



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### OIL WEALTH AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY FOR RESTORING WOMAN WEALTH IN OBIO/AKPOR, RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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#### ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of oil wealth from Shell Petroleum Development Company, on women empowerment in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, Rivers State. It provides in-depth literature specifically on the lived experiences of Rumuola women with regards to the impact of oil wealth on the empowerment of women in the areas of education/vocational training, entrepreneurial support and health/wellbeing, and interrogates the policy implications of environmental security for restoring woman wealth. Qualitative approach was adopted to gather primary data through In-depth Interview and Focus Group Discussion, in addition to ethnohistorical and emic perspectives. Secondary data complemented the responses/observations. Human security concept guided the study. Findings include: Oil wealth does not have any significant positive impact on the empowerment of women in the area of education/vocational training; Oil wealth does not have a positive impact on women empowerment in the areas of entrepreneurial support, and health/wellbeing. The study concludes that the unfavourable experiences of women are triggering a chain of security risks for the environment, and recommends that giving attention to gender issues and the wellbeing of women is very germane to achieving environmental security in Obio/ Akpor, Rivers State.

**Keywords:** Environmental security, Rumuola, oil exploration, oil wealth, women empowerment.

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## 1.0. INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, in various communities in Nigeria, women's involvement in economic activities, in addition to their physical, economic, emotional, psychological and moral supports towards their families were noted and commemorated with beautiful names (Nsirim-Worlu, 2012). Young men who came of age were encouraged to find 'a good wife' who would assist them to harness their potentials, increase their resources and take care of their wealth. This explains why many parents often took up the responsibility of paying the bride price of a 'good girl' of their choice or their son's choice to ensure that legitimate marriage took place at the right age. This provided an opportunity for them to benefit from woman wealth. The contextual use of the term 'woman wealth' connotes a conglomerate of the physical, economic and social development inherent in a woman that provide her the required capabilities to meet her needs and contribute towards the wellbeing of her family and society.

Various Nigerian societies were known for their involvement in agricultural activities which formed strong bedrock for the economies of such places. The role of women in an agrarian environment in Nigeria has multiple dimensions, and such a role is adjudged to be very critical to the overall well-being of members of the society. They were mostly responsible for the cultivation of crops, and contributed significantly to subsistence farming through which they provided essential foods for their families, communities, and societies. Women were also involved in the care and management of livestock, including rearing of native fowls, goats, pigs, and milking animals such as cows. Women from the Ijaw ethnic nationality in the Niger Delta region doubled as *fisherwomen* who went to the rivers in the morning and spent hours there. They paddled their boats with expertise, threw their nets in and caught fishes and other sea food such as periwinkle, prawns, crayfish, *mgba*, *ngolo*, crab, etc, while their husbands and children stayed back home, awaiting their return and food preparation.

Consequently, due to their affinity to and engagement with the environment, women often have a deep understanding of their local environments, forests, rivers, etc., and practised sustainable agricultural methods. They employed traditional farming practices which promoted environmental conservation and played an important role in passing down indigenous agricultural knowledge and resources to younger generations. The aim was to secure the environment and make it sustainable according to Aluko (2018) who concluded



from his study on the role of rural women in environmental security and development, that indigenous knowledge has a positive impact on agriculture, food processing and preservation. Thus, there was no environmental degradation or threat to life and property. Rather, people's well-being was paramount and guaranteed.

With their resources, mothers sent their children and family members to school at different levels or to acquire some form of skills. Many prominent Nigerians would not have become educated or empowered if not for the hard work and sacrifices of their mothers and sisters. Unfortunately, the women themselves had limited or no access to education which explains the high level of illiteracy observed among them. With their resources, they built residential and commercial houses for their families, even though men ended up managing the houses in their capacity as heads of their respective families since women cannot own property in most Nigerian societies (Muoghalu & Akporaro, 2020).

However, the global pursuit of economic development has long been linked to the extraction and utilization of natural resources, with oil wealth becoming a primary driver of growth for numerous nations, including Nigeria where commercial quantities of crude oil was found in Oloibiri, Niger Delta region in 1956. This region continues to be a major player in the global oil industry, and the development of its oil resources remains a crucial aspect of the country's economic endeavours (Enyindah, 2020). However, the impact of oil exploration on the Niger Delta region where oil companies' activities take place is a mixed experience for its people; while the oil industry has brought economic opportunities and wealth, which accounts for about 80-90% of the nation's annual revenue (Ogbogbo, 2006; Enyindah, 2020), unfortunately evidence shows that this does not translate to a better standard of living for the people who are increasingly impoverished. Of more worrisome is the fact that it has also presented challenges and negative consequences for women in multiple ways.

The detrimental impact of oil exploration on women include, but not limited to the loss of massive arable farmlands and their agrarian lifestyle, environmental degradation and its attendant hazards; health challenges; social disruptions in families and communities occasioned by displacement from homes, land, and traditional sources of livelihood;



insecurity to life and property; limited access to education and healthcare services, especially among rural dwellers who hitherto depended on African traditional remedies (African Natural Resources Center, 2017). It was earlier reported by Allen (2012) that Niger Delta people literally co-habit with oil as a result of the proximity they share with it. Oil facilities are sited close to farmlands, and as development took place alongside population enlargement, more people moved closer to these harmful facilities, even in prohibited areas. He also predicted that food shortage was imminent as a result of extensive oil pollution and gas flare; a prediction that has come true and is already taking its toll on the people in spite of the emergence of oil wealth.

## **2.0. CONCEPTUAL REVIEW**

Since the reign of oil wealth began, women's roles and contributions to the environment and society are hardly recognized or documented. In the same vein, the challenges they have had to contend and live with for so many years do not receive the required attention and publicity, considering their level of vulnerability to different conditions. Even though some Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities had been undertaken by the Multinational Oil Corporations (MNOCs), the success story is still debatable, especially where it concerns women. A good percentage of the social projects emanating from the exploration of the environment and oil wealth is more accessible to men (Olalekan et al., 2019).

There is therefore significant gender inequality in accessing the immense wealth generated from oil resources and men's experiences are more favourable than that of women. They have more access to well-paid professional jobs, education scholarships, compensations/damages for land and oil spillages, and are considered in decision-making processes which provide them opportunities to articulate their needs and make representations to the oil companies or Governments. However, factors such as inadequate job creation, and the provision of job opportunities on the basis of gender biased skills and qualifications make the labour market unfavourable to even educated women. Moreover, they are not anywhere close to the decision-making processes (African Natural Resources Center, 2017). Thus, the very category of people who are more vulnerable to the challenges from the environment is, unfortunately relegated to the background.



In Obio/Akpor Local Government Area (OBALGA) of Rivers State, that one important gift of nature that provided women the required natural resources, source of strength and resilience, peace of mind, good health, group and family togetherness, heritages, income and social life, was taken away from them and became degraded by the activities of the MNOCs, their servicing companies and agents. That one gift of nature is the natural environment. Woman wealth was eventually displaced by the emergence of oil wealth. This paradigm shift provided a favourable environment to perpetuate diverse forms of gender inequality, thus marginalizing women. The struggle to survive and remain relevant began for them, but they were literally left with nothing, and faced the daunting challenge of learning new ways of life, skills and knowledge. One of the ways of adapting to the situation was by seeking waged jobs, but without good prospects due to lack of education, equal opportunities, sound health and support from their families and the society.

Obio/Akpor LGA is one of the most populous LGAs in Rivers State which hosts many of the MNOCs. There are numerous water bodies which provide natural irrigation of the lands and made fishing and other water-related activities a part of the people's economic engagements, in addition to the production of food and cash crops (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2011). Oil exploration commenced in OBALGA from 1958. Communities in the LGA where oil exploration and exploitation are taking place or had taken place are numerous. To mention a few, Elelenwo oilfields alone cover Rumuomasi, Rumuobiakani, Oginigba, Woji, Okpo-oro, Rumuibekwe, Rumuokwursi, Rumuogba and Rumuola clans. Crude oil from some oilfields in Akpor kingdom was collected at Aparo Flow Station I, owned by Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC). Rumuola and Rumuokwuta clans were longtime hosts to Shell which operated a gas flare and oil pipelines (Enyindah, 2020), in addition to an oilwell located on Rumuola and Rumuadaolu lands for many years. Shell demobilized from Aparo Flow Station I recently, but before their exit, untold harm had been done to the environment and people living in these clans. However, the girlchild and women are the worst hit.

Understanding the impact of oil exploration on women in OBALGA, specifically, Rumuola clan, requires an analysis of local and cultural factors, and the people's specific experiences over the years. The study area, Rumuola is one of the clans in OBALGA inhabited by the indigenous people of Iwhuruohna or Ikwerre. It is made up of Rumunkara and Orofu



communities, and shares boundaries with Rumuadaolu, Rumuokwuta, Rumuorosi, Eligbam, Oroazi and Rumuomasi communities. It attracts and hosts many people due to its vantage location in the State capital city of Port Harcourt, level of economic activities in the areas of hospitality, banking, education, commercial business and other non-traditional economic activities. Some historic organizations were sited on Rumuola land by the Federal and State Governments including the defunct Niger Grammar School which was later replaced with a Federal Government College, thereafter, a School of Basic Studies and presently, the Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic. Others are the defunct Rivers State Water Works, Nigerian Army Barracks (Bori Camp) and Nigerian Air Force Base. The presence of these organizations triggered accelerated urbanization of the once rural community.

The people of Rumuola are peaceful and hospitable, and over the years, they integrated cultural diversity in their interactions with the non-natives who either visit, relocate or migrate to the clan. Their major language of communication is Iwhuruohna, also known as Ikwerre language, but they use English language and the popular Pidgin English with non-natives. Even though the clan is presently exposed to a lot of modern way of living and social relations, customary laws and practices still regulate their relationships. Family structures are on the basis of kinship ties and both traditional administrative and political authority are held by men.

Before the discovery of oil and emergence of oil wealth, Rumuola women's involvement in economic activities and diverse forms of contributions to families, communities and society at large were recognized. They were called beautiful names to promote and entrench the value of female children such as Nyerinyabueku (Woman is wealth), Nwerekwa (Wife is supreme), Nnekwu (Great Mother), Nwoaku (Child of wealth), Igbe'eku (Box of wealth), Nwerenda (Father's wife), Igonda (Pride of her father), Ihundah (Father's image), Nwowhuru'aku (Child of inestimable value), *Iwai* (money), etc. The culture of *nwere karima, ndah luru'a* was prevalent and effective; a practice whereby fathers who loved and valued their unmarried daughters so much often recognized them as women of substance and accorded them certain privileges of honour in the family.



Women contributed to family lineage continuation through the *obiri nu oro* cultural practice where in a bid to meet the desire and need for male children who will continue the family lineage, a father without a biological son would formally retain one of his daughters or only daughter in the family for her to produce children on his behalf through her male partner(s). Such a daughter was not allowed to get married, had inheritance right to her father's property pending when her own sons/daughters will come of age, and was given full recognition for performing a critical cultural role. Her children would bear their grandfather's name and be recognized as his biological children with full rights of *nwo dieli*, that is, freeborn (Nsirim-Worlu, 2012). Those were great women who played both the role of a woman and that of a man in the family. They tilled the soil and provided food for their children and aged parents. They were enterprising and engaged in trading activities, and added more property to what their parents owned.

Women were farmers who cultivated large expanse of farmlands which were either allocated to their husbands, fathers or brothers. Allocation of land is on the basis of patriliney till date (Wilson, 2018). They produced different varieties of crops with bumper harvests made possible by the fertile Ikwerre land. Casava was cultivated to produce *garri*, *fufu* and tapioca. From yam and corn, they processed pounded yam and *akamu* respectively. Other crops included three-leaf yam, cocoyam, *akidi*, okoro, *radu*, *mgbogwuru*, *rafumgbele*, *ogwa*, *opotoro*, varieties of vegetables, plantain, banana, etc. Palm oil and palm kernel oil were processed from palm fruits for cooking and skin care respectively. They were healthy and strong enough to work in their farms even in old age. As they often produced more than their families could consume, they engaged in trading for the sale of agricultural produce and some handicraft items. So, they were able to make money and acquired other resources.

Rumuola men were also farmers who cultivated mostly yam. Yam cultivation was regarded as a masculine activity, but women did the weeding of the grasses and carried tubers of yam home after harvesting them. Men also fished in the community stream known as *mini rugaraga* or *ohia mini* where they caught different varieties of fish and sea food such as *azu ndam*, *rugbam*, *crayfish*, *crab*, water snail, etc., while women processed the fish for consumption, either dry or fresh and sold the surplus. More money was made. Men also tapped the raffia trees to get unadulterated sweet palm wine and harvested palm fruits. There



was enough healthy food for everyone. They were generous and hospitable to family members, friends and even strangers. Food and other resources were shared to their neighbours and those who needed them. No visitor departed from their homes without being treated to good meals.

When the waged jobs came, many Rumuola men took up such jobs but they were not well paid due to their level of education and lack of relevant skills. Such jobs were mostly Government jobs popularly known as *eru gbeke* or *eru ministry*. Others took up menial jobs. Men went to work in the morning to return in the evening, but their salaries could not put enough food on the table. Their wives and mothers supported them in providing food for the family, so much that a man gets back home to meet a sumptuous meal he did not provide, but there was peace and unity in the family.

Women made their contributions towards building family houses in cases where their husbands or brothers needed assistance. In some instances, women funded the building projects, but in the name of their husbands, fathers or brothers for the fact that Ikwerre patriarchal practices do not allow women to own property of any form. Many married women single-handedly took care of their children in cases where their husbands had multiple wives and neglected them. They fed their children, and sponsored their education or skills training. Moreover, those who were childless used their resources to marry another wife for their husbands and contributed immensely to their co-wife and children's upkeep.

In a bid to build a community of women whose aim was to support one another, they organized themselves into traditional social groups with common interests. These groups provided suitable fora for them to share resources, skills, talents, knowledge and strengthen one another in times of crises, thus building a strong community for everybody, including their children, husbands and family members. As an organized group, they were able to raise enough resources to establish what is still known as Rumuola market, located at the popular Rumuola junction. The market served as an outlet to sell their farm produce and other items, whilst revenue was raised from selling tickets to non-natives. How have they fared over the years with the presence of Shell oil company?





A lot of studies investigated the activities of SPDC and their impact on women in some communities in the OBALGA. However, there is no literature on the experiences of Rumuola women on the basis of an empirical study which is the focus of this paper. This study aims to examine the impact of oil wealth on women empowerment and the prospects of environmental security in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. It seeks specifically to provide first-hand in-depth literature on their lived experiences with regards to the impact of oil wealth on the empowerment of women in the areas of education/vocational training, entrepreneurial support and health/wellbeing, and the implications of environmental security policies for restoring woman wealth in the study area.

The concept of Human Security is adopted for this study. The concept emerged in the 1990s as a response to the limitations of traditional security paradigms in addressing the complex and multifaceted challenges facing individuals in the contemporary world. It broadens the traditional understanding of security beyond military defense and state-centered strategies to include the protection and empowerment of individuals and communities with the aim of enabling them to survive. It also emphasizes the interconnectedness among various threats to human well-being, including poverty, disease, environmental degradation, political domination, and armed conflict (Human Security Report, 2005; United Nations Development Programme, UNDP).

In essence, the concept of human security is concerned with a whole range of issues which focus on the well-being and survival of individuals such as: the protection of individuals from threats to their physical safety and personal security, including violence, armed conflict, terrorism, and organized crime; ensuring equal access to basic necessities of life such as food, water, housing, healthcare, education, and economic opportunities; addressing root causes of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion; prioritizing the promotion and protection of human rights, including civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as respect for human dignity, diversity, and inclusion; and building resilience to weather environmental, economic, and social shocks, by promoting sustainable development practices, and safeguarding natural resources for future generations (Sen, 1999; Sen & Ogata, 2003; JICA Ogata Sadoko Research Institute Report, 2022).



The concept is suitable for this study because it promotes the principles of people-centered approach whereby the needs, concerns, and aspirations of individuals, in this case women, and communities are prioritized as a means of achieving environmental and national security.

### **3.0. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The research type is ethnography. This study adopted a qualitative approach to gather primary data comprising In-depth Interview (IDI) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD), in addition to ethnohistorical and emic perspectives, which take into consideration the researcher's experiences as a member of Rumuola clan. The researcher was born and brought up in Rumuola. She spent about twenty-five years of her life there, until she got married within the same ethnic group in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area. She visits her family of origin regularly which takes about twenty-five minutes' drive from her matrimonial home.

To ensure that historical data were gathered, older indigenes were interviewed. Care was taken to validate individual responses through critical comparison. It was observed that men were not willing to have an FGD with women since traditionally, it is not common to have a formal meeting comprising men and women based on age-long patriarchal practices. They rather preferred an all men gathering. Some respondents did not wish to appear in a photograph. They were very glad to be part of the research initially because they thought that Shell had finally decided to compensate them. The language of communication was the indigenous Ikwerre language. A total of 20 respondents were interviewed while 8 FGDs were conducted between March and May, 2024. Secondary data complemented the responses/observations.

Considering the nature of the study, verbal consent was sought and obtained from the participants/interviewees, especially because the researcher and her assistants are members of the clan. In reporting the responses, real names were used with their consent, except where otherwise stated.

### **4.0. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**



#### 4.1. Impact of Oil Wealth on Women Empowerment in the Area of Education/ Vocational Training

Shell commenced its oil exploration activities in Aparara Flow Station I in 1958, but so much happened afterwards. Environmental risks associated with oil exploration were initially triggered by the forceful acquisition of massive lands by Shell in collaboration with the Government. Thus, women were deprived of their farmlands. Little by little, Rumuola women were unable to continue with their traditional agricultural and petty trading activities and this holds profound implications for their socio-economic conditions.

*Mini Rugaraga* in Rumuola was an important stream which ran through some neighbouring clans, like Rumuorosi, Rumuomoi and Rumuigbo. Women used to farm close to the stream, where they also fetched water and firewood for cooking, and soaked their cassava for fermentation. More industrious men owned big fish ponds. The organic ponds were harvested periodically. Women happily carried the basins of assorted fish home to do the needful. Oil pipelines passed through the stream. *Mini Rugaraga* became polluted from oil spillage.

Today, a water body that does not have a remote resemblance to *mini rugaraga* still exists behind some residential buildings, but highly polluted because it was not cleaned up by Shell. No form of economic or physical activity takes place there, but the water rather floods the neighbouring environment during periods of heavy rainfall due to lack of proper drainage system. That water still has oil pipelines belonging to Shell buried underneath. *Mini rugagara* has been rechristened ‘carnal’ by those who may not know its history. During a FGD session, Mrs Joy Emezurike (aka First Lady) recalled with nostalgia how women used to have bountiful harvests from their farms before their farmlands became degraded by oil spillage, consequently they lost their sources of livelihood and income. She recalled that they expected Shell company to train women in some skills and offer scholarship to some of their brilliant children, but that did not happen.

The Community Development Committee Chairman, Mr. Ken-Rovans Nyebuchi Chuku had this to say:



We have lost so much. Our stream which was a source of sea food is presently highly polluted and impacted by oil. Unfortunately, there was no remediation activity for the stream. We can no longer fish and tap palm wine there. Our women used to cook and trade with resources from the water to sustain their respective families. My own grandmother used to farm on the land close to mini rugaraga, but the land was impacted by oil long before we built our houses. What we suffer now is periodic flooding which submerges our buildings. The worse is that Shell did not consider empowering the girl-child and women through scholarship and skills training until they were about to leave the community. The company didn't do well at all.

See me, at my age, I am just a cleaner at Captain Elechi Amadi Polytechnic, Rumuola. That's the only job available for almost all the mature women from Rumuola because we did not go to school when we were young. My own father said he didn't have money to train me and insisted that my mother should assist him, but Shell pipelines passed through her farmland and she was told not to set any fire around there. By that time, Rumuola didn't have much farmland anymore, so she quit farming. There was no money to train me in school and Shell did not help us (**Anonymous**).

Responses from the FGDs also revealed that women were unable to access higher education as much as men for some reasons including male child preference and limited resources. There was no record of a female beneficiary from Shell education scholarship over the years. This lack of sponsorship limited women's chances of acquiring relevant knowledge and skills to compete favourably with others in the labour market in contemporary times. Shortly before the exit of Shell from Rumuola, a scholarship scheme for secondary school students was provided where at least three girls were beneficiaries, but this stopped upon the company's exit.

I come from Akwa Ibom State, but got married here in Rumuola. My late mother-law taught me how to farm and sell farm produce for profit. I was informed that my husband went to school up to class five because his mother was very industrious. So, I decided to emulate her, but that was not possible because I didn't have a farmland and the resources. I fry and sell puff-puff now with little income. My daughter was among the three girls who got Shell secondary school scholarship a few years ago, but why couldn't the company extend it to university education? My daughter is yet to go to the university up till now (Mrs. Patience Omunakwe).

The study found that oil wealth does not have any significant positive impact on the empowerment of women in the area of education and vocational training.



#### 4.2. Impact of Oil Wealth on Women Empowerment in the Area of Entrepreneurial Support

For over 30 years, Rumuola women were not involved in trading activities at the Rumuola market which they established many years ago. The reason is that their initial purpose of selling their locally produced agricultural produce and handicrafts was truncated as a result of losing most of their farmlands to Shell and having to cultivate on already degraded land. The alternative was to depend on the rent paid by other traders in the market. Presently, they are involved in a protracted conflict with the men over who will be in charge of the market, collect and manage accruable revenue. Litigations over the matter created strained relationships and enmity among men and women with some of the women aligning with their husbands. Their farming, handicraft and trading skills became obsolete in what is now known as Rumuola Town and Port Harcourt city. They lost their traditional economic productiveness and are compelled to depend on men; a dependence that leaves them more vulnerable and marginalized. There was no assistance from the company in the form of financial support for business:

We are hardworking women who like to do small business to support ourselves and our families, but one big challenge we have is lack of financial support to fund the type of business people like these days. Shell did not support us to fend for ourselves even when they have enough resources. They didn't care about our welfare. There was no woman that received any support for business at all, all these years Shell lived with us. **(Chairlady, Rumunkara Women's Meeting, Rumuola)**

Prior to the company's final exit from the land they occupied, clusters were created as committees on the basis of Local Government Areas and host communities for the purpose of interacting with Shell to provide some needs of the communities as a form of CSR. The sum of N1.8m and N2.3m were received at different times and shared between the two host communities. The last tranche was received in 2016. According to the Rumunkara chairlady, women requested for a resource center, cooking utensils and a bus. Shell promised to meet their requests. However, women are yet to receive these items and do not have any information on the present status of the cluster scheme. They believe they were being marginalized by the men.



The study found that oil wealth does not have a positive impact on women empowerment through entrepreneurial support in the study area.

#### **4.3. Impact of Oil Wealth on Women Empowerment in the Area of Health/ Wellbeing**

Results from the study show that prior to Shell exit from the communities, Rumuola men requested for a healthcare centre through the CSR clusters which Shell promised to provide, but never did till date.

In the sixties to nineties, Rumuola residents had one reason or the other to visit the Flow Station almost on a daily basis. It was sited close to residential areas. One reason was to fetch potable water since they had been informed that water from *mini rugaraga* was no longer good for human consumption. Unfortunately, there was no provision for water outside the company facility until after over 40 years of operation. Some other residents went there to wash and dry their clothes very close to the gas flare bond wall; the heat from the flare was intense. The gas flare was sited just a few meters away from the entrance gate and was the first facility one met as one walked towards the office complex. Thus, everyone who passed through the gate was exposed to the gas flare. Residents were ignorant of the imminent dangers from the emissions they were exposed to, and nobody warned them about it. Consequently, the siting of a gas flare further exposed the communities to poisonous emissions, but women and children were more vulnerable. A lot of health challenges came up after many years of Shell operations, including the ravaging menace of cancer. With the present chain of health challenges and the findings from other related studies, it is logical to link the increasing rate of cancer to the negative impacts of oil exploration.

Mr. Princewill Igwe recounted the experience of his mother before her untimely death:

*Our house is in Rumuokwuta, directly behind Shell Apra flow station I. My late mother, Mrs. Nyenwene Beatrice Igwe (nee Chuku) was from Rumuola and married at Rumuokwuta. She was an industrious and hardworking woman who worked with Radio Rivers as a junior staff. She helped people a lot in Rumuokwuta and the extended family. She died from breast cancer on 11<sup>th</sup> December, 1987, at the age of 41. Her death was a big loss to the Igwe and Rumuehio families.*



This was the first reported incidence of breast cancer in the community. Chimarunma (not real name) from Chuku's family was also diagnosed with cancer of the breast at the age of 40 years, but she survived it due to early intervention. However, her younger cousin lost her life to the same disease in 2012, at the age of 35 years, while her aunt died on 17<sup>th</sup> May, 2016. There are three other confirmed cancer-related deaths which happened in quick succession, and definitely many others which may have been attributed to spiritual or diabolic attacks from perceived enemies under the influence of superstitious beliefs.

The Paramount Ruler still mourns the untimely death of his eldest daughter in 2020.

'I loved my dear daughter so much and was shocked to hear about her health condition which baffled me. How on earth did breast cancer affect her? There was nothing like that in our family history. We had been exposed to dangerous emissions unknowingly for years, but what did Shell do for us? There was no infrastructure development. The company did not build even a health centre for us all these years. We had to travel far distances to access health services. Our women patronized traditional birth attendants during pregnancy and child delivery. We used to die at good old age due to the kind of natural and nutritious foods we ate, and the clean natural air and environment, but people die young these days due to environmental degradation and poisoned foods. I can't stop mourning the untimely death of my daughter.'

The study found that oil wealth does not have a positive impact on women empowerment in the area of health and wellbeing.

#### **4.4. Policy Implications of Environmental Security for Restoring Woman Wealth**

Women whose environment had been degraded; sources of livelihood destroyed; whose wellbeing had been compromised, and who are no longer able to meet their needs and that of their families constitute a threat to environmental security. This calls to mind the need to look beyond the glorified oil wealth which apparently has not contributed to the empowerment and wellbeing of women, and seek ways to restore woman wealth. It is however interesting to note that the world has recognized the need to secure, protect and preserve the environment after understanding how threats and risks from a degraded environment become sources of insecurity to nations, states, communities, individuals, and human beings in general. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also recognize the importance of



environmental sustainability (SDG 13: Climate Action) which is linked to the concept of environmental security.

Environmental security is a concept that emerged in response to growing concerns about the interconnection between environmental degradation, resource scarcity, and conflict. It refers to the protection of natural resources, ecosystems, and environmental quality as essential components of national and global security. This concept recognizes that environmental issues can have profound implications for political stability, economic development, and human well-being. In recent times, oil exploring companies and various levels of Governments in Nigeria and their agents are canvassing for the protection and preservation of the environment, especially through the provision of alternative sources of energy and environmental-friendly practices.

The fact remains that the environment cannot be effectively secured without addressing the vulnerable circumstances and conditions of women who have a better understanding of and affinity to the environment, have suffered untold deprivation and are still facing enormous challenges from the environment.

## **5.0. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The findings of the study show that oil wealth does not have any significant positive impact on the empowerment of women in the area of education and vocational training; no positive impact on women empowerment in the areas of entrepreneurial support, and health and wellbeing of women. This implies that the historical woman wealth was destroyed in the course of producing oil wealth. All these deprived years, oil wealth reigned in Nigeria but did not contribute to the empowerment and wellbeing of women and their families in the study area. Many of them are economically incapacitated, marginalized, and contend with life threatening illnesses.

The unfavourable experiences of women are triggering a chain of security risks for the environment. Giving attention to gender issues and the wellbeing of women is very germane to achieving environmental security in Obio/ Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. Restoring woman wealth is crucial for securing and sustaining the environment and provide





an enabling environment for the development of individuals, families, communities and societies from generation to generation. This could be achieved through the provision of structured frameworks that provide equal access to education and training opportunities, as well as scholarship schemes to meet the educational needs of indigent students irrespective of gender; Women should be empowered through the provision of seed capital/grants for those who are interested in business investment; Proper remediation activities should be carried out on impacted environment; Healthcare facilities should be provided, in addition to intentional engagement with women who are victims of life-threatening/terminal diseases for the purpose of funding their treatments; and safe agricultural practices should be promoted to protect the environment.

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