

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN THE NIGER DELTA:

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND NGOS

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Oak Centre is a forward thinking think tank focused on research, innovation, and policy development. By working with experts, policymakers, and grassroots organisations, it produces data driven insights, shapes digital strategies, and fosters impactful solutions. Its goal is to transform knowledge into action, promoting sustainable growth and resilience.

Executive summary

Women's empowerment has emerged as a critical global priority, particularly in regions where socio-economic inequalities persist. The Niger Delta, a resource-rich yet socio-economically disadvantaged region in Nigeria, has witnessed various efforts to address gender disparities.

While government interventions such as the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) have sought to uplift women and youth, their impact has remained limited. This development report explores the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in bridging this gap, enhancing economic participation, and fostering long-term empowerment for women in the Niger Delta.

Introduction

The Niger Delta is home to nine oil-producing states, including Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers. As Nigeria's primary economic hub due to its rich oil reserves, the region contributes significantly to national revenue.

However, the wealth derived from oil exploration has not translated into social progress for the region's population, particularly for women. Economic marginalisation, environmental degradation, and policy shortcomings have severely limited opportunities for women, reducing their participation in economic and leadership roles.

The presence of civil society organisations and non-governmental institutions has thus become increasingly vital in addressing these structural inequalities and fostering economic inclusion.

The case for women's empowerment in the Niger Delta

Women in the Niger Delta face persistent challenges that limit their economic participation. Many are economically marginalised, struggling to access financial capital, own land, or benefit from business support services. The environmental degradation caused by oil exploration has further disrupted traditional economic activities such as farming and fishing, depriving women of their primary means of livelihood. Additionally, limited access to education and vocational training has restricted opportunities for professional growth and career advancement. These challenges are compounded by deep-rooted patriarchal norms that hinder women's participation in decision-making processes and leadership roles.

The role of CSOs and NGOs in women's empowerment

Civil society organisations and non-governmental groups have stepped in to fill the gaps left by government interventions. Many of these organisations have introduced economic empowerment programmes that provide financial grants, business training, and access to markets. Organisations such as the Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND) and the DFID Market Development Programme in the Niger Delta (MADE) have led efforts to support women entrepreneurs by offering financial inclusion schemes, training opportunities, and investment support.

In the agricultural sector, several NGOs have implemented initiatives aimed at promoting modern farming techniques among women. These initiatives have been particularly beneficial in enhancing productivity, improving incomes, and increasing women's participation in agribusiness. One such effort was the 2023 International Women's Day agricultural forum in Edo State, organised through a collaboration between MADE, PIND, and USAID MARKETS II. The event focused on equipping women with knowledge of agricultural technologies that could improve their efficiency and market competitiveness.

Capacity-building and skill development programmes have also been introduced to help women acquire the tools they need to build sustainable livelihoods. Workshops, training sessions, and financial literacy programmes have empowered women to start and scale their businesses. In addition to economic initiatives, advocacy efforts by CSOs have played a crucial role in ensuring that women's rights are protected. Many organisations actively engage in lobbying for gender-sensitive policies that promote inclusivity and equal opportunities in economic and political spheres.

Case study: The impact of MADE's agricultural initiatives

One of the most impactful interventions in the Niger Delta has been the DFID-funded MADE programme. This initiative leveraged the Market Systems Approach (M4P) to create sustainable economic opportunities for women in agriculture. Through MADE, women farmers and agripreneurs were provided with financial grants under the Technology Adoption Grant (TAG) and the Equity & Contribution Investment Fund (ECIF). These financial support mechanisms enabled female farmers to invest in better farming techniques, processing equipment, and market linkages.

Beyond funding, MADE facilitated partnerships between women entrepreneurs and financial institutions such as the Bank of Agriculture and the Bank of Industry. The programme also hosted agricultural forums where women received training on high-yield farming methods and sustainable agribusiness practices. This approach significantly improved the economic standing of women in the Niger Delta, empowering them with the necessary resources to transition from subsistence-level farming to commercial agriculture.

Challenges in women's empowerment initiatives

Despite notable progress, several challenges persist in the quest to achieve full economic empowerment for women in the Niger Delta. One of the most pressing concerns is the inconsistency in government policies, which has resulted in a lack of continuity in women's empowerment programmes. Many government-led initiatives start with enthusiasm but fail to deliver long-term impact due to administrative inefficiencies and shifting political priorities.

Limited access to finance remains a critical barrier, as many women struggle to secure capital for business expansion. Restrictive lending policies, coupled with bureaucratic challenges in securing financial support, make it difficult for women-led enterprises to thrive. Additionally, security concerns in the region continue to threaten economic activities. Many women, particularly those engaged in agricultural production and trading, face risks of violence, theft, and instability, which hamper their ability to conduct business freely.

Another major challenge is the underrepresentation of women in leadership and decision-making roles. Although efforts have been made to include women in governance, many still find themselves excluded from positions of influence where key economic policies are formulated. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-stakeholder approach that brings together government agencies, private sector actors, and development partners to create a more inclusive economic environment for women.

Recommendations for strengthening women's empowerment efforts

To achieve greater impact in women's empowerment efforts, there is a need for stronger collaboration between CSOs, NGOs, and government institutions. Building multi-stakeholder partnerships will ensure that funding is sustainable and that initiatives have long-term viability. Financial accessibility must also be improved by expanding grant schemes, cooperative lending models, and microfinance options tailored specifically for women entrepreneurs.

Investments in digital and technological inclusion will be instrumental in enhancing market access for women in business. Digital literacy programmes and e-commerce platforms can help bridge the gap between rural female entrepreneurs and larger markets, enabling them to scale their operations efficiently. Furthermore, expanding educational and vocational training opportunities will ensure that women have the necessary skills to compete in a rapidly evolving economy.

Gender-sensitive policies should be prioritised at both local and national levels to guarantee that women are adequately represented in economic decision-making processes. Advocacy efforts must continue to push for policies that support women's access to finance, business development resources, and leadership roles.

Conclusion

Women's empowerment in the Niger Delta is not only a matter of social justice but also a crucial economic strategy for regional growth. While CSOs and NGOs have made significant strides in closing gender gaps, there remains a pressing need for scalable, sustainable, and inclusive interventions. Strengthening partnerships, improving policy coherence, and expanding financial access will be key to ensuring that women in the Niger Delta transition from economic marginalisation to becoming key drivers of regional development.

Investing in gender-focused development strategies will not only improve women's livelihoods but will also contribute to broader economic stability and social progress in the Niger Delta.



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