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‘I acted like a man’: exploring female ex-insurgents’ narratives on Nigeria’s oil insurgency

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This paper explores how a small sample of female ex-insurgents make sense of their engagement in Nigeria’s oil insurgency. The study is informed by three key questions: How did Delta women join the insurgency? Why did they join? How do they frame their participation? The paper analyses the prevalence of a masculinising rhetoric among participants. The majority of participants view their roles in the insurgency as antithetical to their gender. The implications of these findings are explored. Overall, the paper contributes to the growing body of work on women’s engagement in armed conflict as perpetrators rather than victims of violence.

Keywords: Niger Delta ; women and political violence ; oil insurgency ; Nigeria

[« J’ai agi comme un homme » : l’étude des histoires des ex-insurgées sur l’insurrection liée au pétrole au Nigeria.] Cet article examine comment quelques ex-insurgées donnent du sens à leur engagement dans l’insurrection liée au pétrole au Nigéria. Cette étude tente de répondre à trois questions clés : Comment est-ce que les femmes du Delta ont rejoint l’insurrection ? Pourquoi l’ont-elles rejoint ? Comment est-ce qu’elles formulent leur participation ? L’article analyse la prévalence d’une rhétorique masculinisante parmi les participants. La majorité des participants voit son rôle dans l’insurrection comme opposé à son genre. Les implications de ces résultats sont examinées. Dans l’ensemble, l’article contribue à la masse croissante de travail sur l’engagement des femmes dans les conflits armés, où elles sont considérées comme des responsables de la violence plutôt que comme des victimes.

Mots-clés : Delta du Niger ; les femmes et la violence politique ; insurgence liée au pétrole ; Nigéria

Introduction

This paper explores how female participants make sense of their engagement in Nigeria’s oil insurgency. Insurgent groups in Nigeria and their violent repertoires of protest have deservedly received scholarly focus (see Okonta 2006; Courson 2011). For instance, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the insurgency’s clearing house, featured prominently in a special issue of *African Security* (Vol. 4 Issue 1). However, scholarly attention has almost exclusively focused on the activities of *male* insurgents (see Courson 2009; Okonta 2006) to the exclusion of female members of such groups. Scholars have overwhelmingly focused on women’s roles as non-violent protesters (Ukeje 2004). Delta women have largely been portrayed as the ‘silent ones’ (George 2008, 1195).

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Academic narrative of the Delta insurgency has centred on traditional roles of women as caregivers, providers of sexual services; issues of socio-economic survival such as food production; non-violent demonstrations for economic empowerment (Okorie and Williams 2009); and silence as resistance (Ekine 2008). These areas are some of the ways in which women have been involved in the Delta crisis.

However, exclusive focus on these areas and failure to interrogate women who were engaged in violent agitation deny women the recognition they deserve as agentic entities. It also reinforces the essentialist natural peace-maker discourse. Such narrow focus undervalues women's contributions and fails to acknowledge how they demonstrated capacity to draw on available resources, constraints and opportunities to shape the structures affecting their lives. One exception is possibly Turner and Brownhill's (2004) analysis of the use of nudity as a form of protest by Delta women.

Three main questions inform this study: How did Delta women join the insurgency? Why did they join? How do they frame their participation? Analysing these issues may help in understanding participants' standpoint and formulating relevant policies to address their grievances (Bøås and Hatløy 2008). This study attempts to unpack the experiences of a small number of ex-insurgent women: how such experiences are understood, narrativised, and challenge entrenched structures. The paper is divided into four parts. The first section focuses on the data and methods. The second section focuses on *how* participants joined the insurgency. The third section analyses *why* participants joined the insurgency; while the fourth section interrogates how ex-insurgent women frame their participation. The concluding section elucidates some implications of Delta women's participation in Nigeria's oil insurgency.

Data and methods

This study draws on qualitative multi-actor primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected in two phases. Phase 1 involved two extended field trips to Nigeria's Delta region in 2009 and 2010. The fieldwork took place in five of the nine Niger Delta states (Bayelsa, Edo, Delta, Rivers and Cross River) as well as Lagos and Abuja. This phase involved interviews and focus group discussions with six sets of participants. These are oil-producing community members, environmental justice/political activists, journalists, military authorities, representatives of two women-focused non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the Delta, and male ex-insurgents. The first phase of data collection involved 42 interviews and 13 focus group discussions (FGDs), which yielded 114 participants. This figure includes 25 community members who were women, two women NGO leaders and 42 males, who were members of various insurgent groups and engaged actively in kidnapping, illegal oil bunkering or theft and related activities.

All but three of the insurgents were undergoing rehabilitation under a government-sponsored amnesty programme in 2010 when they participated in the study. The programme entailed receiving state pardon after insurgents surrendered their arms, and renounced violence. The programme involved multi-faceted training (ideational and vocational) aimed at reintegrating ex-insurgents into society.

The larger study, 'The politics of kidnapping oil workers in Nigeria', was designed partly as an androcentric exercise vis-à-vis interactions with ex-insurgents. It became immediately clear in the course of the fieldwork that women were involved in violent repertoires of protest in more sophisticated ways than had been envisaged. That realisation led to analysis of women's roles based primarily on accounts of male ex-insurgents (Oriola 2012) and necessitated the second phase of the project in 2012.

The second phase involved interviews with 14 female ex-insurgents and one prominent political/environmental justice activist in Rivers and Lagos States. The social location of the participants provides a compelling backdrop to their engagement in the struggle. All participants grew up in the Niger Delta region. They witnessed gas flaring and pollution of rivers that served as sources of water to their communities. All 14 ex-insurgents described their experiences with chronic poverty. Some described losing family members to minor illnesses in part because of lack of access to affordable health care. Several of them had limited educational opportunities. This is accentuated by the fact that four of the participants never had any formal education. This theme of blocked opportunity played a role in their decision to be part of the struggle and is discussed in greater detail in the paper.

All but one participant in this round of data collection were undergoing rehabilitation under the government's amnesty programme. Therefore, interviews were conducted at locations where 14 participants were receiving various forms of vocational training. Only one activist was interviewed at a location outside the government's rehabilitation scheme. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was semi-structured.¹ Overall, this paper uses data collected from interviews and FGDs with 129 participants from three field exercises conducted between 2009 and 2012. However, data from the second phase of the research are privileged in the following analysis mainly because the second phase exclusively involved women all but one of whom were involved in perpetrating violence.

Table 1 shows that the ages of participants range from 24 to 45 years. Eight out of 14 ex-insurgents served as combatants while six performed domestic duties such as cooking. They are all from the core Niger Delta states – Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta States – and belong to the Ijaw ethnic group, the largest of all the political groups in Nigeria. The oil insurgency in Nigeria is essentially an Ijaw-led insurgency (Okonta 2006). The youngest member of the group, aged 24, joined an unspecified camp in Rivers at 14 years of age, although she began with low-level oil bunkering. She is the only participant who became part of the insurgency before reaching adulthood. This information is important for reasons explicated below.

In addition, primary data are supplemented by reference to official emails from Jomo Gbomo, the spokesperson of MEND. The author was one of 50 persons and/or organisations around the world who received these emails.

Limitations

Some caveats are necessary at this stage. First, despite attempts to interview as many female ex-insurgents as possible, the research process involved only 14 of such ex-insurgent women. This is a rather small number and dictates that findings from this study be interpreted with caution. Therefore, there will be little to no attempt to generalise findings from this study. The small number is partly due to extreme difficulty involved in accessing the female ex-insurgents undergoing skill acquisition programmes as part of the amnesty deal. The researcher was encouraged by officials responsible for training women ex-insurgents at one of the sites of this study to 'interview the boys and leave the girls alone.' Issues surrounding restricted access to female ex-insurgents speak to several broader issues. One of these is patriarchy. The approach of the amnesty programme officials was rather paternalistic, although they owed participants a duty of care.

Second, possible gender effects on the interview process must be emphasised – in this case male interviewer–female interviewee effect. The impact of gender on social scientific research is complex and continues to garner scholarly focus. For instance, two female researchers, Sampson and Thomas (2003, 177), demonstrate how a number of males in

Table 1. Participants' bio-data.

Female ex-insurgent participants	Insurgent camp	Role	Level of education	Age during interview in 2012	Age at initiation into insurgency	Marital status	Children	Contact for joining insurgency	Ethnic group
Interviewee 1; participant # 117*	Camp in Bayelsa (Not specified)	Combatant	No education	33	26	Married	2	Husband (insurgent member)	Ijaw
Interviewee 2; participant # 118	Camp in Rivers State (Not specified)	Combatant	No education	32	25	Married	3	Husband (insurgent leader)	Ijaw
Interviewee 3; participant # 120	Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPFF)	Combatant	High school	36	28	Single	0	Sister's boyfriend	Ijaw
Interviewee 4; participant # 121	Camp in Delta State (Not specified)	Domestic duties	No education	45	38	Married	4	Brother	Ijaw
Interviewee 5; participant # 122	No response	Combatant	Two years of post-secondary	30	24	Married	1	No response	Ijaw
Interviewee 6; participant # 123	Escravos (Not specified)	Combatant	Elementary school	27	20	Single	1	Brother	Ijaw
Interviewee 7; participant # 124	Camp in Rivers State (Not specified)	Combatant	Elementary school	31	25	Single	0	Boyfriend	Ijaw
Interviewee 8; participant # 125	Commander Ebi's Camp	Combatant	High school	30	22	Married	2	Sister's boyfriend	Ijaw
Interviewee 9; participant # 126	Camp in Bayelsa (Not specified)	Combatant	High school	27	21	Single	0	Brother	Ijaw
Interviewee 10; participant # 127	Camp in Rivers (Not specified)	Domestic duties	High school	24	14	Single	0	Sister's boyfriend	Ijaw
Interviewee 11; participant # 128	Camp in Delta State (Not specified)	Domestic duties	No education	28	22	Single	2	Boyfriend	Ijaw
Interviewee 12; participant #129	NDPFF	Domestic duties	High school	32	26	Single	1	Boyfriend	Ijaw

Table 1. Continued.

Female ex-insurgent participants	Insurgent camp	Role	Level of education	Age during interview in 2012	Age at initiation into insurgency	Marital status	Children	Contact for joining insurgency	Ethnic group
Interviewee 13; participant # 130	NDPFF	Domestic duties	High school	27	21	Single	1	Brother	Ijaw
Interviewee 14; participant # 131	Camp in Bayelsa (Not specified)	Domestic duties	High school	29	23	Single	0	Boyfriend	Ijaw

* Participant numbering continues from previous research phase.

their seafarer interviews made ‘unsolicited emotional disclosures’ to them apparently because of gender stereotypes of women as ‘good listeners’. It is possible that the female participants whose narratives are analysed below relied on a reverse-gender stereotype – the notion that men are not good listeners. The impact of such assumptions on this study remains unknown, although participants did seem to speak without inhibitions for the most part. It is possible, therefore, that my gender as a male may have had an effect on the responses of participants. For instance, I had a particularly difficult interview session with one participant (a 30-year-old with two years of post-secondary education, married) who gave terse responses to questions that elicited robust responses from other participants. One part of the interview may suffice:

Interviewer: Tell me what the creeks, the atmosphere of the creeks, how would you describe it to somebody who has never lived there. It’s one thing to go there and stay for a few days, it’s another thing entirely to fully experience it.

Respondent: I don’t know how to describe that one.

Interviewer: Okay, that’s that, that’s that. Tell me about the reaction of your family, your dad, your mum, your brothers, your sisters, how did they take your participation? How did you inform them and was there encouragement from them?

Respondent: Nothing, but my dad was not happy.

Interviewer: Why?

Respondent: Why? You should ask him.

Interviewer: Yes, that is why I want to ask you. I have to be careful that any question I ask you, you have to be comfortable with, I don’t want to ask if you are not comfortable with any question.

I ended the interview earlier than planned and had the distinct feeling that she was either generally taciturn or uncomfortable with me. One of the officials at the training centre where the interview was conducted expressed surprise and assured me that she was quite an engaging fellow among her fellow trainees and officials.

Third, social situations often inadvertently conjure power differentials. Such differentials manifest themselves in level of education and ethnic affiliation in this study. The level of education of female ex-insurgents interviewed in this study ranged from no formal schooling to two years of post-secondary education. This may also affect the findings of the study in ways that are not fully knowable. What was clear was that the participants seemed to narrate their experiences as articulately as they could. The impact of Nigeria’s ethnic politics – particularly my Yoruba ethnic identity – on the broader research process in an Ijaw-dominated area, is one that I have noted elsewhere (Oriola and Haggerty 2012).

Fourth, the fact that the participants were undergoing a rehabilitation exercise might have also influenced their response to questions, particularly their involvement in violence. In other words, their accounts of their involvement in the insurgency could have been shaped by the environment in which the interviews occurred.

How did Delta women join the insurgency?

Cases of abduction of young women and girls, subsequent rape and incorporation into rebel groups or immediate disposal of women were rife in wars in Sierra Leone (MacKenzie

2009), Liberia (Fuest 2008), and Democratic Republic of Congo (Mazurana et al. 2001). Sexual violence during the Rwandan genocide, for instance, involved opportunistic assaults, sexual enslavement and genocidal rape (Mullins 2009, 719). More recently, in North East Nigeria, Boko Haram has been kidnapping, sexually abusing, murdering and using as slaves hundreds of women and girls. How individuals join a group, particularly non-state violent groups, may help shed light on their experiences and the degree to which they exercised their agency, although such decisions are not made in a vacuum.

None of the women in this study was forcefully made to join any insurgent group as was the experience in Sierra Leone, for instance (Coulter 2008). This is not to suggest unfettered autonomy in the participants' decision to join various insurgent camps but experiences elsewhere indicate patterns of kidnapping and gunpoint conscription of young boys and girls. This trend is absent in the Delta conflict between insurgent groups and the Nigerian state. As earlier noted, only one of the participants was below 18 years when she joined an insurgent group (see Table 1). This information is important because of the peculiarities of the Niger Delta conflict.

First, the geographic location of the conflict is essentially the creeks of the oil-rich Delta region although insurgents have managed to execute car bombings and similar attacks in cities like Abuja and Lagos – areas that are outside the Delta region.² Therefore, the women and young girls in the social spaces occupied by the insurgents are part of the population that insurgents claim they are fighting for. Carrying out systematic sexual violence against them would make them lose the relation of trust that is fundamental for continued support of the local people (see Hobsbawm 1969).

There is also an extra-theoretical factor at play in the Delta: most insurgent groups rely on older post-menopausal women for spiritual protection. This protection is believed to be conferred through sacred gels and ointments prepared by senior women of Egbesu³ priestly background. Insurgents believe that sexual interactions with women serve to neutralise the protective power of the gods (Oriola 2012). Therefore, only off-duty insurgents are permitted to engage in sexual interactions outside their operational base. Insurgents who have engaged in sexual liaisons with women have to be sanctified through the rituals superintended by older women before being readmitted to the camps at the creeks. This is a fundamentally gendered notion. Most protective measures are geared towards the safety of male insurgents. Female insurgents are also encouraged not to have close interactions with male insurgents but the focus appears to be on male insurgents' sexual liaisons. There are several insurgent groups that do not enlist women as members, though they may use their services for reconnaissance purposes. Many insurgent leaders believe that the mere presence of a woman of the reproductive age bracket destroys the protective shield of the gods on their operational grounds, particularly during their monthly cycles (male insurgent leader in Edo State). The earth or bare ground is viewed as a living being in most African cosmologies.

The unintended consequence or benefit of these beliefs is that questions about systematic sexual violence by insurgents against women at the creeks were quickly dismissed by female insurgents and community members who were interviewed. It is worth noting that male insurgents were often under strict regulations not to engage in sexual activities, as the protective power of Egbesu would be eroded. This might have also been sheer unwillingness to discuss a sensitive matter.

In addition, the nature of the 'enemy' is crucial. The Nigerian military personnel and police officers – representatives of the state – are constructed as the enemy. These agents are predominantly male and drawn from all parts of Nigeria, including the Delta. Therefore, there is no classic 'enemy women', such as is the case in the Rwandan genocide,

to violate. Those who are accused of engaging in rape and other forms of sexual violence against Delta women are (paradoxically) often state agents rather than insurgents (see Omotola 2009).

Nonetheless, how female ex-insurgents in this study joined various camps is indicative of unequal power relations between men and women. This power dynamic appears to have extended to the armed struggle. It manifests in the fact that 13 out of 14 female participants were invited to join an insurgent group by a male figure in their lives (see Table 1). The exception was a participant who declined to explain how she joined the struggle. Four categories of male figures – boyfriends, sisters' boyfriends, brothers or husbands who were insurgent leaders or members – played a huge role in participants' involvement in the struggle. This finding is consistent with the available literature. Daly, for instance, analyses five categories of women lawbreakers in the US – harmed-and-harming women, battered women, street women, drug-connected women and other women (Daly 1992, 27–28) – to explicate how they got involved in criminality. The analysis demonstrates overarching influence of male figures in the women's lives mainly as partners, fathers, drug dealers and/or abusers on the path to law-breaking. Steffensheimer, Schwartz and Roche (2013) also find that women's pathways to corporate crime in the US is 'relational'. This underscores the importance of relationships. For instance, one-third of women defendants in the study had personal relationships, mostly spousal in nature, with the male masterminds (*Ibid.*). This relational dynamic appears relevant to participating in political violence, specifically, engagement of women as insurgents in Nigeria's oil conflict.

This finding regarding relational aspects of women's involvement in crime is not new but raises important issues concerning participants' agency. First, to what extent did the women *desire* to be part of such a life-threatening exercise? Second, gender roles appear to have been reinforced during the insurgency. It is worth noting that six participants were engaged in domestic duties, such as preparing meals and supplying water. Third, what choice did participants have after joining such groups and could they have voluntarily withdrawn membership without threat to life or other adverse consequences? These questions are important because aside from the obvious idea that people should have a say in deciding whether they wish to join a group whose activities pose a risk to life, a trajectory in feminist scholarship has often treated women who are engaged in state armies and insurgent collectivities as agents who have transcended the strictures of patriarchy by transgressing the boundaries of femininity.

In addition, participants argued that their male counterparts treated them as 'their sisters' (female ex-insurgent leader, 36 years old, high school educated, single with no children). Gender dynamics during the insurgency appear to have had two main strands: first, those who performed domestic duties were rarely armed and were prevented from participating in 'action' (28-year-old single mother, not formally educated, performed domestic duties). Their movement in the creeks was restricted although they often mingled with civilians to procure food items (45-year-old married mother of four children, not formally educated, performed domestic duties). Second, women who served as combatants helped to defend insurgent camps as 'gunmen', escorted their colleagues, particularly males in dangerous missions, and engaged in shoot-outs with state agents over oil infrastructure. Such women also served as emissaries in the risky oil-for-arms trade at the creeks. Female combatants narrated stories of initial reluctance by male insurgents to allow them participate in combat (female ex-insurgent leader, 36 years old, high school educated, single with no children). The women had to prove that they were capable of combat roles (33-year-old married mother of two children, not formally educated, combatant). Both sets of women, however, positively construe the texture of relationship with their

male colleagues. They seem to find unproblematic the idea of being treated as male insurgents' sisters (27-year-old, single, high school educated, combatant). This assumed sibling relationship can be seen as helpful given conditions during the insurgency. However, it can also be viewed as another extension of patriarchy.

Why did they join?

Several studies have explored the reasons why insurgents in the Delta region began full-blown amphibious asymmetrical warfare against the Nigerian state (Oriola 2013). Only a few of the studies involved direct face-to-face interactions with insurgents. In addition, the reasons adduced for participation by male insurgents are often extrapolated to female insurgents, if the latter are ever mentioned. This is theoretically and methodologically disingenuous. First, this presupposes that violence is a male *thing*. Second, males have been historically depicted and ostensibly socialised as defenders of society, thereby women's participation may be perceived as aberration. Third, such androcentric studies contribute to rendering invisible, hence unacknowledged, female participation in such exercises. Fourth, males and females are often differentially positioned in society; therefore, the reasons for taking part in such exercises may be divergent along gender lines. Fifth, going by Western cultural feminist thought (Gilligan 1982, for instance), the discursive understanding of what participation means in such groups may also demonstrate gender contours.

Participants in this study indicated four major reasons why they decided to take up arms against the Nigerian state and, in the case of one individual, to defend the right of other actors to do so. These include state repression, marginalisation of the oil-rich Delta region, blocked opportunity and the quest for Nigeria's development. These four factors demonstrate 'intersecting logics of the macro and micro' (Bøås and Hatløy 2008, 44). These rationales are congruent with those of male insurgents with one notable exception: overwhelming concern for the welfare of others, particularly children. Female insurgents are more likely to claim to have joined the struggle because of the need to secure the future of their children. One female ex-insurgent puts it succinctly:

So it's like all of us are struggling to live, only God is giving us his help. That is why I marry early, my first daughter is about 9 years now. This struggling that I pass through [. . .], I will not let my children pass through that struggle; I will make sure I give them the best; that is why I joined the camp. (33-year-old, no education, married with two children)

Another female ex-insurgent (32 years old, no education, married with three children) argues that 'me for my own, as I dey here, I no go school. I dey want say make them train my children for school' ('I did not go to school but I want the government to send my children to school'). This contrasts with the opinions of male insurgents, who often emphasise the excitement of the insurgency and their prowess in the creeks as well as what they have accomplished individually. A former male insurgent argues that:

I believe this struggle was what gave us a voice and without this struggle most persons that are known abroad, within and outside this country wouldn't have been known. (Male ex-insurgent, 38 years old, one of the leaders in the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDFF), single with no children)

Male insurgents are more likely to discursively present their participation as a fight for freedom – without specifying what freedom means – and the need for personal fulfilment.

The discourses of both males and females are generally instrumental. However, male ex-insurgents' discourse may be viewed as personalised-instrumental, while female ex-insurgents' narratives appear non-personalised-instrumental. Male insurgents emphasise how they have been able to advance themselves, while females focus on how they now occupy a social space courtesy of the government's amnesty programme that enables them to guarantee good education for their children and welfare of their family. This speaks to the possibility of 'female gains' (Fuest 2008, 202) following periods of armed conflict.

State repression is a central reason provided by female insurgents for their involvement. This has been a fundamental issue in the Delta movement. The restoration of democratic governance in 1999 after decades of military misrule did not translate to a softening of approach in dealing with the Delta issue. President Olusegun Obasanjo ordered Nigerian troops into the Odi community to curb growing acts of resistance against oil extraction and environmental pollution on 22 November 1999. An estimated 2483 civilians are believed to have died as Odi was reduced to rubble at the end of 'Operation HAKURI II' (Courson 2006). One John Agim of the Nigerian army boasted that:

The intention was just a show of force to let them [Odi people] know they cannot continue like that. I think that has been achieved . . . No village will want to go through what that village went through. It has been taught a lesson.⁴

Oronto Douglas, a respected environmental rights activist put the mood of the Delta people succinctly: 'I think people will not want to take it quietly. They may want to act' (Nwaja 1999) Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, condemned the government's 'revenge mission' and berated the president for 'laying a human habitation to waste . . . [and] unleashing the animalism of the military on Odi' (*Ibid.*)

Other acts of repression in Liama in 2001 and 2002, Okerenkoko and Gbaramatu in 2003 and Odiama in 2005 led to further loss of lives and property (Human Rights Watch 2002). These acts served the dyadic purpose of tarnishing the government's image and generating sympathy for the insurgents. A pervasive pattern of wanton killings in the Delta by the Nigerian military had been firmly established by the time Agge community in Bayelsa State was invaded by operatives of the Joint Task Force (JTF) in August 2008.⁵ Evidence of radicalisation of young people began to grow. Oyefusi (2007, 16) studied 1337 youth spread across 18 communities in the Delta and found that 80.84% demonstrated a high level of grievance against the state and 36% demonstrated a 'willingness or propensity to take up arms against the state'.

The marginalisation of the Niger Delta was also a major rationale provided by female ex-insurgent participants. This includes the lack of basic social services, environmental degradation and destruction of the livelihood of the Delta people. One of the participants points out that:

My organization . . . looked at it that the federal government of Nigeria is marginalizing us, oppressing us, taking our rights away from us. We want to fight for freedom to take our rights back home. (Female ex-insurgent leader, 36 years old, high school educated, single with no children)

She defends the main insurgent group, MEND, and an insurgent leader, Tompolo, believed to have formed MEND, which has carried out several bombings, among other insurgent

acts. She argues that that they are ‘not kidnappers. Tompolo formed MEND when he was neglected and marginalized’ (*Ibid.*).

Another common narrative among female ex-insurgents is their frustrations caused by blocked opportunity. One participant (female ex-insurgent, 45 years old, no education, married with four children) argues that ‘Because you know that time many of us been they vex [got angry] because we no get this kind opportunity, so we been they vex. Even we have children, if na die self make we die comot here, make federal government do something for us, hmm, so we been they fight like that, hmm’ (‘We were angry because we did not have this type of opportunity. Although we had children, we were ready to die to leave the situation. That was why we fought’). The participants were concerned about the lack of access to schools, skill acquisition programmes and employment opportunities. Evidence from the extreme violence of organisations like Boko Haram in North East Nigeria and from countries such as Nicaragua, Namibia, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, Iran, El Salvador and Algeria supports the significance of blocked socio-economic opportunities in such insurgencies (Sajjad 2004).

Another major rationale provided by female insurgents involves major concerns over the perceived lack of development of Nigeria, particularly the Delta region. The participants demonstrate a keen awareness of Nigeria’s socio-political configuration and resource distribution. One prominent political activist argued that:

if things don’t change and if people don’t get justice and the Niger Delta is not developed . . . we don’t have leaders that deliver good governance and the dividends of democracy to our people . . . then I think everybody in Nigeria except me is deceiving themselves because Nigeria will break up . . . (60-year-old, college educated prominent Niger Delta activist)

These views were widely shared even by those who could not articulate their sentiments the way the participant above did. One participant (female ex-insurgent, 27-year-old, no education, single) was concerned about perceived ethnically skewed resource distribution in Nigeria. She argues that ‘na we get everything, na we get the oil, but Hausa people na dem dey enjoy our things, na him make we been dey fight them’ (‘We own the oil but the Hausa people [the largest ethnic group in Nigeria] are the ones benefiting from it. That was why we fought’). This statement indicates awareness of the problematic of resource distribution in Nigeria, which largely favours the three major ethnic groups – Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo.

Overall, participants demonstrate *resource frustration* – a resource-rich community’s collective feeling and outburst of disenchantment and alienation from the body politic because of its inability to benefit from its natural endowment (Oriola 2013). Nonetheless, explaining engagement of participants in Nigeria’s oil insurgency through structural factors such as state repression, marginalisation of the Delta region, blocked opportunity and the quest for Nigeria’s development risks becoming deterministic. These conditions were experienced by millions of similarly situated people who did not resort to violent forms of protest. Therefore, these structural conditions are necessary but insufficient ingredients for mobilisation.

How do they frame their participation?

Dissident rhetoric is indicative of the current state and future trajectories of contentious politics and events (Davenport and Eads 2001). It provides insight into the lifeworld of participants: the aetiology of the social problem, rationale of participant engagement, their

subjective understanding of the issues and solutions. Dissident rhetoric constitutes ‘raw’ narratives of the goings-on. This has the potential to be more nuanced and arguably more reliable than public relations literature which is generally produced by leaders of insurgent groups rather than rank-and-file members. How do female participants frame their engagement in the oil insurgency, which arguably poses one of the greatest existential threats to the Nigerian state since the Civil War of 1967–1970?

Masculinisation of women’s engagement

Female participants were engaged in Nigeria’s oil insurgency as ammunition merchants or gunrunning, spies, armed combatants, mediators in kidnapping episodes, spiritual fortifiers and providers of culinary services, among other roles (Oriola 2012). Many of these duties may be considered non-traditional women’s roles. Nonetheless, participants often *masculinise* their involvement in the insurgency. The women recognise that they transcended gendered traditional boundaries but often describe their actions as archetypal men’s actions and not for *real* women. A high-profile participant who served in a mediatory capacity in the Delta struggle argues that:

I am amazed when people meet me and they go, wow you are a woman and I’m like what did you expect? . . . That’s the way the world is, that’s the way our society is . . . perhaps yes traditionally, the roles I’m playing, the things I’m doing, the way I speak, the fearlessness I exhibit, some people call it recklessness, some foolishness, all those things that I exhibit are *manly ways of things*. (Emphasis added)

She adds that ‘Looking back, I think my father raised me as if I was a boy.’ This well-educated participant arguably appears to share patriarchal notions of gendered political actions. She describes her engagement in the struggle in a masculinised discourse even though she had been involved in ways that very few men had ever been. Her standpoint is decidedly oscillatory. On one hand, she explicates her participation in a masculinised manner, yet believes that women’s engagement in political violence should not be a surprise: ‘if a woman is pushed to that point, I really don’t see that she has a choice.’ The idea that her actions constitute ‘manly ways of doing things’ and that she was raised by her father ‘as if I was a boy’ feeds into and reinforces the very social structure her actions purportedly challenge.

Insurgent women also share these beliefs. A 36-year-old female insurgent widely regarded as a ‘General’ because she commanded a group of about 100 armed women provides a common narrative among participants in the study:

Interviewer: What were your roles?

Respondent: I acted like a man. I do all things with the men. I go with them anywhere they go, and I’m the only one that took Egbesu . . . Other women are just following and they don’t want to take power called Egbesu . . . Other women are just followers . . .

Interviewer: During the militancy did you feel like you had more freedom to be yourself; and have powers that you could not have if you were not part of the militancy? Did you feel empowered?

Respondent: I was happy because I volunteered to fight for freedom for Ijawland. I was so happy.

Interviewer: So you felt that freedom?

Respondent: I felt like a man.

Interviewer: When you say you felt like a man, can you give me a sense of that feeling, an idea of what it means to feel like a man?

Respondent: When I say I feel like a man, I mean I do things like a man, very boldly and I don't give up and I never slack one day. I was always in the forefront. I don't run away.

These speech-acts reveal several interesting things. First, the participants consider their level of engagement in asymmetric warfare as spectacular and extraordinary rather than a routine role that anyone – male or female – could perform. This narrative falls into the well-established stereotypical construction of the 'unnaturalness of women fighters' (Yuval-Davis 1997, 93–94). It is not surprising that the women fighters share this belief given the pervasive patriarchal system within which they were socialised.

Second, the participant cited above and other female combatants equate their involvement as tantamount to 'acting like a man' or in one instance a consequence of having been raised 'as if I was a boy'. This suggests that they suspended the facticity of womanhood in executing their duties. Third, female combatants demonstrate little respect for women who were 'followers' or performed traditional gender roles like food preparation. The insurgent 'General' quoted above states: 'There are some of the people who supplied water, some made a hell of noise' She was visibly displeased with the domestic roles played by many women in the insurgency. This is because the group led by this 'General' executed daring missions. Her group was the female wing of a male-dominated insurgent group. Some members of the female-only sub-group helped to defend their camp against the Nigerian military. This often involved armed battles. They helped to find and secure sites for oil extraction, so as to finance the insurgency. Women also participated in creek-based negotiations to sell illegally bunkered oil in the underground market, often in exchange for arms and ammunition. These negotiations were often risky and unpredictable. Some of her members also accompanied male insurgents on dangerous expeditions in order to present an innocuous façade while maintaining capacity to repel any attacks from state actors. These roles are similar to those described earlier.

Fourth, participants seem to equate boldness, particularly in battle, as a quintessentially male quality although they did the same duties as their male counterparts. Overall, the activities of the insurgent women fundamentally challenge the essentialist notion of 'peace-loving woman' (Alison 2009, 90) yet they seem to embrace 'masculine values' and question the usefulness of 'feminine values' in the situation they found themselves. This is contrary to sections of Western feminist literature and popular culture that espouse the supposed superiority of feminine values over masculine values (see Elshtain 1990). This standpoint contrasts sharply with several non-Western feminists who often demonstrate willingness to come to terms with women's engagement in violence (Yuval-Davis 1997). Nevertheless, female insurgents' construction of their participation in an overtly violent activity as spectacular and equivalent to 'acting as a man' arguably suggests that they subscribe to the peace-loving imagery of women. This implies that in spite of the forthrightness of non-Western academics about violence perpetrated by women, what is held as traditional feminine value cuts across cultures and has enduring value *regardless of actual social role*.

Consequently, although there is no universal validity to the Western idea that women are more peaceful and less violent than men (Alison 2009), this idea somehow manages to have universal appeal. It is shared by non-Western women who have been engaged as fighters in an explicitly violent insurgency. The use of a highly masculinised discourse by insurgent women appears to uncritically accept the tenets of patriarchy and is akin to what Young

(2003, 3) calls the ‘logic of masculinist protection’. This inadvertently feeds into the patriarchal ideational notion that ‘violent women must be either trying to be men or just crazy’ (Campbell 1993, 144).

Absence of women-specific issues

Interviewer: Did you think of women’s rights?

Respondent: I was touched ... I just picked up the courage ...

Interviewer: For women’s rights?

Respondent: No, for the whole Niger Delta; that is the freedom I fought. (Female ex-insurgent leader, 36 years old, high school educated, single with no children)

The conversation above demonstrates the absence of any consistent women’s rights framing in the discourse of female ex-insurgents. Participants argued that they fought for the emancipation of the Niger Delta, resource control and general welfare of the people in the oil-rich region. This ethno-nationalist frame and focus on the liberation of the Delta without a concomitant focus on the rights of women is not uncommon (see Coulter 2008) but is potentially costly. Available evidence from other parts of the world indicates that although women perform non-conventional roles and are viewed as comrades during insurgencies, women’s rights are often relegated to the background in the post-conflict era even when insurgent groups transmute to governing parties. This was the case in Mozambique where a coherent discourse on ‘emancipation of women’ from traditionalism was used as ideological apparatus to mobilise women in the fight for independence (West 2000, 184). However, following the Mozambique Liberation Front FRELIMO’s ascendance to power patriarchal policies and programmes were enacted which reduced women’s roles.

Ann-Kio Briggs, a prominent female political activist, also argues that the issue of women’s rights ‘is a discussion for another day’. Women’s liberation appears not to be part of the rationale for engagement among the ex-insurgents and the ranks of political activists. The major reason women participated is consistent with findings on engagement of male insurgents in the Delta (Oriola 2013). What is intriguing is that there is awareness among female insurgents and activists that not framing the issues in terms of women’s rights may have serious consequences. Briggs points out that ‘in crises time, people, men tend to forget that these are women. Immediately, the crisis is over, they remember that these are women. I cannot be non-useful and therefore the role I have played must be recognised, the role I have played must be appreciated.’ The same participant believes that women’s rights will be addressed ‘when another issue comes up’. All the ex-insurgents shared the view that women’s issues would be taken up in the course of a different struggle.

Conclusion

Growing numbers of scholars are analysing women’s roles as perpetrators rather than victims of violence (Denov and Maclure 2006; MacKenzie 2009). There is also growing focus on ‘female gains’ rather than ‘female losses’ after wars in countries like Liberia (Fuest 2008, 202). However, one of the prevailing myths about women, particularly in developing countries, is their portrayal as docile, apathetic and apolitical entities (Mohanty 1991). This myth constructs women as victims of violence rather than rational actors capable of being perpetrators or beneficiaries of violence during warfare and

similar anomic situations. These beliefs prevail in spite of generations of socio-scientific research that underscore the active participation of women in and opposition to oppressive regimes such as the South African apartheid state (Meintjes 2007). The notion of universal victimhood of women in armed conflict is being challenged by feminists as reductionist on the grounds that it infantilises and denies women their agency (MacKenzie 2009; Coulter 2008; Fuest 2008). Some have also argued that depicting women as victims ensures that those who engaged in armed combat do not benefit from reintegration efforts (MacKenzie 2009).

Overall, 13 out of 14 ex-insurgent participants argued that taking up arms against the state was inappropriate for women. This is interesting, as they took up arms against the state; they construed their engagement using a highly masculinised discourse, did not agitate for women's rights or issues though they were aware of the consequences, and appeared to fully subscribe to gender roles in society. They seemed to accept the traditional ideational infrastructure that they challenged and saw no contradictions therein. This is important because those who engaged in active combat – 8 out of 14 women (excluding the prominent political activist) – might have been expected to support women's involvement in armed combat. Only one participant (30 years old, two years of post-secondary education, married with one child) differed in this regard. It is worth emphasising that she was the only participant with more than a high school education among the 14 ex-insurgent women.

This finding may be a consequence of participants' experiences after demobilisation. Insurgent women continue to pay a gargantuan social and symbolic price for their participation in the insurgency. They have unwittingly earned a 'bad woman' label. This label concerns their (un)suitability as wives, mothers and sisters. Some described being alienated from their children, who grew up with their grandparents or other family members while their mothers were involved in the struggle. Such women are treated by society as 'less than women and less than human' (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 10–11). What this does is to define such women as anathema to the otherwise peaceful nature of women and suggest that their 'identity rather than experience' makes them deviant beings (Alison 2009, 121). This has serious implications for coupling and reintegration to society. The female 'General' stated that: 'The militant name is not good for a woman. It gives me a bad name and tarnished my image. It makes me not to have a husband. People are scared away from me.' She argued that being called a militant had more negative consequences for women than for men, as 'men get wives easily.' Although she had become famous and respected – presumably attractive features for the opposite sex – everybody had 'become afraid' of her and withdrawn. She claimed this had led to a situation where she felt 'inferior'.

Two contradictory trends appear to be at play: on one hand, large sections of the community seem to appreciate women's engagement in the struggle but on the other hand, men and women alike genuinely dread insurgent women. This is similar to experiences of 'rebel women' in Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Liberia and Peru, where women fighters are regarded as 'monsters' (Coulter 2008, 55, 57, 63). However, insurgent men in the Delta enjoy acclaim and have managed to become desirable partners for women in their communities. It is not entirely clear why male insurgents are able to attract women's adoration while men (and women) show female insurgents a lot of respect but find them undesirable as potential spouses. One explanation offered by Turshen based on research involving Algerian women is that ex-insurgent women do not fit into the 'social image of femininity' (Turshen 2002, cited in Sajjab 2004: 11–12). Conversely, male insurgents may fit into masculinist imagery.

This paper has explored female insurgents' narratives about Nigeria's oil conflict. The paper analysed how female participants joined insurgent camps, their rationale for participating in the insurgency and how they discursively masculinised their involvement in the Delta conflict. The majority of the women who participated in this study viewed their insurgent activities as antithetical to their gender. They perceived their activities as the domain of males despite being fully involved in those activities and presumably transgressed gender boundaries. The paper also showed the absence of women-specific issues in female insurgents' narrative. Issues of women's rights were relegated in favour of ethno-nationalist priorities (see Alison 2009) although participants demonstrated awareness about the consequences of not agitating for women's rights.

Findings from this study cannot be generalised for reasons already noted. However, the fact that participants are from poor rural and highly patriarchal backgrounds suggests that early socialisation into gender roles seems trumped by later oppressions, particularly structural violence and social deprivation. A combination of interactional and structural variables made women take up supposedly uncharacteristic roles in insurgent groups. Yet, gender oppression was left intact.

Three factors appear to be at play. First, women may be willing to subordinate their specific or particular concerns for the 'greater' good. Second, structures tend to endure, such that some female actors may not view existing relations as problematic. Such structures may be viewed by ex-insurgents as the natural order of things. This study aligns with Fuest's (2008) questioning of supposed ability of war to destroy patriarchal impediments. In this case, it appears patriarchy has been challenged but left virtually intact. Therefore, the conflict appears to have 'reproduce[d] and strengthen[ed] the former social order' (Coulter 2008, 55–56). This is a theoretical hiatus.

Third, the Niger Delta insurgency focused on liberation of the Niger Delta. This was primarily an ethno-nationalist struggle regarding resource control and environmental justice. The key demands of MEND, a coalition to which the women loosely belonged, were: convocation of a sovereign national conference, fiscal federalism, socio-economic well-being of Niger Deltans and reduction in environmental degradation (Oriola 2013). In other words, the focus of the insurgency was on political reforms rather than revolutionary change. Women's emancipation did not appear to have been part of the reforms sought by insurgents. Several participants considered agitation for women's rights a matter for the future.

Consequently, there is no visible macro-level reward for women's participation in the Delta insurgency except for pockets of female ex-insurgents undergoing rehabilitation and who will presumably become economically empowered, albeit mainly in stereotypical roles. The insurgency has yet to produce the kind of structural opportunities noted by Fuest (2008) in post-conflict Liberia. Rank-and-file male ex-insurgents have also had similar experiences and have occasionally rioted in major Nigerian cities to make demands about their welfare. However, since the Yar'Adua administration's Presidential Pardon and Amnesty for contrite militants surrendering their weapons in 2009, Tompolo and others have become important security consultants in Nigeria's oil sector. This has been a gendered affair with male insurgent leaders receiving government patronage. Similar to the finding of Steffensheimeier, Schwarz and Roche (2013) on white-collar crime, it appears that ex-insurgent women's marginalisation is partly a function of their not having been the masterminds behind insurgent groups. It is also a manifestation of the intersection of gender, class and societal ideational infrastructure in patriarchal modalities. Female ex-insurgents appear disadvantaged by their poor backgrounds, low level of education and gender ideology. The combined effect is spectacular marginalisation and non-

recognition of women's contributions in Nigeria's patriarchal society. Participants in this study demonstrated what Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001, 113; 2004) calls 'ambivalent empowerment' – oscillation between victimhood and agency. While attention has shifted to the Boko Haram crisis in Northern Nigeria, policy makers must make it a priority to ensure social integration of ex-insurgent women.

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Temitope Oriola is assistant professor in Criminology and Socio-Legal Studies at the University of Alberta, Canada. His works deal with the political economy of crime in sub-Saharan Africa and the ascendance of violent non-state transnational actors. Oriola's works appear in journals such as *Sociology*, the *British Journal of Criminology*, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, and *African Security*, among others.

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Notes

1. The interviews were conducted in English. Participants who had little to no formal education responded in pidgin. Translations are provided throughout this article.
2. Jomo Gbomo email statement (no. 27). "Bomb Alert in Abuja!!!" Friday October 1, 2010.
3. Egbesu is the Ijaw god of war.
4. See "Army Teaches a Lesson in Bayelsa State." Accessed May 25, 2010. http://www.waado.org/environment/fedgovt_nigerdelta/bayelsainvasion/FederalGovernInvadesBayelsa/MilitaryInOdi/ToTeachOdiALesson.html.
5. The Joint Task Force (JTF) is a military unit (comprising all branches of the Nigerian armed forces) established to deal with security issues in the Delta region, particularly around the sites of oil infrastructure, and to guarantee the safety of oil workers.

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