



# Green Criminology in the Niger Delta of Nigeria: Why African Women's Voices Matter

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## Abstract

Oil spills in resource-rich areas in Africa have led to irreversible environmental degradation, resulting in social conflicts that have greatly affected women. Yet, the experiences of ordinary women affected by resource extraction activities in the Global South are often marginalised. Recent calls for the southernising of criminology are gaining momentum and could be linked to calls for rethinking how knowledge about Africa is produced, including in its gendered dimensions. For example, in what ways do women's voices matter on issues related to the environment in the Niger Delta? And how do their voices intersect with green criminological theories? This article focuses on amplifying affected women's lived experiences in the resource-rich area of the Niger Delta of Nigeria. Using data collected between 2019 and 2022 through participatory video, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews, the paper underscores the need to give women a voice on matters that affect the environment, and peace and war dynamics.

**Keywords:** Niger Delta; green criminology; ecocide; women; Africa; environment.

## Introduction

Africa has, over the years, been subjected to cycles of civil conflicts of various magnitudes but has seen an overall rise in violence and harm affecting both human beings and the environment. Scholars point to the nature of states established after independence and direct linkages to the colonial era as sources of such conflicts (Arowosegbe 2011; Papaioannou and Michalopoulos 2016; Rodney 2018). In countries like Nigeria, varying degrees of civil unrest have occurred recurrently in the nation's historical development from independence in 1960. Examples would include the Indigene-settler conflicts in Plateau and Kaduna states, the activities of Boko Haram, farmer-herdsmen issues, and agitation about resources and forms of militancy in the Niger Delta (in particular, the Ogoni and the Ijaw ethnic groups). All these conflicts regularly feature in international news (Campbell and Page 2018).

Oil producing communities in the Niger Delta have been blighted by similar lived experiences, including environmental victimisation, socio-economic inequalities and poverty, and related political disputes (Mai-Bornu 2019; Naanen 1995; Obi 2006; Ojatorotu 2010; Ojatorotu and Morake 2010; Okonta 2008; Osaghae 2008, 1995; Saro-Wiwa 1995; Ukiwo 2007). The causes are complex. The Ogoni and Ijaw people, for example, point to extremely poor environmental conditions and the actions and inactions of the central Nigerian state as being among these causes. In the wider context are associated underdevelopment issues which impact negatively on the livelihoods of people. To date, underdevelopment issues have served as catalysts for the emergence of both nonviolent and violent responses against the Nigerian state and multinational oil companies (Haynes 1999: 236). In this case, the state responded to these grievances with the use of force (see Naanen 1995; Okonta 2008; Ukiwo 2007). Donatus (2016) links these grievances to climate change, natural disasters, and the occurrence of ecocide. These caused by the



destruction of ecosystems, plundering of the lands (Kuku 2012; Smith 2005), and the despoliation of ecosystems through extractive activities.

Ecocide is the human destruction of ecosystems or natural environments (Higgins, Short and South 2013). Ecocidal deterioration of the environment is a major issue for communities in the Niger Delta, which has compelled them to demand justice through periodic outbreaks of violent and nonviolent conflicts. Debates concerning the impacts of oil production on the environment have been examined within political science, development studies, sociology, criminology, and other disciplines. Ecocide encompasses human-caused environmental damage and intentional and unintentional ecological degradation (Higgins, Short and South 2013: 263), such as has occurred in the Nigerian Niger Delta. I will consider environmental issues in the Delta adopting a criminology lens, particularly drawing upon other work exploring 'green criminological dialogues' (see Goyes 2018, 2019, 2021; Lynch, Fegadel and Long 2021; Sollund and Wyatt 2022; South 1998, 2009, 2014a, 2014b, 2021; White 2003; White and Heckenberg 2014).

Current debates within green criminology challenge activists and researchers to rethink and move away from the legacies of colonial power relations. These themes continue to dominate the advancement of knowledge about Africa (Crawford et al. 2021; Medie and Kang 2018), its people, and the environment. Recent calls for southernising criminology are gaining momentum; this could be linked to calls to rethink understandings of knowledge-building about Africa. The 'decolonisation of knowledge' agenda is also gaining traction within society and academia (Arowosegbe 2016; Mbembe 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Nyamnjoh 2017; Santos 2018; Smith 1999).

## The Niger Delta

The Niger Delta region, as demarked by the delta of the Niger River (Anele and Nkpah 2013), comprises nine states: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Rivers, and Ondo. The region provides over 90 per cent of Nigeria's foreign revenue, by means of crude oil extraction (Asagunla and Agbede 2018; Ikein 2009). Commentators describe it as a breeding ground for ethnic violence (Afinotan and Ojokorotu 2009). From the time oil was discovered in Oloibiri in 1958 to the present day, the region has seen various forms of grievances, particularly from the Ogoni and the Ijaw (see Mai-Bornu 2019; Naanen 1995; Okonta 2008; Osaghae 1995; Ukiwo 2007). The existence of oil and associated extraction activities affected the livelihood of traditional farmers and fishers by polluting rivers, farmlands, and the air. Oil spills and gas flaring have been common. The region is rich in biodiversity but economically impoverished, with oil and gas extraction not only destroying the environment but also bringing poverty rather than wealth (Elum, Mopipi and Henri-Ukoha 2016). Oil spills have led to irreversible environmental degradation and related social conflicts in resource-rich areas in Africa and these have greatly affected women. Discussions about marginalised groups class Indigenous or local peoples as among the most socially and economically marginalised people globally (Hewammane and South 2023; Lynch, Fegadel and Long 2021). However, the experiences of ordinary women—those who are rural dwellers and work in subsistence farming and petty trading—affected by resource extraction activities in the Global South are often marginalised in practice as well as in scholarly literature (Csevár 2021; Hewammane and South 2023; Jenkins 2014).

de Sousa Santos refers to 'the South' not as a geographical concept but as a metaphor for the populations victimised by capitalism and colonialism globally. 'The epistemologies of the South' is the knowledge they produce to resist, overcome, or minimise suffering. The South, in Santos's words, are 'in the form of excluded, silenced and marginalised populations, such as ... the unemployed, ethnic or religious minorities, and victims of sexism' (2016: 18–19). Women belong to several of these categories. This paper argues for the need to give women a voice on matters that affect the environment (Csevar 2021) and the dynamics of peace and conflict in oil producing areas like the Niger Delta of Nigeria. My aim in this paper is to examine the green crimes experienced by women living in oil producing communities in the Niger Delta.

## Methods

Data for this study were collected in 2019<sup>1</sup> and 2022<sup>2</sup> using participatory video, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews with 55 women living in communities in Rivers and Bayelsa states in the Niger Delta. A two-stage consent strategy was used: the first before the interviews, focus groups, and video recordings; the second after the videos were edited. Special care was taken when interviewing or filming groups of women at the community level. This prompted the employment of participatory video as a research tool, helping to break down unequal power relationships and to reach out to those who may traditionally lack 'voice' in the community. The data collected during this research were reviewed based on the sub-themes that emerged, including: (i) oil, (ii) environment, (iii) violence, (iv) nonviolence, and (v) actions and inactions of the state. In this paper, I focus on seven out of the 55 participants, based on sub-themes and analysis that follow the oral history tradition (Yin 1994).

The author, having conducted research for many years in the Niger Delta region, facilitated their access to participants. The sites selected for interviews were those most affected by oil and gas extraction. The method of using participatory video enabled documentation (Lunch and Lunch 2006; Pink 2006) and also empowered the women in the study to determine how they wished to be represented. Participatory video serves as a platform for amplifying marginalised groups in the society (Fairey 2017) and documents insider views in a lively way (Schwab-Cartas 2012) through verifiable evidence (Jacobs 2015; Lemaire and Lunch 2012). Participatory video was used alongside focus groups and interviews. Interviewing is an effective method when seeking to understand the situation of people in complex circumstances (Fontana and Frey 1994) because it enables the collection of rich data. Focus groups, commonly used in conservation research, facilitate the deep understanding of people's perspectives (Ochieng Nyumba et al. 2018) and expand the material collected through interviews (Parker and Tritter 2006). Overall, the lived experiences of women in Nigeria offer an especially striking case study to explore life amidst the harms of extractivism. In contrast to dominant narratives in the existing literature and policy frameworks, this project positions women as active agents within cultural strategies, organisations, and activities.

## Literature and Theoretical Grounding

My research began with the recognition of the fundamental importance of speaking with—rather than *about*—others on environmental issues to better understand the perspectives of traditionally marginalised individuals and groups. A similar argument is raised in general regarding research concerning Indigenous peoples, their cultures, and territories (see Goyes and South 2021).

Green criminology has entered debates about marginalisation in studies conducted by scholars such as South (1998a, 1998b, 2014), South and White (2014), White and Heckenberg (2014), Lynch (2006), Lynch, Fegadel and Long (2021), and Goyes (2018, 2019, 2021). Tracing the evolution of green criminology, South (2014a: 6) makes a case for 'the enhancement of environmental consciousness in criminology and the development of a green perspective'. South also notes the need for a conscious effort to broaden the scope of inquiry in inter-disciplinary directions and, at the same time, bring together explorations of the 'dimensions of environmental damage, crime and victimisation' (6). These calls emphasise the importance of understanding environmental crime and environmental harm (Heckenberg 2010) while exposing various forms of substantive social and ecological injustice (White and Heckenberg 2014).

Environmental harm considers five key aspects: 'who the victim is, where the harm manifests, where the harm is apparent, the scale of the harm as well as the time frame within which the harm can be analysed' (White and Heckenberg 2014: 13). The interface of criminology and environmental issues allow for increased and concerted attention and hands-on intervention (Lynch and Stretesky 2003: 231; see also Stretesky and Lynch 1998, 2013). White and Heckenberg (2014) note that, although environmental harm is not a new phenomenon, it has been normalised in some areas where people accept it because it is produced under licence. For example, in Nigeria, traditional rural communities that depend on the land to survive as farmers, fishers, and producers of palm oil have witnessed massive destruction affecting their lands, rivers, and ecosystems. Even the air has been affected; every breath that the community takes has been contaminated due to the continuous flaring of gas (Saro-Wiwa 1995). Environmental crime hurts, not only human beings but also non-human species and ecosystems of the region and, ultimately, the whole planet (Sollund and Wyatt 2022).

Two points raised by White (2011) are good descriptors for the Niger Delta situation where the following take place: 1) transgressions that, regardless of their legality, are harmful to humans, environments, and non-human animals; and 2) environmental-related harms facilitated by the state, multinational corporations, and other powerful actors, which have the capacity to shape official definitions of environmental crime in ways that allow or condone environmentally harmful practices (see also Mai-Bornu 2019; Naanen 1995; Obi 2006; Okonta 2008; Osaghae 1995, 2008; Saro-Wiwa 1995; Ukiwo 2007). Activities of multinational organisations like Shell are recognised as causing extremely serious harms and profiting from forms of transnational criminal activity (United Nations Environment Programme 2018).

In seeking to further explain the nature of green crimes, South (2014a: 9) suggests two types of environmental harms and crimes: 'primary', referring to the direct destruction of, and damage to, the earth's resources; and 'secondary', referring to those that are symbiotic or dependent upon primary environmental harms and crimes. South further breaks down primary green harms and crimes in relation to air pollution, deforestation, non-human species, water, and ground pollution. White (2008: 98–99) presents a threefold typology of 'brown', 'green', and 'white' issues. 'Brown' relates to urban life, pollution, and waste; 'green' refers to conservation and 'wilderness'; and 'white' covers the impact of new technologies. These propositions are very strong and valid and can be applied to the Niger Delta environmental concerns. However, they stop short of delineating these within a gendered context and representing how they impact the livelihoods of women living in such environments.

Goyes's (2018, 2019, 2021) work serves as another important entry point for African voices into green criminological dialogues. Like the Niger Delta, Latin America has been subjected to widespread environmental crime and social conflict, as well as crime and harm damaging ecosystems and human and non-human species (Goyes 2021). Environmental victimisation, in Latin America as in the Niger Delta, has heightened social conflict and exacerbated additional crimes. These have included the establishment of illegal markets and the creation of monopolies that control natural resources. Goyes proposes a Southern green criminology. He relates this directly to the legacies of colonisation alongside Marxist ideas and other analyses focusing on the North/South divide and core-periphery, and the dependence of some regions on others. Goyes (2021) also highlights the importance of alternative epistemologies (of those considered 'knowledgeless': people with lived experiences of environmental harm to whom scholars fail to listen). Not listening to alternative epistemologies could be considered as 'epistemicide' (Santos 2014), 'dehumanisation' (Nabudere 2011), and 'epistemic violence' (Heleta 2016; Makgoba 1998; see also Crawford et al. 2021).

As Santos argues, the reinvention of social emancipation is premised upon replacing the 'monoculture of scientific knowledge' by an 'ecology of knowledges' (Santos 2014: 188. This would be open to the promotion of non-relativistic dialogues among knowledges, granting 'equality of opportunities' to the different kinds of knowledge, regardless of their systems of production (Santos 2007, 2010; Smith 2021). Goyes (2018, 2019) posits that social emancipation grows out of the marginalised, impoverished, and oppressed. Although he does not specifically refer to women, I take this to include them, given that they are the most marginalised in communities in the Niger Delta. To decolonise is to disrupt existing norms on how knowledge in, and of, Africa is produced. We, as Africans, want to tell our own stories using our voices, not the voices of the West (Mbembe 2016; Nyamjoh 2017). My experience researching women raises important questions about the voices we record, play back, and amplify in our work: whose stories (Smith 1999) do we listen to when we try to learn about environmental harm, and on what terms? Such questions help in 'rethinking thinking' (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Odora Hoppers and Richards 2012), particularly about how we create, hold, and deploy knowledge (Mai-Bornu 2021) related to women's experiences.

According to Sollund and Wyatt (2022: 3) 'crimes adversely affecting air, land and water typically involve companies and/or organised crime groups which contribute to threatening environmental quality'. On paper, multinational companies like Shell have incorporated corporate social responsibility principles. However, as Nurse (2015: 2) argues, the move of many corporations to engage with corporate social and environmental responsibility evidences a 'disregard for the communities in which they operate and cause considerable environmental damage'. Nurse explains that some corporations choose to situate themselves in places with weak environmental regulations where governments respond to environmental crime with administrative or civil penalties which are usually less punitive than criminal penalties (4).

Although studies and arguments about environmental degradation in the Niger Delta continue to be produced, very few state and state-corporate crime studies have drawn attention to the victimisation of African peoples (for green criminology perspectives, see Nurse 2016; South 2016). Lynch, Fegadel and Long (2021) have investigated oil extraction activities in Nigeria, deliberately linking the Niger Delta environmental crimes and harm to the nexus between ecocide and genocide. They add that 'the ecocide-genocide nexus illustrates how green and state-corporate crimes intersect as the capitalist treadmill of production expands' (238). Genocide is defined as 'a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves' (Lemkin 1944, cited in Lynch, Fegadel and Long 2021: 238). Here, ecocide 'refers to the human destruction of ecosystems as a crime' (237).

Higgins, Short and South (2013) argue for closer attention to be paid to genocide and ecocide as crimes, even though these are traditionally investigated as distinct issues. The argument raised here points to how ecocides can lead to genocides, particularly when 'conditions of life that fundamentally threatens a group's cultural and/or physical existence is affected', as seen in the Niger Delta (Crook and Short 2014: 298). Genocide, as Epstein (1997) argues, is a very powerful framework for discussion. Saro-Wiwa situate the Ogoni marginalisation and neglect within the framework of genocide. They elaborate on the way billions of dollars' worth of oil and gas were deliberately carried away from Ogoni land by the central state and Shell, to the detriment of the Ogoni people (1992). Rather than direct physical or violent confrontation and harm, eco-genocide relies on indirect ecological destruction as a pathway to genocide (Lynch, Fegadel and Long 2021: 240). The engagement with this literature could continue. However, the deficiency to note is that, in so much of the work that has been done in calling attention to environmental harm, the major gap identified within the context of the Niger Delta is the absence of affected women's voices. The livelihoods of women in the Delta have also been impacted negatively, especially due to their close association with nature and the environment (see Mai-Bornu 2023).

Ecofeminists including Shiva (1989) and Merchant (1980) (see also Wachholz 2007) have called for greater attention to the woman-nature link and for acknowledgement of the importance of hearing female voices. Shiva (2014) argues that the woman's role as care giver has been impacted by environmental destruction (see also Wachholz 2007). Furthermore, the exploitative

nature of oil extraction destabilises local livelihoods and, in the process, creates a feeling of impotence by making women feel ineffective in providing food for their family (Nieves Rico 1998). Historically, women have engaged hands-on with the land while striving to provide for their families (Mai-Bornu 2023). This is the focus of the next section which presents the results from the data collection.

### **Why Women's Voices Matter**

Most of the words appearing in this section will be from the women I interviewed. The depth of detail and description in the interviews represents a richness that needs no mediation. Consider the power of Madam B's words to understand how the community perceived oil exploitation:

Over the past decades in the Niger Delta, the oil producing belt of Nigeria, the expectations of community members have been that the oil economy will create improved living conditions for community members, particularly those in communities where oil is extracted from. There have been those high expectations from community members, particularly the women and these have translated to community members expecting to be employed in the oil companies, expecting to be able to have access to quality education, expecting to be able to have access to healthcare services, expecting to be able to have access to potable clean drinking water.

These expectations were broken; instead, repeated victimisation has been experienced. Madam A's words reflect the challenges of living amidst the destruction of extractivism: 'The key issue in the Niger Delta is access to natural resources, not just the oil resources but other resources that the people have relied upon for livelihoods over the years'. Women's voices suggest that harms resulting from state and state-corporate violence against Indigenous peoples (Goyes 2015; Rojas-Paez 2017) and issues related to inequalities and marginalisation are recurring.

Of particular significance for women are the ways in which both patriarchy and capitalism have a combined impact on women, discriminating against and excluding them from all the processes of natural resource governance. In an interview, Madam C recounted:

When we have spillages, they don't talk to the women. Discussions are conducted with heads of families, which are men, the women who farm on the farmlands that are impacted by oil spillage, nobody is asking them a question, it is the men. So whatever compensation is paid in cases where such things are being paid, is given to the man who is a member of the household, and nobody thinks of the women .... A lot of women don't know their rights. Women living with disability are doubly discriminated for first, being women and second, their disabilities.

Women usually take care of children and culture and tradition bestows on them the role of caregiver. However, it also relegates them to the background of the private sphere, never to the foreground in public spaces (see Vance 1993: 138; Wachholz, 2007). In contrast to men, women are identified as the 'other', thereby helping to legitimise their mistreatment and exploitation (Lynch, Burns and Stretesky 2014: 67). This signifies that, in the Niger Delta, the strong culture of women being at the forefront of exploring the environment in order to meet the needs of the family has been disrupted radically. The local peasant economy has been disrupted and, across communities of the Niger Delta, there has been a process of disempowerment, especially affecting women.

The linking of environmental issues to pollution, especially of sources of pure water, is one that deserves more detailed examination (see Brisman et al. 2018: 195–200). In the words of Madam D:

There is no access to clean water in some communities. Even right now, as I am speaking, everybody is making personal efforts, individual efforts to access water. Some have a bore hole, but for low-income families, they have to buy water from those who are able to install bore holes or they depend on the benevolence of some rich and wealthy families. Those in rural communities have been directly impacted. Apart from these, the main sources of water for these communities have been the rivers, the creeks, the streams. But over the years, these bodies, these water bodies have been polluted by oil being spilled into the rivers, into the creeks. So, people drink polluted water. And that means there is no access to clean drinking water.

In this scenario, it is difficult for the women to access their farmlands; it is difficult for them to even go back to the polluted waters to obtain water to use for the household. This suggests that there are different dimensions to the way that violence—including slow violence (Nixon 2011, cited in Hewemann and South 2023)—is impacting people in the Niger Delta region.

Additional factors that affect the livelihoods of women in the Niger Delta include the lack of basic amenities, particularly those related to healthcare, as explained by Madam E:

In most communities, you will see the structure, community health centre, or you see hospitals [but the] only functional hospitals are the ones located in the state capitals, and then that would be the teaching hospitals or a major government hospital in the state capital. Every other healthcare facility is private, so that means for poor families, for low-income families, for community members, they don't have the resources to access healthcare in private health facilities. In those public hospitals there are also a lot of challenges, either health personnel is [sic] not present, or the right medication is lacking, or the attitude of their healthcare personnel is inadequate. People now go back to traditional ways of taking care of their ailments, going back to plants and herbs and other indigenous ways of maintaining your health. This also has its own challenges, because the pollution, the spillage of oil into the environment, destroying plants, destroying the environment, has also affected the potency of the medicinal plants.

Madam F added:

All through the Niger Delta, over six to seven decades of oil extraction activities, women have been displaced from their traditional means of livelihood. Women have been affected by pollution. A lot of health challenges, particularly fertility issues. A lot of women are having, experiencing early menopause, including myself. Many women are having challenges getting pregnant. And even some men, men don't like talking about it because they like feeling strong and macho. Even so, men are having erectile disfunction as a result of pollution. Something needs to be done. Somebody needs to take action. But the stakeholders, the key people that have the power and the influence to ensure that actions are being taken in the interests of the people are not doing anything.

All these testimonies connect with environmental injustice. The abuse of power results in poor people having to suffer the effects of environmental damage caused by others' greed. As South (2014: 12) argues, 'negative environmental health impacts may affect individuals in ways that produce many "isolated" tragedies before the cumulative effect or accumulated evidence reveals a more widespread or systemic problem affecting wider groups and populations'. In many cases, such issues are invisible, they go easily undetected, and in the process, the broad impact on the populations' turn into tragedy. Environmental justice therefore requires improving quality of life through the provision of basic human needs: healthcare, access to food, environmental protection, and improved economic welfare (McDonald 2002, cited in Patel 2009: 97; see also Lynch et al. 2017).

Violence in the Niger Delta is multifaceted, including physical; psychological; and environmental, through pollution. Women suffer most from these various forms of violence, but they do also demonstrate resilience. Madam G said:

Women have citizen rights in Nigeria. They have rights as people. And they can actually use this right to engage with those processes, those systems that have discriminated and oppressed them on these things. And we have exposed women to political rights. They can vote in elections. They can participate in decision making processes. They can speak up about oppressive systems. So, it is time for the women to wake up and begin to take actions and begin to engage. Women really need to break the bias. And when women do that, it is not only for the interest of the women, it is for the interests of the family.

South (2014) explains that most human environmental harm derives from economic forces that both demand and enable detrimental behaviours. One of the interviewees Madam B asked:

Now that the multinational oil companies are divesting and moving offshore, what happens to the polluted environment they leave behind, if the environment is left without recovery? What happens to the future of the women?

These questions call for more attention to the destruction of the environment through activities of extractive industries in resource producing areas. They call for a careful rethink on how best to consider women in the Niger Delta as ends in their own right, as individuals with a dignity that merits respect from laws and institutions in their communities (Nussbaum 1999).

## Conclusion

Women are always at the receiving end of environmental degradation (Goyes, Mol and Brisman 2017) and their voices need to be amplified more, across and within disciplines. Building upon key arguments regarding the importance of green criminological dialogues, I have demonstrated the importance of women's voices for understanding the impacts of environmental crimes and harms in the Niger Delta. Placing women's experience at the core of studies on ecocide and other

related environmental issues is critical. It has the potential for producing alternative and richer understandings by working at the level of marginalised groups.

Women's groups in the Niger Delta request equal opportunities and a say on policies and initiatives concerning them, not just positions as women leaders in existing Community Development Committees relegating them to waitresses. Other women's groups are interested in a feminist economy and believe a new economic system would bring balance, peace, access to social services, and an opportunity to speak and be heard. This would translate into participation in governance. The Nigerian state and multinational oil companies should rethink how policies and laws that affect women are developed with more inclusive and bottom-up lenses.

I am in agreement with the arguments put forward by key scholars in the field of green criminology. However, here I have pushed for the amplification of the salient and important marginalised voices in society that belong to women. Interviews and lived experiences illustrate the close relationship that women in oil producing communities have with their lands, the consequential deep knowledge they have about green harm, and the pressing need to hear their voices.

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