oil Workers and Oil Communities: Counterplanning from the Commons in Nigeria". Available at: <http://www.uoguelph.ca/~terisatu/Counterplanning/c3.htm>.
- Turner, T. E. 2001. "The Land is Dead: Women's Rights as Human Rights: The Case of the Ogbodo Shell Petroleum Spill in Rivers State, Nigeria." Paper published by T. Turner.
- Turshen, M. 1998. "Women's War Stories" in Turshen, M. and Twagiramariya, C. eds. "What Women Do in Wartime". London: Zed Books.
- United Methodist Church. 1996; 2004. "Rape in Times of Conflict and War." *The Book of Resolutions*. Available at: <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=4&tmid=1037>.
- Walby, S. 1990. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- West, T. 1999. *Wounds of Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics*. New York: New York University Press.

## Endnotes

- 1 The testimonies used in this paper were gathered by members of the Niger Delta Women for Justice (NDWJ), the Ijaw Council for Human Rights (ICHR), and myself during fieldwork undertaken between 2000 and 2003. NDWJ works with other women's organisations across the Niger Delta; ICHR works alongside Environmental Rights Action, Oil Watch Nigeria, and NDWJ.
- 2 For more on the activities of multinational oil companies (Shell, Chevron-Texaco, Mobil, Elf) and their unholy alliance with successive military and civilian regimes, read *Where Vultures Feast* (Okonta & Douglas, 2001) and *Green Backlash* (Rowell, 1996). Further information can also be found at [www.seen.org](http://www.seen.org) and Project Underground at [www.moles.org](http://www.moles.org).

- 3 ERA field report 17 - <http://www.essentialaction.org/shell/era/eraField17.html>
- 4 The Military Task Force continues to operate under the new Presidency of Umaru Yar'Adua
- 5 *Blood and Oil: Testimonies of Violence from Women of the Niger Delta*, is a collection of testimonies of women from seven different ethnic groups of the Niger Delta. The testimonies cover the period from 1990-2000 of state and multinational violence against Niger Delta communities and the impact of the violence specifically on women's lives.
- 6 I have paraphrased Blessing's testimony because, due to her use of local English, the reader would find it very hard to understand.
- 7 When the brutal military dictator, General Sani Abacha, came to power in November 1993, one of the first things he did was to create the now notorious Rivers State Internal Security Task Force led by Lt Colonel Paul Okuntimo and to appoint a new military governor of the Rivers State, Lt Colonel Dauda Komo. These two together with Shell Oil spent the next three years terrorising the Ogoni people culminating in the judicial murder of Ken Saro Wiwa and 8 other activists on 10<sup>th</sup> November, 1995. Following the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the women of FOWA became prime targets of the RSISTF who in the words of a FOWA member "were looking for us the way children look for rats in the bush."
- 8 Nyo Khana – Ogoniland is divided into six kingdoms (or clans) of Babbe, Eleme, Gokana, Nyo-Khana, Ken-Khana and Tai.