

ECOFEMINIST ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT: THE NIGER DELTA CASE

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Women have played a prominent role in environmental preservation in all societies, including societies facing serious environmental problems. Women in places like Nigeria's Niger Delta carry out tasks such as farming, fetching of firewood for domestic use, fetching of water, and the like. These activities involve the use of natural resources and thus make women more vulnerable when there are problems such as oil pollution, gas flaring, and other related activities that endanger the environment. In the Niger Delta women have protested against oil related activities that damage their environment. They have also participated in other events to conserve their environment. The paper adopts an ecofeminist perspective in critiquing environmental mismanagement in the Niger Delta. It highlights the fact that women are prominent in campaigning for a sustainable Niger Delta. There is need for writers from academic and social circles writing on the Niger Delta not to ignore the women's voices.

INTRODUCTION

Women have always played a role in the furtherance of human civilization. They have equally played a role in maintaining and protecting the earth and its ecosystems. In resolving the present environmental crisis that the earth and humanity are facing, the role of women is indispensable. It is painful to note that it is women and children who have often suffered from the negative effects of various environmental problems. Though they have suffered much from the negative impact of these problems, their wisdom and insight are often neglected in the harnessing of environmental decisions to curb the crisis. In a place like Nigeria's Niger Delta, women have taken bold steps in various ways to foster environmental management in order to ensure environmental peace and stability.

The Niger Delta has suffered much not only from oil exploration activity and gas flaring, but also from the negligence of government, from the massive unemployment of young people, from ethnic militant violence, and also from the difficult terrain of the region. The role of women should not be neglected or despised in the ongoing struggle

for the effective management of environmental resources in the region. The Rio Declaration is right in stating that, “Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieve sustainable development” (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development 1992, Prin. 20). This statement is clear in enunciating that the role of women is vital in environmental management and development. And because of this, they are actively and forcefully involved in initiatives and projects that help in environmental protection. They should not wait to be allowed to participate but should speak up for themselves and demand participation in decision-making as it affects environmental well-being.

The role of women in the past and in recent times in fostering environmental management in the Niger Delta will be critically examined from an ecofeminist perspective. The central thesis here is that women have a unique role to play in managing environmental resources. Their wisdom and insight are never to be neglected. The line of argument is equally that if their role is fostered, it will help in building a better Niger Delta that is environmentally sustainable. This paper proceeds in the following manner: (1) understanding some terms, (2) environmental situation in the Niger Delta, and (3) role of women in environmental management in the past. It is when these have been done that the paper will be brought to a conclusion.

UNDERSTANDING SOME TERMS

Key concepts that pervade this work include ecofeminist ethics, women, environmental management, and the Niger Delta. This paper will not concern itself with a detailed history of ecofeminism. It is important to note that feminism pays an overwhelming concern to issues of women especially from the perspective of their being oppressed and marginalized through patriarchal forces all throughout much of history. Two definitions of feminism are presented, as follows: (1) “Feminism advocates an approach that perceives and interprets social situations from a woman’s point of view” (Igube 2004, 29); and (2) “feminism is about challenging the division of labour in the world that puts men in charge of the public sphere—works, sports, wars, government—while women slave away and unpaid in the home, carrying the whole burden of family life” (Watkins, Rueda, and Rodriguez 1993, 3). Feminism is all about the quest for greater opportunities and rights for women and also children who often are the subject of much violence, degradation, and conflict in human society. It is a struggle to affirm that ontologically, women are equal with men. And this ontological equality needs to be experienced and expressed in social and cultural life. That there are bio-sexual differences does not make them unequal, inferior, or valueless.

Ethics has to do with issues of right and wrong. It examines the moral criterion why some actions are right and others wrong. It is concerned with the pursuit of the good life. Ethics, as understood, is often called moral philosophy. It will be on target to say that:

It deals with how men ought to behave, and why it is wrong to behave in certain ways and right to behave in certain other ways. In other words, ethics studies the reasons why certain kinds of actions are morally wrong

and why the other kinds of actions are morally right and commendable. Good and bad (or right and wrong) actions are known in classical moral philosophy as “virtues and vices.” (Omogbe 1993, ix)

Feminist ethics looks at the issue of the oppression and subjugation of women to various forms of suffering and pain as a moral question. The issue hinges on what is right and wrong. It affirms that this oppression is evil, wrong, and ought not to be. It is against human ethics. It offends the fundamental dignity that every human being carries. It depersonalizes the personhood of women and deprives or hinders them from most of the positive contributions they can make to life. This is the vantage point from which ecofeminist ethics launches out. It avers that “Ecofeminist ethics is based on the assumption that the domination of women and nature are morally wrong and ought to be eliminated” (Idjakpo 2014, 99).

Ecofeminist ethics takes up these issues of the oppression meted out against women in relationship to the oppression that the earth or the natural environment has suffered. As women has been made to suffer so also the earth has been made to suffer and they are all as a result of male power or dominance (Ruether 2005, 91). Significantly, it is imperative, as Ruether (2005, 91) says, that

The word ecofeminism was coined in 1972 by Francoise d’Eaubonne who developed the “*Ecologie-Feminism*” group, arguing that “the destruction of the planet is due to the profit motif inherent in male power.” Her 1974 book *Le Feminism ou la mort (Feminism or death)* saw women as central to bringing about an ecological revolution.

For the purpose of this paper, ecofeminist ethics as described by Rosemary Radford Ruether, one of the world’s ecofeminist theologians, is appropriate. She (2005, 91) explicitly presents ecofeminism as:

An interconnection between the domination of women and the domination of nature. This interconnection is typically made on two levels: ideological-cultural and socioeconomic. On the ideological-cultural level women are said to be “closer to nature” than men, more aligned with body, matter, emotions, and the animal world. On the socio-economic level, women are located in the spheres of reproduction, child raising, food preparation, spinning and weaving, cleaning of clothes and houses, that are devalued in relation to the public sphere of male power and culture. My assumption is that the first level is the ideological superstructure for the second. In other words, claiming that women are “naturally” closer to the material world and lack the capacity for intellectual and leadership roles justifies locating them in the devalued sphere of material work and excluding them from higher education and public leadership.

Arising from the issues raised by ecofeminist ethics, it is overtly clear that it has relevance from every society in the world including Nigeria’s Niger Delta that has suffered

from so much environmental degradation as a result of human oil exploration activities rooted in a mindset of dominance over the earth. As a result of this situation in the Niger Delta, it is women who have suffered much. Their means of livelihood such as streams, rivers, and farmlands have been polluted from oil activities. Oil related violence between ethnic militants and oil multinational companies have often hampered them from moving their farm produce to urban centers.

The Niger Delta is a part of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and in the southern part of the country. A description of the Niger Delta can be found in many sources. Here, it is described in the following way: (1) “the largest wetland in Africa”; (2) “the third largest in the world”; (3) it is made up of many ecological zones such as mangrove swamps, fresh water, rainforest, “sandy coastal rich barrier”; and (4) “it covers an area of 7000” square kilometers (Azaiki 2006, 49). Nigerian official records state that the Niger Delta is made up of the following nine states of Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Ondo, Cross River, Rivers, Imo, Akwa Ibom, and Abia (Federal Government of Nigeria 2006, 17).

From an ecofeminist standpoint and humanistic perspective, the place of women cannot be overlooked. Without them environmental management cannot be adequately achieved. The term “environmental management” implies all human activities, events, initiatives, efforts, projects, plans, and their actual implementation that are aimed at protecting or preserving the environment and its resources so that they are used in a sustainable manner. The term environment as defined by the Environmental Protection Act of 1990 indicate that it “consists of all, or any of the following media, namely the air, water, and land; and the medium of air include the air within buildings and the air within other natural or manmade structures above or below” (Stranks 2008, 134). The environment refers to everything that is in existence. It is made up of the human and social environment and the natural environment. It includes all resources such as plants, animals, rocks, rivers, streams, organisms, and the entire ecosystem. The environment is necessary for human survival. Humans have a responsibility to preserve and protect it not only for the good of humans but for the good of the entire cosmic community. All these are implied in environmental management. Management as a word means “the art or act of managing; the manner of directing or of using anything; administration; skillful treatment” (*The Chambers Dictionary* 1994, 1016). Environmental management involves all human acts of using and relating with the earth and all its resources. This from an ecofeminist perspective should be done in such a way that it does not negatively impact on women disproportionately and devalue the earth.

ENVIRONMENTAL SITUATION OF THE NIGER DELTA

The Niger Delta has been in existence for thousands of years before the emergence of crude oil. But it was the discovery of crude oil that has brought it into more prominence. It is equally the emergence of a crude oil economy that has resulted in so many conflicts—conflicts between ethnic militants and oil companies, conflicts between ethnic groups, intra-ethnic conflicts, and environmental conflicts. It is true that conflicts are a necessary part of human existence. It is when these conflicts are not well managed that they result in violence and destruction of human lives, properties, and environmental resources. There is massive youth unemployment in

the Niger Delta, yet within Niger Delta communities, oil companies are enriching themselves with billions of naira and exporting the profits to their home countries. The youths who feel deprived and oppressed often protest. Some of these protests often turn into violence. Youth protests are meant with extreme high handedness of the military power of the state leading to death of young people. Ethnic groups have also fought themselves over boundaries where oil is discovered. They fight over which community should receive payment from oil companies.

Since the discovery of oil, there is hardly any region of the Niger Delta that has not suffered from oil exploration activities. There is often oil spillage in the Niger Delta. This oil spillage destroys plants, animals, and forest resources. It is painful to note that oil companies often blame oil spillage on sabotage and oil thieves. While it is true that some oil spillage are as a result of oil thieves, a great proportion of oil spillage is due to old and decaying pipelines, unmaintained pipelines, weak pipelines, and other outdated oil facilities.

The environment of the Niger Delta is suffering and the nonhuman life in the Niger Delta is subjected to great pain. Various varieties of plants and animals used to be in abundance in the Niger Delta but have been brought into extinction. This author recalls that while he was growing up, there used to be a lot of monkeys in the forests around his village of birth and other villages such as Ovwor and in Otogor, where he grew up. Passing by the roads across these villages, you can hear various species of birds singing and the sound of various animals. This is no longer so. The excessive noise of oil exploration activities such as drilling, excavation of pits, seismic activities, felling of trees have all driven these animals out of their natural environment. Day after day in many places of the Niger Delta, the night fire and heat from oil rings and gas flaring is unbearable. People in nearby villages where there is gas flaring can hardly sleep. They are also prone to various illnesses and diseases.

In the midst of the environmental problems taking place in the Niger Delta, women have been put through much pressure. In many places, they are responsible for domestic chores that involve usage of natural resources. They go out to fetch water for their homes, fetch firewood for cooking, and participate in farming activities, planting, and harvesting crops. They engage in various trades to take care of their families. Whatever happens to the environment in the Niger Delta has a direct impact on them. When their farmlands and streams are polluted, they are directly affected. When there is any form of violence, they cannot go to the farm or market places. Their meager resources are often spent in taking care of victims of violence and oil exploration activities. No wonder in the past, women have from time to time protested oil exploration activities in the Niger Delta. They have equally carried out other activities to mitigate the impact of oil exploration. Some of these are hereafter examined.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

Despite the suffering that women have undergone, they have played a prominent role in acting for the protection of the environment in the Niger Delta. An examination of the place of women in the environmental management must begin by looking at some of the basic activities that women are involved in on a daily basis. Women are “daily

managers of the living environment” and “they have profound knowledge of the plants, animals and ecological processes around them” (Dankelman and Davidson 1988, xi). This, very often, is ignored in many writings on women in the Niger Delta as if they are not important.

Naturally the female species are endowed with nurturing of all life forms. Traditionally in the Niger Delta region, women are the managers of the environment and ecosystem resources. They are responsible for the day to day running of their homes (requiring for continuous interaction with the ecosystem services; fetching water, firewood, and fodder), farmlands, forestry, and fishery resources. They account for about 90% of food production, processing, and marketing (Chinweze, Abiola-Oloke, and Jideani 2009, 170).

Two of the foremost activities that women are involved in are farming and fishing. There are many villages in the Niger Delta. In these villages, traditional methods of farming and fishing are still prominent. The land was protected through shifting cultivation that allows the land to lie fallow and restore and renews itself. This is quite different from modern agricultural means that may be prominent in cities where the land is never allowed to fallow and the land is farmed with fertilizer which chemically degrades the land. There is a need to encourage small scale traditional subsistent agriculture as it was earth friendly. The fact that traditional subsistent agriculture that relied on natural nutrient protects the environment is acknowledged by many authors. As related by some other scholars, big is not necessarily beautiful (Schumacher 2011). Women have taken care of nature through their traditional lifestyles which did less damage to the environment, but with the coming of so-called mechanized agriculture, nature had become more endangered. Vandana Shiva (2009, 274) is right in arguing that there are economic biases targeted at women, nature, and traditional peoples. She (2009, 275) writes that their organic agriculture is considered to be unproductive and primitive in preference for modern agricultural technologies whereas it was traditional organic agriculture that favoured “nature’s cycle of renewability.” Philosophers need to question ideologies that see development only in terms of use of modern industrial technologies and that refuses to take into cognizance the achievements of women in traditional societies.

The above does not in any way say that there is no value in mechanized agriculture, but mechanized agriculture must be fashioned in such a way that it becomes more earth-friendly. Being earth-friendly protects and preserves the employment of women as farmers. It preserves the land from poisonous fertilizers. In terms of fishing, there are equally many women in the Niger Delta who are fisherwomen. They continue to live by good traditional values. They fish without using chemicals to kill the fish. They were also mindful of fishing for mature fishes and not fingerlings. This may look insignificant but they contributed to environmental protection in a significant way.

The household and lifestyle of women have been greatly impacted since the discovery of oil. Some men have travelled out of their homes in search of oil jobs often to the neglect of their wives and children. The influx of foreign workers into the Niger

Delta has also heightened social vices such as prostitution, human trafficking, and so forth. Because the land and resources that women depend on for sustenance have been ravaged by the activities of oil companies, women have protested the activities of oil companies. The following two situations enunciated by Terisa Turner reveal that women have not been silent in the devastation of their lifestyles by male dominated oil companies:

In the 1980s women attacked oil industry installation and personnel throughout Nigeria such as the 1984 Ogharefe women's uprising and the 1986 Ekpan women uprising. In the oil centre of Warri where both took place, women do most of the peasant farming but land is controlled by men. The study argues that oil-based industrialization superimposed on this local political economy a new regime which dispossessed women of access to farmland. Women responded by attacking the oil industry with varying degrees of success. In the 1984 uprising women seized control of a US oil corporation's production site, threw off their clothes and with this curse won their demands. These had to do with financial compensation for pollution and alienation of land. In the 1986 uprising women shut down the core of the whole region's oil industry. They were less successful in winning their demands for land compensation and oil industry jobs (Turner 2007, 499).

Turner (2007, 499) noted that the 1984 struggle, because it was against a foreign oil company, succeeded from the gender solidarity of the women but that of 1986 suffered as most of the time men sided with the state against the women. She notes that very often when old men receive benefit from the capitalist exploitative foreign oil companies, it is women who loss out as their land right is infringed upon and very often are deprived and pushed out of local governance. It should be noted that

About 58 protests have been organized by women in the region to fight neglect, isolation, hunger, poverty, unemployment, and mismanagement of oil resources. The protests by women against mismanagement and exploitation of oil deposits in the Niger Delta were played down by many commentators on the problem. (Olakunle 2010, 134).

It is indisputable to doubt whether the protests of women against environmental injustice and degradation are necessary. Without protests, oil companies will continue to carry out their exploitative activities without care for native culture and the environment. Both the efforts of women in the Niger Delta, national NGOs, and other international organizations and groups have made oil companies more sensitive to a certain degree. Some other protests that women are involved in showing their concern for environmental justice and peace are the 14 July 2002 protest in Escravos by 600 women against 700 Chevron Texaco workers, the 1991 Okutukutu and Etegwé women protest of overflowing for their farmlands as a result of oil related activities, and the

Obunagha community protests of Shell social failures (Dadiowei 2003, no. 7). What the women are asking for are

...clean environment conducive for survival, jobs for their children, safe drinking water, hospital, pollution of the rivers and creeks, low farm yields, no fishes and crayfish, etc. The above issues that women raised are a clear indication that oil production which is the most crucial factor in Nigeria has “impacted beyond endurance on the people of the Niger Delta.” (Dadiowei 2003, no. 7)

It will be a mistake to think that women have not actively participated in environmental management in the Niger Delta. They have. It is just that often in a society that is still male-dominated, their activities are often ignored. Olakunle (2010, 143 and 146) writes that women have educated themselves through the internet, satellite, television, etc., on how other oil bearing communities such as Texas have developed whereas their own communities are neglected and so they have engaged in “community sensitization, press war, civil disobedience and lobby,” and initiated a peace meeting between the government and oil communities. Every form of resistance even when small is important and eventually has colossal effects on society (Ekine 2008, 70). Sokari Ekine (2008, 71) argues:

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 surround them. These acts of resistance are not just for the local cultures but are also important in the socioeconomic and political context. (Ekine 2008, 71)

CONCLUSION

The role of women in struggling for an environmentally sustainable Niger Delta will be reenergized if they are informed by the values and ethics of ecofeminism. Among insights from ecofeminism that can help in empowering women towards greater environmental preservation are: (1) women are ontologically equal to men and not inferior to them, (2) women’s experiences need to be highlighted and promoted, and (3) women’s understanding and management of natural resources remains helpful. Realize that ontological equality does not mean that men and women will play exactly the same roles or functions in society. But be mindful that the dignity and humanity of each need to be validated and respected. And the viable aspects of each culture that enhance this dignity should be upheld.

There is no doubt that more forceful efforts will be needed by women to engage the government, oil companies, and their communities to their struggles. Since their lives and livelihoods have been adversely impacted by oil exploration and degraded the Niger Delta, they should spare no effort in confronting socioeconomic environmental injustice in the land. What women need above all is to reawaken their self-image and personhood in recognizing that they are ontologically equal to men. Men equally have suffered as a result of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. What is needed is not only sister-sister solidarity but also solidarity between men and women to confront the evils of environmental degradation. As Gabriel (2004, 9) remarks:

Women can and should assist in checking pollution of rivers, creeks and ponds (around them) with sewage and garbage. They can form vigilante groups, enlighten members of their communities and develop other ways of disposal that are not harmful to aquatic life. There is a need for women to organize workshops, seminars and conferences regularly so that all and sundry will be acquainted with environmental issues. In this way, they complement the activities of government and other agencies in this regard.

It is not that women have not done some of these things, but as a popular proverb says, “the greatest room in the world is the room for improvement.” Women should not rest on their laurels or achievements. They should intensify and push hard ahead with their call for more justice in the Niger Delta.

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Submitted: 16 July 2015; revised: 24 March 2016