Gender Assessment in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

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Photo credits: Bryan Hoffman, CEDPA
Cover page photograph: Focused Group Discussion with women in Edo state

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Abbreviations

BLOOM	Better Life Options and Opportunities Model
CAS	Community Analysis Sessions
CEDPA	Center for Development and Population Activities
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
DFID	Department for International Development
FGD	Focused Group Discussion
HDI	Human Development Index
HIV/AIDs	Human Immuno Virus/Acquired Immune Diseases
IDIs	In-Depth Interviews
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
KEIs	Key Expert Interviews
LUA	Land Use Act
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
PIND	Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta

Disclaimer

"The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of PIND."

Executive Summary

One of PIND's guiding principles is to "integrate gender participation and awareness of gender issues into every aspect of project design and implementation to foster equitable participation and benefits for both men and women." To achieve this goal, PIND commissioned CEDPA in the last quarter of 2010 to conduct a gender assessment in the Niger Delta with a view to better integrate gender considerations into its programming. The study sought to investigate key gender constraints and opportunities for both men and women in the region.

The data obtained from various sources were analyzed and synthesized into a comprehensive analysis of the gender constraints and opportunities in the Niger Delta region. The gender assessment entailed qualitative primary data was collected through participatory and interactive focus groups and key informant interviews in each of the nine states of the Niger Delta region except in Imo. This data was also supplemented by secondary data from literature reviews and investigated the construction of gender across a variety of relevant domains and It included a highlight of how gender is constructed within and among different ethnic and religious groups, how it is framed in both civil and customary law, as well as how it shapes one's access to resources, security, and decision making structures. Special emphasis was placed on identifying traditional gender norms that have negative health, economic and social outcomes as well as those gender norms that inhibit the full participation of women and men in all aspects of public and private life. The analysis identified the constraints and opportunities to be addressed in order to ensure that men and women are able to participate in, and benefit from, the PIND programming as well as those constraints to be considered to better enable the program to achieve its intended outcomes. The key findings that emerged from the study reveal that women are against the traditions and culture about widow rites, their inability to inherit land, their exclusion from decision making both in the household and the family. In addition, the study also articulates women's lack of income generating opportunities due to their lack of skills. The study concludes that rape, prostitution and transactional sex are also a major concern for women was reported to have resulted into unwanted pregnancies and fatherless children. This document is therefore a report of the comprehensive findings of the CEDPA commissioned gender assessment in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Background

The Niger Delta generates nearly 80% of Nigeria's revenue, yet the majority of the population there remains in dire poverty and the region has been beset by violent conflict. Current development efforts and assistance recognizes that much more effort is needed to improve socio-economic conditions in the region if its problems are to be sustainably overcome. No single organization can address these problems on its own and thus the best solutions lie in the establishment of effective multi-stakeholder partnerships.

In an attempt to better understand and reflect the needs and desires of women in the Niger Delta in its programs and project, the foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND), a non-profit organization established a guiding principle that integrate gender participation and mainstreaming of their issues into every aspect of project design and implementation to foster equitable participation and benefit for all. The foundation intends to design, fund and build broad stakeholder support for programs and activities that will empower communities and women to generate equitable socio-economic development in the Niger Delta to achieve a peaceful and enabling environment for equitable economic growth.

Since its establishment in 2010, PIND has engaged a broad range of stakeholders to gather feedback and input in developing its strategic objectives and priorities. It has commissioned studies to better understand the needs and issues of youth and women in the region and held focus group discussions with entrepreneurs, government officials and civil society organizations (CSOs). The information obtained from these stakeholders has helped to shape PIND's strategic direction. This gender assessment report is therefore a product of the study PIND commissioned CEDPA to conduct in the last quarter of 2010.

Purpose

The purpose of the assessment was to identify:

1) key gender considerations in the Niger Delta region,
2) key gender constraints in the Niger Delta region,
3) Gender constraints as they relate to PIND's expected program outcomes.

Limitation of the study

Well established research shows that women in the Niger Delta are often inhibited from speaking freely in mixed group settings. Therefore, it was found necessary to conduct single sex focus groups for quality data that would capture and reflect women's interests and concerns. The resource and time limitations of this study made it impractical to conduct two sets of focus group discussions (FGDs) as well as to conduct key expert interviews (KEIs) and community analysis sessions (CASs), which were considered priorities by PIND and necessary to triangulate the findings from the FGD. Given women's known marginalization in public life, it was also presumed that the design of the existing PIND strategy was taken more from a gender-neutral perspective and that it was women's input into the design of the strategy that was needed. Reviewing the PIND strategy, it was also noted that it was women who faced the majority of constraints in achieving the expected project outcomes. Therefore, it was decided that FGDs would be conducted only with women. The fact that there were no focus group discussions with only men is indeed a limitation of the study.

Research Design

The research was designed to gather both the traditional and changing gender norms for both men and women (other “middle” genders are not considered here) in the region as well as the gender constraints that may limit PIND in achieving expected project results.

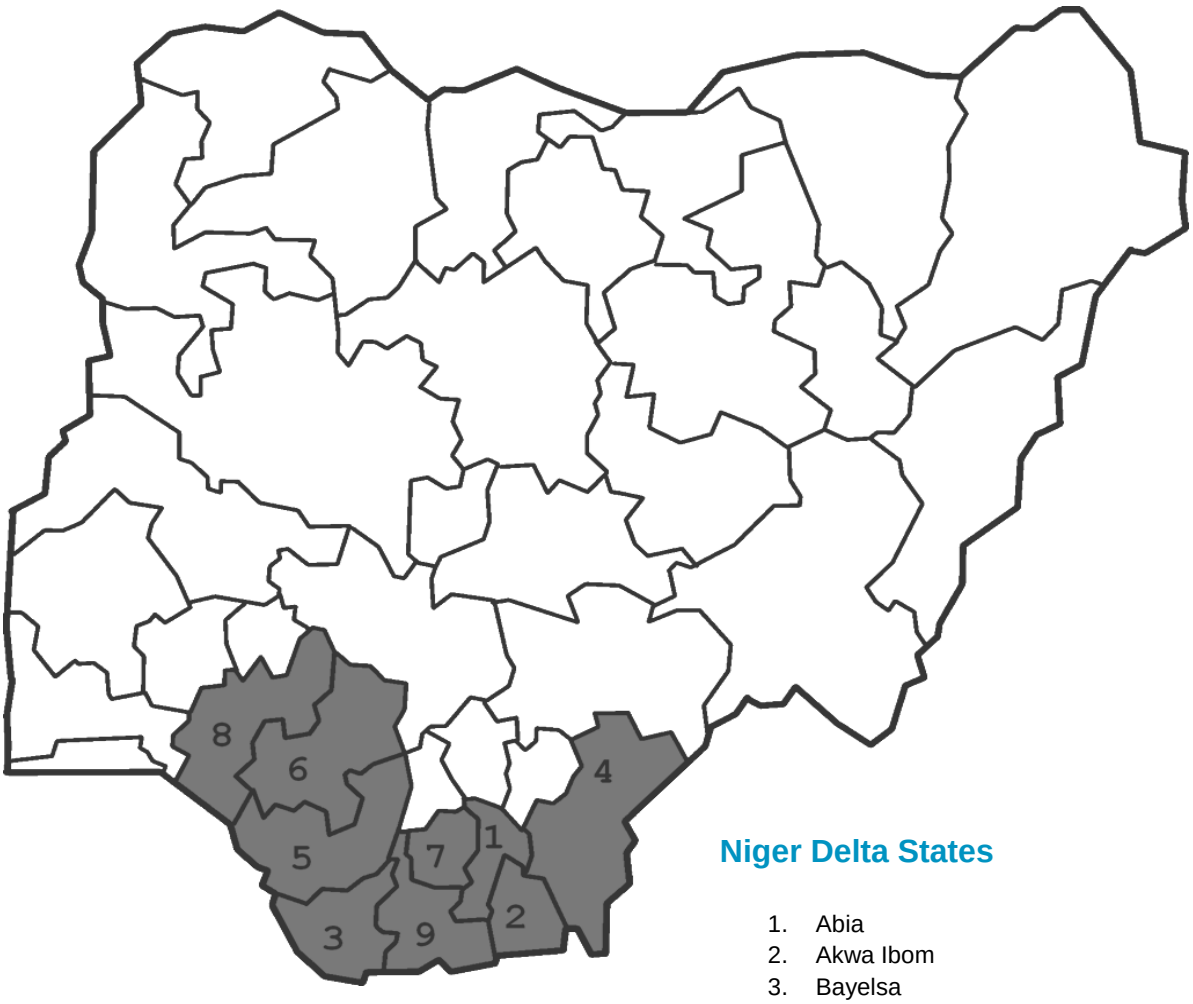
The focus group discussions were intended to uncover both gender norms for women, and gender norms for men as perceived by women, as well as key gender constraints faced by women. Informant interviews with academics, NGO heads, and other “experts” were conducted both to provide supplemental information on key gender considerations and constraints, but also to provide a “check” on what emerged out of the focus groups. At the suggestion of PIND, the research design also called for community analysis discussions. These discussions were really intended to share the findings of the study with members of the community. In addition, it was anticipated that these discussions would also provide interesting reaction from community members to what the women said, as well as insights on male gender norms.

Methodology

A review of relevant literature was conducted and was intended to inform the field research and observations and included both academic articles and the “gray” literature of NGO and donor reports and studies. The review privileged articles written by Nigerian academics and those particular to the Niger Delta region. As apparent in the review a number of themes tended to dominate in the literature: environment and social change (including land displacement), health and customary law with particular reference as it relates to women. For the field research, CEDPA conducted FGDs and KEIs were conducted in eight states. Community analysis sessions were conducted in the four states of Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Abia and Delta. The FGDs, KEIs, and Community Analysis Sessions (CASs) were conducted by CEDPA’s team based in CEDPA’s Calabar office. The team consisted of CEPDA’s local M&E expert Harry Thomas and gender expert Arit Oku. To provide internal consistency, the team conducted all of the focus group discussion and the informant interviews in all eight states.

The selection of the states was made in accordance with the key states in the region as defined by PIND, and those where security concerns would allow the team to conduct the research. As the team wanted to include a broad range of ethnic groups in the study, the ethnic configuration of the states was also a consideration in the selection process. Those states covered in the research were: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Ondo and Rivers.

Figure 1: Map of Nigeria showing Niger Delta states



The sites for the FGD and KEIs were selected in reference to where CEDPA and the researchers had contacts with local NGOs that could identify participants and provide space and facilitation to conduct the discussions. The sites were also chosen with respect to where the FGD would include the broadest range of ethnic groups.

Protocols for the FGD and KEIs were developed by CEDPA and shared with the field research team. Efforts were taken to ensure a wide distribution of ages and ethnic groups within the participants in the FGD. A description of the ethnic configuration and community type are included in the table below and a description of those in attendance is provided below. It should be noted that 90% of the participants in the CASs were over 30 years old.

Table 1: Ethnic Configuration and Community Type for Focus Group Discussions and Community Analysis Sessions

State	FGD town	Community Type	Comments
Cross River	Akpabuyo	Rural	
Akwa Ibom	Eket	Urban	Participants were drawn from Onna (rural) Esit Eket (rural), Ibeno (rural) and Eket (urban)
Rivers state	Port-Harcourt	Urban	Participants were transported from different rural communities (e.g. Tombia, and Abolema)
Abia State	Obeihe- Ukwa West	Rural	
Bayelsa State	Yenogoa	Urban	Participants also came from rural parts like Ekeremor, Silga and Ogbia
Delta state	Agbarho	Semi-Urban	
Edo state	Benin	Urban	Participants were from different parts of Edo state
Ondo state	Okitipupa	Rural	

It should be noted that there is wide variation of ethnicities within states and different practices and gender norms vary within these ethnic groups based on location and local practice. While efforts were made to include a wide range of ethnicities within the FGD, it should be kept in mind that including an accurate representation of all the ethnicities within each state was well beyond the capacity of this study.

The community analysis sessions were intended to be open to the entire community. In practice though, it was community and traditional leaders who attended in larger numbers. A description of those in attendance provided below.

Table 2: Location and Attendance Community Analysis Sessions (CAS)

States	Participant Description
Calabar South, Cross River	• Six male Traditional Leaders and one female health worker from the local hospital • Rural • Efik
Akpayak, Akwa Ibom	• 11 men and three women, none of which were in leadership position • Rural • Ibibio, Ekid
Ipu-East, Abia	• The King and his family, including women • Rural • Igbo
Agbarho, Delta	• All male community and traditional leaders women • Semi-urban • Urhobo, Itsekiri

Key Findings and Observations

Traditional Gender Norms in the Niger Delta Region

The experience of both men and women in the Niger Delta is shaped by strict gender ideologies that define appropriate male and female behavior. What men and women do, how there are expected to behave, what jobs they undertake and how they interact within the larger community are prescribed by traditional gender norms. Many of these gender norms have negative health and social outcomes and severely restrict the ability of women to meaningfully participate in and benefit development efforts and interventions.

Again, it is important to reiterate that gender norms vary among and within different ethnic groups. However, there was a great deal of consistency among the respondents of the eight FGDs. Significant variations between the groups are noted in the text.

Traditional Gender Norms for Women in the Niger Delta Region

Early Life

The secondary status of women appears early on in a young girl's life. As a married woman's access to her home and property after her husband's death is secured only by producing a male heir, a boy child is more welcomed at birth than is his female counterpart. In most of the cultures covered in the study, girls marry out of the family and therefore are often seen as temporary members of their natal homes. A participant from Rivers remarked, *"From birth when a woman bears a male child, they throw a party – a male child represents the home but the female child will go away."* The exception to this boy privilege is in Cross Rivers where the first daughter or *Adiaha*

has significant status in the household that often exceeds that of the first born son in decision-making and inheritance issues.

Given the fact that girls marry out, there has been reluctance on the part of families to invest in a girl's social and educational advancement since, in most cases, it will not yield a return to the family. As one respondent from Edo notes, "They believe in training males. They neglect the females because they will marry and go away."

While this may still be the norm, there is real evidence to suggest that it is changing. In both the FGDs and the CASs, participants spoke of an increasing willingness to educate girls. Girls are increasingly viewed as the primary caretakers of parents in their old age, and therefore some families may be more willing to educate them to increase their capacity to provide. A respondent from Delta remarked, *"Many people are beginning to understand the value of education, and they regret not having send the girls to school… It is the girls who return to take care of the parents even when they are married.*" This sentiment was most pronounced in Delta and Edo.

Interestingly enough, there doesn't seem to be any prohibition on sending girls to school. The sentiment seems to be that it is fine to send girls to school as long as the family does not endure any major costs. Girls may be pulled out of school in favor of boys once it starts costing the family money. The major reason for girls' high attrition rates in secondary school is marriage and pregnancy. In Akwa Ibom it was noted that girls are pulled out of school to help their mothers in the field.

The practice of female genital cutting, which was once wide-spread in the region, seems to be dying out as a practice. While it was mentioned, it was not mentioned as a "problem" and mention of it was usually followed by qualifiers such as "it is changing," or "it is no longer practiced as widely." In some cases, alternative rites such as the "ritual nick" were practiced instead of the removal of the clitoris (Bayelsa).

Marriage and Household

One of the primary markers of a girl's entrance into adulthood is marriage and childbearing. Girls are encouraged to marry early and as one responded noted, *"Boys go to school, and girls get married"*. Girls are encouraged to get married. They are literally pushed into marriage" (Bayelsa). Despite this comment, participants made no mention of forced marriage. It is important to note the early ages at which girls marry. In some of the communities, participants mentioned girls as young as twelve getting married. The Demographic Health Survey for Nigeria shows that 48 percent of girls are married by the age of 18, while only four percent of boys are. This indicates that young girls are marrying much older men – a trend that may have important consequences for the construction of masculinities in the region.

Most marriages are conducted under customary law. Again, it should be kept in mind that there are different variations of customary law. However, most traditional law systems place wives under the authority of the husband. Once married, a husband can control where a woman goes, what she does and what she wears. As will be discussed below, much of what it means to be a man in many of the ethnic groups is to demonstrate control over one's family. Women in the focus groups spoke of having to seek their husbands' permission to leave the house. The payment of bride wealth and bride price by men's family to the girl's family underscores the notion of the husband's ownership over the wife.

Photo 2: FGD Session in Delta state

Male control over their wives and children is often extended through the use of gender based violence which appears to be an accepted means of control by both men and women. As one respondent from Edo noted, *"A wife has the status of a child, who is expected to be beaten to keep him or her in order."* Polygamous marriages and multi-partner relationships for men make women's relationship to their husbands and family tenuous and underscore male control in the household. While men are granted the freedom to engage in polygamous marriages and multi-partner relationships in addition to marriage, women are expected to be obedient and faithful to their husbands.

Once married, all marital property, including women's earnings, comes under the control of the husband who is free to dispose of it as he chooses. While not articulated as such in the FGDs, the possibility that men can "confiscate" women's earnings and spend it on another women or families, may be considered a deterrent for women to earn money or at least to earn it with their husbands' knowledge.

In discussions of inheritance, it was interesting to note, that all of the FGD women said flatly that women *"can't" inherit either as daughters or as widows*. The exception to this was among the Itsekiri people in the Delta where unmarried girls could inherit property. Closer investigation of the transcriptions revealed several statements that suggested that various customary law systems provided for widows to inherit, but that in practice, women were unable to advance these claims. For example, a respondent in Edo remarked that women didn't inherit property but that this was changing. In Akwa Ibom, a respondent commented that good laws exist, but that they weren't enforced. In Rivers, a participant made a similar comment noting that widows can't inherit "despite the laws." Also in Edo, a woman remarked that widows have the right to inherit, but that husbands' families grabbed land. These statements reveal the sense that women may be entitled to inherit under customary law, but their rights are overridden by the men – either male relatives of her husband or traditional leaders entrusted in carrying out customary law. Women may feel powerless to pursue these rights in the face of a legal system that they feel is stacked against them.

Within the household women are to maintain the home care for the children and cook meals for the husband. Many women spoke of the need to treat their husband's nicely so that they will spend time in the home and not spend their time with other women. Many of the women listed this 'caring' as a chore that was necessary, but time consuming.

Traditionally, as will be discussed below, men's role was to protect and provide for the material needs of the family. This role is obviously changing for men, and it is apparent from the FGDs that women are contributing more and more to the household expenses. Many women are now assuming the costs of their children's education (Akwa Ibom and Rivers). In Rivers, it was noted that

while men may still pay for boys to go to school, it is women who pay for their daughters to attend school.

While women may be contributing more to the household expenses, it appears men are often abrogating much of their "responsibility" to provide for their children. For example, in Rivers a respondent remarked, *"…when a woman shows that she has money, that man will tend to leave the responsibility to her. He will tell the children, "go to your mother, she has money"*. This comment attests to the increased role women may be assuming in providing financially for their children.

Income-generating Activities

In addition to household chores, women are expected to engage in farming or fishing. As they get older women may also engage in petty trading. Women's lack of skill training, access to quality inputs and access to technologies prevent them from improving their yields and productivity. As women do not have clear title to land, they often lack the collateral necessary to secure loans. Married women must have their husband's co-sign for loans, and there was mention of husbands confiscating their wives' loans and spending the money on something else.

The sentiment that women's ability to engage in income-generating activities is restricted by their need to seek their husband's approval came out clearly in the FGDs and KEIs in several states including Edo, where men prevent their wives from engaging in commerce for fear she may become more powerful than him. As one expert acknowledged, "[*The] mindset is that women should be confined to the home so they must not engage in business that will take them far from home. They can only conduct business that the husband approves. So, awareness has to be created on the need for women to be involved and the advantages [of their involvement]. Male involvement [is] very important."* (Akwa Ibom)

Women appear to have more freedom to engage in petty trading as they get older and stop menstruating. The FGD participants in Edo and Ondo complained that there were few opportunities available for skills training, and that older women tended to monopolize the few microfinance opportunities that are available. The participants also noted that it was the older women who were able to attend the skills training classes.

With few means to access or generate income, women and girls engage in transactional sex, prostitution (including being trafficked) and "sugar-daddism". Transactional sex appears to be commonplace and is expected in exchange for clothes, jobs or grades. Participants noted widely that girls would prostitute themselves to pay for school fees in Cross Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Rivers, Edo and Ondo.

In Edo and Ondo, prostitution and trafficking appear to be a big problem with families encouraging their daughters to enter into trafficking situations. There was even mention in Edo of women disrupting trafficking awareness programs because they wanted their daughter to engage in prostitution.

Young girls, it should be noted, are encouraged to "marry" or to take on sugar daddies that might provide them and their families with resources. Generally girls are paired up with much older men who can pay the bride price or have access to these resources. This results in unwanted pregnancies and "fatherless" children which were noted as a real concern in both the FGD and the community analysis sessions.

Community Decision Making

Community decision making appears to be the providence of men. As one woman remarked: *"They take decisions without involving women. In the town hall meetings, a woman must cover her head to be able to speak and she must remain seated. She cannot stand up and make a point because this will be considered dishonorable to the men who are present ... If a woman stands up to speak she will be fined. A man is perceived to be more honorable than a woman, so you are expected to submit to the man."* (Rivers)

One expert the team spoke to add these sentiments, "*As a development worker, when you visit the communities, you never get to see the women. Even if you get the women to be admitted into the town hall meetings, they will not talk before the men. They will just keep quiet."* (Edo)

Echoed throughout the FGD is this notion that it is the traditional leaders who choose the women with whom development agencies, oil companies and politicians get to speak. There is a sense that these "female leaders" are chosen by the traditional leaders because they will carry out the wishes of the traditional leaders. For example, in Rivers a woman recounted, "*Old, aged women who cannot speak out are the women leaders*. This is because women do not select their own leaders. Men select their leaders; even within the political parties. So, they select women who cannot oppose them."

Another comment about women's participation in talks with Shell/Chevron reiterates this notion of female leaders being chosen to keep the status quo, "Even when under pressure women are included in these processes, these women are selected by the men, and they know that the women will not really participate in the debates but merely approve of the men's decisions." (Delta)

Women in the FGD were particularly vehement when they talked of being excluded from discussions with the oil companies over compensation. They clearly felt that the traditional and community leaders would ensure that they did not benefit from any compensation money offered. For example one participant confides, *"I am from an oil producing areas. Women do not share in the contracts that men receive. The land for farming is gone, and when compensation is received, none of the money gets to the women who are the actual farmers*." (Rivers)

In Rivers, women were angry about the fact that they felt excluded by the traditional leaders from discussions with the oil companies. The women got together and started directly engaging with the oil companies. One participant explained that in response *"the men got very upset that the women were going to the oil company directly and started to react*." The women then called upon the commissioner of police to intervene. As one respondent recounts the story, *"Now in that community, when contracts are available, the women and men can apply, and the best person wins."*

Women have some access to traditional leaders to advance their claims. In several communities there is an established position of a female chief or female leader who represents women's claims to the traditional councils. This position is the "Jime" in Ondo and the Obong Anwan in Akwa Ibom (although this position in Akwa Ibom is not allowed in the village council meetings). There are examples of women using "Godfathers" as intermediaries to access the traditional leaders. In extreme cases, women may engage in "naked protests" which speaks to the inability of women to press their claims through other means. Interestingly, this type of protest was used mostly to protest harmful widow rites.

The potential for rape or other physical abuse functioned to limit women's participation in public space. Women often spoke about having to be at home in the evenings when community meetings were held. It was accepted though that women should not be out at night and those that ventured out risked rape. Many of the FGDs mentioned rape as a real concern.

Widowhood

As mentioned earlier, women's access to land and her home are secured through either her husband or through her sons. Land grabbing, where a husband's family "grabs" all the marital property often leaving the widow and her family destitute, appears to be common even in cases where there is a male heir. Consider one story from Edo: "*I worked with my husband to buy what we had in our house. When he died, the family came to demand the papers for the house. When I did not give them, they ransacked the wardrobe and everywhere. They took everything away after the burial. We were living in Lagos when my husband died. The relatives rented a bus, and the whole busload of them came to Lagos from Benin. They threw my children and I out. I was going to fight them but my pastor advised me to let them be."*

Widows are also subject to degrading widow rites such as drinking the water used to wash the corpse, or eating from an unwashed plate for a designated period of time. According to respondents, widows must fulfill these practices to prove that they did not cause the death of their husbands. In several communities participants said that if they didn't practice these rites, they would be labeled a witch and ostracized from the community. This was another topic about which women were particularly impassioned and sensed a real injustice. There were several examples in Rivers state where women protested against these rites.

Additionally, it is worth noting, the women spoke about similar mourning rites for widowers that are no longer practiced. In one community in Rivers, rather than seeking to end widow rites, some women organized and pressured widowers to abide by widower rites that had fallen out of practice.

Wife inheritance, a practice whereby the husband's family inherits the widow and the marital property is still practiced. But FGD respondents noted that now the husbands' families are not interesting in caring for the widow or her children, they only want they only want the property. In one case, women were able to pay money to their husband's family to be "free to live her life" rather than marry her husband's relative.

Intergenerational Tension

The literature and personal communications[1] identified intergenerational tension between women of menstruating age and post-menopausal women. In the FGDs, it was mentioned that post-menopausal women loose much of the characteristics that make them female and are thus thought to be "more like men." There also was some evidence of women having more direct access to traditional leaders in Edo once they reached menopause, even being appointed to the traditional council at this time. Participants also mentioned that women had more freedom of mobility and freedom to engage as petty traders as they aged. In terms of the intergenerational tension, the FGD in Ondo talked about how older women were monopolizing micro-credit schemes and tended "fill" the adult education classes.

[1] Email correspondence with Diedre LaPin a Resident Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and World Bank advisor on Niger Delta Strategy

Photo 3: FGD session in Okitipupa, Ondo state

Women at Odds with Traditional Leaders

One very real tension that did come up was the tension between the women and the community/traditional leaders. This was painfully apparent in the community analysis sessions that were dominated by older men, and usually traditional leaders. When the findings of the FGD were shared with community members, the leaders often used this as a time to dismiss women's concerns or defend the status quo. In one case the male community leaders just laughed and tried to put a humorous twist on issues that were articulated as real concerns for women. Consider the notes of the CEDPA researcher:

> *The men agreed totally with the observations made by the FGD participants, but they took the defensive stance trying to explain the reason why things are the way they are. They mostly used arguments from the Bible and culture and tradition as handed down and god-ordained. … But they also agreed that present realities, especially education, Christianity and the economy, are changing perceptions, but change is slow. They repeatedly said, 'It is from creation that men have been in control. God created Adam first and the woman was created to assist him. …The women were no better than a slave but times are changing.' It was obvious that women's issues are not really of much concern to them because of the perception that this is the way that God ordained it, and that God-ordained way is what is keeping families stable and successful. (Notes from community analysis session, Delta)*

In the community analysis session from which the notes above were taken, it is also interesting to note that a community leader who is seeking election to the house of assembly joined the group at the tail end of the discussion. The CEDPA researcher commented, *"He spoke very conservatively about women cautioning that if we pursue gender balance we will break up homes like what happened in the West. He also went so far as to suggest that we should not vie too much money to women or it will break up homes. Interestingly, even then men who earlier appeared to be favorable to positive change for women were nodding in agreement with the new entrant's analysis."*

In another community analysis session in Cross River, the lone female in the group spoke about HIV rates, the community leaders said that these rates were "politically motivated" and untrue. They then went on to blame HIV rates and unwanted pregnancy on women's promiscuous dress and behavior.

Photo 4: Community Analysis Session in Cross River state

In two of the community analysis, the men remained "purposely quiet" when issues of men's sexual behavior were discussed even when they noted high rates of unintended pregnancy as a problem. On a more positive note, an older chief in Delta region felt girls should be educated and women should receive chieftaincy titles.

Traditional Gender Norms for Men in the Niger Delta Region

Early Life

The lives of men are also circumscribed by traditional gender norms regarding male behavior. Male privilege within the family is constructed early on when the birth of a boy is greeted with a sense of relief for both the mother and the family. For the family, this means the family line will continue, and, for the mother, her access to the family home is secured in the face of the death of her husband. The desire to have at least one male child was cited as a contributing factor in high maternal mortality rates. (Edo)

Within the household, boys are indulged and exempted from household tasks. As one FGD participant remarked, "*Boys do nothing. The girl cooks and cleans and fetches water and when it comes to serving the food, the boy enjoys the best. Girls wake up at 4 am to begin household chores while boys are still sleeping. Boys have privileges. They have preferential treatment."* (Akwa Ibom) There is a clear preference to send boys to school and marriage, or more likely fatherhood, does not mean the end of his education as it does for girls. As one respondent remarks, "…*but for the boy his education continues unhindered."* (Cross Rivers)

Virility is seen as a primary marker of masculinity. (Uchendu 2007) For boys this is expressed in their early onset sexual debut and their engagement in multi-partner relations. There is also a sense from the literature and the FGD that it is generally acceptable for boys to use a high level of coercion around sex with girls, and harassing girls for sex is commonplace. (Uchendu, Odimegwu and Okemgbo undated) Given the frequency with which rape was mentioned in the FGDs, it appears that men's access to girls and women is an expression of their dominance. In Akwa Ibom, women spoke of a high tolerance in the community for young men raping girls, *"By 8 pm if you go out, you will be raped by young boys and nobody is doing anything about it."* (Note: this could also be seen as a consequence of the conflict.)

The notion of men's sexual behavior and their engagement in multi-partner relationships is often expressed in terms of men's nature. Comments such as "men are polygamous by nature" were frequent in the FGDs. While men's sexuality was considered a "problem" for the women, the older

men in the community assessment sessions remained conspicuously quiet on this point in Cross River, Akwa Ibom, and Delta states.

Odimegwu and Okemgbo provided some evidence to suggest that HIV awareness has had an impact on the sexual behavior of young men. One of the interviewees remarked, "*In this era of HIV/AIDS, people have to be careful in the number of sexual partners they have. It is no longer a sign of manhood to have many girlfriends. You may contract disease and die thereby. There is common knowledge that this practice of many girlfriends is not ideal. Although we are changing from that, yet, some young boys are still doing it."* (Odimegwu, 2007, p. 23)

Marriage is viewed as an essential marker of manhood and a determinant for achieving social adulthood. As Uchenudu, 2007, points out there are several proverbs in Yourba, Igala and Igbo that reiterate the notion that men can only be considered men once they marry. For example there is an Igala saying that an unmarried man cannot call himself a man. Likewise there is an Igbo proverb that a man without a wife is irresponsible (Uchenudu, 2007). As Uchenudu, 2007, comments, "…men demonstrate their leadership potentials in the smallest social unit – the family. By and large, it was the pre-condition for much of men's social and political responsibilities in the wider society. Not being married undermined a man's social status." (Uchenudu, 2007, p. 286)

Marriage thus provides "men a means of exhibiting their competence to leader and control" – traits considered necessary to prove one's manhood (Uchendu, 2007, p. 286). To be respected as a man therefore is to demonstrate full control over one's wife. A disobedient wife has the power to jeopardize her husband's manhood and respect in the eyes of the community. As Uchenudu points out, "Success in marriage means to have children and to exercise authority over the children and their mother" (Uchendu, 2007, 290). The tying of women's behavior to men's honor has been cited as a contributing factor to high levels of gender based violence in other parts of the world, particularly in the Arab world and Latin America.

However, throughout the literature, there is a sense that what a young man needs as prerequisites in order to marry seem to be changing. As Uchendu points out, while in the past a man's readiness and desirability as a husband was demonstrated through political prestige and status within the community, today it appears men's access to income and his ability to provide materially for his family are considered essential. Uchendu comments, "Social respect and political advancement were the cumulative rewards of ideal patriarchal masculinity. In the present, material acquisitions ensuring a comfortable existence would be the primary index" (Uchendu, 2007, p. 292).

No-Man's Land

Today the ability of young men to achieve this requisite for marriage is imperiled by the loss of livelihoods and high unemployment rate even for university graduates. The lack of employment for young men was a recurring theme in the FGD and a major explanation for their entry in gangs, vigilantly groups and militias. As a result young men may not feel able to secure the jobs or income necessary for them to marry and are thus forced to remain in a kind of social no-man's land where they are obviously not boys – but because they are unmarried, are not considered social adults. The literature gives testimony to the fact that in many cases, it is not unusual for 30 to 40 year- old men to be considered as youth. (Barker and Ricardo, 2005)

Many authors have pointed out the connection between men being trapped in a suspended adolescence with few employment prospects and no social role with the prevalence of gang violence and violent conflict (Mesquida and Wiener, 1999, Urdal, 2004) and Barker and Ricardo's work in northern Nigeria certainly suggests that young men with nothing to do are more likely to be drawn into conflict, while gainfully employed men are less likely to participate. (2005). This sentiment was echoed in the FGDs where respondents said it was the lack of employment that pushed these young men into joining the conflict. Consider the following comment from the FGD in Abia, "Most of the youth are poor and unemployed. Most of the boys – when they finish or dropout of primary, secondary and university, when they come out and there is unemployment – they get involved in

militancy and violence." Another comment reiterates the same sentiment, "Some of the boys who are responsible for the ongoing violence are university graduates here with no jobs. Youth restiveness is caused by unemployment and lack of training."

Photo 5: FGD Session in Abia state

While most authors point to the lack of employment and social role as push factors for young men to enter conflict, Barker and Ricardo (2005), provide a new twist. They state in reference to Sub-Saharan Africa:

*One of the tensions between older and younger men is about access to women. In much of Africa, adolescent women often marry older men, sometimes much older than they are, in part because these older men have the resources to pay bride wealth or bride-price. …this data also suggests that older men have greater access to younger women at the expense of younger men. (*Barker and Ricardo *2005)*

Their suggestion is that in the past older men, who controlled the distribution of material means (land, livestock, and houses) that young men would need in order to marry, would distribute it to younger men when they reached a designated marriageable age. Now, Barker and Ricardo suggest, in the context of HIV, older men are intentionally holding onto to these resources in order to monopolize access to young women themselves. The outcome is the same – older men have greater access to young women and young men are forced to delay marriage. This they argue, combined with limited opportunities to earn an income is very real push factor for young men to engage in violent conflict. Instead of starting a family and earning an income, young men go off and engage in violent conflict.

There is another finding from the FGDs that may compliment Barker and Ricardo's suggestion. Several of the respondents suggested that young men's participation in the conflict was their way to ensure that they were not going to be excluded from getting their share of the oil wealth by the traditional leaders. One expert in Abia commented, "*Youths are trying to grab their share of the wealth. This has led to youth restiveness*." In Bayelsa, a respondent recounted an experience of young men in her community. CEDPA's researcher noted:

She said that initially, what the militant youths were trying to do was to force the oil companies to pay some attention to their host communities. In the initial phase of the struggle, she said that the youths compelled Shell to extend power supply to the three communities where they were operating at the time. She noted that when the young boys started dealing directly with the oil companies, it brought about a huge disagreement between the elders and young people.

Barker and Ricardo (2005), discuss how migration to cities offers one way young men can escape the tight grip on power and resources older men may wield in the villages. When discussing the intergenerational struggles in the KwaZulu Natal region in South Africa they remarked, “At the root of this struggle was the attempt of older African men to hold onto the rights traditionally accorded them, and the efforts of a younger generation to break free from patriarchal control (Barker and Ricardo, 2005, p. 13). A similar dynamic may be occurring for young men in Nigeria. Joining these militias might be seen by youth as one of the only ways they can break free of the patriarchal control of their elders and get their share of the wealth that they might otherwise feel would be held by the traditional leaders.

There is a sense that engagement in the conflict offers young men one of the few social roles that may be available to them. Engaging in conflict also gives young men a means to demonstrate other essential traits of manhood such as fearlessness, decisiveness, protection of the weak, dominance (Uchendu, 2007) and the opportunity for them to earn an income.

Fatherhood

Providing material for one’s family is viewed as one of the key functions of both a husband and father. Uchendu (2007), points out in a study of young university men that, “…male youths did not associate the role of father with giving affection but in terms of efficiency in meeting their financial obligations.” (Uchendu, 2007, p. 283)

Throughout the FGDs there was a murmur that the economic displacement due to oil and the migration of men seeking employment in the oil industry has fueled the sex industry, and, as a result, unwanted pregnancies and fatherless children. For example, one respondent from Abia stated, “The oil business involves a large number of oil workers who are posted to the communities or the oil rigs without their families. The young girls are easy prey. The girls get pregnant and the man has moved on to other postings. So the young girls end up with children who do not even know who their fathers are or even where to find them or even how to trace them. “

Another participant in Abia suggested the fact that, “fathers are not at home to train their children” as a reason (along with unemployment) that young men join militant activities. Another comment suggests that even while men may be physically in the same community, they may be marginalized from their families.

A respondent from Abia complained, “Once a man drops some money for you in the morning, he would just go out without saying where he is going. He does not care less whether the children have eaten, how they behave or what they do. When the woman tries to train the children; one can even say that all these boys who have become like wild animals are a result of being brought up by their mothers alone. Well brought up children are from families where the fathers and women work together to train the children. The men leave home and go after other women in hotels where they go to enjoy.”

As noted above, women are now contributing more and more to the household income, and in particular, to the education of their children. As women start to assume what was once consider the traditional male role within the family, men may feel their role has been undermined and therefore feel marginalized within that household unit. A FGD participant from Ondo said, “It is not easy to marry nowadays. Men are not ready to marry. They play wayo. [2] Men are not giving money to their wives and are not taking care of the children. Increasingly, women are taking care of the household. Only women are taking care of the children nowadays. In some cases, when a man sees that a woman is working he will leave her with all the responsibilities.”

Gender norms for both men and women are changing despite the tight grip that the traditional leaders are considered to maintain on the communities. Norms and expectations are changing in

[2] A person who indulges in trickery and lying to get his way- someone who is not to be trusted.

response to economic migration, loss of livelihoods, the presence of militias and the threat of HIV. Although not without their accompanying risks, economic migration and engagement in militias appear to offer men a way to escape the strict gender confines of village life and challenge the control of traditional leaders. Moving into a city or joining a militia appear to offer young men at least the hope of securing resources and livelihoods on their own – something they may feel traditional leaders would prevent them from doing in their home communities (Barker and Ricardo, 2007).

Women appear less likely to have these escape routes and as a result may find themselves more squarely at odds with the traditional leaders who appear keen on managing social change. Many women have mentioned the important role the Christian church plays in their lives, and the potential it has for improving the lives of women, particularly in regard to changing "traditional" practices such polygamy, female genital cutting and widow rites. While the church may seek to end these practices, the ideology that places women under the authority of man is so often justified in terms of the Bible and religious belief that it appears the church will be unlikely partner in promoting a more empowered notion of women and gender relations.

Traditional gender norms, whether they are actualized or remain as an ideal, result in negative health and social outcomes for both men and women and lie at the heart of several key development challenges in the region. A woman's ability to meaningfully engage in economic activities in her own right is severely constrained if she is dependent upon her husband for access to land to farm, money for nets to fish with or goods to sell at the market. A woman's right to health and bodily integrity is compromised by gender based violence, the inability to negotiate condom use and the threat of rape.

Men's right to health is compromised by a culture that encourages men to seek out multiple partners as an outward display of his virility as well as a culture that offers him few social roles other than that of "trouble maker," soldier, or member or gang member. A man's ability engage in economic activities will to some extent depend on him securing access to community resources such as land and oil compensation – resources he may feel are monopolized by traditional big men.

Key Issues for Women that Emerged from the FGD: [3]

Tradition and Culture

The issues women had with respect to tradition and culture were expressed in terms of male sexual behavior (multi-partner relationships, keeping of multiple wives and concubines, and fathering many children). Women also spoke consistently and vehemently about the degrading widow rites to which they were subject.

Women's Inability to Inherit Land

Falling under the rubric of culture (customary law) but viewed as a separate issue by women was women's "inability" to inherit land. As mentioned earlier, perhaps women's sense of injustice steams from the possibility that women may be allowed to inherit under customary law, but in practice women's rights to inheritance are overridden in favor of the husband's family.

[3] An analysis of FGD was made and coded for frequency and intensity of issues raised. The following issues were raised in all eight FGD.

Poverty/Lack of Income-generating Opportunities

Women articulated the loss of manufacturing industries, such as glassware, and the loss of agricultural income generating opportunities in oil palm and fishing, due to pollution. The lack of skills building programs and the sex-segregated nature of many industries were also viewed as contributing to women's unemployment and overall poverty.

Exclusion from Decision-making

This was expressed in terms of women being marginalized from participation in political structures as well as tribal and community councils. It was also expressed in terms of women not being able to negotiate with the oil companies directly (with the exception of a group of women in Rivers State) and therefore women felt they were unable to access the community funds and jobs that were provided in concessions. This was also expressed in terms of traditional leaders appointing women "leaders" who did not represent the needs and interests of women. Women felt there was no authentic voice for positive change for women.

Access to Education

This was expressed in terms of school and material costs being expensive and the need to keep girls in school.

Access to Healthcare

This was expressed in terms of existing healthcare being expensive and hard to reach. Health clinics were far away and often crowded. Women said that it wasn't worth their time to go there if they will be just sent away. As a result, women tend to rely on traditional birth attendants who they acknowledge as not being very skilled.

Prostitution and Trafficking

This was noted as a particular concern in Edo and Ondo. HIV, unwanted pregnancies and fatherless children were also expressed as concerns resulting from prostitution and transactional sex.

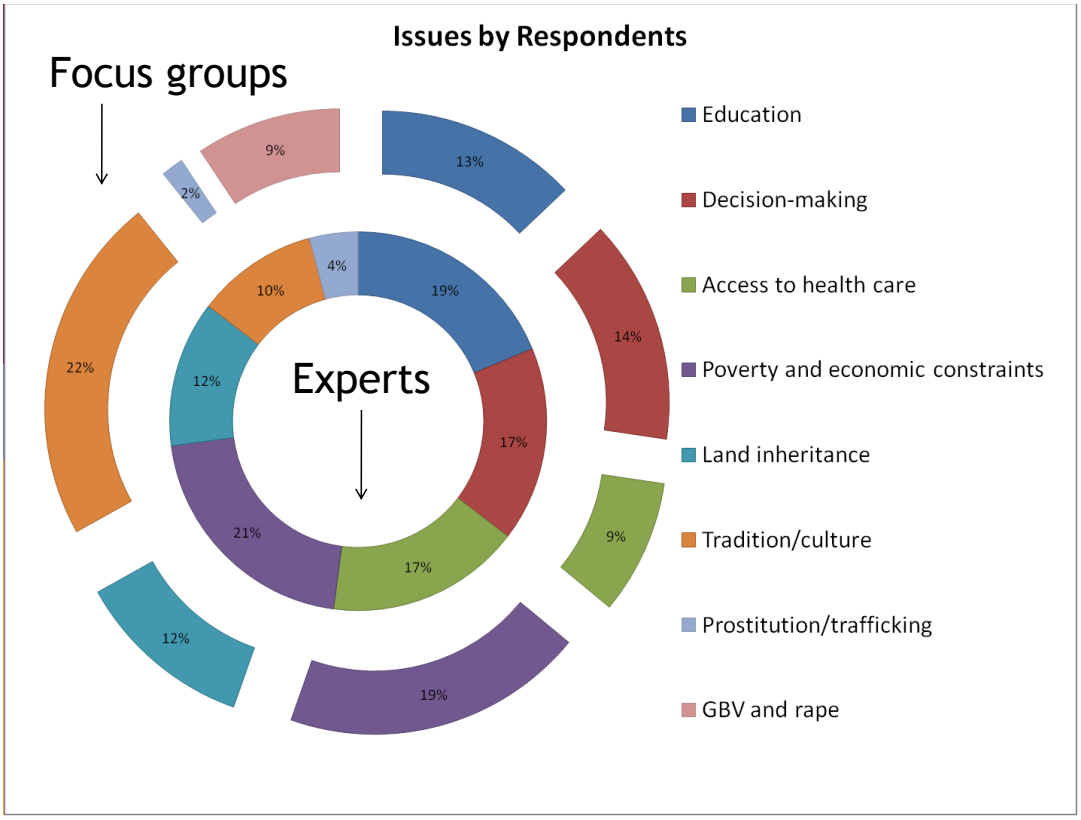
Rape

Rape was listed as a major concern for women. It was noted that there was a great deal of rape within the family and that it was highly stigmatized and under-reported. There was also mentioned that security forces were complicit in situations of rape and physical abuse.

Issues by Respondents

Note that there were differences in what women named as "issues of concern" and what was identified in KEIs as key areas of concern for women. For example, women mentioned rape as a key issue of concern in the FGDs, where it was not mentioned as an issue of concern by the experts. Also, traditional and culture was listed as an issue more in the focus groups than by the experts.

Figure 2: Issues by respondents



Conclusion

For over 20 years there have been a number of successful programs that work to promote more gender equitable gender norms and transform gender relations. These programs tend to fall into four categories.

1. Programs that work with women and girls to challenge traditional gender norms as they relate to women

This type of programming aims to challenge traditional gender norms that limit women's expectations of themselves and their role in the family, the community and their country. Such programming tends to seek to "empower" women and to help women and girls seek alternatives to harmful cultural practices such as early marriage, early first births and traditional roles that circumscribe their full participation in society. This type of programming may assist women by providing "empowerment" including leadership training, public speaking skills and negotiation skills. Similarly they often work to move women into "non-traditional" roles by providing vocational skills training and business skills.

Some of the hallmark programs that represent this type of approach in the Niger Delta region are: Challenging Patriarchy (run by Kebet Kache and Action Aid), the Girl Power Initiative (International Women's Health Coalition) and CEDPA's Choose a Future and BLOOM models for girls.

2. Programs that work with men and boys to challenge traditional gender norms as they relate to women

This type of programming was developed in response to the limitations that appeared in programs that only focused on women. The rationale behind this approach is that men are needed to create an "enabling environment" for women's empowerment. This type of programming is designed to help men change their attitudes and expectations of women to promote more gender equitable gender norms. Much of this type of programming tries to encourage men to value women and girls, educate girls, avoid early and forced marriages, "allow" their wives to space their pregnancies and/or to go to work. Many of these programs focus on a specific topic such as working with men to stop gender based violence or to promote the use of family planning services. This type of programming is usually what people refer to as the "constructive engagement of men and boys" in women's health and empowerment.

Notable projects representing this type of programming in the Delta region are the Conscientizing Male Adolescents (Calabar International Institute for Research, Information and Development) and Engaging Men in Eliminating Gender-based Violence (Men's Resource Center International and DOVENET) in Ebonyi. Raising Voices out of Uganda is a program to combat gender based violence that would be very applicable to the Delta region in Nigeria.

3. Programs that work with men and boys and women and girls together to challenge traditional gender norms as they relate to women

This type of programming brings boys and girls together to investigate traditional gender norms as they relate to girls (*see programs above*). It reflects a different methodology from the programs described above.

A notable program reflecting this type of programming is CEDPA's BLOOM model in Calabar.

4. Programs that work with men and boys to challenge traditional gender norms as they relate to men

These program focus on helping men and boys critically reflect upon the socially constructed notions of masculinity and what it means to be a man in a given culture. They are designed to help men understand the negative health and social outcomes of masculinities. To help men and boys acknowledge that there are negative outcomes that are associated with masculinities such as being tough, in control, not seeking help and having multiple sex partners. These programs are often aimed at promote more health seeking behaviors for men and to enable men to create more healthy constructions of manhood.

Successful application of this type of programming in the workplace include Unilever's Healthy Images of Manhood (HIM) program in Tanzania and in youth based settings , the Instituto Promundo in Brazil.

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