Feminist Environmental Justice in Practice: Women as Agents of Change in the Niger Delta's Oil Conflict

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Master of Arts in Global Studies

Title: Feminist Environmental Justice in Practice: Women as Agents of Change in the Niger Delta's Oil Conflict

This study focuses on the gendered aspects of environmental degradation and justice in Nigeria's Niger Delta, centering the lived realities of women affected by environmental harm, as corroborated and contextualized by legal practitioners, NGO leaders, and community members. Although oil exploration has brought substantial economic benefits to Nigeria, it has also caused severe environmental harm, loss of livelihoods, and health issues, disproportionately affecting women because of their roles as caregivers, farmers, and resource managers. Despite these roles, women remain excluded from decision-making and environmental governance, a marginalization reinforced by patriarchal structures.

Using a feminist political ecology and intersectional lens, this study draws on lived realities and corroborating testimonies to examine how women in the Niger Delta overcome structural barriers, organize collective action, and maintain a persistent, under-the-radar feminist environmental justice movement that is continuous yet underappreciated. Drawing on the literature, case studies, and semi-structured interviews, the study highlights the strategies, achievements, and persistent challenges in the fight for environmental justice in the Global South.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Personal Motivation to Conduct this Research

My motivation for this research began with two formative experiences that, over time, converged. The first was growing up in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, where environmental degradation is not an abstract policy problem but a daily, visible reality. The oil flares, the contaminated rivers, the farms that no longer yield what they once did. The second was studying Environmental Law during my undergraduate years, which gave me a formal framework for understanding why these problems persisted despite decades of legislation. My Bachelor of Law and Barrister at Law degrees provided a foundation for thinking seriously about what legal frameworks can and cannot do. But it was not until I began working as a legal analyst, analyzing policies and regulatory laws, that I began to question whether they are effective. The gap between what the law says and what actually happens in the Niger Delta communities became a concern as laws existed, regulations were in place, yet the communities continued to bear the consequences of pollution that no enforcement mechanism was meaningfully addressing.

This awareness did not stay at the professional level. Alongside my legal work, I participated in community environmental activities, including gutter clean-ups and environmental awareness programs in my community, working alongside local residents to address the immediate, tangible dimensions of environmental harm. It was in these practical settings that the contradiction at the heart of this research first became visible to me. The people doing the most work to protect and restore their local environments were, overwhelmingly, women. I began my research and found that over the years women have

organized clean-ups, led awareness campaigns, and mobilized their neighbors, yet when formal governance structures convened, when decisions were made about oil spill remediation, community development funds, or environmental policy, women were not in the room. Women were among the most directly and consistently harmed by pollution, yet they were almost entirely absent from the governance meetings, compensation negotiations, and community councils where responses to that harm were decided.

This gap between exposure and exclusion was not incidental. As I engaged more deeply with these issues through research and community connections in the Niger Delta, I found a pattern. Women fetched water from rivers contaminated by oil spills. They farmed land that crude oil had rendered barren. They gathered periwinkles and crayfish from mangroves blackened by decades of extraction, feeding their children food grown in poisoned soil. They also organized. They marched. They staged protests at spill sites. Yet when it came to the formal channels through which remediation was demanded, compensation distributed, and policy shaped, women's voices were consistently sidelined: by patriarchal community structures, by legal frameworks that tied land and compensation rights to male-headed household status, and by oil company representatives and government regulators who dealt predominantly with male community leaders. My personal observations aligned with a structural reality, the architecture of environmental governance in the Niger Delta was designed in ways that systematically excluded the people bearing its greatest cost.

It was the contradiction between women's centrality to mitigating the environmental crisis and their marginality in its governance that became the foundation of this research. During fieldwork across three communities, Ikarama, Obunagha in Bayelsa State, and Bodo in Rivers State, the patterns I had observed through advocacy work and professional legal analysis crystallized into a researchable question, not simply why women suffer more from

pollution, but how the same gendered structures that produce disproportionate suffering also systematically prevent women from participating in its remedy. I am aware that my proximity to these issues both strengthens and constrains this work. My legal background and proximity in the Niger Delta facilitated access and enabled deeper conversation than a purely external researcher might have achieved. At the same time, I have strived throughout for reflexivity, recognizing both my closeness to and distance from the specific daily realities of the women whose experiences are at the center of this study.

Problem Statement

Across the Niger Delta, six decades of oil extraction have transformed one of Africa's richest wetland ecosystems into one of its most contaminated landscapes. Since the discovery of oil in commercial quantities in Oloibiri, Bayelsa State, in 1956, the activities of national and multinational oil corporations have generated enormous national revenue alongside severe and ongoing environmental degradation. Oil spills, gas flaring, pipeline failure, and dredging have contaminated waterways, destroyed farmland, poisoned aquatic ecosystems, and produced a chronic health crisis across communities in Bayelsa, Rivers, and Delta States (Watts 2021). The United Nations Development Programme documented 6,817 oil spills in the Niger Delta between 1976 and 2001 alone, accounting for the loss of over three million barrels of oil, more than 70% of which were never recovered (UNDP, 2006). The crisis has not stopped. The National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency recorded 13,885 publicly reported spill incidents between 2010 and 2025, with 1,442 incidents in 2023 alone (NOSDRA, 2025). A 2011 UN Environment Programme assessment found that contamination in Ogoniland was so severe that remediation could take twenty-five to thirty years. More than a decade after that assessment, communities in Bodo are still awaiting complete cleanup. Nigeria's Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative estimated that

between 2009 and 2020, the country lost over 619.7 million barrels of crude oil to theft and sabotage alone, representing a scale of ongoing extraction harm that far exceeds what any single cleanup program has addressed (NEITI, 2022).

Women and children bear a disproportionate share of this environmental burden, a fact directly tied to their gendered roles and responsibilities in Niger Delta communities. This disproportion is structural, rooted in the gendered roles and responsibilities that define daily life in Niger Delta communities. Women are the primary farmers, water-fetchers, fishers, and caregivers. Their daily lives are inseparably linked to the land, rivers, and mangrove ecosystems that oil pollution has most severely damaged. When water sources are contaminated, women bear the consequences directly because they are the ones who fetch, cook with, and give that water to their children. When farmland is destroyed, women bear the loss because farming is their work and their income. When gas flaring produces chronic respiratory and reproductive health effects, women and children bear the heaviest burdens because they spend the most time close to the household and the contaminated environment.

Yet despite being disproportionately affected by environmental harm, women are routinely excluded from the governance structures, decision-making processes, and compensation mechanisms that determine how, whether, and for whom that harm is addressed. Patriarchal community structures, legal frameworks that tie compensation rights to male household headship, and customary governance norms that exclude women from leadership roles combine to produce what I describe as a double burden; women suffer more from environmental harm and have less institutional power to demand its remedy.

While scholarship on environmental justice in the Niger Delta has grown substantially over the past two decades, much of this work has focused on the structural features of the oil industry, on legal frameworks, corporate liability, and state negligence, without adequately

attending to the gendered dimensions of environmental injustice or to the voices and agency of women themselves. Drawing on nine semi-structured interviews I conducted across three Niger Delta communities and a body of documentary evidence including NGO field reports, Nigerian statutory and regulatory laws, and UN assessments, it centers women's lived experiences, and activism as primary evidence for understanding what environmental injustice in the Niger Delta means in practice. The specific aims of this study are to examine the gendered effects of environmental harm in the Niger Delta, to explore how women navigate, resist, and organize against their exclusion from formal governance despite structural constraints, and to analyze the persistence, under-recognized continuity, and impact of feminist environmental justice movements in the region, including the strategies and successes that might inform comparable movements elsewhere.

Research Design and Questions

This research investigates the intersection of gender, power, and environmental justice in the Niger Delta, centering the lived experience of one woman whose account of oil pollution is corroborated and contextualized by legal practitioners, NGO leaders, and community members This research investigates the intersection of gender, power, and environmental justice in the Niger Delta, centering the lived realities of women affected by environmental harm, as corroborated and contextualized by legal practitioners, NGO leaders, and community members, together with documentary and field-report evidence rather than through multiple first-person interviews with the women themselves. The study draws on feminist political ecology and intersectionality as its primary theoretical frameworks, examining how gender intersects with class, ethnicity, geographic location, and age to shape the differentiated environmental experiences of women across three communities. A qualitative, interview-centered design was chosen because the forms of knowledge this

research seeks, specifically the lived realities of women's harm, exclusion, and resistance, as corroborated and contextualized by legal practitioners, NGO leaders, and community members, are precisely the forms that official environmental documentation and formal governance records systematically omit. Because the persistence of environmental injustice in the Niger Delta is sustained not by an absence of law but by power imbalances embedded in the institutions that produce the official record, a methodology anchored solely in those official sources would risk reproducing the silences this thesis seeks to examine.

The research is organized around three questions:

1. How do women in the Niger Delta experience the gendered effects of oil extraction and environmental degradation on their livelihoods, health, and communities?
2. How do women navigate, resist, and collectively organize against their structural exclusion from environmental governance, compensation, and decision-making processes?
3. In what ways has a feminist environmental justice movement persisted, in the Niger Delta, and how do women's activism and collective action challenge the structures that produce and perpetuate environmental injustice?

Research Methodology

This research is grounded in a feminist qualitative methodology, an epistemological approach that centers the knowledge, experiences, and voices of marginalized communities, particularly women, as primary sources of insight into social and environmental phenomena (Bell and Braun 2010; Braun and Sylla Traore 2015). Feminist methodology, as articulated by Sandra Harding (1987) and developed by Patricia Hill Collins (2000), proceeds from the premise that knowledge is situated and partial, who conducts research, from what social location, and with what questions, shapes what can be known. Rather than treating objectivity

as the product of researcher detachment, feminist standpoint epistemology insists that the perspectives of those who bear the greatest burden of social and environmental injustice, in this case, women in Niger Delta communities devastated by decades of oil pollution, generate indispensable forms of knowledge about the mechanisms and effects of that injustice that cannot be accessed through other means (Braun 2008). The use of qualitative methodology is well suited to this research as it prioritizes depth, context, and meaning over statistical generalizability, enabling the exploration of the complex, layered dimensions of women's environmental activism and governance exclusion that quantitative methods would flatten or render invisible (Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Creswell 2014).

The theoretical frameworks guiding this research, feminist political ecology and intersectionality, directly inform its methodological choices. Feminist political ecology, as elaborated by Rocheleau et al. (1996), holds that environmental knowledge is gendered, women and men have different, unequally valued forms of knowledge about, access to, and dependence on natural resources, and these differences must be treated as analytically central rather than peripheral to environmental research. An intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000) further requires attending to how gender intersects with class, ethnicity, age, and geographic location to produce differentiated environmental experiences and governance exclusions across different communities and women (Braun 2015). The methodology used in this thesis aims not only to document women's environmental activism in the Niger Delta but to analyze it as a phenomenon shaped by multiple intersecting structures of power, patriarchal governance, corporate extraction, state negligence, and customary land tenure, that simultaneously produce environmental injustice and constrain the avenues available for challenging it (Braun 2020). Case study research design was selected as the overarching strategy, enabling in-depth investigation of three specific communities, Ikarama, Obunagha,

and Bodo, while generating analytical insights that speak to broader patterns of environmental governance and gender exclusion in the Niger Delta region (Yin 2014).

Research Sites

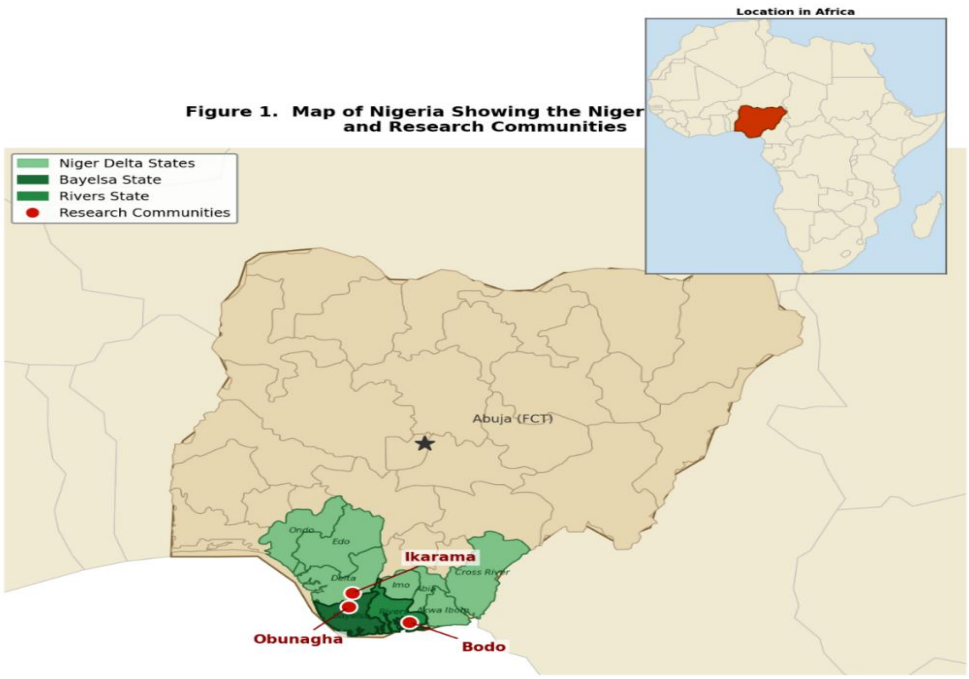
This study employs a comparative case study design, focusing on three communities within Bayelsa and Rivers States that have experienced distinct but interconnected forms of oil pollution. The three sites were selected because they illustrate different pollution contexts, chronic pipeline spills affecting a farming community, gas flaring from a large processing plant, and catastrophic pipeline ruptures with their aftermath, and because together they span different ecological settings and community histories, enabling comparison while maintaining analytical depth.

Ikarama

Ikarama is situated in the Okordia Clan within the Yenagoa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. The community is home to the Okordia-Rumuekpe Trunk Line and other pipelines, making it a chronic site of oil spill incidents. According to Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria, there have been over twenty major oil spill incidents in Ikarama between 2007 and 2023, resulting from both equipment failure and pipeline vandalism. A major spill in July 2022 contaminated large swaths of farmland and water bodies, destroying cassava and plantain crops and rendering rivers unusable for fishing or domestic use. Community members reported persistent crude oil residues in rivers that serve as their only water source, and pollution has resulted in food insecurity, loss of livelihoods, and increased health risks, particularly among women and children who are primary water-fetchers and food providers. Ikarama was selected as a research site because the scale and duration of pollution there, combined with the presence of an active women's farming

cooperative, offered an opportunity to examine both the long-term livelihood impacts of pollution on women and their forms of collective response.

Figure 1. Map of Nigeria with Research Sites: Ikarama, Obunagha, and Bodo



Map created using Natural Earth geographic data

Obunagha

The Obunagha community is among several villages near the Gbarain-Ubie Integrated Oil and Gas Processing Plant in Bayelsa State. Since the plant's commissioning in 2010, relentless gas flaring and periodic oil spills have severely impacted the community's health and environment. Scientific studies and community reports document that gas flaring releases carcinogenic compounds including benzene, toluene, and xylene into the air, leading to respiratory illnesses, eye irritation, and skin diseases. Shell operated this plant until its divestment in January 2024, after which Renaissance Africa Energy Company assumed operations. Obunagha was selected because it represents the gas flaring dimension of the Niger Delta's environmental crisis, a form of harm with particularly severe health

consequences for women who spend more time in and around the home, as well as for children, and because the transition in corporate ownership in 2024 raises ongoing questions about continuity of accountability.

Bodo

Bodo is situated at the southernmost tip of the Gokana Kingdom in Ogoniland, Rivers State, bordered by Andoni to the east, Bolo to the west, and Bonny and the Atlantic Ocean to the south. The name Bodo translates to ‘on the sea,’ derived from Boodor, meaning ‘because of the sea’ (Tanen 2005). In 2008 and 2009, two massive pipeline ruptures released over 560,000 barrels of crude oil into Bodo’s waterways, one of the largest spill events in Nigeria’s history. Mangrove forests and fishing grounds were devastated, and local women who depended on fishing, the gathering of periwinkles, and small-scale trade of aquatic products lost their livelihoods almost overnight. Consumption of contaminated water and fish led to increased rates of gastrointestinal diseases, rashes, and reproductive health issues. A landmark 2015 compensation settlement with Shell and a court-mandated cleanup have delivered only partial remediation, a further oil spill in 2023 has renewed the cycle of harm. Bodo was selected because it offers a case study of the aftermath of catastrophic pollution, including women’s organizing in response to the spills and the formal settlement process, and the limits of legal redress in restoring livelihoods.

The three sites were selected not for their similarity but for their complementarity across three distinct dimensions of the Niger Delta’s environmental crisis. Ikarama represents chronic, pipeline-spill-dominated contamination affecting an inland farming community where women’s primary livelihood is agriculture, revealing what decades of unremediated spill accumulation does to food security and women’s roles as providers. Obunagha represents the gas flaring dimension of the crisis, where harm is atmospheric and continuous

rather than episodic and visible, showing how health consequences of extraction fall disproportionately on household members, placing women and children at heightened risk. Bodo represents the aftermath of catastrophic, legally contested pollution in a fishing community, showing both the potential and the sharp limits of formal legal redress, including what happens to women's economic losses when compensation flows through male-dominated community hierarchies. Together, the three sites allow this research to examine women's experiences primarily through a gendered analysis that draws on the interviews conducted, corroborated and contextualized by legal practitioners, NGO leaders, and community members, and by documentary evidence, rather than through multiple first-person women's accounts across all three sites. This is a methodological limitation that this thesis makes explicit rather than obscuring across different pollution types, corporate relationships, and livelihood contexts, thereby building a more complete picture of gendered environmental injustice than any single community could provide.

Sampling Strategy and Participant Recruitment

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a strategy well suited to qualitative research that seeks information-rich cases rather than statistical representativeness (Creswell 2014). Rather than sampling only women directly affected by pollution, I sought participants occupying different positions within the institutional channels through which gendered exclusion is produced and reproduced, community leadership structures, legal and compensation processes, NGO advocacy networks, grassroots cooperatives, and the security apparatus surrounding oil infrastructure. This was a deliberate methodological choice because the central argument of this thesis is that women's exclusion from environmental governance is produced and sustained through specific institutional channels, interviewing individuals positioned within each of those channels allows the research to trace how that exclusion is

enacted at each institutional point, rather than documenting only its downstream effects on women.

Initial access was established through environmental NGOs with a sustained presence in the case study communities, including Environmental Defenders Network (EDEN) and Young Friends of the Earth Nigeria, whose staff and community networks connected me to community leaders, legal practitioners, security personnel, and cooperative members working on environmental governance issues in Ikarama, Obunagha, and Bodo. Subsequent participants were identified through referrals from these initial contacts, a snowball approach that proved necessary given security concerns and community mistrust, where vouching by a trusted intermediary was frequently a precondition for access. As discussed in the Limitations section below, this recruitment pathway was considerably more successful in reaching professionals and community leaders embedded in formal or NGO-affiliated networks than in reaching women without such affiliations, a constraint that itself speaks to the patterns of exclusion this thesis investigates.

Confidentiality and the Use of Pseudonyms

All primary interview participants discussed in this thesis, namely Morris, Ebi, Pere, Preye, Ebiwari, Dise, and Ebiye, are identified by pseudonym rather than by their real names. This protects their identities given the politically sensitive nature of environmental advocacy, security work, and legal practice concerning the oil industry in the Niger Delta, where several communities have expressed open mistrust of outside researchers and where environmental defenders in the region have faced intimidation for their advocacy (Mai-Bornu 2024). This use of pseudonyms applies only to individuals interviewed directly for this study. Where the thesis cites named public figures quoted in published reports or public statements, those

individuals are identified by their real names and titles, consistent with standard academic practice for citing information already in the public domain.

Participant Overview

The interviews I conducted for this research span five identifiable categories of participant: a community development committee chairman, an environmental NGO leader, an NGO founder and movement-builder, a pipeline security officer, and legal practitioners specializing in oil and gas and environmental law. A full demographic and professional overview of participants, including each individual's role, community or area of operation, and whether they were directly and personally affected by oil pollution, is provided in Appendix A.

Interview Design and Data Collection

I conducted nine semi-structured interviews with environmental justice activists, community leaders, lawyers, pipeline security personnel, and NGO representatives across the Niger Delta. Interviews were conducted in person and lasted approximately thirty minutes to one hour. The semi-structured format was chosen deliberately, I used an interview guide to ensure consistent coverage of core themes across participants while leaving space for participants to raise issues outside the formal guide that were important to them. This flexibility proved critical, as several participants raised dimensions of gendered exclusion, particularly around legal and compensation processes, that refined and deepened the analytical categories I brought to the fieldwork.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the explicit consent of participants. Participants were informed prior to interview that recording was requested, that they were free to decline to answer any question, and that they could end the interview at any time.

Given the security concerns affecting parts of the Niger Delta, particular care was taken not to record or retain information that could identify participants' specific locations or movements, and all interview materials were stored securely.

Documentary and Secondary Source Analysis

Interview data was triangulated against a body of documentary evidence to corroborate testimony, establish historical context, and situate individual accounts within the longer record of environmental governance failure in the Niger Delta. These documents included field reports produced by Environmental Defenders Network (EDEN), including samples of water pollution over the years and subsequent field reporting on Ikarama spanning 2007 to 2022, assessments and data published by the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Environment Programme, and the National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency, Nigerian statutory and regulatory laws, including the 1999 Constitution, the Oil Pipelines Act, the Environmental Impact Assessment Act (2004), the NESREA Act (2007), the Petroleum Act (1969), the Associated Gas Re-Injection Act (1979), and EGASPIN (2002), national media coverage, and organizational publications from Kebetkache Women Development & Resource Centre and Youth for Environmental Sustainability and Development.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary sources were analyzed thematically through the combined lens of feminist political ecology and intersectionality. Analysis proceeded iteratively, an initial reading identified recurring patterns across participants' accounts, which were then organized into the four major themes that structure the Findings and Data Analysis chapter, namely, women's lived experience of environmental harm, the gendered character of activism and resistance, the structural and legal barriers

constraining women's participation in governance, and persistent, historically continuous, but largely under-recognized feminist environmental justice movement. These categories were treated as provisional rather than fixed and were revised as analysis proceeded to better capture distinctions raised by participants themselves, including the difference between formal legal neutrality and practical institutional exclusion that emerged from the legal interviews, and the distinction between women's economic role in environmental defense and their formal exclusion from decision-making that recurred across community-level accounts. Throughout, I prioritized centering women's own accounts and strategies, while also drawing on the accounts of male participants, including an NGO leader, a CDC chairman, a security officer, and legal practitioners, to illuminate the institutional mechanisms through which women's exclusion is enacted.

Table 1. Interview Questionnaire for Community Leaders, NGOs, and Pipeline Security

NO.	Interview Questions
1	Can you tell me about your background and your involvement in environmental issues in the Niger Delta?
2	How would you describe the current environmental situation in the Niger Delta region?
3	What roles do women play in addressing environmental problems here?
4	Can you share examples of environmental initiatives led or influenced by women?
5	In your view, how do women's approaches or contributions differ from those of men?
6	What challenges do women face when engaging in environmental activism or decision-making?
7	How have communities, leaders, NGOs, or lawyers supported women's involvement in environmental justice?
8	What more could be done to strengthen women's participation?
9	How has women's activism affected environmental conditions or community wellbeing?
10	Can you share a success story where women's involvement made a real difference?

Table 2. Interview Questionnaire for Lawyers

NO.	Interview Questions
1	In your experience, how effective are existing Nigerian laws and regulations in holding oil companies accountable for environmental degradation in the Niger Delta?
2	Are there current legal reforms or advocacy efforts aimed at strengthening women's rights and environmental justice in the Niger Delta? Can you share examples?
3	To what extent do women participate in legal processes related to environmental cases in the Niger Delta? Are there any structural or cultural obstacles to their involvement?
4	Have legal interventions (such as class action lawsuits or court-mandated cleanups) resulted in meaningful remediation for communities, particularly for women? Why or why not?
5	What are the main legal barriers that women face when seeking justice or compensation for environmental harm in the Niger Delta? How accessible are legal remedies (such as court cases or compensation processes) to women affected by oil spills and pollution?
6	In what ways do intersecting factors like gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity influence women's access to justice and participation in environmental governance?
7	How do customary land tenure systems and the Land Use Act impact women's ability to claim compensation or assert land rights in cases of environmental degradation?
8	What legal or policy changes would you recommend to improve environmental justice and gender equity in the Niger Delta?

Significance of the Study

This research makes several contributions to the scholarly literature on environmental justice, feminist political ecology, and Niger Delta studies. First, it addresses a documented gap. While scholarship on the Niger Delta's environmental crisis is extensive, it has largely focused on legal frameworks, corporate liability, and state regulatory failure without centering women's own experiences of harm and exclusion. This thesis addresses that gap by centering the lived realities of women affected by environmental harm, with the accounts of legal practitioners, NGO leaders, and community members who spoke directly to women's experiences of harm and exclusion, alongside documentary and secondary sources as primary evidence. Existing accounts of who suffers from pollution in the Niger Delta and why tend to treat gender as secondary to ethnicity, resource curse dynamics, or legal analysis. This thesis redresses that imbalance by treating women's testimony as its primary empirical foundation, rather than as supplementary illustration for arguments grounded elsewhere.

Second, this research extends feminist standpoint epistemology into the Nigerian environmental governance context. By arguing that those who bear the greatest burden of an injustice occupy an epistemically privileged position relative to its mechanisms, this thesis challenges the tendency in both academic and policy literature to treat official records, government reports, and corporate documentation as the authoritative account of what is happening in the Niger Delta. As the Methodology section discusses, those official sources themselves produced by institutions implicated in the governance failures this thesis investigates. Centering women's accounts is not merely an ethical choice but an epistemological one, grounded in a claim about what kinds of evidence are needed to understand environmental injustice in its full scope.

Third, the research has direct policy relevance. The findings speak to specific institutional mechanisms with documented gender-discriminatory effects, expressed here in community-specific terms: land tenure law, customary governance structures, compensation procedures, pipeline security oversight, and legal barriers to litigation. This kind of evidence is precisely what is needed to support the legal and institutional reforms that environmental lawyers, NGOs, and women's advocacy organizations in the Niger Delta are currently advancing.

Limitations of the Study

Firstly, my reliance on qualitative methods and a comparative case study design limits generalizability in the statistical sense. What can be said with confidence is that the patterns documented across Ikarama, Obunagha, and Bodo reflect mechanisms of gendered exclusion that recur consistently across different pollution types, community structures, and legal histories. Whether these patterns extend to all oil-affected communities in the Niger Delta is a question for future research with a broader sample, though the depth and specificity of evidence this method produces is precisely what the research questions require (Denzin and Lincoln 2011).

Secondly, access to participants was constrained by security conditions and political instability across parts of the Niger Delta. The region has experienced decades of conflict involving oil companies, government security forces, community militias, and groups engaged in pipeline vandalism and crude oil theft. In this environment, outside researchers are viewed with understandable caution: several community members who initially agreed to participate withdrew when the research would be formally recorded. Gaining access required trusted intermediaries, and this mediation shaped which communities could be visited safely

and which individuals were willing to speak openly. In some instances, the presence of armed personnel near pipeline infrastructure constrained where I could move freely.

Thirdly, the two-month fieldwork window limited access to women in subsistence farming and fishing roles, who were typically unavailable during interview hours due to the demands of agricultural work, water-fetching, and caregiving. This is not merely a logistical constraint. Women's time poverty in oil-affected Niger Delta communities is itself a product of the structural conditions this thesis analyzes: the disproportionate domestic and livelihood labor women carry is the very thing that makes them unavailable for formal civic processes, including research interviews. As a result, the sample is weighted toward participants with existing connections to NGOs and formal advocacy networks, and underrepresents women without such affiliations. This skew is not coincidental. Women who have not been organized through NGOs tend to be those most thoroughly excluded from formal civic life, those lacking the education, mobility, or institutional access that NGO participation provides. Their relative absence from this research therefore illustrates the very patterns of exclusion the thesis investigates.

Fourth, I could not visit all affected areas within the three communities due to pollution levels that made access unsafe in some locations and remoteness in others. Finally, community mistrust toward outside researchers, shaped by decades of experience in which external documentation has not translated into accountability or remediation, limited the depth of some conversations. Each of these limitations is acknowledged in the analysis where it bears on specific findings.

This research is subject to several limitations. First, my reliance on qualitative methods and case studies limits generalizability beyond the three selected communities, though the depth of analysis this approach enables is precisely what the research questions

require. Second, access to interviewees and data was constrained by security issues and political instability in some parts of the Niger Delta states, which affected both which communities I could visit and which individuals within those communities were willing to speak with a researcher. A further access constraint emerged from the timeframe of my fieldwork, conducted over approximately two months, it did not allow me to interview women who were unavailable for interview during that period due to the demands of farming and domestic work, a pattern that itself reflects the structural constraints this thesis analyzes. As a result, the sample is weighted toward participants with existing connections to NGOs and formal advocacy networks, and somewhat underrepresents women without such affiliations. Third, I could not visit all affected areas in the communities due to the high level of pollution in some locations and the remoteness of others. Finally, there was mistrust from members of some communities toward outside researchers, which hindered access to participants and limited the depth of data I was able to collect in those settings. Each of these limitations is acknowledged in the analysis where it bears on specific findings.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter I introduces the research, presents the problem statement and research questions, and describes the methodology, research sites, sampling strategy, and approach to data collection and analysis. Chapter II reviews the existing literature on environmental justice, feminist political ecology, and intersectionality, situating this research within the theoretical conversations to which it contributes and examining prior scholarship on gender and environmental governance in Nigeria and the broader Global South. Chapter III describes the socio-political and environmental context of the Niger Delta, including the history and scale of oil pollution, the legal and regulatory framework governing oil extraction in Nigeria, and the gendered political economy that shapes women's exposure to environmental harm

and their exclusion from governance. Chapter IV presents the research findings, organized thematically around four themes: women's lived experience of environmental harm; gendered activism and forms of resistance; the structural and legal barriers constraining women's participation in governance; and the persistence of an organized feminist environmental justice movement operating largely under the radar. Chapter V concludes the thesis with a summary of the central findings and recommendations for policy, law, and future research, centered on the participation of women in the environmental governance and remediation processes from which they have historically been excluded.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines the evolution of environmental justice, the rise of feminist political ecology and intersectionality, and the dynamics of women's environmental activism in the Niger Delta. It draws on global and local literature to identify the persistent gendered power imbalances in environmental governance, highlighting specific case examples from the Niger Delta, and locates the research gap this thesis seeks to address.

Environmental Justice: Concept and Evolution

Across academic, activist, and policy literatures, environmental justice is frequently described as an objective, a goal pursued with specific conditions (Walker 2012). The idea of environmental justice was conceived in the United States in the mid-1980s as part of the racial equality movement (Ikeme, 2003). During this period, people of color began to organize environmental campaigns to prevent pesticide poisoning and to oppose the siting of noxious facilities in their communities (Beretta, 2012). The environmental justice movement quickly gained visibility as it highlighted the disproportionate exposure of marginalized communities to environmental risks.

A turning point came in 1990, when a groundbreaking study on environmental injustice was released by an African American sociologist named Robert Bullard (1990). That same year, the Congressional Black Caucus, a bipartisan group of scholars, social researchers, and political advocates, convened with EPA representatives to review its concerning discoveries and explore methods to tackle the perceived inequitable treatment of minorities by the EPA inspectors. In response, the EPA established the "Environmental Equity

Workgroup" to examine the claim that racial minorities and low-income groups experienced a greater environmental risk load than the broader population.

The group's results were published in *Environmental Equity: Reducing Risk in All Communities Report* (June 1992), which backed the assertions presented by prior research and the Congressional Black Caucus and suggested ten policy recommendations aimed at attaining greater equity concerning ecological hazards. One of these involved establishing an office to tackle these problems. In 1992, the first formal governmental body focused on environmental justice was established and was renamed in 1994 as the Office of Environmental Equity. This period of civic engagement, thorough research, and policy reform marked a significant shift as environmental justice in the U.S. became a public discourse and was incorporated into federal policy frameworks (Laurent, 2011).

Despite the progress over the years, when we look across history, academic, activist and policy literatures, there is no one agreed definition of environmental justice being used, instead there are multiple alternatives as to what the concept is. For example, the *Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, defines environmental justice as "the equal protection and meaningful involvement of all people with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies and equitable distribution of environmental benefits." (Commonwealth of Massachusetts 2002: 2).

Similarly, the *US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)* also defined it as "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies ... It will be achieved when everyone enjoys the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards and equal access to the

decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work." (US Environmental Protection Agency 2008).

Bunyan Bryant further defines the concept:

> "Environmental justice refers to those cultural norms, values, rules, regulations, behaviors, policies and decisions to support sustainable communities, where people can interact with confidence that their environment is safe, nurturing and productive. Environmental justice is served when people can realize their highest potential, without experiencing the 'isms'. Environmental justice is supported by decent paying and safe jobs, quality schools and recreation; decent housing and adequate health care; democratic decision making and personal empowerment; and communities free of violence, drugs and poverty." (Bryant 1995a: 6).

This account of diffusion risks overstating the U.S. roots of environmental justice as a global movement. Activism and critique related to pollution, resource extraction, and community vulnerability existed across the Global South long before "environmental justice" became an international term, including opposition to oil extraction in the Niger Delta from the 1970s and 1980s. The later global EJ framework was less about exporting an American idea than about adapting political and discursive tools, providing a common name and vocabulary to movements that had long operated independently, often without access to that language. Schlosberg (2007) presents an influential multidimensional model that extends beyond simply fair distribution of environmental harms to include recognition, participation,

and capabilities. Recognition requires acknowledging marginalized communities such as women, Indigenous peoples, and ethnic minorities as legitimate stakeholders, recognizing their cultural identities and experiences as vital to environmental governance. Participation emphasizes that these communities should have meaningful, not just token, involvement in decision-making. The capabilities dimension, inspired by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, asserts that environmental justice is only achieved when communities have the practical conditions necessary for thriving lives. This framework is particularly pertinent for analyzing environmental injustice in the Niger Delta, where women experience not only unequal oil pollution but also systemic neglect of their identities, contributions, and exclusion from participatory governance.

Building on these foundational frameworks, Taylor (2000) traces the evolution of environmental justice from a narrow anti-toxic movement into a broad-based social movement that links environmental harm to racial capitalism, colonialism, and structural inequality. Taylor argues that the movement has progressively incorporated a wider range of communities, issues, and geographic contexts moving from local disputes over waste facility sitting to global challenges of climate change, extractive industry, and resource imperialism. This expansion is echoed in the work of Martinez-Alier et al. (2016), who document the emergence of a global environmental justice movement encompassing struggles over land, water, forests, and energy in the Global South. In the Niger Delta, this global dimension is evident in the connections forged between local women's organizations and international networks such as Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth, highlighting how local struggles against oil pollution are embedded within wider structures of global resource extraction and corporate accountability.

Applying these ideas to the Niger Delta region, environmental justice would mean a fair treatment and meaningful involvement of the people, regardless of their ethnicity or income, in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies, and the ability to live free from environmental harms in the places they live, work, play, learn, and worship. The need for environmental justice in the Niger Delta is one of urgency as the region has suffered a long history of environmental degradation caused by oil exploration and exploitation.

Feminist Political Ecology and Intersectionality

Gender inequality is a persistent global issue that cuts across geographic, cultural, and economic barriers limiting women's access to resources, political representation, and decision-making authority despite progress in many countries. For instance, Norway is often seen as the leading nation in gender equality particularly in local politics on environmental issues due in part to policy measures such as the Brundtland Commission report advocating for sustainable development presented in 1987 by Gro Harlem Brundtland and the appointment of a cabinet with at least 40 women representatives, known as 'The Women's Government' (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2021). Norway's commitment to gender inequality is further demonstrated by adherence to international frameworks like the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and Agenda 21, an action plan for sustainable development as well as quotas ensuring at least 40% representation of each gender on public councils, boards, and committees (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2021). However, with so much emphasis on its success for sustainable development and gender equality in environmental governance, there is still persistent gender disparities at the local level, where women landowners are often on the sidelines for conservation discussions and the men are always leading conservation groups. This similar pattern of gender inequality was also found in places like Senegal, India,

and Nepal where women perform much of the environmental work yet remain marginalized in the decision-making processes, revealing how patriarchal norms continue to maintain women's silence in environmental governance.

Gender and power are central when analyzing environmental governance, particularly in how resources are accessed, controlled, and contested. Political ecology, an interdisciplinary field, offers a framework for analyzing these relationships by focusing on the political economy and cultural aspects that influence environmental governance (Peet and Watts, 2004; Robbins, 2020). This approach challenges "apolitical" views of ecology working from a common set of assumptions, and that it employs a reasonable consistent mode of explanation (Robbins, 2020); instead, it highlights the material and political nature of environmental resources and decision-making, influenced by various interests, investments, and power dynamics (Peet and Watts 2004). Building on this, feminist political ecology points out gender as a critical dimension of power, exploring how gender relations intersect with other social factors such as class, ethnicity, caste, race, age, and nationality to shape unequal access to natural resources (Buechler and Hansen 2015; Rocheleau et al., 1996). This perspective not only highlights gendered power structures related to land and environmental issues but also aims to identify and challenge gender-based oppression and injustice within environmental governance (Benjaminsen & Svarstad, 2021; Braun 2021).

In Nigeria, where environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and resource conflicts pose significant challenges, gender equality in regional conservation and development efforts continues to be underexplored. The role of women in conservation governance remains marginal and has persisted over the years despite women's ecological knowledge and active participation in natural resource management. In many rural communities, women have always interacted with nature on a daily basis as they are often responsible for fetching water,

gathering firewood, processing food, and cultivating home gardens which are activities linked to the environment. These gendered roles place women in the frontline of ecological challenges. However, when it comes to decision making in conservation or development efforts, women are most times excluded (Adekola & Olusola, 2016). One major barrier to women participating in conservation efforts is the patriarchal structures especially in the northern and rural southern regions, where customary law dominates; women are limited to only domestic roles or auxiliary functions, excluding them from formal governance institutions (Ajayi et al., 2012). In some parts of the Niger Delta where we have mangrove ecosystems that are vital, women still have limited input in the local conservation initiatives despite the fact that they bear the brunt of environmental degradation. Their exclusion reinforces systemic inequalities and hinders effective environmental outcomes (Fadamiro, 2018).

Scholars working at the intersection of feminist political ecology and environmental justice have long drawn on intersectionality to deepen this analysis. Braun (2015) explicitly bridges feminist political ecology, intersectionality, and environmental justice frameworks to examine how large-scale extractive and infrastructural development reproduces inequality along mutually constitutive lines of gender, class, ethnicity, and geography. Similarly, Braun (2011a) demonstrates how an intersectional lens reveals the compound disadvantages that women face in contexts of resource extraction, where multiple forms of social oppression, including gender, ethnicity, age, and class, combine to shape their experiences of marginalization and power (Sundberg, 2017; Sultana, 2020). Crenshaw (1989) first brought intersectionality into academic discourse through her foundational work on Black women and employment discrimination, and this framework has since become vital for understanding the complex layers of discrimination present in environmental governance (Hopkins 2019). Together, feminist political ecology and intersectionality offer a powerful lens for examining

the persistent inequalities embedded in environmental politics and development, particularly in contexts like the Niger Delta where gendered power imbalances shape the struggle for environmental justice.

Feminist Environmental Justice in the Global South

Feminist environmental justice movements in the Global South can be best understood within the framework of extractivism, a political-economic model where states and corporations structure national economies around large-scale extraction of resources like oil, gas, minerals, and timber for export. This process often leaves limited processing or benefits for the local communities where extraction occurs. Watts (2004) examines the Niger Delta as a prime example of what he calls the political ecology of oil, where petroleum extraction results in environmental damage and violent conflicts over revenue, sovereignty, and governance. He and Peet describe this pattern more broadly across extractive economies in the Global South (Peet and Watts 2004). Extractivism is not just an economic activity but also a form of governance that centralizes decision-making within state and corporate actors, marginalizing local communities, especially women whose land, water, and labor sustain these industries without sharing in their benefits or governance. Braun (2011b) analyzes the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, a large infrastructure project that pipes water from rural Lesotho to South Africa, illustrating that this pattern extends beyond oil. Such development projects tend to reinforce inequalities of race, class, and gender, shaping local economies around the needs of the project rather than the communities. Martinez-Alier et al. (2016) place this dynamic within a global environmental justice movement that fights over land, water, forests, and energy in the Global South, with Niger Delta women's organizing as one example among many.

Recent research identifies collective action, networks, and advocacy as key indicators of a feminist environmental justice movement that has operated in the Global South for decades, often without being named or formally recognized as such (Ikelegbe, 2005a; Ekhator, 2020). In the Niger Delta, women's groups such as Kebetkache Women Development & Resource Centre have played prominent roles in mobilizing communities, organizing protests, and advocating for gender-sensitive environmental policies. Friesenhan (2024) and Abonyi (2022) show how Niger Delta women use eco-poetry, storytelling, and indigenous knowledge to resist marginalization and assert their agency. These actions challenge both environmental harm and patriarchal structures, demonstrating the power and specificity of feminist environmental activism in Nigeria.

The experiences of Niger Delta women must be situated within a broader landscape of feminist environmental activism in the Global South. Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement in Kenya, founded in 1977, represents one of the most celebrated examples of women-led environmental activism on the African continent. Maathai organized rural Kenyan women to plant millions of trees to combat deforestation and soil erosion, thereby building community solidarity, advancing environmental restoration, and strengthening women's political agency (Maathai 2006). The movement demonstrated that women's environmental activism, when given institutional support and recognition, can generate transformative ecological and social outcomes that extend well beyond the immediate environmental concern. Crucially, Maathai's movement succeeded not only in planting trees but in cultivating democratic consciousness and resistance to authoritarian governance, a precedent that resonates with the way Niger Delta women's environmental campaigns have simultaneously challenged corporate impunity, state negligence, and patriarchal community structures. While the ecological and political contexts differ significantly, the Green Belt Movement's model of linking environmental restoration to women's empowerment,

economic autonomy, and democratic participation offers instructive parallels for the persistent, largely unrecognized feminist environmental justice movement in the Niger Delta.

Feminist environmental justice scholarship has increasingly emphasized the need to move beyond frameworks developed in Northern contexts, which often assume institutional access, legal protections, and civil freedoms that are absent or severely constrained in many extractive zones of the Global South (Sultana 2020; Harcourt and Nelson 2015). In these contexts, women's environmental activism frequently operates under conditions of state repression, corporate impunity, and deep patriarchal resistance. As Mai-Bornu (2024) demonstrates in her green criminology analysis of the Niger Delta, women environmental defenders face not only structural exclusion but also direct risks of intimidation and violence for their advocacy work. This reality calls for an analytical framework sensitive to the specific vulnerabilities and forms of agency that characterize feminist environmental justice struggles in the Global South, rather than applying Northern metrics of success or participation. It also underscores the importance of international solidarity networks and transnational advocacy coalitions (Braun and Dreiling 2014), such as those facilitated by Friends of the Earth International and Amnesty International, which have amplified the Niger Delta women's cause on a global stage and increased the political costs of corporate and state inaction.

Within the Niger Delta specifically, the persistence of a feminist environmental justice movement, operating largely under the radar of formal recognition, represents a convergence of grassroots women's organizing, NGO advocacy, legal activism, and cultural expression. Ekhator (2020) documents how Nigerian women have begun to use domestic and international human rights law as a framework for demanding environmental accountability, a strategy that connects environmental justice claims to broader gender justice and human

rights frameworks. Meanwhile, the use of eco-poetry, oral testimony, and storytelling by Niger Delta women activists, analyzed by Friesenhan (2024) and Abonyi (2022), represents what Harcourt and Nelson (2015) call "practicing feminist political ecologies" embodied, place-based, and culturally rooted forms of environmental knowledge and resistance that challenge both extractive capitalism and patriarchal governance simultaneously. These varied modes of activism protest, litigation, poetry, cooperative organizing, and international advocacy together constitute a multifaceted feminist environmental justice movement that cannot be reduced to any single strategy or leader, and that derives its resilience precisely from its decentralized, community-embedded character.

A critical strand within feminist political ecology, articulated most forcefully by Bina Agarwal (1992, 2010), challenges the essentialist tendencies of some early ecofeminist writing, which risk naturalizing women's relationship to the environment in favor of what she terms "feminist environmentalism." Agarwal's framework grounds women's environmental engagement not in innate biological affinity with nature but in the material conditions of their lives: their dependence on natural resources for subsistence, the gendered division of labor that assigns them primary responsibility for food, water, and fuel, and their structural exclusion from property rights and formal governance institutions. In contrast to cultural or spiritual accounts of women's environmental knowledge, Agarwal insists on analyzing the class, caste, and gender-specific forms of marginalization that shape different women's relationships to the environment, an approach that aligns directly with the intersectional framework employed in this thesis. This distinction is theoretically important for the Niger Delta context, where the environmental activism of women in Ikarama, Bodo, and Obunagha is rooted not in an abstract relationship with nature but in the concrete destruction of the resources upon which their livelihoods and their families' survival depend. Agarwal's insistence on collective action and legal reform as pathways to gender-equitable

environmental governance also speaks directly to the advocacy strategies documented in the findings of this research.

Vandana Shiva's foundational work, particularly Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development (1988), draws attention to the ways in which development paradigms rooted in Western scientific rationality have simultaneously marginalized both women and nature in the Global South. Shiva's analysis of India's Chipko movement, where women embraced trees to prevent commercial logging and asserted their right to the forests upon which their subsistence depended, offers an early and influential example of gender-based ecological activism that prefigures the forms of resistance documented in the Niger Delta. While Shiva's work has been critiqued for occasionally romanticizing women's relationship to the environment (Agarwal 1992; Jackson 1993), her central insight that the enclosure and commodification of natural resources systematically dispossesses subsistence-dependent women remains analytically powerful and resonates strongly with the experiences of Niger Delta women whose farming and fishing livelihoods have been destroyed by oil extraction. Together, Agarwal's material feminist environmentalism and Shiva's critique of destructive development paradigms provide a theoretical foundation for understanding why women in the Niger Delta, far from being passive victims of oil pollution, emerge as the primary agents of resistance and justice-seeking in the region.

Gaps in Existing Literature

Feminist political ecologists and environmental justice scholars have made significant strides in centering women's voices and lived experiences in contexts of resource extraction and environmental harm. Braun (2008) foregrounds one woman's struggle for environmental justice in a large-scale development context, while Braun (2015) demonstrates how feminist political ecology, intersectionality, and environmental justice frameworks can be bridged to

reveal the gendered costs of extractive development. Braun and Traore (2015) apply this approach to women and environmental responsibility in Mali, showing how gendered roles shape both exposure to pollution and strategies of response. However, this body of work has focused predominantly on dam construction, water governance, and waste management in contexts outside Nigeria. There remains a gap in analyses that specifically foreground the voices, strategies, and lived experiences of women in the Niger Delta as primary agents of resistance and justice-seeking in a region defined by oil extraction. Most studies of the Niger Delta's environmental crisis focus on legal frameworks, corporate liability, and state regulatory failure without adequately attending to the gendered dimensions of injustice or to women's agency. This thesis addresses that gap by examining how women navigate and contest environmental harm in Ikarama, Obunagha, and Bodo, and by documenting their contributions to a feminist environmental justice movement that has persisted in the Niger Delta for decades, largely outside formal recognition.

Together, the frameworks and debates reviewed in this chapter provide the analytical foundation for this thesis. Environmental justice names what is happening to people in Niger Delta communities. Feminist political ecology and intersectionality explain why women suffer the most and why they are also the most active in resisting that harm. And the scholarship of Braun (2008, 2015), Braun and Traore (2015), and others working in the Global South demonstrates that women-led environmental resistance is not an anomaly but a documented pattern of response to extractive injustice. The next chapter moves from this theoretical foundation to the specific Nigerian and Niger Delta context that shapes the communities and women at the center of this research.

CHAPTER III

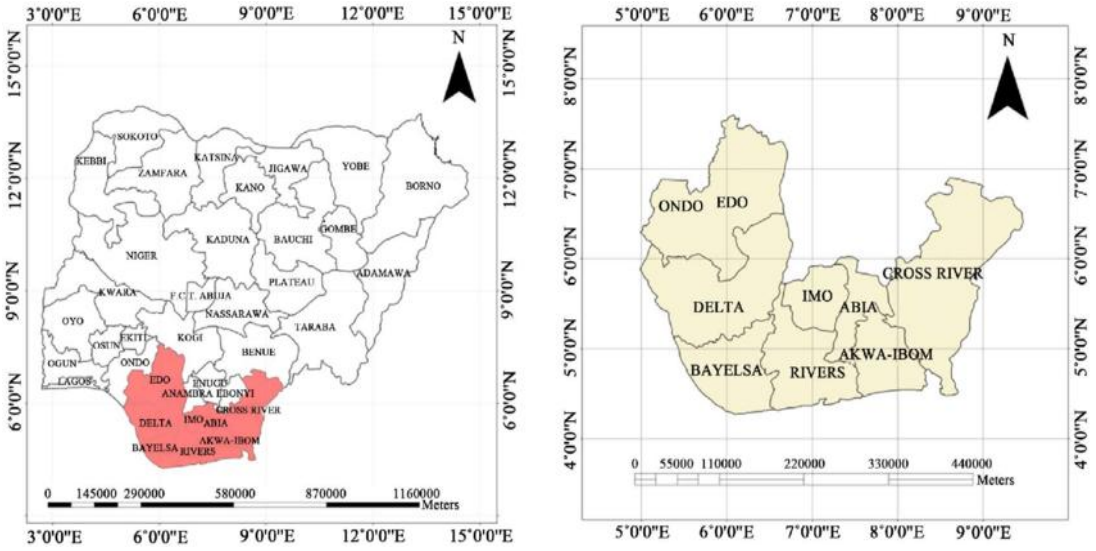
RESEARCH CONTEXT: ECONOMY, POLITICS, AND GENDER

Overview of Nigeria and Environmental Degradation in the Niger Delta Region

Nigeria is ranked among the world's top oil-producing countries, with production reaching approximately 1.7 million barrels per day in early 2025 (Sahara Reporters, 2025). The country's wealth in petroleum, natural gas, and other mineral resources, such as iron ore, tin, coal, and limestone (OPEC 2022), has shaped its economy and politics for decades. The discovery of oil in Oloibiri in the Niger Delta region in 1956 and associated extraction activities in Nigeria have shown that there are negative consequences for the livelihoods of the people (Helbert & O'Brien 2020). The extractive industries play a central role in Nigeria's economic and political systems, especially in the Niger Delta region, where most of the country's oil reserves are located. These industries own and generate significant national revenue and foreign exchange earnings, which are sold to resource-rich countries around the world in the form of oil imperialism.

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria, often referred to as the "Niger Delta" and demarcated by the delta of the Niger River (Anele and Nkpah 2013), covers approximately 70,000 square kilometers and is home to various ethnic groups and communities, rich in natural resources, particularly oil and gas. The Niger Delta comprises nine states: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Rivers, and Ondo. Despite this resource wealth, the communities who live there have experienced decades of environmental harm, political neglect, and economic marginalization.

Figure 2. Map of Nigeria and the states in the Niger Delta region



However, this region has been marred by a complex web of environmental challenges and socio-economic issues, making it a focal point for discussion. The discovery of oil in the Niger Delta in the mid-20th century brought both opportunities and challenges. While oil extraction has contributed significantly to Nigeria's national revenue and economic growth, it has also led to severe environmental degradation and a cycle of underdevelopment for the communities residing in the region where the socio-environmental impacts are most felt. In fact, the social, political, and environmental costs of oil and gas exploitation and production are often described as inevitable (Coarse, 1990), sometimes referred to as the ‘resource curse’. In environmental terms, this is because oil extraction processes, such as drilling, gas flaring, and pipeline transportation, most often result in oil spills, contamination of water bodies, destruction of farmland, and biodiversity loss. These environmental impacts are not adequately addressed, leaving communities to bear the long-term consequences.

As oil and gas exploration and production generate significant waste and pollution leading to environmental degradation, exploration and exploitation activities in the oil-bearing areas have also permanently alienated a large tract of land (Coarse, 1990).

Environmental degradation is compounded by legal and structural frameworks that favor extractive industries over local interests. Most of the Niger Delta's land and offshore areas are covered by Oil Mining and Oil Prospecting Licenses, granting companies access to vast tracts often at the expense of local communities (Alakpodia 1980; Aghalino 2004). By manipulating the Land Use Act, which vests ownership of lands in the government, subsidiaries of Shell, Chevron, and Total, and other oil companies in Nigeria have cashed in on this legal leeway to appropriate land with minimal compensation, perpetuating the dynamics of oil imperialism (Ikein, 1990; Ndukwe, 2000). Also, the Pollution of land, water, and air has resulted in widespread health hazards, including respiratory diseases, skin infections, waterborne illnesses, and reproductive health complications which have affected the physical well-being and economic survival of the affected communities. Women and children are particularly vulnerable, as their daily responsibilities center on water fetching, food preparation, and caregiving, making them more directly exposed to environmental harm.

In its February 2008 edition, the *TELL Magazine* studying 50 years of oil exploration in Nigeria wrote: "Obviously, 50 years of oil exploration and exploitation has occasioned environmental degradation and pollution resulting in excruciating and brutalizing poverty, unemployment, diseases and health hazards and even death among the people living in the region" (TELL February 18, 2008, p.15). The magazine goes further to contend that the state of affairs in the Niger Delta has led to high levels of socio-economic underdevelopment, manifesting in the absence of infrastructure, low standards of living, and feelings of abandonment, denial, and frustration among its people.

Environmental Problems in the Niger Delta

Environmental problems in the Niger Delta stem directly from six decades of oil extraction. The region has experienced ongoing oil spills, gas flaring, and pipeline failures,

which together have made it one of the most polluted places on earth. The contamination of air, soil, and water with toxic compounds has been so severe that researchers and environmental advocates have described it as ecocide. Nigeria recorded more than 9,000 oil spill incidents over a recent ten-year period alone, a scale of environmental harm that dwarfs comparable incidents in wealthier nations with stronger regulatory oversight. The oil industry's carelessness compounds the problem, perhaps best illustrated by a 1983 report issued by the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation itself, long before any widespread public protest emerged. In the report, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation acknowledged the gradual poisoning of the country's waterways and the destruction of vegetation, farmland, and clean water sources caused by oil spills during petroleum operations, and admitted that in the more than fifty years since the industry's inception, neither the government nor the oil operators had made any concerted, effective effort to control the resulting environmental damage (NNPC 1983).

> "We witnessed the slow poisoning of the waters of this country and the destruction of vegetation and agricultural land and good water source by oil spills which occur during petroleum operations. But since the inception of the oil industry in Nigeria, more than fifty years ago, there has been no concerned and effective effort on the part of the government, let alone the oil operators, to control environmental problems associated with the industry".

The resultant environmental degradation from gas flaring, dredging of larger rivers, oil spillage and reclamation of land due to oil and gas extraction across the Niger Delta region costs about US$758 million every year. Regrettably, 75% of the cost is borne by the local communities through polluted water, infertile farmland and lost biodiversity. The region could

experience a loss of 40% of its habitable terrain in the next thirty years as a result of extensive dam construction in the region.

Oil Spills

The Department of Petroleum Resources estimated that 1.89 million barrels of petroleum were spilled into the Niger Delta between 1976 and 1996 out of a total of 2.4 million barrels that spilled in 4,835 incidents. (Approximately 220 thousand cubic metres). A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report states that there has been a total of 6,817 oil spills between 1976 and 2001, which account for a loss of three million barrels of oil, of which more than 70% were not recovered. 69% of these spills occurred offshore, a quarter was in swamps and 6% spilled on land. Bronwen Manby, then researcher in the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch, reported in July 1997 that, according to NNPC's own official estimates, approximately 2,300 cubic metres (610,000 U.S. gallons) of oil were spilled annually in some 300 separate incidents, and that under-reporting likely meant the true figure was substantially higher, with conservative estimates placing it as much as ten times greater (Manby 1999).

The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation places the quantity of petroleum jettisoned into the environment yearly at 2,300 cubic metres (19,000 US bbl) with an average of 300 individual spills annually. However, because this amount does not take into account "minor" spills, the World Bank argues that the true quantity of petroleum spilled into the environment could be as much as ten times the officially claimed amount. The largest individual spills include the blowout of a Texaco offshore station which in 1980 dumped an estimation amounting to Sabotage 400,000 barrels (64,000 m^3) of crude oil into the Gulf of Guinea and Royal Dutch Shell's Forcados Terminal tank failure which produced a spillage estimated at 580,000 barrels (92,000 m^3). In 2010 Baird reported that between 9 million and

13 million barrels were spilled in the Niger Delta since 1958. One source even calculates that the total amount of petroleum in barrels spilled between 1960 and 1997 is upwards of 100 million barrels (16,000,000 m3). United Nations report from 2011 documented that the environment of the Niger Delta is so polluted that it could take 25 to 30 years to reverse the associated sustainability consequences of the pollution.

A catastrophic spill occurred on May 1, 2010 at an ExxonMobil offshore oil platform approximately 35 to 45 kilometres (20 to 25 nautical miles) from shore. The rupture spewed more than 3.8 megalitres (1 million US gallons) of crude into the Delta. Because the spill occurred just 10 days after the Deep-water Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, people affected by repeated spills in the Niger Delta noted "massive differences" in international response to these disasters and relative lack of media coverage for such events in Nigeria.

Gas Flaring

Nigeria flares more natural gas associated with oil extraction than any other country, with estimates suggesting that of the 3.5 billion cubic feet (100,000,000 m^3) of associated gas (AG) produced annually, 2.5 billion cubic feet (70,000,000 m^3), or about 70%, is wasted by flaring. This equals about 25% of the UK's total natural gas consumption and is the equivalent to 40% of Africa's gas consumption in 2001. Statistical data associated with gas flaring are notoriously unreliable, but Nigeria may waste US$2 billion per year by flaring associated gas. Flaring is done as it is costly to separate commercially viable associated gas from the oil. Companies operating in Nigeria also harvest natural gas for commercial purposes but prefer to extract it from deposits where it is found in isolation as non-associated gas. Thus, associated gas is burned off to decrease costs.

Gas flaring is generally discouraged as it releases toxic components into the atmosphere and contributes to climate change. In Western Europe 99% of associated gas is used or re-

injected into the ground. Gas flaring in Nigeria began simultaneously with oil extraction in the 1960s by Shell-BP. Alternatives to flaring are gas re-injection or to store it for use as an energy source. If properly stored, the gas could be used for community projects.

Gas flaring releases large amounts of methane, which has a high global warming potential. The methane is accompanied by the other major greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide, of which Nigeria was estimated to have emitted more than 34.38 million metric tons of in 2002, accounting for about 50% of all industrial emissions in the country and 30% of the total CO_2 emissions. While flaring in the west has been minimized, in Nigeria it has grown proportionally with oil production.

The international community, the Nigerian government, and the oil corporations seem in agreement that gas flaring needs to be curtailed. Efforts to do so, however, have been limited, although flaring has been declared illegal since 1984 under section 3 of the "Associated Gas Reinjection Act" of Nigeria. While OPEC and Shell, the biggest flarer of natural gas in Nigeria, alike claim that only 50% of all associated gas is burnt off via flaring, these data are contested. The World Bank reported in 2004 that Nigeria was flaring approximately 75% of the gas it produced (World Bank 2004).

Gas flares have potentially harmful effects on the health and livelihood of nearby communities, as they release poisonous chemicals including nitrogen dioxides, sulphur dioxide, volatile organic compounds like benzene, toluene, xylene and hydrogen sulfide, as well as carcinogens like benzapyrene and dioxins. Humans exposed to such substances can suffer from respiratory problems (Amnesty International, 2011; UNEP, 2011). These chemicals can aggravate asthma, cause breathing difficulties and pain, as well as chronic bronchitis. Benzene, known to be emitted from gas flares in undocumented quantities, is well recognized as a cause for leukemia and other blood-related diseases. A study done by the

Climate Justice Program and ERA 2005 estimates that exposure to benzene would result in eight new cases of cancer yearly in Bayelsa State alone.

Gas flares are often close to communities and regularly lack fencing or protection for villagers who risk working near their heat. Many communities claim that nearby flares cause acid rain which corrodes their homes and other structures, many of which have zinc-based roofing. Some people resort to using asbestos-based material, which is stronger in repelling acid rain deterioration. Unfortunately, this contributes to their declining health and the health of their environment. Asbestos exposure increases the risk of forming lung cancer, pleural and peritoneal mesothelioma, and asbestosis.

Whether or not flares contribute to acid rain is debatable, as some independent studies conducted have found that the sulphur dioxide and nitrous oxide content of most flares was insufficient to establish a link between flaring and acid rain. Other studies from the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) report that gas flaring is "a major contributor to air pollution and acid rain." Older flares are rarely relocated away from villages and are known to coat the land and communities with soot and to damage adjacent vegetation. Almost no vegetation can grow in the area directly surrounding the flares due to their heat.

In November 2005 a judgment by the Federal High Court of Nigeria ordered that gas flaring must stop in a Niger Delta community as it violates guaranteed constitutional rights to life and dignity. In a case brought against the Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria (Shell), Justice C. V. Nwokorie ruled in Benin City that "the damaging and wasteful practice of flaring cannot lawfully continue." Gas flaring in Nigeria has continued long beyond that 2005 ruling. As of 2024, when Shell divested its onshore assets to Renaissance Africa Energy Company, gas flaring at facilities including the Gbarain-Ubie Plant in Bayelsa State remained ongoing, directly affecting communities like Obunagha on a daily basis (Ogunyale,

2025). The failure to enforce the court's order illustrates the fundamental gap between judicial intent and regulatory reality in the Niger Delta.

Environmental pollution at Ikarama community in Bayelsa State, Nigeria

Ikarama is situated in the Okordia Clan within the Yenagoa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. The community is home to the Okordia-Rumuekpe Trunk Line and other pipelines, making it prone to frequent oil spills. This line was sold to a consortium called Renaissance Africa Energy, comprising Nigerian firms such as ND Western, Aradel, First E&P, Waltersmith, and Petrolin. After the acquisition, SPDC was rebranded as Renaissance Africa Energy Company Limited.

According to Environmental Rights Action (ERA)/Friends of the Earth Nigeria, there have been over 20 major oil spill incidents in Ikarama between 2007 and 2023, often resulting from both equipment failure and pipeline vandalism. Notably, a major spill in July 2022 contaminated large swaths of farmland and water bodies, destroying crops such as cassava and plantain and rendering the rivers unusable for fishing. The community members reported persistent crude oil residues in their rivers which are sometimes their only source of water, unfit for domestic use. The pollution has resulted in loss of livelihoods, food insecurity, and increased health risks, particularly among women and children who are primary water fetchers and food providers. Despite promises of remediation, clean-up efforts remain inadequate, and many farmlands remain barren years after the spills.

Figure 3. Crude oil oozing from the excavated pond (ERA 2008)



Figure 4. Part of the newly dug pond (ERA 2022)



Environmental pollution at Obunagha Community in Bayelsa State

The Obunagha community is among several villages near the Gbarain-Ubie Integrated Oil and Gas Processing Plant. Since the plant's commissioning in 2010, relentless gas flaring and periodic oil spills have severely impacted the community. Shell operated this plant until its divestment in January 2024, after which Renaissance Africa Energy Company (RAEC) took over its operations. Scientific studies and community reports reveal that gas flaring releases carcinogenic compounds such as benzene, toluene, and xylene into the air, leading to respiratory illnesses, eye irritation, and skin diseases which have severely impacted their community.

Each day, thick fumes billow from tall flare stacks managed by exploration firms, disrupting rainfall and coating vegetation with black soot, drastically altering the environment. Additionally, pipeline vandalism and ongoing oil extraction have contaminated the farmland with heavy crude, making soil dense and unproductive. Crops like cassava and yams now struggle to grow, producing much less than before. (Cross Riverwatch, 2025). Rivers and farmland have been contaminated not only by flaring but also by repeated pipeline failures. For example, a 2021 spill from the Gbarain-Ubie pipeline leaked crude oil into the Nun River, destroying fishing areas and poisoning water sources. "Community members like Rachel Queen have described persistent black soot deposition on vegetation, poor rainfall patterns, and a reliance on unsafe water for drinking and cooking." (Cross Riverwatch, 2025). Health records from local clinics indicate a spike in cases of respiratory and waterborne diseases among children and women since oil operations intensified. Efforts to seek compensation or effective remediation have largely been unheeded, exacerbating food insecurity and hardship for the most vulnerable.

Figure 5. Gas flaring at Obunagha community (Cross Riverwatch, 2025)



Environmental pollution at Bodo Community in Ogoni land, Rivers State

The name Bodo translates to 'on the sea,' derived from Boodor, meaning 'because of the sea' (Tanen 2005, 1). It is situated at the southernmost tip of the Gokana Kingdom in Ogoniland, east of Nigeria's Niger Delta. To the east by Andoni, to the west by Bolo, and at the south by Bonny and the Atlantic Ocean, it forms a coastal boundary (Tanen, 2005; Piegbara and Kedei, 2003; Alawa, 1977). Due to Bodo's border by creeks towards Bonny Island, Bodo is susceptible to oil spills.

In 2008 and 2009, two massive pipeline ruptures released over 560,000 barrels of crude oil into Bodo's waterways, one of the largest spills in Nigeria's history (UNEP, 2011; Amnesty International, 2015). Mangrove forests and fishing grounds were devastated, with satellite imagery documented in published reports showing blackened wetlands and destroyed aquatic habitats. Local women, who depended on fishing and gathering of periwinkle, lost their livelihoods almost overnight (Amnesty International, 2011). Consumption of contaminated water and fish led to increased rates of gastrointestinal diseases, rashes, and reproductive health issues. Despite a landmark compensation agreement with Shell in 2015 and a court-mandated clean-up, progress has been slow, and many areas remain polluted.

Women have organized protests and advocacy campaigns, demanding urgent remediation and restoration of their means of survival. The Bodo case continues to underscore the intersection of environmental damage, gendered impacts, and struggles for justice in the Niger Delta.

Figure 6. Oil spill in Ogoniland (Jolaoso, 2025)



Figure 7. Sample of oil-polluted rivers in different communities in the Niger Delta Region (EDEN, 2026)



Impact of Environmental Pollution on Human Health, the Economy, and Social Development

Environmental pollution in the Niger Delta has a significant impact on human health, the economy, and social development. On human health, exposure to environmental pollutants causes a wide range of problems including respiratory diseases such as asthma, bronchitis, and lung cancer, as well as cardiovascular disease, neurological disorders, reproductive complications, and developmental delays in children. These health burdens fall disproportionately on women and children who spend the most time in contaminated environments. On the economy, pollution reduces agricultural yields, damages forests, and corrodes infrastructure. Contaminated water bodies disrupt fishing livelihoods, which are central to household income for women in inland Niger Delta communities. Contaminated farmland reduces crop productivity and property values, pushing households further into poverty. On social development, pollution deepens existing inequalities. The communities most exposed to environmental harm are also among the most economically marginalised, creating cycles of poverty and environmental vulnerability that are especially acute for women who lack the resources to relocate or access healthcare.

Legal and Regulatory Framework of Environmental Law in Nigeria

The environmental crisis in the Niger Delta cannot be understood separate from the legal and regulatory framework governing oil extraction in Nigeria since the colonial period. The historical overview of environmental law in Nigeria can be traced back to the colonial era. In 1901, the British colonial government enacted the Forestry Ordinance, which was the first law in Nigeria to regulate the use of forest resources. The Ordinance was followed by a number of other laws, such as the Game Preservation Ordinance (1916), the Water Ordinance (1923), and the Public Health Ordinance (1928). These laws were primarily concerned with

protecting public health and safety, and they did not address the broader issue of environmental protection.

After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the government enacted a number of new laws that were specifically designed to protect the environment. These laws included the Oil in Navigable Waters Act (1968), the Oil in Navigable Waters Regulations (1968), and the Petroleum Act (1969). The Petroleum Act was particularly important, as it required oil companies to take steps to prevent oil spills and other forms of pollution.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Nigeria experienced a number of major environmental disasters, including the Koko oil spill in 1988. These disasters led to a growing public awareness of environmental problems and prompted the government to take further action to protect the environment. In 1988, the government established the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) to coordinate environmental protection efforts. FEPA was given a broad mandate to develop and enforce environmental regulations, and to promote environmental education and awareness.

In 1999, Nigeria adopted the Constitution which is the grundnorm of the country. The Constitution and the body of statutes and regulations enacted in its wake, summarized below, together form the legal architecture within which the environmental crisis in the Niger Delta has unfolded.

In recent years, the Nigerian government has enacted a number of new environmental laws, such as the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (Establishment) Act (2007) and the Environmental Impact Assessment Act (2004). Despite this progress, significant challenges to environmental protection in Nigeria remain, including weak enforcement, corruption, and a lack of regulatory resources, challenges examined in detail later in this chapter. The statutes and institutions summarized below represent the formal legal

architecture; whether that architecture functions in practice for the communities and women most affected is the question this thesis ultimately investigates.

Environmental Laws in Nigeria

The primary constitutional basis for environmental protection is Section 20 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN), which requires the state to protect and improve the environment and safeguard Nigeria's water, air, land, forests, and wildlife. This provision establishes environmental protection as a state obligation, though it sits within the directive principles section of the Constitution, limiting its direct enforceability in court. Alongside the Constitution, the Oil in Navigable Waters Act of 1968 addressed Nigeria's obligations under international conventions, prohibiting the discharge of oil into territorial waters.

The oil industry is specifically governed by the Petroleum Act of 1969, which vests all petroleum resources in the federal government and provides the regulatory framework for exploration, production, and distribution. Its enforcement has historically favoured corporate interests over community protection. The Oil Pipelines Act (OPA) regulates the licensing of pipelines but has proved inadequate in addressing the harm caused by pipeline failures in communities like Ikarama. The Associated Gas Re-Injection Act (AGRA) of 1979 was designed to end gas flaring by requiring oil companies to reinject associated gas during production. The Act included criminal penalties for violations, yet gas flaring has continued in the Niger Delta for decades, exposing communities like Obunagha to carcinogenic compounds on a daily basis.

Environmental protection statutes introduced in later decades extended the formal regulatory framework. The Environmental Impact Assessment Act of 2004 requires that the environmental effects of proposed projects be assessed before approval, including cumulative and secondary impacts. The National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement

Agency (NESREA) Establishment Act of 2007 created an agency with a broad mandate to enforce environmental standards, prevent pollution, and protect Nigeria's natural resources. The Environmental Guidelines and Standards for the Petroleum Industry (EGASPIN, 2002) provide technical guidelines governing environmental control in petroleum operations, including standards for waste generation and effluent limitations. The National Policy on the Environment (NPE) establishes a programmatic framework connecting environmental problems to their causes and solutions, with remediation and restoration as core policy goals.

Read together, these instruments represent a substantial legislative effort to govern the environmental consequences of oil extraction. The gap this thesis investigates is not, therefore, one of legislative ambition but of enforcement, and more specifically, of who is included in the governance structures that determine whether laws are applied at all. As documented in the Findings, women in the communities most affected by oil pollution are routinely excluded from the decision-making bodies, compensation processes, and regulatory visits through which these laws are, or are not, given effect.

Despite these extensive legislatures, the legal frameworks have proven consistently weak in practice. Nigeria has enacted over one hundred and twenty Acts and subsidiary legislations addressing environmental issues, yet enforcement remains fragmentary, penalties are negligible relative to the scale of environmental damage, and the institutions responsible for oversight suffer from overlapping mandates, resource constraints, and corruption (Aghalino, 2004). As the figures presented earlier in this chapter make clear, the annual cost of oil and gas exploitation, the thousands of documented spills since the 1970s, and the persistence of illegal gas flaring decades after it was statutorily banned are not failures of legislative ambition but of enforcement. A 1983 report by the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) itself acknowledged that “since the inception of the oil industry in Nigeria, more than fifty years ago, there has been no concerned and effective effort on the

part of the government, let alone the oil operators, to control environmental problems associated with the industry." This admission, offered more than four decades ago and still apt today, underscores a fundamental reality: the problem in the Niger Delta is not an absence of law, but a systemic failure of enforcement, a failure whose consequences fall disproportionately on the women whose livelihoods and health are most directly bound to the land and the rivers.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Summary of Findings

This chapter presents my experience during fieldwork in the three communities, and findings from the semi-structured interviews I conducted with community leaders/ members, an NGO founder, an NGO leader, a pipeline security officer, and legal practitioners across Ikarama, Obunagha, and Bodo. The findings are organized around four themes that emerged from the data. The first theme covers women's lived experience of environmental harm, how oil pollution directly affects their health, livelihoods, and daily lives. The second examines gendered activism and resistance, documenting the strategies women have used to fight back. The third explores the structural and legal barriers that prevent women from participating in governance and accessing compensation. The fourth describes the persistence of a feminist environmental justice movement in the Niger Delta, including the organizations and collective actions driving it. Together, these findings answer the three research questions from Chapter I, how women experience the gendered effects of pollution; how they resist and organize; and what kind of feminist environmental justice movement has persisted from their efforts. Although several participants are men, every interview was structured around women's experiences of environmental harm and exclusion, and the analysis throughout this chapter keeps women and the gendered dimensions of the crisis at its center. The male participants speak from institutional positions, community leadership, NGO documentation, pipeline security, and legal practice, that shape the conditions under which women live, organize, and seek redress.

This section explores legal neutrality, a concept introduced earlier. It explains how laws that appear gender-neutral on their face can still lead to gendered outcomes in practice

(Ekhator 2020; Okolo-Obasi, Okolo-Obasi, and Nwankwo 2020). Nigerian environmental and land laws, for example, are ostensibly gender-neutral; no law forbids women from filing compensation claims, participating in Joint Investigation Visits (JIV), or holding community leadership roles. However, laws that seem neutral on paper operate through institutions that are not neutral in reality: customary governance structures that entrust authority primarily to men, compensation processes handled through male-headed families, and enforcement agencies that mainly interact with male community representatives. Consequently, the legal system produces gendered outcomes without apparent blame, highlighting a disconnect between legal provisions and actual power and resource distribution. This gap, between law and practice, is the focus of this chapter's third theme and underscores the argument that environmental injustice in the Niger Delta cannot be addressed solely through legal texts.

I arrived in the Niger Delta in August 2025 with a fieldwork window of approximately eight weeks. The plan was to conduct semi-structured interviews across the nine states that make up the Niger Delta, but due to the short window, security issues, proximity of some of the oil producing communities in the state, and the negative effects of breathing in polluted air from some of these communities, I was only able to visit three communities across Bayelsa and Rivers State, which are just two states out of the initial nine states. I visited Ikarama, and Obunagha in Bayelsa State, and Bodo in Rivers State to speak with people who have engaged with oil pollution and environmental governance from different institutional positions. I had connections to the Niger Delta before the fieldwork began, and this connection stems from the fact that I hail from Bayelsa State in the Niger Delta. This mattered because the Niger Delta is not a place where a researcher can arrive cold, hand out consent forms, and expect people to open up. Trust matters here, and the introductions I received through environmental NGOs, particularly the Environmental

Defenders Network (EDEN) and Young Friends of the Earth Nigeria, were the reason most of my interviews happened at all.

I visited the three communities in sequence, spending eight days in Ikarama, seven days in Obunagha, and ten days in Bodo. The distance traveling between Ikarama and Obunagha was roughly two hours, and the roads were quite bumpy. Between formal interviews, I spent time in each community observing, listening, and taking notes. What I saw and heard on the ground shaped how I analyzed the interview, observation, and secondary document data and informed my description and analysis below.

Participant Profiles

Before turning to the themes, I want to introduce the people I interviewed, because the analysis makes more sense when you have a sense of who each person is, how I found them, and what the conversation was like. The interviews spanned five participant categories: a community leader and member, an NGO founder, an NGO leader, a pipeline security officer, and legal practitioners. Each brought a different vantage point on the same structural reality.

Table 3. Overview of Interview Participants

NO.	Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Duration
1	Morris	Male	66	47 minutes
2	Tonye	Male	42	47 minutes
3	Ebi	Female	41	30 minutes
4	Pere	Male	48	45 minutes
5	Preye	Male	47	30 minutes
6	Ebiwari	Male	32	50 minutes
7	Ebiye	Male	31	43 minutes
8	Dise	Male	62	35 minutes

Morris

Morris is the Executive Director of a newly registered environmental NGO co-founded with Tonye in 2024, following a collective resignation of approximately eleven staff members from Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria, where both men had worked for approximately eighteen years. The resignation was carried out en masse and included their executive director. Morris describes the new organization as a continuation of ERA/FoEN's mission rather than a departure from it. He and his colleagues are, in his words, "bringing the experience of that institution forward on the same path". Alongside the NGO directorship, Morris also serves as Technical Assistant to the government on environmental matters, a role that gives him a professional vantage point spanning both civil society advocacy and state environmental governance.

Morris was my first formal interview upon my arrival in the Niger Delta region. The interview was held at the EDEN office located in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State. He came to the conversation with a specific personal history on the question of women's environmental leadership that predates his career at ERA/FoEN. As he recounted in our interview, more than fifteen years earlier he had published a newspaper article arguing that women in Niger Delta oil-producing communities should be given formal chieftaincy recognition. By his account, the article drew a published challenge, which he answered over four consecutive days in the same newspaper, drawing on historical and scriptural examples of women in leadership. The article itself could not be retrieved for citation, but the episode matters less as a documentary source than as evidence of how long he has held and publicly defended this position. His eighteen years at ERA/FoEN gave him something a firsthand record of oil pollution impacts in communities including Ikarama, where, across the four to five hundred field reports ERA/FoEN produced during his tenure, he and his colleagues maintained a standing practice

of refusing to begin any community documentation session unless women were present. He said “If women had not gathered, they stopped and asked the community to bring them into their meetings”

Our conversation established many of the analytical threads I would follow throughout this research. Morris had spent years witnessing the gap between women’s frontline exposure to environmental harm and their near-total absence from governance structures. He was precise about this, noting that women suffer not only economic and social burdens from pollution but severe health consequences, including cancer deaths in Ikarama that he recounted from his direct field experience in the community. He called for policy interventions to expand women’s leadership in environmental governance, and he identified culturally embedded norms and structural barriers as the reason that leadership remains so rare. The interview with Morris also included Tonye, the Program Manager and co-founder of the same organization, whose contributions are cited below.

Tonye

Tonye is the Program Manager of the same newly established NGO and was present throughout the interview with Morris, contributing substantively to the conversation. Like Morris, he spent approximately eighteen years with Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria before resigning en masse with ten other colleagues in April 2024. Tonye offered two contributions that are particularly significant for this research. First, he confirmed from direct experience that, across the four to five hundred field reports ERA/FoEN produced during his time, not one was published without female representation: “I don’t think there is anyone without a female representation inside.” In other words, on every field visit the team spoke with women, recorded their testimony, and verified it before the report was published. This confirms that the ERA/FoEN field reports used as secondary evidence throughout this

thesis were collected using an approach that actively insisted on women's voices in community documentation sessions. Second, Tonye observed that in the human right's legal community, women are more represented than in environmental law, pointing to a structural gap in specialized advocacy for women in oil-affected communities. The gap matters practically, a woman farmer seeking compensation for her destroyed harvest needs counsel who understands both the gendered realities of her position that she farms land titled to a male relative, that community structures will not represent her, and the technical terrain of Nigerian oil and gas law, Joint Investigation Visits (JIV) procedure, and corporate liability. Lawyers with the first kind of knowledge cluster in gender-based violence practice; lawyers with the second are overwhelmingly men serving corporate or community-elite clients. Almost no one practices at the intersection where women in oil-affected communities actually need representation.

Ebi

Ebi is the founder of Youth for Environmental Sustainability and Development (YESD) and a former project officer at Environmental Rights Action and coordinator of Young Friends of the Earth Nigeria. She describes herself as an environmentalist by profession. I interviewed her via Zoom call, where she began by recalling her early career at Environmental Rights Action (ERA), arriving in host communities where fishing and farming had once thrived and finding them transformed by oil: "I witnessed the chaotic impact of oil spills on host communities whose natural environment once thrived with fishing and farming." Inspired by pioneer activists including Ken Saro-Wiwa and Nnimmo Bassey, she went on to found Youth for Environmental Sustainability and Development (YESD), dedicated to environmental justice from a human rights perspective. During the interview, she also described her experience in the aftermath of the 2023 oil spill of how women in Bodo

had not only organized peaceful demonstrations in response to the spill, but they had also played a central role in restoring peace between rival community groups, the Deebam, Deewell, and Greenlanders, whose tensions had been inflamed by the crisis. Her journey from NGO fieldworker to organization founder is a story of building the institutional infrastructure, meaning the organizations, funding channels, training pipelines, and advocacy networks through which individual concern gets converted into sustained collective action, that she wished had existed when she started out.

Pere

Pere works in pipeline security in Ikarama as a private security officer employed directly by Renaissance Africa Energy Company, not as a member of any government force. Renaissance is the consortium of four Nigerian independent oil companies, ND Western, Aradel Holdings, First Exploration and Petroleum Development Company, and the Waltersmith Group, together with the international energy firm Petrolin, that acquired the Shell Petroleum Development Company's entire onshore business in a deal completed in 2024, renaming it Renaissance Africa Energy Company and ending Shell's near century of onshore operation in Nigeria. The interview took place at the Okordia Manifold, the fenced pipeline junction facility outside Ikarama where several flowlines converge before crude is pumped onward, a compound of valves, pipes, and a small operation post rather than an office building. The site was filled with armed personnel drawn from the Nigerian Army and the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, government forces deployed by the state to guard oil infrastructure, who work alongside company security staff like Pere. Pere is not from Ikarama, he is from Amashuma in the Biase area and has been deployed across multiple locations since he started working in this field in 2021, including a previous posting at Ahoada in Rivers State, an area of intense illegal oil bunkering where armed groups from

surrounding communities tap pipelines to steal crude, which is then refined in makeshift bush refineries or sold into a black market that moves stolen oil by barge and tanker, which he described as a near war-zone where armed oil thieves regularly fired on his team. He holds a master's degree and was one of the calmer participants in this research, describing his work with the matter-of-fact precision of someone for whom extreme situations have become routine.

He was the only participant in this research who gave me a direct window into the operational side of oil infrastructure governance. He manages two pipelines: a 14-inch crude oil pipeline and a 12-inch gas pipeline. He patrols to check for leaks, third-party interference, such as illegal tapping connections, and activity at known points of interest where oil thieves have previously planted extraction lines. When a spill is detected, he works with the Nigerian Army and Civil Defence Corps, and when the spill triggers a Joint Investigation Visit (JIV), the following parties are convened: National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA), the police Criminal Investigation Department (CID), a family representative from the community that holds customary land rights over that pipeline stretch, the Department of Petroleum and Allied Resources Utilization (DPARU), formerly the Department of Petroleum Resources (DPR), and Health, Safety, and Community (HSC) representatives. One detail he explained that is absent from most formal accounts of this process is that when a Joint Investigation Visit (JIV) determines that a spill was caused by illegal tapping, they cannot formally name responsible individuals without court-standard proof, so the language used in investigation reports is "people of interest" rather than named perpetrators. This classification distinction has direct consequences for whether the company is required to remediate the spill.

When I asked about women's presence in these processes, his answer was more nuanced than expected. The regulatory agencies themselves often send women: the National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) officials who attend Joint Investigation Visits (JIVs) are, in his words, "in most times female," and the same is true of Department of Petroleum and Allied Resources Utilization (DPARU) representatives. The Health, Safety, and Community (HSC) has many women in its department. What women are absent from is the community representative side of the Joint Investigation Visit (JIV), where land and compensation are negotiated, and from the field security side entirely. He gave three reasons for women's absence in field security roles which are the physical danger of confronting armed oil thieves, which he described from firsthand experience of being shot at; community cultural attitudes where men dominate and push women to the margins of public processes; and a third reason he offered - unprompted and with some candor – was- financial exclusion. "For the fear of maybe the kind of money they want to share," -he said, "-they don't want the women to know." - Men keep women out of these processes partly to keep them ignorant of the compensation money that flows through them. He also noted that the head of Civil Defence at a nearby location had recently been a woman before her transfer, evidence in his view that women can hold senior roles when given the opportunity. His conclusion was that the barrier is cultural and institutional, not one of capacity: "it's just a matter of mindset."

Preye

Preye is the CDC Chairman of one of the case study communities. The conversation with him was one of the most clarifying interviews of the fieldwork, not because he offered anything surprising but because he articulated with complete honesty the cultural logic that keeps women out of community leadership. He spoke with genuine concern about the environmental impact of the oil spill his community had experienced, the loss of yam and

cassava crops, and the decline in fish in the rivers. Then I asked why women had not held positions like his, which would have given them direct influence over the community's response. His answer did not dodge the question, he plainly said that cultural and traditional barriers prevent women from assuming such roles, even though women are directly and severely affected. Women have observations and ideas about the impacts of spills on crops, fisheries, and livelihoods, but those observations are rarely gathered or passed on to decision-makers.

Ebiwari

Ebiwari is an energy and oil and gas lawyer. This interview was held via zoom and his account gave the research its sharpest lens on the gap between formal legal neutrality and what affected women actually experience when they try to use the law. He was clear about both sides. No provision of Nigerian law formally prohibits women from initiating environmental litigation: “Nigerian procedural and substantive laws apply equally to all litigants irrespective of gender.” But the formal neutrality of the law tells you very little about what happens in practice. Compensation processes are carried out through community leaders and family structures that are predominantly male dominated. Women face high litigation costs, procedural delays, and evidentiary burdens. His conclusion was that “while legal remedies exist in theory, their practical accessibility to women affected by environmental degradation in the Niger Delta remains limited and uneven.” This distinction is central to the argument of this thesis. A law that is formally neutral but practically inaccessible produces the same outcome as a law that discriminates outright, women are shut out. The difference is that formal neutrality makes that outcome much harder to challenge because there is no discriminatory clause to strike down and no statute to amend. What has to change instead is

who controls the community structures, the family negotiations, the compensation committees, through which the law is applied.

Ebiye

Ebiye practices land tenure and environmental law. This interview complemented Ebiwari's by drilling into the specific interaction between the Land Use Act and customary tenure. The Land Use Act, which vests all land in the state, does not explicitly protect women's land interests, and its implementation reproduces existing patriarchal norms. Customary land tenure systems in the Niger Delta typically vest land control in male children. When oil companies or state authorities negotiate compensation for environmental damage, women's direct entitlements are limited to losses tied to personal property, crops or fishing equipment, not to land or community-level reparations. Women are seldom involved in compensation distribution committees or negotiations. Women in these communities depend on the goodwill of the men in their lives, fathers, sons, husbands, to access land and to receive any share of compensation when that land is damaged. A woman whose husband or father is willing to advocate for her may farm securely and see some of the payment; a widow without adult sons, or a woman estranged from her family, may lose both the land and the remedy at once. Rights that arrive only through a male intermediary are not rights in any functional sense; they are favors, revocable at the intermediary’s discretion.

Dise

Dise is an elderly resident of Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, who served as my guide throughout my time in the communities, and his role in this research grew far beyond a single informal interview. He drove me around the communities, especially in Obunagha; he walked me through its waterways, and he dropped me near my lodging each evening. What Dise offered was not a single structured conversation but something closer to a running

commentary on the community delivered over days, the kind of knowledge that only comes from having lived through decades of change in one place. He described the chronic health problems that residents had come to treat as ordinary: respiratory conditions, skin irritation, and eye problems, present so consistently across the community that they had stopped registering as remarkable. He took me to the blocked water canals and lakes that once connected Obunagha to its neighbouring communities, explaining what SPDC's infrastructure had done to routes that families had used for generations, and he was the one who made visible what maps and reports could not: the physical, everyday scale of what fifteen years of blocked access to fishponds and farmland actually looked like on the ground. When I asked about women's absence from CDC leadership, Dise gave the same answer I would hear from every other community leader in this research, tradition, expectation, the long-standing assumption that such matters were for men, but he gave it without defensiveness, simply describing the world as he understood it to work. It was in his company, walking back through the community after he dropped me off, that I saw the image from Obunagha that stayed with me longests: women returning from their farms with firewood balanced on their heads, walking beneath the haze of the flare as though it were simply part of the sky.

The Three Communities During Fieldwork

Chapter III already described these three communities using the documentary record, published reports, and field documentation, which establish the scale and history of their pollution. What follows is different. It is what I found on the ground upon my arrival.

Bayelsa State, home to Ikarama and Obunagha, has an estimated population of about 2.9 million and recorded the second-highest poverty rate in Nigeria in the National Bureau of Statistics' 2022 survey: 88.5 percent of residents are multidimensionally poor, and child poverty exceeds 95 percent, despite the state receiving substantial oil-derivation revenue

(NBS, 2022). Rivers State, home to Bodo, is far more populous, with an estimated 4.4 million people living in poverty out of roughly 7 million residents, concentrated in rural and riverine LGAs like Gokana where Bodo sits (NBS, 2022). In both states, households in oil-producing rural communities depend overwhelmingly on farming and fishing, precisely the livelihoods that pollution destroys, and access to piped water, healthcare, and formal employment is minimal. These indicators matter for this thesis because they mean that the women whose experiences follow are absorbing environmental harm from a baseline of deep economic precarity, with little institutional cushion of any kind.

Ikarama

Ikarama is a farming community in the Okordia Clan of Yenagoa Local Government Area, Bayelsa State. The clan is the central unit of traditional governance in this part of Ijaw territory: a cluster of communities sharing a common ancestry, a paramount ruler, and customary land authority. Belonging to the Okordia Clan means that Ikarama's land matters, chieftaincy questions, and dealings with oil companies are mediated through clan structures as much as through the formal local government, a point that matters later in this chapter, because oil infrastructure in Ikarama is officially named after the clan rather than the community, and because clan-level governance is one of the male-dominated structures through which women's access to land and compensation is filtered. The Okordia-Rumuekpe Trunk Line runs through it, a trunk line being the major high-capacity artery of an oil transport network: while small flowlines carry crude from individual wellheads to gathering points like the Okordia Manifold, the trunk line receives the combined output of many wells and carries it at high volume across long distances and many communities toward the export terminals. This one, built by Shell and now operated by Renaissance Africa Energy Company, runs from the Okordia area of Bayelsa State to Rumuekpe in Rivers State, where it feeds the

wider pipeline network toward the Bonny Export Terminal. Communities like Ikarama that sit directly on a trunk line occupy a particular position in the extraction geography: enormous wealth passes through their farmland and waterways daily, at high pressure and volume, while the community itself holds no oil well, receives none of the revenue, and absorbs the consequences of every rupture and every illegal tap. A trunk line failure spills the combined flow of many wells at once, which is part of why Ikarama's spill record is as severe as it is, and the history of that pipeline's relationship with the land it crosses is visible everywhere.

When I arrived, I could see how dry the land was, and the water they drink is not drawn from their rivers or running taps because of how unhealthy it is, instead; they buy sachet water, also called pure water, from vendors outside the community who supply it to people's shops every now and then. Pure water is the major source of drinking water and is possibly used for cooking by some people who can afford it. As inflation in the economy rises, a bag of pure water, which contains twenty sachets, costs five hundred naira (N500), approximately thirty-six cents USD.

The next day, I set out hoping to speak to the community development chairman (CDC), but he was unavailable for three days, so I walked around the community with the hope of asking questions to the community members about the oil pollution in the community, but was told to wait for the chairman, and he would be the one to respond to my questions. So, I waited, and on the fourth day, he was available. The chairman took me around the community and pointed out farmlands that had not recovered from the 2022 spill and how it has made it impossible to grow crops like cassava and yam. We also walked to the river, which had a sheen nobody talked about because it had been there long enough to become part of the landscape.

The community saw more than twenty major oil spill incidents between 2007 and 2023. That number stops being a statistic when you are standing on land where people show you crop losses and contaminated soil with the matter-of-fact calm of people who have stopped expecting the situation to surprise anyone. While speaking with him, I observed women coming from their farms in the bushes with firewood on their heads alongside their kids. I was not surprised, as it is common practice of most families that the woman's job is domestic and going to the farm is part of it, and yet, they are absent from the formal decision-making process of their community.

Figure 8. Pipelines at the Okordia Manifold



Figure 9. Tari Azebi at the entrance of the Okordia Manifold



Obunagha

Obunagha is a fishing and farming community in the Gbarain Clan of Yenagoa Local Government Area, Bayelsa State. The Gbarain-Ubie Integrated Oil and Gas Processing Plant sits in the community, and the relationship between the community and that plant is the first thing you feel when you arrive. You smell it before you see it properly. The flare stacks tower above the village and burn continuously, twenty-four hours a day, releasing thick fumes that rise into the sky and fall back down onto everything below. The rooftops are the clearest evidence as many of the zinc sheets are coated in a thick black soot that has been building since 2007 when the plant began full operations. It is the same on the leaves of plants and on any surface that stays still long enough.

The water situation in Obunagha, like in Ikarama, is one of total dependence on purchased sachets. The community has no public water supply. The river water from Taylor Creek, which runs through the Gbarain communities, is too polluted to drink. Rainwater, the

traditional alternative, is no longer trusted because of what falls from the flare into it. Those who have the means dig boreholes, but even that water is only considered safe for bathing and cooking and not for drinking. So the community members in Obunagha buy the same sachet water as the community members in Ikarama, the same N500 bag of twenty sachets, the same thirty-six cents USD, the same recurring daily expense on top of every other cost that pollution has added to their lives.

I arrived in Obunagha and was introduced to the community through contacts from the Environmental Defenders Network (EDEN). On my first day, I walked through the community trying to get a sense of the place before seeking out the CDC Chairman of Obunagha. I observed how the community members are so used to the polluted air that it no longer bothers them. The elderly man (Dise) who drove me around town commented on how members of the community over the years have experienced chronic health problems such as respiratory conditions, skin irritation, and eye problems. Women with young children see these symptoms as background facts of life, managed rather than solved, because neither the company nor the government had addressed them. Shell operated the plant until January 2024, when Renaissance Africa Energy Company assumed operations. At the time of my fieldwork, the transition was ongoing, and there was uncertainty about what, if anything, would change under the new operator.

I was unable to see the CDC Chairman of Obunagha due to his unavailability, so I did my research online and found interviews in which he had spoken publicly about the community's situation during the 2021 community protest, when residents blockaded the Gbarain-Ubie plant over years of unaddressed gas flaring, the absence of potable water, worsening erosion, and the lack of host-community benefits (Vanguard, 2021) when community members shut down the gas plant base by blocking the access road and refusing

to move despite armed soldiers being deployed. What he said publicly was “We frown at the current situation whereby Obunagha, as host community, will bear the adverse impacts of operations of the oil company with little or no benefit. Our community is facing devastating erosion menace as could be seen along our waterfront, and we also lack potable water supply. Imagine the harsh effect of the gas flaring we are subjected to daily” (Vanguard, 2021). I was taken around the community by the same elderly man, Dise, who showed me what the plant’s construction had done to the waterways. Since 2006, SPDC’s infrastructure works had blocked the natural water canals and lakes that connected Obunagha and its neighbouring communities to their fishponds and farmlands. Community representatives had written letters and attended meetings for years. It took until 2021, some fifteen years after the canals were first blocked, for the Bayelsa State Governor to intervene at a stakeholder meeting and describe Shell’s explanations as “unacceptable.” The delay itself tells a story: Obunagha is a small community without the political weight of an urban constituency, the blocked canals harmed livelihoods rather than producing the kind of visible catastrophe that forces official attention, and the state government has long depended on cordial relations with the operators of the Gbarain-Ubie plant, which feeds Nigeria’s domestic gas supply. Community complaints moved slowly up a chain that had little incentive to act on them. By the time the Governor spoke, the blockage had been in place for fifteen years (BayelsaWatch, 2021). The fishponds were still out of use. Pond fishing had been one of the few livelihood activities in Obunagha that women could run close to home, compatible with childcare and farming, with harvests sold in local markets for steady small income. When the blocked canals cut the ponds off from the creek system that refreshed them, that entire income stream ended. The fish ponds were still out of use. The women who relied on those ponds had long since had to find other ways to supplement household income, like petty trading in the market at Yenagoa, small-scale cassava processing (results in what is called garri), and in some cases taking on

debt to cover the gap. None of these alternatives replaced what the ponds had provided. Petty trading required capital many households did not have, cassava processing was labor-intensive and low-margin, and debt; what several women told community leaders simply deferred the hardship rather than resolving it. Fifteen years after the canals were first blocked, the loss of the fishponds remained, for the women of Obunagha, an unresolved and compounding wound; not a single event but a standing absence that reshaped what was economically possible for them, year after year.

In Obunagha, independent academic research on the flare's impact on soil, conducted by university-based researchers rather than by the operating company, sampled soils beginning at 200 metres from the flare point, which is the shortest distance at which samples could be collected from active farmland. That is how close the flaring infrastructure is to where people grow food. A study of soil samples taken at that distance found acidic conditions, heavy metal contamination including chromium, cadmium, and nickel, and conductivity values indicating severely disrupted soil chemistry (Silver, 2019). A woman farmer whose account was documented by field journalists described the practical result of this in terms no scientific paper can fully convey: "When the companies started exploration in our community, farm products, like cassava, did not grow well; within two months, rain would fall, and all our crops would die. I usually harvest more than ten bags, but now I only get two bags" (Ogunyale, 2025). She was also taking her children to a clinic almost every month.

Another resident told the same journalists that the noise and vibration from the plant caused walls to crack, and that houses near the facility simply did not last long after construction (Ogunyale, 2025). Walking near the plant perimeter, I could see what he meant.

The structures closest to the facility showed the fear of living adjacent to continuous industrial noise and heat.

Dise described to me the same cultural logic that kept women out of CDC leadership in Obunagha as it did in the other communities: tradition, expectation, the long-standing assumption that these matters were for men. What made it more stark in Obunagha than anywhere else I visited was that the women being kept out of that conversation were the same women breathing the flare's output, farming the soil 200 metres from the stacks, and buying pure water to prepare meals for their homes because the river was no longer safe. As Dise dropped me off close to my lodging and I walked through the community, I saw a group of women returning from their farms with firewood balanced on their heads, moving past the haze of the flare as if it were simply part of the sky. It is striking to consider what that image contains, these women are tasked with the gendered labor of collecting firewood, daily, so that their families have fuel for cooking, and they carry it home breathing the pollution of flares that represent the gas, oil, and plastics of modern appliances and development, an energy economy whose benefits flow elsewhere while its fumes settle here.

Figure 10. Gas flaring at Obunagha community: Long range



Figure 11. Gas flaring at Obunagha community: Close range



Bodo

Bodo is a town of around 69,000 people at the southernmost tip of the Gokana Kingdom in Ogoniland, Rivers State. Most people who live there, fish and farm as a source of their livelihood. The road to Bodo passes through the scrubland and creek-side terrain of Gokana before opening onto a community that clearly orients itself toward water. Bodo Creek wraps around the town, its mangrove forests running along the waterways in the low, tangled

formation that makes this part of Ogoniland look like a place where land and river are still negotiating who owns what. Before 2008, these mangroves were one of the most productive fishing ecosystems in the region. Periwinkles, small edible sea snails that live in the mangrove mud and are gathered by hand at low tide, are a staple protein and a mainstay of women's income across the Niger Delta, because harvesting them requires no boat and no capital, only labor and access to the mudflats. The periwinkles traded in the major Ogoni markets at Bori and Onne came largely from Bodo Creek (Pegg and Zabbey, 2013). Women gathered them at low tide, waded into the creeks, and brought them back to sell. That was how households ran.

I arrived in Bodo knowing most of what I would see before I saw it because Ebi, the YESD founder profiled earlier in this chapter, had already told me at length during her interview. She had described Bodo the way you describe a place you have watched closely for a long time and never stopped being angry about. She had worked with ERA/FoEN in communities across the Niger Delta early in her career and had seen what the 2008 and 2009 spills did to Bodo's waterways and to the livelihoods built around them. More than 560,000 barrels of crude oil had entered the creek in two separate pipeline ruptures. The mangrove forests were devastated. The fish were gone. Women who had spent their lives gathering periwinkles and catching fish found themselves without an income or a livelihood almost overnight. Ebi had watched the community fight for seven years for a compensation settlement with Shell, finally reaching a £55 million agreement in 2015, and she had watched the 2023 spill on the Trans-Niger pipeline reopen everything that settlement had only partly closed, the unremediated contamination, the un-restored livelihoods, and the community's unresolved question of whether legal victory would ever translate into a clean creek.

So, I went to Bodo to see it rather than to conduct formal interviews. I did not speak with residents in a structured way on this visit. I walked through the town, looked at the creek, and tried to match what I was seeing with what Ebi had described. What strikes you first, if you are expecting a fishing town, is how quiet the water is. Bodo Creek should be busy with boats and nets and women wading at the edges. Instead, it sits there, visually calm in a way that feels wrong, because you know what that calmness costs. The remediation process that followed the 2015 settlement was partial; the £55 million payment compensated individual losses and funded some community projects, but the physical cleanup of the creek and mangroves proceeded slowly, covered only portions of the contaminated area, and left sediment and root-zone oil largely in place, so the ecosystem the livelihoods depended on was never actually restored. The 2023 spill in the Sugi area of the community compounded the remaining contamination. The fish had not returned in the way anyone had hoped.

Walking through the community, I noticed what Ebi had told me to expect, particularly women carrying on the work that remained to them. Cassava farming, which does not depend on the creek the way fishing does, has become one of the main alternatives. They also raise goats, another livelihood strategy that did not require the water to be clean. These are the adaptations of a community that has been waiting for proper remediation for over fifteen years and has learned not to wait passively. Ebi described to me how the women in Bodo had organized demonstrations after the 2023 spill and demanded accountability. And, as Ebi described it, they had done something else that mattered enormously: in a community where the Deebam and Deewell rival cult groups had a long history of violent competition for territorial control, the women had helped broker peace. Bodo had been seriously plagued by conflicts between these groups for years, conflicts driven in part by political manipulation and in part by the frustrations of a community whose resources had been taken and whose young men had few legitimate options (Nyiayaana, 2011). In the

aftermath of the 2023 spill, when the anger in the community was at its highest, women's organized presence had been a stabilizing force, one that pulled the Deebam, Deewell, and Greenlanders back from confrontation. Ebi spoke about this with a particular kind of pride, because it illustrated something she had spent her career arguing: that women's environmental activism was also social activism, and that the two could not be separated.

The context of that peace matters and deserves its own explanation. Deebam, Deewell, and the Greenlanders are armed confraternities, locally called cult groups, that emerged across Ogoniland and the wider Rivers State in the 1990s and 2000s, competing violently for territory, political patronage, and control of the informal economy, including proceeds connected to oil bunkering (Nyiayaana, 2011). In Bodo, the collapse of fishing livelihoods after the 2008 and 2009 spills pushed unemployed young men toward these groups and sharpened the competition between them; the environmental crisis and the security crisis fed each other. What the women of Bodo did in response worked on both fronts at once. They organized protests around the spills and the stalled cleanup, and at the same time they used their standing as mothers, traders, and church women, positions with moral authority that cut across the cult-group divide, to convene dialogue, calm reprisals, and bring the Deebam, Deewell, and Greenlanders factions back into talks. Their organized, peaceful, and public presence made de-escalation possible in a way that armed intervention had not.

This point deserves elaboration because it is one of the analytical centers of this thesis. In Ebi’s account, the distinction between environmental issues and social issues is an artifact of how outsiders categorize problems, not how communities live them. When the creek dies, livelihoods die; when livelihoods die, young men join armed groups and households fall into crisis; when violence rises, it is women who bury sons, absorb the

economic shock, and hold households together. So, when Bodo's women organized around the spills, they were necessarily also organizing around hunger, insecurity, and peace, because those are the forms environmental harm takes in a fishing town. Ebi's pride in the peacebuilding work reflected her career-long argument that any environmental movement that does not do social repair is not addressing the actual damage, and any peace effort that ignores the dead creek is treating a symptom. Women's environmental leadership in Bodo was effective precisely because it refused that separation.

I left Bodo thinking about something else Ebi had said in the interview. She described the late Miss Popbia Lezor, the women's leader from Bodo's Saabiligbo community whose advocacy had brought attention to the plight of women and children after the spills. Popbia had since died, but the tradition of women stepping forward in Bodo when the community needed someone to hold things together was clearly not. Walking past the farms at the edge of town, I could see women moving between the cassava plots in the afternoon, working the farms because the creek was still not safe, doing what they had always done, and still being counted out of the meetings where the future of that land and that creek would be decided.

Figure 12. Ogoni woman strained by massive oil pollution from Shell, which has negatively impacted their lives and food supplies.



Women's Lived Experience of Environmental Harm

Women's lived experiences in the Niger Delta are central to understanding environmental justice. As primary caregivers, farmers, and resource managers, women are disproportionately affected by oil pollution, loss of livelihood, and health hazards, meaning they absorb more of the harm, for longer, and with fewer resources to escape or offset it, because their daily work places them in direct and continuous contact with the contaminated land and water. The evidence from all three communities tells the same structural story from three different settings.

In Ikarama, repeated oil spills have left farmland uncultivable and water sources contaminated, forcing women to travel long distances to collect water and food. This has a direct impact on their labor; they absorb the pollution's consequences through their own time, labor, and energy, and every hour spent walking to fetch clean water is an hour taken from farming, trading, rest, childcare, and every other aspect of life. Women described fetching

water from rivers they knew were polluted because no cleaner source existed. They farmed land still visibly affected by crude oil, watching their cassava and plantain yields decline each season, and they prepared food from that harvest because there was no alternative. The consequences fell directly on household food security, child health, and the women's own economic stability.

In Obunagha, gas flaring has led to widespread respiratory problems and crop failures. Women with young children described chronic coughs, eye irritation, and skin conditions as background facts of life, managed rather than treated, because neither the company nor the state had taken responsibility for them. The health consequences of gas flaring, which has been illegal in Nigeria since 1984 yet continues unabated, fall disproportionately on those who spend the most time in proximity to it, typically women managing their households and children in homes and school near the flare.

In Bodo, the destruction of fishing grounds and mangrove forests following the 2008 and 2009 pipeline ruptures stripped women of livelihoods built over generations. Women who had depended on fishing and the gathering of periwinkles lost those sources of income almost overnight. The partial remediation that followed the 2015 settlement had not restored what was lost, and the 2023 spill reopened those wounds.

Morris, in his interview, named what all of this amounts to at the systemic level. Women in farming, fishing, and caregiving roles "suffer not only economic and social burdens but also severe health consequences, including increased risks of diseases such as cancer, due to environmental exposure." He was explicit that these are not accidental patterns but the direct result of women's gendered roles placing them in disproportionate contact with the most contaminated aspects of the environment.

Ebi added the temporal dimension. When she described arriving as a young NGO fieldworker in communities where fishing and farming had once thrived, and finding them transformed by decades of oil extraction, she was describing what women across the Niger Delta have experienced incrementally over their lifetimes, the slow disappearance of a way of life, not in a single catastrophic event but through the accumulation of spills, flares, contamination events, and failed remediations over decades of extraction and environmental pollution. That accumulation is the lived reality behind the statistics.

Morris provided some of the most specific and direct testimony in this research about the physical toll of oil pollution on women in Ikarama. In the three to four years before I interviewed him, he documented three women in the community who died of cancer. None was above 50 years old as the youngest was 23 or 24 years old and the oldest was approximately 47. Each had a different cancer: one a water or liver-related malignancy, one Graves disease (a thyroid condition that can be triggered by environmental toxins), and one another form he did not specify. He said plainly: “They are all women.” These are not statistical abstractions from a distant report. They are specific people Morris knew, whose deaths he documented in the same community where he has worked for nearly two decades and where ERA/FoEN’s field reports have consistently found crude oil contamination in soil and water since 2007.

He also described an account he received directly during an Amnesty International field visit to Ikarama in 2009. A woman whose home was adjacent to a spill site told him that every morning when the sun rose and heated the crude oil, the fumes would rise and become dangerous. She and her children would leave at dawn and not return until after five in the evening. She did this for an extended period while waiting for cleanup that did not come. This woman later developed what Morris described as strange ailments that community

elders said they had never seen before. She died. Amnesty International's published briefings on Ikarama from that period confirm that the organization conducted field visits to the community at the time Morris describes. Her case did not appear in those briefings by name, but Morris witnessed it directly.

A third case, described jointly by Morris and Tonye, involved a woman who was walking to her farm carrying a torch or burning material used to start cooking fires or burn cleared grass, a common practice in the communities. There was an oil spill on a nearby pipeline. When she passed close to it with the flame, the spilled oil ignited. She survived, but with injuries that affected her for the rest of her life. This incident captures something the statistical literature on oil spill impacts does not: that the danger of uncontrolled spills is not only chronic and slow-building but can be immediate and explosive, and that the people most likely to encounter these dangers are those whose daily living and work take place on contaminated land.

Figure 13. Taken at EDEN's office (Morris telling the story of each picture on the board).



Women's testimonies across all three communities confirmed what feminist political ecology predicts that because women's daily lives are more directly organized around natural resources than men's, environmental harm hits women first and hardest. The contamination is not gender-neutral in its effects even when it is gender-neutral in its physical reach.

Gendered Activism and Forms of Resistance

Across all three communities, and across the longer history of women's environmental activism in the Niger Delta, women have organized, protested, founded cooperatives, built

institutions, and demanded accountability in ways that have shaped the environmental governance landscape of the region.

The history of this activism stretches back several decades. The Ogharefe women's protest against Pan Ocean in 1984 was one of the earliest large-scale community demonstrations against a multinational oil corporation in the Delta. Forty-seven women in Warri organized and participated in anti-oil company protests in 1984 and 1986, demanding compensation for pollution damage and confiscated land (Turner and Oshare, 1993; Ikelegbe, 2005a). Groups of women besieged Pan Ocean after it refused to pay locals for land it had taken over for oil fields, insisting on compensation that matched the scale of daily crude oil extraction from their territory. In 1999, women blocked SPDC oil stations with men supporting them. In 2002, two to three hundred women from the Ijaw and Itsekiri communities led the most significant protest of all, a ten-day occupation of Chevron's exploration site, using the symbolic threat of undressing as their most powerful negotiating tool. Women from Ilaje, along with others from Ijaw and Itsekiri, simultaneously stopped operations at SPDC's operational headquarters. Their demands were consistent across all of these actions including jobs for their husbands and children, community infrastructure, and basic services including clean water, healthcare, schools, and electricity.

When Chevron made verbal promises and then broke them, more than 600 women returned to the oil rigs in 2003 and took nearly 700 oil workers captive. The scale of that action, and the clarity of its demands, reflected how much women had been pushed before they pushed back with that kind of force (Ikelegbe, 2005b).

In more recent years, this tradition of protest has combined with more sustained organizational work. In Bodo in 2015, women and community members wore sack clothes and carried their fishing gear to the site of the oil company offices, creating a visual argument

about their economic losses that drew national and international attention and contributed to the landmark compensation settlement with Shell that year. As Ebi described it, “women-led campaigns and organizations have played a crucial role in raising awareness about the scars of environmental degradation.”

Ebi still talked about, Popbia Lezor, a leading voice for women in Bodo’s Saabiligbo community, whose committed activism amplified the plight of women and children affected by oil spills and demonstrated how grassroots women leaders can drive change. Popbia’s work, and the broader tradition she represented, is what Ebi means when she says: “As women, we are the backbone of our communities. Our contribution includes food security, economic stability, and family wellbeing through farming, fishing, trading, and caregiving. Our voices are crucial in the general advocacy and sustainability efforts.”

In Ikarama, women blocked access roads after the 2022 major spill, successfully drawing media attention and prompting state environmental agencies to visit. In Obunagha, women have led campaigns against gas flaring, collecting health data and submitting petitions to local authorities. These are not one-off protests. They are part of a continuous pattern of women using the channels available to them, direct action, advocacy, and alliance-building, when formal governance channels remain closed.

What distinguishes women's activism from men's in the Niger Delta is not only tactical but motivational. Women tend to center family well-being, intergenerational impacts, and the long-term consequences of environmental decisions rather than short-term economic transactions. In Bodo City, women were more likely to work collectively and pursue peaceful resolution alongside their demands for accountability, which is why their inclusion in the 2023 post-spill response contributed not only to environmental advocacy but also to restoring peace between community factions. Community sources from Bodo emphasized that

women's organized, peaceful presence made it possible to bring the Deebam, Deewell, and Greenlanders groups back to dialogue. Women's environmental leadership, in other words, is also social leadership (Braun 2005). This gendered motivational pattern is not unique to the Niger Delta. Bell and Braun's (2010) study of environmental justice activism in the Central Appalachian coalfields found the same asymmetry: women drew on their identities as mothers and as members of place-based communities to justify and sustain their activism, while the hegemonic masculinity tied to the coal industry actively discouraged men's involvement in the same struggles. Comparing the two cases suggests that women's disproportionate leadership in extractive-frontier environmental justice movements is not incidental or culturally specific to the Niger Delta, but reflects a broader pattern in which resource-extractive economies construct masculinity around the industry itself, leaving women, whose identities are constructed instead around caregiving and community survival, as the more available and more motivated base for grassroots organizing.

Structural and Legal Barriers to Participation and Compensation

Despite their activism, women face persistent and compounding barriers that limit their influence on the environmental governance decisions that most directly affect them. These barriers operate at three levels: community governance, regulatory process, and legal compensation frameworks. The interviews documented all three levels with consistent specificity.

At the community level, the CDC structure that Preye chairs is the clearest example. It is the governance mechanism through which communities interact with oil companies, government agencies, and compensation processes. Women do not hold leadership positions in it. Their knowledge of environmental impacts- which farmland was damaged, which water sources were contaminated, which household losses were caused by a given spill- is not

systematically gathered or transmitted to the people making decisions. As Preye acknowledged directly, cultural and traditional barriers prevent women from assuming leadership roles regardless of the severity of their exposure to harm. Women are often not invited to community meetings with oil companies or government representatives, and when they are present, their concerns are treated as secondary.

At the regulatory level, Pere's account of the pipeline security and JIV process illuminates another institutional exclusion point. The joint investigation visit, the first formal documentation of what a spill has done and why it happened, takes place in a context from which women are entirely absent. This is not merely symbolic. The JIV produces the evidence record on which compensation claims and corporate liability determinations are built. Women's knowledge of which farm plots were affected, which fishing grounds were contaminated, and what the livelihood impacts were is precisely the knowledge that would make JIVs more accurate and more just. Its absence means that the harms women suffer are systematically under-documented at the moment those harms enter the official record.

There is also a longer-term dynamic in communities like those where this research was conducted. In most communities, women are not considered appropriate participants in matters of environmental governance and oil company liaison. As Preye explained, there is a long-term tradition of only men being in leadership positions. Women are expected to manage the household, go to the farm, and stay out of the formal decision-making processes. Those processes are the very ones that determine whether and how the damage to their farms and their water sources gets addressed.

Morris also described the informal, interpersonal mechanisms through which women who do speak in governance settings are gradually discouraged from continuing. This operates alongside, and is often more effective than any formal exclusion rule. He described a

pattern he has observed in community and organizational meetings, a woman who speaks consistently, who gets up in every meeting and voices her view, is quietly monitored by certain men. After the first, second, and third time, those men begin talking about her: “She don’t come and kill you,” in the sense that her voice is being characterized as dangerous or excessive. The result is not a formal prohibition, but a social cost attached to continued participation, one that accumulates over time and that is invisible to any formal legal or governance analysis. Morris’s observation complements Preye’s account of formal cultural barriers with a mechanism of informal exclusion that operates inside meetings themselves, after women have already found their way into the room.

Legal Barriers and the Gendered Administration of Compensation

To complement the community testimonies, this research drew on expert legal analysis from Ebiwari and Ebiye, two practitioners working at the intersection of Nigerian oil and gas law and environmental governance. Their accounts provided the most precise account available in this research of how formal legal neutrality coexists with structural gendered exclusion.

Ebiwari confirmed that while no provision of Nigerian law formally prohibits women from initiating environmental litigation, the barriers women encounter are structural and emerge principally at the post-litigation and compensation stages. As he stated:

> There is no formal legal prohibition under Nigerian law preventing women from initiating or participating in environmental litigation arising from oil spills and pollution in the Niger Delta. Nigerian procedural and substantive laws apply equally to all litigants irrespective of gender.

Yet the formal neutrality of the law conceals profound practical inequities. Compensation processes are, in his words, "often carried out through community leaders or families that are predominantly male-dominated," creating a governance structure that "frequently marginalizes women in decision-making and benefit sharing, even where they are directly affected by environmental harm." Women face compounding practical barriers, including "limited access to legal representation because of high litigation costs, procedural delays, and evidentiary burdens." As Ebiwari concluded:

> While legal remedies exist in theory, their practical accessibility to women affected by environmental degradation in the Niger Delta remains limited and uneven.

On the question of land tenure, Ebiye confirmed that the interaction between statutory and customary law creates compound disadvantages for women seeking environmental redress. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the Land Use Act vests land ownership in the state; Ebiye's contribution was to specify its gendered operation: "it does not explicitly protect or advance women's land interests and its implementation often reproduces existing patriarchal norms." Customary land tenure systems in the Niger Delta 'typically vest control over land in the first male child, especially the male children,' meaning that when oil companies or state authorities negotiate compensation for environmental damage, women's direct entitlements are frequently limited to "losses tied to personal property (e.g., crops or fishing equipment), not to land or community-level reparations." They are "seldom involved in compensation distribution committees or negotiations." The practical meaning of this is that women in these communities depend on the goodwill of the men in their lives, fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, to access land and to receive any share of compensation when that land is damaged. A woman whose husband is generous may farm securely and see some of

the payment; a widow without adult sons, or a woman estranged from her family, may lose both the land and the remedy at once.

Ebiwari's analysis further illuminated the intersectional dimension of these barriers. Women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or minority ethnic communities face 'compounded disadvantages, including limited education, weak political representation, and social exclusion from decision-making,' which reduce their capacity to engage with legal institutions. The most marginalized women, those from rural and impoverished communities in areas like Ikarama and Bodo, are precisely the ones who both bear the heaviest burden of environmental harm and face the greatest structural obstacles to redress. Even where communities have achieved legal victories, such as the landmark Shell Bodo settlement following the 2008 and 2009 pipeline ruptures, the resulting compensation has frequently been distributed through male-dominated family and community structures that do not prioritize women's specific economic losses or health impacts. This exemplifies what Crenshaw (1991) terms the 'intersectional invisibility' of women within communities that are themselves marginalized: their needs are doubly erased, first by the state and corporations that deny environmental liability, and second by community-level governance structures that reproduce gender hierarchies even in the administration of justice.

The interviews also produced actionable observations about what could change. Pere noted that developing targeted training, improving safety measures, and creating pathways for women to participate safely in security and investigative roles would be a meaningful start. Preye suggested two immediate steps: collecting women's observations and ideas about environmental impacts and ensuring they reach decision-makers, and exploring options for women to run for leadership positions like CDC chairman so that affected women can

contribute directly to environmental solutions. These are modest proposals by any measure, but they point toward the structural change the evidence demands.

When I asked why female lawyers are not engaging with environmental justice in the Niger Delta, both Morris and Tonye responded candidly. Among all the women environmental advocates in Morris's extensive network, built over nearly two decades of field work, only one is a lawyer. Women's legal organizations in the region are overwhelmingly focused on domestic violence and gender-based violence law, not environmental law. Tonye observed that in the human right's legal community, women are more represented than in environmental advocacy, but the overlap between female lawyers and environmental practice is very thin. The implication for women in oil-affected communities is significant, even if legal remedies are formally available and women are motivated to pursue them, the lawyers most likely to understand both the gendered dimensions of their harm and the technical specifics of Nigerian oil and gas law are overwhelmingly male. This is a structural gap in the advocacy ecosystem that sits upstream of any individual compensation claim.

A Persistent, Under-the-Radar Feminist Environmental Justice Movement: Women as Leaders

The fourth theme is the evidence that something is changing, not because the structures documented above have reformed themselves, but because women have built organizations and movements that are challenging those structures from outside them and beginning to shift them.

Kebetkache Women Development & Resource Centre

Founded in 1999 and headquartered in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Kebetkache Women Development and Resource Centre is one of the most significant women-led civil society organizations in the Niger Delta. Its name, drawn from the Ogoni language, translates to 'Progress through Unity,' a phrase that captures both the organization's philosophy and its method. Led by Executive Director Dr. Emem Okon, Kebetkache is committed to promoting women's rights and environmental justice across the Niger Delta and the broader African region. It bridges grassroots community organizing with national policy advocacy and international coalition-building.

Kebetkache's gender-focused approach distinguishes it from broader environmental organizations. It works specifically to build women's capacity to understand and assert their rights, to participate meaningfully in environmental governance, and to lead their communities' responses to oil pollution. In 2011, it convened a landmark conference on gas flaring, women's rights, and global climate change in Okwuzi community, Rivers State, bringing together women from oil-affected communities to challenge the federal government's failure to enforce the 2005 High Court judgment declaring gas flaring illegal. More recently, Kebetkache partnered with the National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency to equip women farmers with practical skills in hydrocarbon remediation, recognizing that in the absence of timely state or corporate cleanup, communities and women in particular must be equipped to restore their own environments. As Executive Director Dr. Okon stated at a 2025 training in Baraliagbo community, Rivers State: 'We have campaigned against pollution, we have campaigned for ecosystem restoration, and we know women have critical roles to play in protecting the environment and promoting sustainability.'

Kebetkache has also pursued international advocacy. Dr. Okon attended Chevron's annual shareholders' meeting in San Ramon, California, directly confronting the CEO about the contamination of freshwater sources in the Niger Delta on behalf of community women experiencing early menopause, cancer, infertility, and respiratory disease linked to oil pollution. In October 2022, Kebetkache convened the first African Women's Climate Assembly in Port Harcourt, bringing together 150 women from 14 African countries to unify struggles against extractive industries and articulate women-centered development alternatives. This multi-scalar approach, from local protest to international corporate accountability forums, reflects the transnational character that feminist environmental justice activism in the Global South increasingly takes (Sultana 2020; Harcourt and Nelson 2015). Within the Niger Delta, Kebetkache continues to mobilize the annual Niger Delta Women's Day of Action for Environmental Justice, bringing together community women from across the region to demand accountability and inclusion in environmental governance.

On funding, like most Niger Delta environmental NGOs, Kebetkache operates primarily on international grant funding rather than government or corporate support, with backing over the years from funders including the Global Greengrants Fund, Both ENDS, and international climate and women's rights philanthropies; YESD and EDEN similarly depend on international grants and partnership funding. This dependence on external grant cycles is itself a structural vulnerability, one this thesis's recommendations address in calling for sustained institutional support.

Youth for Environmental Sustainability and Development (YESD)

YESD, the organization Ebi founded, represents the generational dimension of this movement. It is a youth network dedicated to actively involving young people in advocacy, activism, and research focused on environmental sustainability, collaborating with local

communities and youth leaders across Nigeria. YESD frames young people not as vulnerable but as vital stakeholders and frontline advocates, aligned with Schlosberg's (2007) recognition dimension of environmental justice. Its motto, 'Sustainable Development via Innovation and Research,' reflects a focus on evidence-based advocacy and long-term systemic change rather than solely reactive protests.

YESD's significance for this thesis stems from its ability to connect the generational and gender dimensions of environmental justice activism in the Niger Delta. Young women in the region inherit an environment more damaged than the one their mothers grew up in, face greater obstacles to economic participation as oil pollution has destroyed farming and fishing livelihoods, and are frequently excluded from governance structures that allocate oil revenues and compensation. YESD's effort to include young women in advocacy and research demonstrates that feminist environmental justice in the Niger Delta must be intergenerational. The future of women's environmental activism depends on building the capacity, voice, and civic confidence of the next generation of advocates, researchers, and community leaders.

Environmental Rights Action (ERA)/Friends of the Earth Nigeria

ERA/FoEN was founded on January 11, 1993, making it one of Nigeria's oldest environmental human rights organizations. It is the Nigerian chapter of Friends of the Earth International, connecting local advocacy to a global network active in over 70 countries. ERA/FoEN's mandate encompasses protection of human rights and the environment, with work spanning climate justice, corporate accountability, food sovereignty, and forest conservation. Its mission, 'protecting the environment, democratizing development,' places institutional access at the heart of environmental protection.

ERA/FoEN's field reporting on Ikarama, beginning in 2007 and continuing to the present, provides some of the most detailed longitudinal evidence of Shell's failure to

remediate oil spill sites. A 2008 field report documented that seven months after the July 2007 blowout at the Okordia Manifold, Shell had carried out only superficial recovery and had not conducted any proper cleanup. Community representative Chief Mission Neberi, who participated in the Joint Investigation Team immediately after the spill, testified that Shell refused to cooperate with the investigation and later attempted to reclassify the equipment failure as sabotage, a common corporate strategy for evading liability since sabotage-attributed spills do not trigger the same cleanup obligations as operational failures. A follow-up ERA/FoEN field visit on May 6, 2022, fifteen years after the original spill, found crude oil still seeping from the ground at the same site. When community youth president Benjamin Warder excavated land to build a fishpond in April 2022, crude oil emerged during excavation. Cassava, sweet potato, and cocoyam were being cultivated on land still contaminated with hydrocarbons, posing grave risks of carcinogen uptake through root crops consumed by residents and sold at local markets.

The gender-specific impacts of this remediation failure are direct. Women, who farm on contaminated land, collect shellfish from polluted waters, fetch water for their families, and prepare food, bear the primary health burdens from more than fifteen years of incomplete cleanup at sites like Ikarama. ERA/FoEN's 2022 report noted the rise of cancer cases, including among young people, in communities near these sites. ERA/FoEN's Executive Director Chima Williams has urged NOSDRA to press Shell into proper remediation of all affected sites in Ikarama; the Bayelsa State government to pursue legal action on the community's behalf; and the federal government to extend UNEP cleanup standards to Ikarama and other polluted communities in Bayelsa.

Tonye also confirmed an ERA/FoEN institutional practice that is directly relevant to how the secondary evidence in this thesis was produced. When ERA/FoEN field teams arrive

in a community to document a spill or conduct research, they look around at whoever has gathered to meet them. If no women are present, they refuse to begin. They ask the community why there are no women and insist that women be brought into the space before any session starts. As Tonye stated: “Out of our five or four hundred reports that we have shown out to the media, I don’t think there is anyone without a female representation inside.” This means the ERA/FoEN field reports cited throughout this thesis, including the Ikarama reports spanning 2007 to 2022, were collected using an approach that actively insisted on women’s voices as a precondition for documentation.

Environmental Defenders Network (EDEN)

The Environmental Defenders Network (EDEN) emerged directly from the same April 2024 departure from ERA/FoEN that Morris describes in his interview. It was founded by Chima Williams, ERA/FoEN’s former executive director and the 2022 Goldman Environmental Prize winner for Africa. EDEN is a non-profit organization focused on environmental defenders’ protection, climate justice, and environmental accountability. It opened its offices in Ikeja, Lagos, on September 2, 2024, with Philip Jakpor, formerly Head of Media and Campaigns at ERA/FoEN and now executive director of the Renevlyn Development Initiative, serving on its board. EDEN also maintains a head office in Benin City, Edo State. Its name carries a deliberate meaning. The network exists specifically to support people who defend the environment and who face real and documented risks for doing so, including killings of environmental defenders in Nigeria amid weak state protection.

The emergence of EDEN and YESD represents a broader generational shift in Niger Delta environmental civil society. The April 2024 departure from ERA/FoEN has produced a cluster of new institutions each pursuing aspects of the same mission under independent

leadership. For this thesis, the significance is twofold. It confirms that the institutional tradition ERA/FoEN built over thirty years, including the fieldwork practices and women-centered documentation standards Tonye describes, is being carried forward rather than abandoned. And it means that the civil society landscape in which women's environmental activism in the Niger Delta is embedded is actively reconfiguring itself at the very moment this research was conducted.

Connecting the Themes

The four themes documented in this chapter are not separate phenomena. They are parts of the same structural story, told from different positions within it. Women experience disproportionate environmental harm because of their gendered roles. They respond to that harm through activism and collective organizing precisely because formal channels have excluded them. Those formal channels, at the community, regulatory, and legal levels, are structured in ways that systematically reproduce their exclusion. And the movement they have built, outside and alongside those formal channels, is the sustained collective response to that exclusion.

What this research adds to the existing literature is not a new structural argument but the specific, community-level evidence from Ikarama, Obunagha, and Bodo that gives that argument its weight. Ebi knows what it costs to build an advocacy organization from the ground up. Ebiwari and Ebiye know where the law's formal neutrality ends and its practical discrimination begins. Preye knows which governance structures women are kept out of and why. Pere knows which institutional moments women are absent from and what that absence means for the documentation of harm.

Together, their accounts make the case that the environmental crisis in the Niger Delta is also a governance crisis, and that the governance crisis cannot be addressed without

addressing the gendered structures that determine whose knowledge counts, whose losses are compensated, and whose voices are heard when decisions about the environment are made. Chapter V turns to what addressing that crisis would require.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to answer three questions: how women in the Niger Delta experience the gendered effects of oil pollution; how they resist and organize in response; and what kind of feminist environmental justice movement has emerged from their efforts. The findings, drawn from the semi-structured interviews across Ikarama, Obunagha, and Bodo, together with documentary evidence and field observation, answer all three.

On the first question, the evidence is consistent across all three communities, women bear the heaviest burden of environmental harm because their daily roles as farmers, fishers, water-fetchers, and caregivers place them in continuous direct contact with contaminated land, water, and air. In Ikarama, women farm soil still leaching crude oil more than fifteen years after the original spills, and Morris documented three women in that community who died of cancer within four years, none older than 50. In Obunagha, women raise children under a gas flare that has burned continuously since 2007, with respiratory illness treated as a background fact of life. In Bodo, women lost fishing and periwinkle-gathering livelihoods almost overnight in the 2008 and 2009 spills and have never fully recovered them.

On the second question, women respond to this harm with sustained, organized, and strategically sophisticated resistance. From the Ogharefe protest of 1984 through the Chevron occupation of 2002 to the Bodo demonstrations after the 2023 spill, Niger Delta women have used direct action, symbolic protest, cooperative organization, and peacebuilding to demand accountability. Their activism is distinctive in centering family wellbeing and intergenerational consequences, and in Bodo it extended beyond environmental demands to restoring peace between rival community factions.

On the third question, a feminist environmental justice movement now exists in institutional form. Kebetkache Women Development and Resource Centre connects grassroots organizing to international corporate accountability forums. YESD extends the movement to the next generation. The Environmental Defenders Network and the organization Morris and Tonye found carried forward ERA/FoEN's documentation tradition, including its insistence on women's presence in every field session. What these organizations share is the understanding that environmental justice in the Niger Delta cannot be achieved without dismantling the gendered structures that determine whose knowledge counts and whose losses are compensated. The barriers documented in this research, exclusion from CDC leadership, absence from Joint Investigation Visits on the community side, compensation routed through male hierarchies, land rights vested in men, and the informal social discouragement of vocal women, are not incidental failures. They are the architecture of a governance system that the movement is now working to rebuild.

Recommendations

The findings of this research point to several recommendations for policy, law, and practice in the Niger Delta. Women must be formally included in Joint Investigation Visits (JIV) following oil spills, not as observers but as equal participants whose knowledge of local farming, fishing, and water-use patterns is treated as relevant evidence.

Regulatory agencies, especially the National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) and the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA), should collect and publish gender-disaggregated data on the health and livelihood impacts of pollution.

Compensation schemes must be redesigned to reach women farmers and fishers directly. Routing payments exclusively through male community leaders reproduces the same

exclusion patterns that this research documents. Women must be present in all compensation distribution committees.

The Petroleum Industry Act should be revised to mandate women's representation in Host Community Development Trusts, remediation committees, and all bodies that make decisions about how oil revenues and environmental reparations are spent in affected communities.

Environmental impact assessments should be gender-sensitive, recognizing losses beyond formal land ownership, including the destruction of fishing livelihoods, crop losses on farmed (but not legally owned) land, and health impacts, especially reproductive and respiratory harm, that fall disproportionately on women.

The Land Use Act's gender-discriminatory implementation must be addressed. Women who farm lands they do not legally own should be entitled to claim direct compensation for crop losses and livelihood disruption caused by oil spills. Community-based legal education programs, especially those targeted at women, can help make these rights real in practice.

Targeted legal aid and public interest litigation support should be available to women and rural communities seeking environmental redress. The cost of litigation is one of the most significant practical barriers women face when trying to use the legal system, and no amount of formal legal neutrality addresses this barrier without structural support.

The Nigerian government, oil companies, and international development partners should provide sustained funding and institutional recognition to women-led environmental organizations in the Niger Delta, including Kebetkache Women Development and Resource Centre, Youth for Environmental Sustainability and Development (YESD), and the

Environmental Defenders Network (EDEN). These organizations are doing work that fills gaps left by state and corporate actors, and they deserve support rather than dependence on uncertain grant cycles.

These recommendations are grounded in what participants said during field research and what the existing legal and advocacy literature supports. The challenge is not identifying what needs to change. The challenge is building the political will to change it.

Future Research

This research opens several directions for future work. A larger study with a broader sample, particularly one that reaches women outside NGO networks, could test how far the patterns documented here extend across the Niger Delta's hundreds of oil-affected communities. Longitudinal research tracking the implementation of the Petroleum Industry Act's host community provisions could establish whether the reforms recommended here take hold in practice. Comparative work between the Niger Delta and other Global South extraction zones, building on the frameworks of Braun (2015) and Braun and Traore (2015), could situate the Nigerian experience within the wider political economy of gendered extractive harm. And research on the newly formed organizations documented in this thesis, EDEN and the organization founded by Morris and Tonye, could track whether the post-2024 generation of Niger Delta civil society succeeds in institutionalizing the women-centered practices its founders carried out of ERA/FoEN.

The final word belongs to Ebi, whose interview gave this thesis one of its clearest statements of what is at stake and what is required: "to encourage women's participation, we need to include them in local, national, and international decision-making processes." The women of Ikarama, Obunagha, and Bodo are not waiting to be included. They are farming contaminated land, raising children under gas flares, organizing protests, brokering peace,

founding organizations, and demanding accountability. The question this thesis leaves with its readers is not whether Niger Delta women are capable of environmental leadership. They have been exercising it for decades. The question is how long the formal structures of environmental governance can continue to exclude the people who understand the crisis best.

APPENDIX A

LIST OF ACRONYMS

AG: Associated Gas

AGRA: Associated Gas Re-Injection Act (1979)

CBD: Convention on Biological Diversity

CDC: Community Development Committee

CFRN: Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999)

CID: Criminal Investigation Department

DPARU: Department of Petroleum and Allied Resources Utilization (formerly DPR)

DPR: Department of Petroleum Resources

EDEN: Environmental Defenders Network

EGASPIN: Environmental Guidelines and Standards for the Petroleum Industry in Nigeria

EIA: Energy Information Administration (United States)

EJ: Environmental Justice

EPA: Environmental Protection Agency (United States)

ERA/FoEN: Environmental Rights Action / Friends of the Earth Nigeria

FEPA: Federal Environmental Protection Agency

HSC: Health, Safety, and Community

JIV: Joint Investigation Visit

LGA: Local Government Area

NBS: National Bureau of Statistics (Nigeria)

NEITI: Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative

NESREA: National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

NNPC: Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation

NOSDRA: National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency

NPE: National Policy on the Environment

OPA: Oil Pipelines Act

OPEC: Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries

RAEC: Renaissance Africa Energy Company

SPDC: Shell Petroleum Development Company

UNDP: United Nations Development Programme

UNEP: United Nations Environment Programme

YESD: Youth for Environmental Sustainability and Development

APPENDIX B

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Customary Land Tenure: The system of land control in Nigeria in which land rights are held and passed down primarily through male family lines, typically vesting control in male children and limiting women's independent claims to land or compensation for damage to it.

Divestment: The sale or transfer of an oil company's operating assets and interests to another company.

Double Burden: The compounded disadvantage whereby women suffer disproportionately from environmental harm because of their gendered roles, while simultaneously holding less institutional power than men to demand its remedy.

Environmental Justice: The principle that all people, regardless of gender, class, or geographic location, are entitled to a fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens.

Host Community: A community located within or adjacent to an area where oil extraction infrastructure operates, and which is therefore formally entitled under Nigerian law to certain development benefits and compensation considerations from the operating company.

Joint Investigation Visit: The formal, multi-party site inspection conducted after a reported oil spill to determine its cause, extent, and the compensation owed, typically involving the oil company, government regulatory agencies, and community representatives.

Remediation: The process of cleaning up and restoring land, water, or ecosystems damaged by oil pollution to a condition safe for human use and habitation.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE FOR COMMUNITY LEADERS, NGOS, AND PIPELINE SECURITY

1. Can you tell me about your background and your involvement in environmental issues in the Niger Delta?
2. How would you describe the current environmental situation in the Niger Delta region?
3. What roles do women play in addressing environmental problems here?
4. Can you share examples of environmental initiatives led or influenced by women?
5. In your view, how do women's approaches or contributions differ from those of men?
6. What challenges do women face when engaging in environmental activism or decision-making?
7. How have communities, leaders, NGOs, or lawyers supported women's involvement in environmental justice?
8. What more could be done to strengthen women's participation?
9. How has women's activism affected environmental conditions or community wellbeing?
10. Can you share a success story where women's involvement made a real difference?

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE FOR LAWYERS

1. In your experience, how effective are existing Nigerian laws and regulations in holding oil companies accountable for environmental degradation in the Niger Delta?
2. Are there current legal reforms or advocacy efforts aimed at strengthening women's rights and environmental justice in the Niger Delta? Can you share examples?
3. To what extent do women participate in legal processes related to environmental cases in the Niger Delta? Are there any structural or cultural obstacles to their involvement?
4. Have legal interventions (such as class action lawsuits or court-mandated cleanups) resulted in meaningful remediation for communities, particularly for women? Why or why not?
5. What are the main legal barriers that women face when seeking justice or compensation for environmental harm in the Niger Delta? How accessible are legal remedies (such as court cases or compensation processes) to women affected by oil spills and pollution?
6. In what ways do intersecting factors like gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity influence women’s access to justice and participation in environmental governance?
7. How do customary land tenure systems and the Land Use Act impact women’s ability to claim compensation or assert land rights in cases of environmental degradation?
8. What legal or policy changes would you recommend to improve environmental justice and gender equity in the Niger Delta?

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