

# Petro-politics, Gender Violence and Human Trafficking in Nigeria's Niger Delta Region

 Abosede Omowumi Babatunde

Centre for Peace and Strategic Studies, University of Ilorin, Nigeria

[bose\\_babatunde@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bose_babatunde@yahoo.co.uk)

## Abstract

In Nigeria's Niger Delta, oil politics by global oil corporation, national government and local leaders perpetuate gender inequalities in the distribution of oil benefits to women in oil communities. Women also bear the greater cost of oil-induced environmental harms which adversely affect their traditional livelihood of farming and fishing. Scholarship on human trafficking in Nigeria focused scant attention on the structural conditions that influenced women experience of human trafficking in extractive contexts. This article examines how oil politics perpetuate gender violence and expose women to human trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labour in the Niger Delta region. Based on feminist political ecology perspectives and field studies in selected oil communities, the study seeks to explain how oil politics perpetuate women's socio-economic deprivation, in ways that expose them to human trafficking as victims and accomplice. Women exposure to human trafficking amplify their experience of gender violence and violate their rights and aspiration for emancipation and justice in Nigeria's oil extractive region. International organizations and policy makers need to consider the global and local dynamics that magnified women's experience of human trafficking in extractive communities and the wider implications for the global and local efforts to combat human trafficking.



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## 1 Introduction

In Nigeria's Niger Delta, decades of injustice linked to the negative environmental, social, and economic impacts of industrial-scale oil extraction and production have resulted in widespread harm to the environment, traditional source of livelihood (farming and fishing) and health of the people (Watts, 2008; Adunbi, 2013; Okafor-Yarwood, 2018; Babatunde, 2020). In the Niger Delta, the global, national and local social forces involved in industrial scale oil extractive activities are the powerful transnational oil corporations, national government, local leaders and militant youth. These powerful actors control access to and distribution of the benefits accruing from oil resources, in ways that deprive majority of the Niger Delta people a fair share of the oil benefits. Nevertheless, the impoverished people bear the larger cost of the environmental harms. Nixon (2011) uses the term slow violence to illustrate the longer lasting temporal and spatial violence resulting from the detrimental environmental impacts of oil development, in which poor communities and individuals are confronting the ongoing legacies that manifest in diverse forms of direct and indirect violence. Giles and Hyndman (2004; 16) observe that oil companies and states collaborators pursue any means that can facilitate and secure lucrative sources of fuel, without any consideration for the adverse consequences on the communities where the resources are extracted. The detrimental consequences of oil extraction and production in the Niger Delta have led to what Iheka's (2021: 9) describes as "violence of oil materiality", which result in impoverishment for poor communities, especially the women.

This article focuses on the intersection of petro-politics, gender violence and human trafficking in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. It seeks to explain how the politics of oil by transnational oil corporation, national government and local actors perpetuate gender inequalities and injustices and influence women's exposure to human trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labor in the extractive communities in the Niger Delta. It argues that in circumstances of severe deprivation fueled by the deleterious consequences of oil politics, women are exposed to various forms of human trafficking, as a survival strategy.

In the Niger Delta, the initial nonviolent resistance against environmental degradation and socio-economic deprivation, championed by Ken Saro Wiwa-led Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni in the early 1990s brought the plights of the people into global attention (Obi, 2005). This later transformed to armed militancy after the Nigerian milit-

ary government execution in 1995 of Ken Saro Wiwa, and eight Ogoni activists for inciting the Ogoni youth to brutally murder four prominent Ogoni elders they accused of co-optation with the government for monetary gains (Watts, 1997). The case of MOSOP illuminates the contentious oil politics between the Nigerian government, oil multinationals and the community leaders, who appropriate the larger share of the oil benefits to the detriments of the powerless and vulnerable people, especially the women.

Since the late 1990s, much of the Niger Delta has been engulfed in armed militant agitations by the Niger Delta youth, against the global corporations, and national government (Imobighe, 2004; Osaghae, et al, 2011; Adunbi, 2015). Oil violence in the Niger Delta also involves conflict between and among oil communities over intense contestation among the local leaders, political elites and youth to get a share of the little benefit from oil accruing to the communities (Babatunde, 2019). Women and children are the major victims of the oil politics and violence, as they deal with various forms of gender and sexual violence along with socio-economic deprivation (Ikelegbe, 2005; Babatunde, 2018). While women are deprived of a fair share of the oil benefits accruing to their communities, they also contend with sexual and gender-based violence during violent contestation between the powerful Nigerian government, oil communities and the local and youth leaders.

In fact, women were molested, beaten and raped by the military and mobile police personnel (popularly known as “Kill and Go” operations) deployed by the military government and oil multinationals, during the government repressive onslaught on MOSOP’s nonviolent resistance, (Osaghae, 1995). In the wake of the of the transition of MOSOP’s non-violent resistance to violent agitation by militants’ groups in the Niger Delta, women have also experienced physical and sexual violence perpetrated by security forces who invaded local communities to carry out security operations against the armed militants (Nwankwo, 2015; Oriola, 2016; Babatunde, 2018).

The Nigerian government Amnesty programme for the militants, as a peace initiative to halt the armed militancy and restore peace in the Niger Delta, established in 2009 and sustained by successive government, along with the various government-initiated development interventionist agencies have not mitigated oil violence or address the environmental and development crisis in the Niger Delta. In the post-Amnesty era, oil violence in the Niger Delta takes the form of sea piracy, kidnapping, cult gang clashes, militancy, oil bunkering, artisanal oil refining, and communal conflicts (Watts, 2015, Obi, 2019; Kabari, et al, 2024). Women continue to contend with gender and sexual-based violence perpetrated by armed youth during militants and cult gangs’ clashes and communal conflicts (Mfon and Uwomano, 2020). At the same time, traditional cultural norms and practices relating to gender roles, and access to resources deprive women ownership of vital economic resources like land and fishing areas needed for their livelihood and survival (Omeire, et al., 2014). While women are able to access land and fishing areas through their male folks, they lack ownership rights that can allow them to benefit from oil royalties and compensation payments for oil-induced environmental damages to their farmlands (Ibeanu, 2001; Ikelegbe, 2005. Babatunde, 2018). The powerful male-led local leaders, along with government and oil multinationals exploit the traditional cultural norms and practices to deny women access to oil benefits, thereby worsening their experience of socio-economic deprivation and gender violence.

Turcotte (2011) maintains that gender violence in the Niger Delta is linked to the broader political economy of violence that creates the conditions fostering and facilitating petro-politics in the region. At the same time, the turbulent oil politics intersects with gender violence and inadvertently exposes women to human trafficking for forced labor and sexual exploitation, as they cooperate with and/or resist global oppressions (Hudson, 2021) and local subjugation. In this way, petro-politics materializes in multiple forms that have always been gendered and systemically violent. Thus, petro-politics, gender violence and women's exposure to human trafficking are intricately connected.

Daggett (2018) uses the term petro-masculinity in explaining the nature of energy politics which is not only based on profit maximization but also transects gender identities in ways that instigates gender violence. Gender-based violence broadly encompasses any form of direct or indirect violence which is targeted at individual on the basis of gender (Russo and Pirlott, 2006; Andersson, et al. 2008; Mittal and Singh, 2020). For this study, gender violence refers to direct and indirect violence linked to various forms of injustices, inequalities, and human rights violation experienced by the local women and associated with the detrimental nature of oil politics by the global oil corporations, government and local leaders in the oil communities in the Niger Delta.

Oil politics in the Niger Delta is rooted in globalization of capitalism as the structures of domination and monopolization of power that manifest in the expropriation of vital economic and non-material resources and the operation of systems of social stratification that subvert people's chances for survival (Anglin, 1998). Segato and McGlazer (2022: 9) observe that colonial intervention in Africa, which paved way for oil capitalism captured gender relations, and hierarchies in ways that inflated and absolutized the masculine position. This transformed the masculine—public space into a sphere that sequestered and monopolized politics and fostered gender inequalities. Thus, a complex mix of gender-related cultural values, beliefs, norms, social institutions, along with extractive practices have legitimized gender violence against women in the Niger Delta. This paper, thus, raises this pertinent question; in what ways have oil politics by the powerful global, national and local actors perpetuated gender violence and exposed local women to human trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labor?

The conventional perspectives by international organizations and policy analysts tend to advance the view that women are "forced" into human trafficking. This kind of supposition seems to disregard the structural conditions that influence the choice that women make, like the case of the local women in extractive communities, notably the petrol industry, has the potential to do more harm than good. Kelly (2003) emphasize that most definitions of trafficking are much wider than 'force', because perspectives that consider the use of force as the only precondition for human trafficking run the risk of enabling traffickers and exploiters to escape sanction in diverse cases. It can also justify the misconceived actions of those law enforcement officials who arrest, detain, prosecute and summarily deport women and girls detected as trafficked victims in the countries of destination.

The existing literature on illegal migration and specifically human trafficking in Nigeria and the West African subregion, have focused on the structural drivers of human trafficking relating to poverty, and the inadequate intervention by national government and subregional organizations to combat human trafficking (Usanlele, 1999; Agbu, 2003;

Aghatise, 2004; Attoh 2009; Aderinto, 2012; Ingwe, et al, 2012; Braimah, 2013; Babatunde, 2014; 2019; Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta, 2018; 2022; Adeniyi, 2019; Ehiemua, 2019; Ebuka-Onuoha, 2019).. While these interrelated issues are central to the analysis of the human trafficking phenomenon in the sub-region, in the specific case of the Niger Delta, we also see additional dynamics in play, which are intricately embedded in the gendered and deleterious nature of petro-politics and its wider impacts. The case of the Niger Delta demonstrates that women as accomplice in human trafficking may inadvertently victimize other women, in ways that spawn a cycle of gender violence and worsen the plights of women in the long run. Despite the efforts of the Nigerian government and international organizations to combat human trafficking, the US Trafficking in Person Report (2022) found that the country has continued to demonstrate inadequate capacity to meet the minimum standard for combating trafficking in person. In fact, human trafficking phenomenon proliferates in the country, including in the oil extractive communities that generates the main source of government revenue and provide cheap energy for the global community. This raises critical questions about the viability of the anti-human trafficking efforts of the Nigerian government and international community. This analysis can offer policymakers and international organizations critical insights into the global and local forces that influence the nature and dynamics of human trafficking in oil extractive contexts.

In the Niger Delta, studies on human trafficking have focused largely on Benin, Edo State as the site of human trafficking for sexual exploitation (Usanlele, 1999; Attoh, 2009; Braimah, 2013; Ehiemua, 2019; Ebuka-Onuoha, 2019). The nature and dynamics of human trafficking in other Niger Delta States which are embedded in the gendered and deleterious oil politics is understudied. This paper spotlights the gender dynamics of oil politics fueling gender violence and trafficking of women for sexual exploitation and forced labor in resource-rich conflict-affected contexts in Africa and elsewhere.

After the introduction, the next section theorizes the gendered political ecology of resource governance fueling gender violence and human trafficking. This is followed by a section that engages the relevant literature on the human trafficking phenomenon. The fourth section describes the method for data collection and analysis. The fifth section focuses on how the nature of oil politics fuels gender violence and human trafficking in the Niger Delta. In the penultimate section, the discussion focuses on the challenges to combating gender violence and human trafficking in the Niger Delta. The concluding section outlines how the politics of resource governance result in the complex and intractable nature of gender violence and human trafficking in the Niger Delta.

## 2 Theoretical perspective

Political ecology approaches are particularly useful in understanding the environmental, socio-economic, and political issues that shaped women experience of gender violence and human trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labor in extractive context. Political ecologists see environmental problems as a manifestation of broader political and economic forces associated with the worldwide spread of capitalism (Bryant and Bailey, 1997). Feminist political ecologists offer a gendered approach to the analysis of environmental problems through an examination of how gender inequalities shape environmental change and conflict (Leach, 1991; Schroeder, 1993; Rocheleau and Ross, 1995). The Niger Delta provides a good analysis of the contestations between diverse

global, national and local actors over environmental issues and the wider impacts of these contestations.

In the Niger Delta, the intersection of oil politics, gender violence and human trafficking is shaped by the interactions between the different global, national and local actors associated with oil capitalism and the consequences of these interactions. The costs and benefits associated with oil-induced environmental changes are distributed unequally among actors. This unequal distribution of environmental costs and benefits can either reinforce or reduce existing social and economic inequalities (Bryant, 1992). In the Niger Delta, the unequal distribution of environmental costs and benefits by the oil multinationals, national government and local leaders perpetuate existing social and economic inequalities for local women in the patriarchal communities. This exposes women to structural and gender violence and increases their vulnerability and exposure to human trafficking.

Peřsa and Ross (2021) argue that women in particular have been structurally exposed to more severe pollution than men living in the extractive communities, and the experience of structural inequalities shape perceptions of and reactions to mining-induced change. This aptly reflects the case of the local women in the Niger Delta, where their economic and domestic activities involve close interaction with polluted farmland and fishing water, contaminated water for drinking, bathing, cooking and other purposes. Nevertheless, women are marginalized in compensation payments for the environmental harms and displacement of their livelihoods, in ways that made them to struggle for survival (Ikelegbe, 2005; Babatunde, 2018).

Cole (2016) asserts that how women are able or not to express the environmental and social injustice they experience, depends on the cultural context. The case of the Niger Delta illustrates that in their struggle to survive their state of deprivation, women seek any means of sustenance including being exposed to human trafficking as victims and accomplice, thereby amplifying their experience of gender violence due to the inhuman treatment that characterized human trafficking. Women complicity in human trafficking as accomplice depicts their capacity to exploit and perpetrate violence against other women, which ultimately amplifies gender violence and undermines their wellbeing and security.

### **3 Human trafficking in Nigeria**

The Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2019) asserts that 3.5 million Africans are being trafficked at any point in time, out of which 99% of the detected victims in West Africa are trafficked within their own country or region. In a related study, Schwikowski (2024) asserts that seven million Africans live under various forms of modern slavery, in which most are victims of human trafficking, especially migrants from West African countries including Nigeria, Mali, Niger, and Senegal seeking better living conditions in Europe or elsewhere. A 2024 report of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) observes that in 2023, more than 3,100 people drowned in the Mediterranean Sea, and about 1,900 died enroute within Africa, while many perished in the Sahara Desert and at least 8,565 people died on international migration routes (Schwikowski, 2024).



The Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2019) found that most of the trafficking victims in Africa are women and more than 50 percent of victims in sub-Saharan Africa are children, who mostly originated from West Africa. Women and girls are trafficked primarily for domestic servitude and forced commercial sexual exploitation, while boys are trafficked for forced labour in street vending and domestic servitude (Udujia et al. 2019). The International Organization for Migration (IOM 2022) contends that trafficking may not necessarily entail overt use of physical force. It could be an exploitation of a situation in which the victim has little or no alternative than to submit themselves to the trafficking scenario. West Africa region is considered a major centre of trafficking in person because of the rising insecurity linked to the crisis in Mali, and Lake Chad Basin, particularly the Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria (IOM 2022). UNODC (2006) identifies some of the contributory factors for the rising menace of trafficking in persons in the West Africa countries of Benin, Nigeria and Togo to include poverty, large family size, lack of educational opportunities, lack of employment, and ignorance on the part of families and children of the risks involved in trafficking. Moreover, human trafficking is attributed to weak corporate social responsibility (CSR) by multinational companies operating in developing countries (Udujia et al. 2019). The oil multinationals CSR projects in oil communities are perceived to be lopsided and inequitable (Idemudia, 2014; Udujia et al. 2019). This suggests that the poor extractive practises of multinational companies in developing countries can spawn structural condition of socio-economic deprivation that increases people's vulnerability to human trafficking networks.

In Africa, Nigeria has one of the most extensive human trafficking networks as a major source, transit, and destination country for women and children trafficked for forced labor and sexual exploitation (Craig, 2012; Babatunde, 2014; 2019; United States human trafficking report, 2022). Although Nigeria is ranked as sub-Sahara Africa's largest producer and sixth largest in the world; with proven oil and gas reserves of 37 billion barrels and 192 trillion-cubit feet (IMF 2018), the Niger Delta region where Nigeria's oil resource is located and where oil multinationals carry out oil production activities is a major site of human trafficking (Udujia et al. 2019). Human trafficking in the Niger Delta is mostly prevalence in the rural oil communities (PIND, 2018). Related studies have documented the prevalence of human trafficking in some states in Nigeria including Akwa-Ibom, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ebonyi, Kano, Ogun, Oyo and Lagos (UNESCO 2006; Udujia et al. 2019). Of these identified Nigerian states with high prevalence of human trafficking, five states including Akwa-Ibom, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, are all within the Niger Delta region.

While there is no reliable estimate of the specific numbers of victims of human trafficking in Nigeria, the report of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) suggests that an estimated 1,318 persons were trafficked for the purpose of forced labour, while 1,299 persons were trafficked for sexual exploitation between January 2014 and August 2017. In fact, the 2018 report of the Walk Free Foundation shows that an estimated 1.4 million individuals are living in modern slavery in Nigeria, which encompasses forced labour, debt bondage, forced marriage, slavery and slavery-like practices, and human trafficking.

A report of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO, 2021) indicates that between 2017 and 2018, Nigerian victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation (estimated at 92 percent) detected in the European Union are women. The report further suggests that the trafficked women originated predominantly from the south of Nigeria, particu-

larly Edo State which has been majorly identified as the central hub for sex trafficking from Nigeria to Europe for the last decades. Research shows that Edo State remains an important departure point for victims of overseas sex trafficking, while there is an increase in the numbers of female victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation to Europe from other Southern states including Delta, Ekiti, and Ondo State (in which Delta and Ondo, along with Edo states are part of the Niger Delta region), as well as the northern state of Kano (EASO, 2021). Moreover, Anambra and Akwa Ibom states (Akwa Ibom is another state in the Niger Delta region) have been identified as an important departure point for irregular Nigerian migrants (EASO, 2021).

In Nigeria, there are internal trafficking of women and children from rural communities to cities predominantly for exploitative domestic work (ACCORD, 2017). For cross border trafficking, the victims are recruited from all parts of the country. The trafficked victims are transported by land, sea, and air to various destinations. The major international destinations for trafficked Nigerians include neighbouring West and Central African countries of Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Benin, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, Gabon and Guinea; European countries such as Italy, Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany and the United Kingdom; North African countries of Libya, Algeria and Morocco; and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East (Omorodion 2009; Udujia et al. 2019).

Tracing the root of human trafficking in Edo State, Zasha, et al (2017) found that the historical metamorphosis of legitimate trade by Edo women into trade in women and girls in Italy, the overdependence on oil and the neglect of other sectors, and the desecration of cultural values and social norms that had hitherto promoted women's purity, created the condition for the emergence of multiple networks of actors who capitalized on these factors to advance trade in women and girls. Apart from these critical issues, it is also important to consider the political ecology of oil extractive practices that fuels the structural conditions that expose women and children to the human trafficking network across the Niger Delta region. Traffickers usually target the most vulnerable groups such as girls from polygamous families, school drop outs, the rural poor, urban women, and illegal migrants (Zasha, et al, 2017).

The disempowering situation experienced by women in the oil communities constitutes the "push" factors while the lure of a better living conditions abroad and the stories of wealth amassed by the trafficked returnees represent the "pull" factor. The prospects of improved living conditions abroad are reinforced by the stories about those who were trafficked but eventually succeeded in paying off their debts and returned home to live wealthy life by building large houses, acquiring properties, establishing business, and support to family members (Ngwe and Elechi, 2012). Narrating the case of Edo and Delta states, Zasha, et al. (2017) explain that many poor parents and families who witnessed the display of wealth generated from abroad by the trafficked returnees, were encouraged to give out their children and young girls to traffickers, out of ignorance of the source of such wealth and the kind of inhuman treatment that characterised human trafficking. In a related study, PIND (2018), found out that the "success stories" of these traffickers enable them to use their knowledge, networks and recruiting techniques to lure others, either as traffickers, accomplice or victims. The fact that only few of such cases have been witnessed, hardly dissuade the poor and vulnerable local people, who are easily susceptible to the allure of a better living conditions as portrayed by the traffickers (Udujia et al. 2019).



The practice of polygamy and large families is considered as one of the key cultural factors driving the high prevalence of human trafficking in Nigeria. In Edo society, particularly in Benin City and the neighbouring communities, many families have many children because the indigenous cultural practices allow men to marry many wives and have a large family size. In fact, the statement of majority of the respondents in the sampled rural communities suggests that an average family or household size ranges from seven to twelve. The recruitment process often entails signing of agreement between the families of the victim and the traffickers (in cases where the families consented). This is followed by oath taking through the use of juju (local charms) to swear oath of allegiance to the traffickers as a tactic to keep the victims in perpetual servitude. The juju process requires that the trafficked victims take oaths at the ancestral shrines to instil psychological fear in them and discourage any form of resistance (NAPTIP, 2011). For fear of repercussion linked to the oath, victims are unable to escape even in the face of severe psychological, emotional and physical torture and other dehumanizing treatments (Zasha, et al. 2017).

The victims are most often unaware of the dangers associated with trafficking, and also tend to downplay the serious hazards on the road or at the destination. (Zasha, et al. 2017; Udujia et al. 2019). Most of the trafficked victims hardly receive basic benefits, and they lack freedom of movement, while the women and girls also face sexual abuse, and other forms of human rights violation (Ogunniran, 2017). The survivors of human trafficking experience several long-term physical, psychological and health-related trauma for the rest of their life (Powell et al. 2018). However, the victims often receive limited support services and they face potential discrimination or stigmatisation from family or community members (PIND 2018). The survivors are most often targeted for extortion, intimidation and death threats from the traffickers (NAPTIP 2011).

Nigeria ratified the United Nations (UN) protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children in 2001, and passed an anti-trafficking law which was enacted in August 2003 as the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act 2003 (NAPTIP 2011). Nigeria also passed the Child Right Act in 2003 to deal comprehensively with the issue of child trafficking (NAPTIP 2011). While the Nigerian government has put in place some measures to combat human trafficking including the establishment of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), tasked with the prevention of human trafficking, prosecution of traffickers and protection of trafficking victims, significant gaps remain. In recent times, the Nigerian government supported the signing and implementation of a UN action plan to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by the Civilian Joint Force (CJTF); offered sensitisation campaign to identify and prevent sexual exploitation and abuse of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country; and provided empowerment and reintegration programme for survivors of trafficking (United States Department of States 2018). In the 2022 United States human trafficking report, Nigeria remains on the Tier 2 ranking - depicting the country incapacity to meet the minimum standard for combating trafficking in person.

The limited success of government human trafficking interventions may be attributed to the weak commitment to tackling the underlying structural, cultural and institutional issues contributing to the human trafficking problem. Apart from the challenge of underfunding, NAPTIP has shown limited capacity to prevent trafficking of persons, rescue and provide rehabilitation for victims and survivors, and prosecute perpetrators

(Okeshola and Adenugba, 2018). The failure to address the structural conditions that contribute to the risk of exposure to human trafficking, as depicted in the case of oil extractive communities in the Niger Delta, reflects a major gap in the anti-trafficking efforts of the Nigerian government. It also illustrates the contradictions in the efforts of the international community to combat human trafficking considering the “multiple social forces” including international and local actors, facilitating oil capitalism that result in environmental, structural and gender violence, particularly for women in extractive communities (Nixon, 2011; Babatunde, 2018; Iheka, 2021).

At the state level, few governments have enacted law or implement policies to tackle human trafficking. In the Niger Delta, for instance, the government of Edo State passed a Bill on Edo State Trafficking in Persons Prohibition, Enforcement and Administration and set up a Task Force against Human Trafficking as part of the strategies to combat human trafficking in the state (Zasha, et al, 2017). Further, there is collaboration between the state government and civil society organisations in the efforts to prevent the recruitment of vulnerable women and girls by human traffickers, as well as provision of reintegration programmes for survivors. While these efforts are commendable, it is not effective in addressing the challenge of human trafficking because the state and global actors that instigated the structural and institutional conditions that allow human trafficking to thrive have not shown commitment to address these issues. Although local and internationally based NGOs as well as inter-governmental organizations such as UNICEF, ILO-IPEC and IOM have been active in efforts to combat trafficking in persons in Nigeria through research, sensitization, awareness-raising and empowerment programmes to assist individuals and families (UNODC, 2006), these efforts can hardly achieve significant positive impacts unless the structural issues at the root of human trafficking are comprehensively addressed.

## 4 Method

The article relies on qualitative-dominant approach comprising focus group discussions, key informant interviews, field observation of the everyday realities in the oil communities, and the analysis of secondary data on the experiences of the women in oil extractive communities in the Niger Delta. The qualitative research method is relevant in explaining the previously unseen layers of the intersection between oil politics, gender violence and human trafficking. This ethnographic method of data collection involving interviews and direct observation, is relevant for the analyses of bottom-up processes and local experiences (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2016; Lorentzen, 2021). This is why in my assessment; it offers the most appropriate methods to answer these elements of the question I have posed on how oil politics by global and local actors perpetuate gender violence and human trafficking in the Niger Delta.

My fieldwork took place at intervals between 2016, 2019 and 2023. I conducted 36 semi-structured interviews with the support of research assistants with six categories of key informants: government officials, community leaders, youths and women leaders, personnel of oil companies and the law enforcement agencies in the major oil-producing Niger Delta States of Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers, and Akwa Ibom, where oil conflicts, militancy and other criminal activities including arm, drug and human trafficking have been rampant. The respondents were purposively selected on the basis of gender, age, position, and occupation to ensure the representation of relevant stakeholders that can

provide insights into the intersection of oil politics, gender violence and human trafficking in the oil extractive communities. In-depth interviews were conducted with four government and NGO officials such as National Agency for Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons and Other Related Matters (NAPTIP), personnel of the Ministry of the Niger Delta and local NGOs, to further generate insights on the efforts to prevent and protect trafficked victims and prosecute traffickers. I was able to generate data on the nature of oil politics and how it shaped gender violence and human trafficking in the extractive communities.

Six focus group discussions sessions involving seven participants per FGD, were conducted with the leaders of militants' groups, female and male ex-militants and trafficked victims to generate insights on the interlocking issues that shaped gender violence and the nature, trends and dynamics of human trafficking in the Niger Delta. The focus group discussions helped to elicit the everyday realities, experiences and perceptions that may not be revealed during 'one-on-one' interviews. The ex-militants and trafficked victims were accessed through local contacts and NGOs working with the oil communities. The informed consent of respondents was sought and their identity concealed.

My fieldwork and data collection method were developed to generate perspectives on how the deleterious nature of oil politics by the global, national and local actors contribute to women's experience of gender violence and human trafficking. The qualitative data were coded using NVivo software and analyzed using content and thematic analysis approaches to make claims about the connection between oil politics, gender violence and human trafficking in the Niger Delta region.

## **5 Women's experience of gender violence and human trafficking in Oil Communities**

The socio-economic constraints facing women in the extractive communities in the Niger Delta is construed as gender-economic violence (Turner and Oshare, 1994; Ekine, 2008). The Niger Delta women invisibility and powerlessness within gendered power relation that underlie access to and distribution of oil benefits result in gender inequalities, injustice and structural violence. Turcotte (2011) maintains that the analysis of gender violence can be understood through an exploration of the role of women within petroleum relations. Across the interviews I conducted in the sampled communities, majority of the respondents estimated that women constitute about 60% to 70% of the populations in the rural communities, and they play significant roles in the local economy, where they engage in subsistence farming, fishing and trading.

The accounts of the interviewees indicate that women are marginalized in accessing land for agricultural purposes. Women are positioned within the socio-cultural norms as tenants who cultivate land on lease basis. The statement of the local women suggests that married women are allocated certain portion of their husband land to farm on lease basis. The male child of the women is expected to inherit the land from the father, while the female child is only allowed to cultivate the land on lease. In case the allotted land is insufficient for farming, women can rent land from landowners at the rate of N10,000 per annum. However, this might not be affordable to many of the impoverished women. Gender norms which determine women's rights to land and other resources foster

socio-economic and political prejudices against women because their access to socio-economic resources is dependent on their male relatives. This deprives women of sustainable livelihoods (Omeire, et al., 2014), and undermine their capacity to mitigate oil-induced environmental and socio-economic challenges (Ikelegbe, 2005).

Women's sources of livelihood are tied to land and water resources, which have been significantly affected by oil pollution from frequent oil spills and gas flaring that contaminate land and water resources (Okafor-Yarwood, 2018; Babatunde, 2020). Majority of the respondents express the notion that the negative effects of oil pollution became visible and disruptive since the late 1980s. The oil-induced contamination of food sources also result in health-related hazards in which women are disproportionately affected because their farming, fishing and trading as well as domestic (washing, cooking and cleaning) activities place them in more direct contact with oil pollution. This collaborates previous studies which establish that women living in oil communities are more susceptible to air and water borne diseases, spontaneous abortion and infant mortality linked to oil pollution (Oluduro, et al, 2013; Bruederlea, and Hodler, 2019). The local women complain that smoke from gas flaring affects the eyes, throat and cause skin rashes. As one woman declared in pidgin English, "eyes go dey pepper you from the smoke wey come from gas flaring". The women spoke about how they are denied compensation for the contamination of their farmlands and crops by incessant oil spills and gas flaring, because they have limited land rights and oil companies only pay compensations to landowners. Pegg and Zabbey (2013) found that oil companies' policies recognize only landowners for compensation for damage caused by oil pollution on farmland.

The devastating impact of oil pollution on fishery are not compensated because oil companies do not pay any compensation for damage to fishing grounds. Since women also derive their livelihood from fishing in the rivers and creeks, they are significantly affected by the depletion of fish stock in the rivers and creeks. The fact that oil companies also attribute most of the oil spills to sabotage rather than to corrosion or obsolete equipment suggests that few compensations for oil pollution are paid to the oil communities (Babatunde, 2020). Majority of the women explained that they hardly receive any compensations even when oil companies pay compensations to the community leaders. According to one of the women leaders:

If women are given part of the compensation from oil companies, they receive the least amount and it is only those women who are associated with the powerful community elites and militants' youth through sexual relations or as relatives that received some small portion of the compensation.

It is noteworthy that even when women access socio-economic benefits through their association with men, they still receive negligible share because most of the men married many wives and also have concubines. As such, it would be difficult for these women to get a significant share of the benefit. A local youth emphasize that oil benefits in the form of local contracts, employment opportunities and royalties provided by oil companies and government officials are monopolized by the community leaders and militant leaders who provide some portion to those within their patronage network. The community leaders and militant youth intensely contest among themselves for these oil benefits such that the less powerful people, like the local women, both young and old, are marginalized from accessing these benefits unless they are associated with the powerful

men. These accounts illustrate women's constraints in accessing oil benefits within the socio-political structure dominated by the powerful local actors.

The powerful global, national and local actors draw on cultural norms and practices that deprive women of socio-economic resources to perpetrate gender-economic violence. The power relations and interactions between these powerful actors disempower the women folks. Anugwom (2012) asserts that women face material poverty due to the displacement of their primary livelihood, and lack of access to basic tools of trade or capital. The predicament of the women compels them to make choices that can ensure their survival. A local woman poignantly laments, "women are now forced to do things they do not wish to do". As this discussion shows, women are vulnerable to any form of activities (licit or illicit) that can provide them with economic resources for their survival and sustenance, including prostitution, and ultimately, involvement in internal and cross-border human trafficking.

Across the interviews conducted with respondents, many examples of human trafficking cases emerged. The militant youth in the oil communities engage in criminal activities such as artisanal oil refining, illegal oil bunkering, sea piracy, kidnapping, cultism, as well as arms, drugs and human trafficking. The militants lure young women most of whom are already involved in local prostitution into cross-border trafficking with the promise of a better life abroad. A young woman in one of the communities declare "some of us now do restaurant jobs in Yenagoa or beer parlor where we engage in prostitution. I became a single mother due to unwanted pregnancy while I engaged in prostitution". The interviewees explain that women, both married and unmarried, usually go to Shell camp at Kolo creek, Ogbia to engage in sexual dalliance with the oil workers for monetary compensation. Majority of the community members emphasized the prevalence of transactional sex and prostitution in the oil communities. As a youth explain:

Any man, even a mentally derailed one can sleep with these young women if he could afford to pay as low as N100 to N500. You will see beautiful women around trailer parks, oil companies' camps, and bars where they sell their body in exchange for money.

This account also suggests that the commodification of women's bodies become a medium of exchange for oil benefits. The above statement illustrates how women are disempowered through the turbulent oil politics by the powerful actors; local leaders and militants who directly negotiate with oil companies, receive and distribute the oil largesse, in ways that marginalize women who seek alternative income through prostitution and ultimately human trafficking. My research reveals that young women loiter around motels in places like Ebubu community in Eleme Local Government Areas, Rivers State, seeking men to pay them for as low as N500 for sex. These young women are highly vulnerable to the human traffickers. It should be noted that some studies document that between 2013 and 2018, Rivers State has a higher prevalence of internal and cross-border trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labor which mostly involved children (PIND, 2018; Uduji, et al., 2019). NAPTIP officials interviewed alluded to the involvement of many young girls and women from the Niger Delta region as victims and accomplice to human traffickers. According to the interviewees, some of the women involved in prostitution found themselves with unwanted pregnancies which result in unwanted children that they eventually give out to traffickers. Many of these young women are not able to cater for their children, and they seek ways of relieving



themselves from child-care and associated responsibility. One of the local women observe:

Our unmarried and married women experience difficulty in catering for their children. Moreover, some of our men married many wives, and leave the responsibility of catering for the children to their wives. In some cases, a women may bear about seven children, so child-care often overwhelms them.

In the rural communities, women usually bear many children partly because of lack of information and accessibility of contraceptive in the rural areas with poor access to health care services as well as the local customs that promote large family size. Thus, child-care weighs heavily on these women, making them vulnerable to human traffickers who give them false promise that they would cater for their children and also offer them monetary compensation. These vulnerable women are deceived into giving out their children to human traffickers out of ignorance that the children are trafficked for domestic servitude and other forms of forced labor.

One of the Director of a local NGO, Youth for Change and Social Life Development Foundation (YOFCI) in Akwa Ibom State, explain that some of the young girls were recruited in churches by the traffickers who projected the image of a helper seeking to assist the impoverished young girls to further their education abroad. The girls who are desperate of getting out of the poverty trap and hopeful of a better future are easily lured by the traffickers. It is not until they arrive at their destination in another country that it damned on the victim that they have been trafficked for sexual exploitation. According to YOFCI official, most of the trafficked victims are young and adult women between the age of 22 to 49 years. Some of the women within this age bracket are victims while some are accomplice of human traffickers. Most of the older women are accomplice while the young women are mostly the victims. The main pattern of recruitment is through brothels and churches. In some few cases, the girls are also recruited through facebook where they make friends with potential traffickers who later deceived them into meeting with them and offering them an opportunity to travel abroad for greener pasture.

There is also the widespread notion among the respondents that young girls and women works with human traffickers to help them recruit trafficked victims. The respondents describe how some of the women have been able to connect with the ex-militants involved in human trafficking who helped some of them to travel to Europe for sexual exploitation and forced labor. While some of the trafficked women believed that their traffickers were helping them to travel abroad for prostitution or get a better job, they did not realize that they would be in a kind of enslavement. One of the women, a survivor of human trafficking for sexual exploitation disclose:

I was involved in local prostitution when the Madam in the beer parlor that I patronized told me that she could link me with those who will facilitate my travel to Europe where there is a major prostitution organization that can offer huge money. She connected me with a man who facilitated my travel to Europe by air. I was made to swear oath of loyalty to the man. I did not realize I was in a worst kind of sexual molestation, servitude and enslavement. It was when the brothel was raided that I was set free and deported back to Nigeria. Since I re-



turned, I have not been able to get any stable employment and barely manage to survive.

A young woman, another victim and survivor of human trafficking met the trafficker through facebook friendship. The young woman who is from an oil community in Akwa Ibom State, was lured to Lagos State to meet with the trafficker who offered to take her abroad to further her education. The victim explains that she was motivated to follow the trafficker because of her desperation to leave her impoverished condition in her community. She expresses it thus:

My mother is solely responsible for providing for us, her six children because my father married many wives. My mother engages in farming on the land that was allocated to her by my father where she cultivates cassava and plantain on subsistence basis. It has been difficult to cater for her children because of declining yield linked to oil pollution. I have to drop out of school when my mother could not afford to cater for my school needs. I was also not able to benefit from the scholarship offered to the community by the oil companies because the community leaders monopolized and determined the beneficiaries. Whenever we complain, they will tell us to wait for another one that is coming soon.

The victim further narrated that her trafficker helped her to procure forged travel documents in Lagos, but they could not use it to travel. It should be noted that a local NGOs official observe that some officials of the Nigerian Immigration service, worked with human trafficking syndicates in procuring fake travel documents for the victims. After spending a week in Lagos, they eventually travelled by road through Sokoto State to Mali, enroute to Libya. It took 30 days on the road to reach Libya and some of the trafficked victims died on the road, and their corpse were thrown into the bush or desert. The victim added that she was made to do juju to demonstrate allegiance to the trafficker when they arrived in Libya, where she was used for prostitution. She later became pregnant and gave birth to a child. It took some years before she was eventually found by the Libya authorities and deported back to Nigeria. These accounts indicate that the nature of human trafficking in the oil communities entails a form of voluntary and involuntary recruitment process that involve deception and the use of some women as accomplice to lure ignorant young girls and women into trafficking. Most of the trafficked victims were ignorance of the nature of sexual exploitation and forced labor they would engage in. This might be partly attributed to the fact that most of the victims are recruited from rural areas where there is limited enlightenment programmes and access to media publicity about the fate of trafficked victims. Thus, the recruitment process for victims of trafficking in the case of the Niger Delta women is a combination of choice, ignorance, and force - the choice that women make in their struggle to survive oil-induced gender violence, ignorance about the nature of human right violations that characterized human trafficking, and force that is linked to deception to lure victims and force them into a form of human enslavement and inhuman treatment. In the oil communities, the nature of human trafficking seems to complicate the notion of voluntary and involuntary recruitment in the human trafficking phenomenon, which should be considered in reforming policies to combat human trafficking.

An ex-militant explains, some of the former militants who were unable to benefit from the Amnesty programme of the Nigerian government initiated in 2009 as a form of state pardon and peacebuilding initiatives, that offered monthly financial incentives for them,

resorted to any form of illicit activities. Some of the ex-militants who have not been able to get any viable employment joined the human trafficking syndicates or other form of criminal activities to secure means of sustenance. One of the female ex-militants explained that she helped to lure young girls for traffickers and the victims are trafficked to other African countries and Europe. The interviewee further explains that she became an accomplice in recruiting victims of human trafficking in her search for means of survival to escape poverty. Although, she was aware that the victims were trafficked for prostitution, she was ignorant that the victims were enslaved or denied their rights. She perceived that she was helping the victims to get a better life and she also derived a means of survival to take care of her children from the money she obtained from the traffickers. According to the woman, she would have become a victim too, if not that she needed to stay in her community to take care of her young children. This account corroborates Ingwe et al.'s (2012) postulation that young girls and women in the Niger Delta are lured into human trafficking for sex work because they are denied their rights to basic needs by the government and multinationals oil companies.

Majority of the interviewees emphasize that women are involved in recruiting young girls and women for the traffickers. They also act as spies and emissaries to transport victims and weapons for the traffickers to evade security surveillance. Moreover, some of the interviewees explain that women serve as “business” partners for the traffickers, by providing money to obtain forged travel documents for the victims, and they receive some returns from the profit derived from the trafficked victims. However, most of the local women handle the recruitment aspect of the operation because they lack the financial means to contribute to the “business”.

Similarly, the officials of the NGOs working in the Niger Delta alluded to the rising cases of human trafficking in the region. The local NGOs assert that the major site of recruitment of victims of human trafficking used to be Edo State. In recent times, the trafficking syndicates have moved to Akwa Ibom State where they are able to easily transport their victim across the border to neighboring Cameroun and other countries. In Edo State, there is intense crackdown on traffickers by law enforcement agencies, while there is low security surveillance around the sea border in Akwa Ibom where trafficked victims are trafficked across the sea through Cross Rivers, to Cameroun, a neighboring country, and from there to other countries in Africa or Europe.

## **6 Combating gender violence and human trafficking in the Oil Communities**

Local NGOs and NAPTIP have been at the forefront of efforts to prevent human trafficking, protect the victims and prosecute human traffickers. In the Niger Delta, local NGOs play more of an advocacy and empowerment roles, while NAPTIP focuses on prevention, protection of victims and prosecution of human traffickers. Most of the respondents in the oil communities acknowledge the key roles of local NGOs such as Stakeholder Democracy Network (SDN), Foundation Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND), and Youth for Change and Social Life Development Foundation (YOFCD), in providing empowerment programmes for the impoverished women facing gender violence, and creating awareness about the adverse consequences of human trafficking. One of the officials of PIND explains that they provide skill acquisitions and financial empowerment to curtail the involvement of the women and youth in prostitution and hu-

man trafficking. However, interviews conducted in the oil communities suggest that the impacts of these empowerment initiatives have been minimal. Most of the local youth assert that few of the young women in the oil communities actually benefited from these empowerment programmes. This is attributed to the fact that the local NGOs empowerment programmes are coordinated through local leaders, thereby giving them the prerogative to select the beneficiaries. The statement of one of the local NGOs suggests that they accessed communities through the local leaders, and consulted them in selecting the beneficiaries of their empowerment programmes. In this way, the local leaders determine 'who get what and how' of NGOs' empowerment initiatives. Thus, the empowerments are distributed to those women who are associated with the powerful local leaders as concubines, wives, mothers, sisters and relatives. As a result, most of the local women who are not directly associated with the powerful local leaders are unable to benefit. In fact, a young woman describes it thus:

When empowerment or training opportunities from local NGO, oil companies or government are allocated to our community, na man know man dem dey use select those wey go benefit. In fact, one of the community leaders told me that he must have sex with me before I could be given one of the slots for a training programme. When I refused, I was denied the opportunity to be selected for the training.

This kind of scenarios described by the young woman as man know man, refers to a situation in which economic benefits are apportioned on the basis of patronage. This kind of man know man patronage system permeates oil communities, and results in rampant transactional sex which ultimately boost the thriving sex industry and trafficking network in the oil communities. This suggests that the local NGOs efforts to empower the young girls and women have not made significant impacts in ameliorating their impoverished conditions, leading to dysfunctional survival strategies through prostitution and human trafficking. Most of the local NGOs alluded to the challenges that local politics posed to the empowerment programmes for women. Yet, they have not been able to navigate these challenges to facilitate more gender inclusive empowerment programmes. This supports the assertion of Ako and Ekhaton (2016) that the peace-building activities of local NGOs in the Niger Delta have not been gender inclusive.

At the same times, the few women who have benefited from local NGOs empowerments observe that the initiatives have had little impact in alleviating their socio-economic challenges. An interviewee, a young women stresses that:

Some of the local NGOs provided skill acquisition trainings for us. We learned tailoring, hair dressing and other skills. At the end of the training, they provided us with a starter pack worth N50, 000 in the form of equipment like tailoring machine and hair dryer. These instruments were not adequate to start the business and we could not get any assistance from the government or oil companies. Even when we managed to start the business, it did not thrive, so we have to seek other means of survival.

According to a survivor of human trafficking, the empowerment programme of NGOs is inadequate and NAPTIP only provide rehabilitation programme for few of the survivors. These accounts demonstrate that local NGOs fail in evaluating the short and long-term

impacts of their empowerment programmes and the extent to which these programmes are gender sensitive.

Some of the survivors told me that they had to go back to local prostitution, cultism, or engage in business of selling of artisanal oil in the quest for survival. The statement of one of the women leaders also indicate that they face challenge of sustaining the incentives provided by some of the local NGOs. According to the interviewee, one of the local NGOs provided a fish pond for the women association in their community but the business folded up after three years because they were unable to sustain it. This is attributed to the fact that they were not able to generate sufficient income to regularly treat the water for acidity linked to gas flaring and also buy more fingerlings and feed the fish.

The officials of the local NGOs declare that they have to collaborate with NAPTIP, Nigerian Immigration service, and law enforcement agencies like the Police and Department of State security Service. Moreover, they observe that NAPTIP and the National Orientation Agency focus more on sensitization programme in communities, whereas the efforts on victims' protection and prosecution of traffickers are minimal. A local NGOs official asserts that sensitization of potential victims at risk cannot be effective when minimal efforts is channeled into empowering the impoverished women to address their socio-economic plights as a preventative measure. Nevertheless, NAPTIP has been able to arrest some of the traffickers who are mostly males. At the time of this research, NAPTIP official noted that three of the traffickers were arrested in Akwa Ibom State. The statement of the local NGOs suggests that there is lack of coordination or synergy among the law enforcement agencies because they hardly share critical intelligence among themselves. This undermines the efforts of the local NGOs because when they provide information about suspected traffickers or potential victims to the law enforcement officers, the agencies fail to act on time or share the information among other law enforcement agencies to facilitate timely action.

At the same time, the fact that most of the survivors of human trafficking are reluctant to come out to share their experience or provide information that can facilitate the arrest of the traffickers pose a challenge to prosecuting traffickers. This perhaps may be attributed to the fear of repercussion linked to the juju or oath of allegiance that the trafficker forced their victims to take. The accounts of local NGOs express the notion that some of the law enforcement agencies work with traffickers for monetary gains. It is noteworthy that an official of a local NGO declare: "who do not even know who to trust among the law enforcement agencies, because they are compromised due to endemic corruption, but unfortunately, we have to work with them in our efforts to combat trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labor." These gaps in law enforcement efforts worsen the challenge of preventing human trafficking, protecting victims and prosecuting the traffickers.

My research reveals that although the trafficked victims knew that they would engage in prostitution in their destination countries, they did not realize they would be in a kind of sexual enslavement or forced labor that placed them in perpetual bondage to their traffickers. While women's involvement in human trafficking can be considered to be voluntary, it is also important to consider how their experience of marginalization and injustice circumscribe the choices they make in their search for means of survival. The efforts to combat human trafficking can only be effective through a tripartite programme focusing on prevention, protection of victims, and prosecution of human traf-

fickers. However, the Nigerian governments have so far not demonstrated commitment to addressing the issues at the root of human trafficking, and specifically the plights of women in the oil communities in the Niger Delta.

Most of the women involved as accomplice to human traffickers told me that they have been able to generate sufficient income to cater for their needs and that of their family through the illicit activities. They did not consider the fact that they are inadvertently a perpetrator of human trafficking, who contributed to the exploitation and enslavement of other women, thereby amplifying women's experience of gender violence. Women as accomplice of human trafficking also face risk of arrest and prosecution which could result in imprisonment. Thus, their struggle for survival through human trafficking turned them into criminals or resulted in a cycle of gender violence and human rights violation. Some of the young women assert that human trafficking is a lucrative "business" that generated huge reward which is far higher than what they obtained from local prostitution. In fact, one of the interviewees explains that some of the women who were trafficked to Europe have been able to build big houses in their communities. Thus, human trafficking is considered a lucrative means of livelihood and survival, without any consideration for the psycho-social impacts on the trafficked victims or the possibility of arrest and prosecution.

The complicity of the local women in the recruitment of victims of human trafficking makes it difficult for NAPTIP and law enforcement agencies to detect, arrest and prosecute traffickers. This is because women are perceived as harmless, and incapable of such criminal acts. This kind of preconceived notion about women enable them to help in the recruitment process without being detected and they are able to evade security surveillance. It is not surprising that most of the arrested human traffickers are men. However, NAPTIP officials assert that they have been able to arrest some women as accomplice. Women often serve as informants who get intelligence report on the plans of law enforcement officers, thereby assisting the traffickers to evade arrest. NAPTIP official spoke about the difficulty they faced in tracking, arresting and prosecuting the human traffickers. NAPTIP also confront the challenge of limited funding that undermines their capacity to protect and empower victim of trafficking (Babatunde, 2019).

The militants' leaders who are culpable in the marginalization of women in accessing oil benefit have also capitalized on women's vulnerability to co-opt them into the human trafficking activities in ways that enable them to evade security surveillance. This can provide more incentives for the powerful local actors to continue their exploitation of women for personal gains since trafficking is a hidden crime and lucrative "business". This situation depicts the complex and intractable nature of the gendered political ecology of petro-politics driving human trafficking in the oil communities. Oil companies exploited the patriarchal structure that perpetuates the marginalization of women by playing exclusionary politics that worsen the plights of women. Although the oil companies and the government intervention agencies are aware that women are largely excluded from accessing oil benefits, they prefer to offer oil benefits to the local leaders and militants who are loyal to them or those who violently challenged the adverse impacts of oil-related activities on their environmental resources and traditional livelihood. The local women who have been at the forefront of non-violent advocacy (Babatunde, 2018) are neglected and deprived of the oil benefits.



The oil companies' personnel explain that they have created some empowerment programmes for the local women as a fulfilment of their corporate social responsibility. These empowerment programmes are facilitated through the local leaders and community development committees who liaison with oil companies as representative of their communities on oil-related matters. The fact that women are hardly included in these committees and even when they are included, they constitute a negligible minority often portend that women concerns and needs are not factored into government and oil companies' empowerment programmes. Thus, the powerless women continue to face deprivation and exclusion. In this way, transnational oil corporations, national government, local leaders and militant leaders perpetuate women's disempowerment, gender violence and their exposure as victims and accomplice of human trafficking. The case of the Niger Delta women is relevant in understanding how the gendered political ecology of resource extraction by powerful global, and local actors instigates gender inequalities, injustice, and violence against women with devastating consequences for women emancipation, human rights and security.

## 7 Conclusion

This article focused on the intersection of oil politics, gender violence and human trafficking in the extractive communities in the Niger Delta. It showed how the contentious and exploitative nature of oil politics by the transnational oil corporations, national government, local leaders and militant youth perpetuate gender violence, and expose women to human trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced labor. Women experience socio-economic challenges linked to the adverse impacts of oil-related activities that result in the degradation of land and water resources that sustain their traditional livelihood. The displacement of women's sources of livelihood affects their capacity to meet their basic needs. They are also not able to obtain alternative sources of livelihood and are deprived of the little benefits accruing from oil resources by the local leaders and militants' youth who control access to and distribution of the benefits. While these powerful local actors struggle among themselves to get a portion of the oil resources, women who have limited power in the socio-political relation in these male-dominated communities are the least to benefit. Women's ability to get a share of the oil benefit is linked to their association with the powerful male actors through familial relations or sexual dalliance.

Women's socio-economic constraints in the oil communities circumscribe the choices they make to survive their impoverished condition. Thus, women's experience gender-economic violence that disempowered them and increased their susceptibility to human trafficking. Women are not only victims of human trafficking, some of them also work with traffickers to recruit young women for sexual exploitation and children for domestic servitude and other forms of forced labor. This article showed that most of the women are already exposed to a life of prostitutions as a means of accessing financial rewards from the powerful local men and oil companies personnels. Therefore, transactional sex has been a thriving "business" in the oil communities. This makes the "business" of internal and transborder human trafficking to permeate these oil communities. The militants involved in illicit crimes of kidnapping, illegal oil bunkering, artisanal oil refinery, and sea piracy are also involved in arms, drugs and human trafficking.

While women often voluntarily become victims of human trafficking and also helped in luring and recruiting young girls for traffickers, the recruitment process can be con-



sidered as forceful, given that their experience of gender violence limit the choices they make to survive. Nevertheless, women involvement as recruiters of victim of human trafficking turned them to exploiter and perpetrator of violence against other women.

The socio-economic realities of women linked to the disempowering effects of petro-politics have been a driving factor that underlies the complex and intractable nature of the human trafficking phenomenon in the extractive communities in the Niger Delta. It has also undermined the already weak efforts of local NGOs and government agency, NAPTIP to combat human trafficking. While both government and non-governmental organizations have put in place some efforts to prevent human trafficking, protect victims and prosecutive traffickers, these efforts have been plagued by numerous challenges. These constraints relate to the limited funding, inability to address women's socio-economic challenges that make them vulnerability to traffickers and weak capacity to detect, arrest and prosecute traffickers. In fact, the militants in the Niger Delta capitalized on women's experience of gender violence and their vulnerability to lure them into human trafficking, and to use women who are perceived as harmless in the recruitment and planning process in ways that allow the traffickers to evade security surveillance.

This article showed that global, national and local actors are culpable in perpetrating gender violence and trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation and forced labor in the Niger Delta. The complicity of transnational oil corporations in women's experience of gender violence and human trafficking undermines the global efforts to combat human trafficking. Addressing gender violence is crucial to efforts to combat human trafficking in the oil communities. Since gender violence is embedded in the contentious and exclusionary nature of oil politics, gender violence can only be addressed by reforming oil resource governance in ways that is gender-inclusive in addressing women's marginalization. Thus, combating human trafficking in the oil communities in the Niger Delta would be difficult to achieve if the global, national and local actors continue to perpetrate gender violence and disempower the women folks. It remains unclear if this is achievable when the political actors with the capacity to address women's socio-economic challenges have been the instigators of these constraints, as the case of the Niger Delta women typifies.

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