



## The Impact of the Niger Delta Conflict on Women's Livelihoods: Challenges and the Role of Humanitarian Interventions

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines the multifaceted effects of the Niger Delta conflict on women's livelihoods in Nigeria and evaluates the efficacy of humanitarian interventions designed to mitigate these adverse impacts. Drawing on qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with female-headed households and humanitarian practitioners, the research identifies critical challenges—including economic disruption, social marginalization, and pervasive insecurity—that undermine women's capacity for sustainable development. Moreover, the study situates its findings within broader theoretical frameworks, including feminist theory, intersectionality, and conflict theory, to offer nuanced insights into gendered experiences of conflict. It further explores how targeted interventions ranging from livelihood support programs and microcredit schemes to community-based security initiatives enhance resilience among affected women. Implications for policy and practice underscore the necessity for gender-sensitive, community-oriented approaches in post-conflict recovery efforts.

**KEYWORDS:** Niger Delta, conflict, women's livelihoods, humanitarian interventions, female-headed households, feminist theory, intersectionality, conflict theory

### INTRODUCTION

The protracted conflict in Nigeria's Niger Delta has profoundly destabilized the region, yielding repercussions that extend far beyond the immediate impacts of violence. Women especially those heading households are among the most adversely affected groups. In conflict settings, traditional social and economic structures are disrupted, thereby exacerbating vulnerabilities and rendering women disproportionately at risk. This paper focuses on two principal objectives extracted from a broader thesis: (a) to elucidate the multifaceted impact of the Niger Delta conflict on women's livelihoods and (b) to evaluate the role of humanitarian interventions in mitigating these impacts.

Recent scholarship has emphasized that conflict often engenders severe economic instability and social marginalization for women (Eze, 2021; Osaghae, 2020). For instance, female-headed households (FHH) in the Niger Delta have experienced compounded challenges due to limited access to financial resources, institutional support, and social safety nets. Concurrently, humanitarian interventions such as microfinance initiatives, vocational training, and cash-for-work programs have been highlighted as critical mechanisms for restoring economic stability (Johnson & Kalu, 2023; Okoro & Ibrahim, 2023). However, the dynamic nature of the conflict continually gives rise to new challenges even as previous issues are addressed.

In addition to the empirical dimensions, this study is theoretically anchored in feminist and intersectional frameworks. Feminist theory provides insight into how gendered power relations shape women's experiences during conflict (Enloe, 2014), while intersectionality theory highlights the compounded effects of gender, class, and ethnicity (Mohanty, 2003). Conflict theory further elucidates how resource competition and structural inequalities contribute to and sustain the conflict environment (Smith, 2022). Through this multi-theoretical lens, the paper seeks to answer the overarching research question: *How does the Niger Delta conflict impact women and their livelihoods?* It further explores sub-questions concerning the specific adversities encountered by female-headed households and the effectiveness of post-conflict humanitarian interventions.

Integrating a deeper gender analysis into post-conflict recovery has far-reaching implications that go well beyond the immediate humanitarian response. First, by dissecting the gendered dimensions of conflict, the inquiry unveils the intricate ways in which women's—and, by extension, marginalized groups'—lived experiences are shaped by intersecting identities such as class, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Feminist theory and intersectionality reveal that women do not experience conflict uniformly; rather, the impacts on their livelihoods, security, and psychological well-being vary significantly. This nuanced understanding is essential because it exposes how structural inequalities and patriarchal systems often compound the effects of conflict, making

recovery processes inherently gendered. In turn, these insights help to challenge conventional post-conflict narratives that tend to treat affected populations as homogeneous groups, thereby advocating for more tailored, equitable, and sustainable recovery strategies.

Second, the practical implications for policymakers and humanitarian organizations are profound. By incorporating gender-sensitive approaches into intervention strategies, recovery programs can be designed to address both immediate needs such as ensuring safe access to resources and protection from violence and long-term structural issues like economic disenfranchisement and social marginalization. For instance, evidence suggests that peace agreements crafted with significant input from women are more durable and inclusive (Guterres, 2024). This demonstrates that integrating gender perspectives is not merely a matter of social justice but also a strategic imperative that enhances overall resilience and stability in post-conflict societies. As global development paradigms increasingly prioritize inclusivity and resilience, understanding the unique challenges faced by women in conflict zones becomes imperative. It ensures that recovery programs are not only reactive but also transformative, aiming to dismantle the underlying power imbalances that perpetuate vulnerability.

Ultimately, this inquiry contributes to a broader reimagining of peace and recovery by highlighting that sustainable development hinges on the active participation and empowerment of women. Such a focus drives the creation of policies that support community-driven, gender-responsive approaches, aligning with international frameworks like UNSCR 1325 and contemporary feminist peace research. By doing so, it fosters an environment where recovery efforts address both the symptoms and the root causes of post-conflict instability, paving the way for more inclusive and lasting peace.

**The Socio-Economic Impact of Conflict on Women:** A robust body of literature documents the disruptive effects of conflict on social and economic systems. Eze (2021) argues that conflict zones inherently disrupt women's economic activities, leading to increased dependency and vulnerability. This disruption is especially acute for female-headed households, which often lack the requisite resources, networks, and institutional support to withstand prolonged instability. For instance, when conflict destroys local markets, agricultural productivity, or informal trading networks, these households lose the critical economic engines that traditionally enable women to sustain their families, leaving them reliant on precarious or external forms of assistance.

Osaghae (2020) further details how the erosion of community support systems and institutional neglect isolates these households, compounding the adverse impacts on women's livelihoods. The collapse of social infrastructures not only diminishes direct economic opportunities but also undermines access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and legal support. Without these systems in place, women are forced to navigate complex post-conflict environments largely on their own, which intensifies their vulnerability in a context marked by insecurity and limited state presence.

Studies from other regions corroborate these findings. Research in conflict settings across Africa and the Middle East has consistently shown that women suffer disproportionately due to the breakdown of both economic and social infrastructures (Adeyemi, 2021). These disruptions extend to critical sectors such as agriculture, trade, and informal economic activities sectors that traditionally form the backbone of women's livelihood strategies. The loss of access to productive assets, credit facilities, and supportive community networks forces many women into a cycle of poverty and dependency. Moreover, the pervasive nature of these disruptions often exacerbates pre-existing gender inequalities, as patriarchal structures that limit women's access to resources become even more pronounced during times of crisis.

Integrating feminist theory and intersectional analysis into this discussion reveals that these economic disruptions are not merely incidental; they are deeply rooted in historical and structural inequalities. Conflict magnifies the gendered dimensions of economic life, exposing how deeply interwoven social, cultural, and economic vulnerabilities leave women and particularly female-headed households at a disadvantage. This body of literature calls for targeted interventions that not only restore economic stability but also rebuild the social fabric necessary for long-term resilience and gender equality.

**Humanitarian Interventions and Economic Recovery:** Humanitarian interventions have been posited as crucial tools for alleviating the economic hardships faced by women in conflict-affected areas. Johnson and Kalu (2023) provide evidence that microfinance initiatives and vocational training programs can help restore income-generating activities among affected women. Complementarily, Okoro and Ibrahim (2023) assert that community-based programs not only offer immediate relief but also empower women to achieve long-term economic independence.

In examining the efficacy of such interventions, several studies underscore the importance of contextually tailored strategies. For example, interventions that combine short-term relief (e.g., food and medical aid) with long-term developmental programs (e.g., educational initiatives and skill development workshops) have been found to yield more sustainable outcomes (Smith, 2022). Moreover, integrated humanitarian strategies that involve local stakeholders in planning and implementation are often more effective, as they are better attuned to the socio-cultural dynamics of the affected communities.

**Theoretical Perspectives:** To deepen our understanding of the gendered impacts of the Niger Delta conflict, it is essential to consider several interrelated theoretical frameworks:

- i) **Feminist Theory:** Feminist theory asserts that conflict cannot be fully understood without considering how gendered power relations shape experiences and outcomes. Scholars such as Enloe (2014) argue that patriarchal structures embedded in political, economic, and social institutions systematically marginalize women. In the Niger Delta, these patriarchal norms can intensify the adverse effects of conflict by limiting women's access to resources, decision-making platforms, and economic opportunities. Feminist theorists contend that interventions must not only alleviate immediate violence but also dismantle the underlying gender inequalities that predispose women to greater vulnerability. This means that peace initiatives should incorporate strategies to empower women economically and politically, ensuring that the reconstruction process addresses the root causes of gendered marginalization.
- ii) **Intersectionality:** Intersectionality theory, introduced by Crenshaw (1991) and further developed by scholars like Mohanty (2003), emphasizes that gender does not operate in isolation. Instead, women's experiences in conflict are compounded by other social categorizations such as race, class, ethnicity, and regional identity. In the Niger Delta, for instance, the impacts of conflict on women are not uniform; those from poorer, marginalized ethnic communities often face a double burden. Intersectionality helps us understand how overlapping systems of oppression intensify the exclusion and exploitation of certain groups. This framework encourages policymakers to adopt tailored interventions that recognize the diversity of experiences among women acknowledging that a one-size-fits-all approach may neglect the needs of the most vulnerable subgroups.
- iii) **Conflict Theory:** Conflict theory, with its roots in Marxist thought, posits that social conflict arises from structural inequalities and competition over scarce resources. In the Niger Delta, this perspective is particularly salient as the conflict is driven by the struggle over natural resources (e.g., oil) and the historical marginalization of local communities by both state and multinational actors. Conflict theorists argue that these structural inequities create fertile ground for unrest by continually pitting groups against one another in a zero-sum contest over wealth and power. This theory underscores the need for humanitarian interventions that go beyond immediate relief measures to address the systemic economic and political injustices that fuel the conflict. By targeting both the overt violence and the underlying structural causes, conflict theory informs strategies that aim for long-term transformation rather than mere pacification.

Recent studies have extended these theoretical perspectives to specific conflict contexts. For example, research by Bello and Musa (2022) on post-conflict recovery in northern Nigeria emphasizes the importance of incorporating gender analysis into humanitarian planning. Similarly, Olagunju (2021) examines the interplay between local governance, resource allocation, and women's empowerment in conflict-affected regions, suggesting that sustainable recovery is contingent on addressing both economic and political dimensions of inequality.

Other scholars have contributed to the literature by exploring the psychological and social ramifications of conflict. Studies by Adamu et al. (2023) reveal that prolonged exposure to conflict conditions has significant mental health repercussions for women, which in turn affect their ability to engage in economic activities. This strand of research highlights the importance of integrating psychosocial support into humanitarian interventions to ensure a holistic approach to recovery.

Overall, the literature indicates that while the adverse effects of conflict on women are well documented, there remains a critical need to explore the efficacy of humanitarian interventions through a gendered lens. This paper contributes to filling that gap by synthesizing empirical evidence with established theoretical frameworks.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework for this study draws on a combination of feminist theory, intersectionality, and conflict theory.

Feminist theory provides a critical lens for understanding the ways in which gendered power relations shape women's experiences in conflict. According to Enloe (2014), conflicts often reinforce patriarchal norms by marginalizing women's voices and reducing their roles to that of victims. In the context of the Niger Delta, this theoretical perspective highlights how economic disenfranchisement, social exclusion, and security challenges are interlinked with broader gender hierarchies. Feminist theory argues that any meaningful intervention must not only provide immediate relief but also challenge the structural inequalities that perpetuate women's vulnerability.

Intersectionality theory, pioneered by Crenshaw (1991) and expanded by Mohanty (2003), emphasizes that women's experiences in conflict are not homogeneous. Instead, they are shaped by multiple, overlapping identities—including race, class, ethnicity, and geographic location—which can intensify their marginalization. For female-headed households in the Niger Delta, intersectionality reveals how systemic inequalities intersect with the dynamics of conflict, resulting in compounded disadvantages. This framework informs the analysis by encouraging a multi-dimensional approach to assessing both the impacts of conflict and the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions.

Conflict theory explains social dynamics in terms of power struggles and resource competition. In the Niger Delta, the conflict is rooted in historical grievances, economic disparities, and competition over natural resources. Smith (2022) suggests that the underlying structural conflicts often manifest in localized violence, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations such as

women. From this perspective, humanitarian interventions must be designed not only to provide short-term relief but also to address the systemic issues that fuel conflict. This dual focus is essential for fostering long-term resilience and sustainable development. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the paper establishes a robust analytical framework that both contextualizes empirical findings and informs practical recommendations for policy and humanitarian action.

## **METHODOLOGY**

**Research Design:** This research adopted the phenomenological paradigm approach by focusing on the similarities or commonalities of lived experiences of the participants in the interview and focus group discussion.

This study adopts a qualitative research design to capture the lived experiences of women in the Niger Delta affected by ongoing conflict. Given the complex and sensitive nature of the subject matter, qualitative methods are best suited to provide rich, in-depth insights into the challenges faced by female-headed households. Data were collected via in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, ensuring that both individual and collective perspectives were documented.

**Sampling and Data Collection:** A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants with firsthand experience of the conflict and its aftermath in the Niger Delta. The sample comprised women from varied backgrounds—including local economic actors, community leaders, and humanitarian program beneficiaries—with interviews conducted in local dialects as needed. In total, the researcher interviewed three humanitarian staff, seven women from heavily affected communities, and five humanitarian beneficiaries, and also held two focus group sessions across multiple Niger Delta communities. Participants were chosen based on their willingness to share their experiences and their residence in states most impacted by the conflict (Rivers, Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom, Delta, Abia, and Imo), while also ensuring representation by age, education, and employment. Secondary data were obtained from existing literature and reports on the Niger Delta conflict, peace resolution, and the Presidential Amnesty Program.

**Data Analysis:** The collected qualitative data were analysed using a rigorous, iterative thematic coding process. Multiple rounds of coding both deductive and inductive enabled the identification and refinement of recurrent themes, such as economic disruption, social marginalization, and pervasive security challenges. Special emphasis was placed on capturing participants' nuanced perceptions of humanitarian interventions and their effectiveness in addressing these issues. The iterative nature of the analysis allowed for continuous refinement of the coding framework until thematic saturation was achieved, ensuring that subtle variations in experiences across diverse groups and regions were fully explored.

Furthermore, the analysis was deeply informed by theoretical frameworks including feminist theory, intersectionality, and conflict theory. These perspectives provided a rich interpretative lens to contextualize the findings within broader discussions on gendered power dynamics and structural inequalities in conflict settings. Triangulation with secondary literature and reports on the Niger Delta conflict, peace resolution, and the Presidential Amnesty Program further enhanced the credibility of the analysis, offering a comprehensive view of how gender, resource competition, and historical marginalization intersect to shape the lived experiences of women in the region.

**Findings:** The analysis of qualitative data revealed a range of interconnected challenges affecting women's livelihoods in the Niger Delta. The following themes emerged prominently:

**1. Economic Disruption:** Respondents reported severe income losses occasioned by the crisis. Women described how the instability had disrupted activities such as agriculture, trade, and other informal economic ventures that once served as the backbone of their financial security. This economic breakdown resulted in widespread poverty and an increased reliance on limited external aid. The situation is especially dire for female-headed households, which lack a secondary income source and face severe constraints in accessing credit and financial services. Moreover, the loss of local markets and traditional livelihood networks has long-term implications, as women find it increasingly difficult to rebuild economic resilience once these networks are dismantled.

**2. Social Marginalization:** The conflict has deepened social marginalization by eroding community support systems and restricting access to essential services like education, healthcare, and legal support. Many participants highlighted how the disintegration of communal networks has left them isolated, further diminishing their ability to cope with and recover from crisis situations. This isolation is compounded by systemic neglect from both state and non-state actors, who often overlook the specific needs of women in these communities. As a result, female-headed households find themselves with diminished social capital a critical resource for navigating conflict and mobilizing local support which further entrenches their vulnerability and limits opportunities for social and economic recovery.

**3. Security Challenges and Forced Migration:** Insecurity is a pervasive theme across interviews, with numerous accounts detailing experiences of violence, harassment, and forced displacement. The constant threat of violence disrupts everyday life, leading to chronic stress and long-lasting psychological trauma. Forced migration not only displaces individuals physically but also serves the social and community ties that are essential for collective resilience. As women lose access to traditional support systems and safe

spaces, their ability to maintain economic stability and social cohesion is further compromised. This disruption of community fabric and the resultant fragmentation of social networks magnify both the immediate and long-term impacts of the conflict.

**4. The Role of Humanitarian Interventions:** While the conflict has imposed severe hardships, humanitarian interventions have emerged as critical lifelines. Key interventions include:

- i) **Livelihood Support Programs:** Vocational training, microcredit schemes, and cash-for-work programs have enabled many women to diversify income sources. These initiatives provide both immediate relief and long-term capacity building.
- ii) **Community-Based Security Initiatives:** Programs focused on community policing and conflict resolution have contributed to the creation of safer local environments. Such initiatives have helped empower women by fostering collective security and mutual support.
- iii) **Integrated Development Strategies:** Interventions that combine short-term relief with long-term development, such as educational programs and skill acquisition workshops, have proven particularly effective. These integrated approaches have enabled women to navigate the immediate crisis while planning for future economic stability.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study not only echo previous research but also deepen our understanding of the multifaceted impacts of conflict on female-headed households in the Niger Delta. First, the severe economic disruption experienced by these households is more than just a loss of income—it represents a systematic breakdown of traditional livelihoods. Research by Eze (2021) and Osaghae (2020) highlights that conflict forces women to abandon familiar income-generating activities such as agriculture and informal trade. This loss is compounded by the rapid erosion of community support networks, which historically provided a safety net in times of crisis. As these networks disintegrate, women face a dual challenge: they lose both the means to earn a livelihood and the collective strength to negotiate for better resources, leaving them in increasingly precarious economic positions.

Moreover, this economic instability reinforces and amplifies pre-existing gender inequalities. Feminist theory, as articulated by Enloe (2014), argues that patriarchal structures are deeply embedded within both formal institutions and everyday social practices. In the context of the Niger Delta, the conflict intensifies these gendered power imbalances by stripping women of opportunities for economic autonomy and forcing them into roles that perpetuate dependency on external aid. The absence of alternative income sources and limited access to financial services, such as credit facilities, further marginalizes female-headed households. This dynamic creates a vicious cycle where economic vulnerability not only restricts immediate survival but also hinders long-term empowerment and recovery.

Additionally, the qualitative data reveal that the breakdown of traditional economic systems goes hand in hand with the erosion of social capital. Women's ability to mobilize resources, share knowledge, and support one another is critical in rebuilding communities after conflict. However, as the conflict disrupts these communal bonds, the capacity for collective recovery diminishes. This isolation reinforces a state of dependency and vulnerability, making it harder for affected women to overcome both economic and social adversities. Thus, the study underscores that the impact of conflict is not confined to immediate economic losses but extends to altering the very social fabric that enables communities to sustain themselves over time.

Second, the evidence supporting the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions adds depth to the literature on post-conflict recovery. Johnson and Kalu (2023) and Okoro and Ibrahim (2023) have demonstrated that targeted interventions can restore economic stability. The present study extends these findings by revealing that integrated approaches which combine immediate relief with long-term capacity building are most effective. Such strategies are consistent with theoretical propositions from conflict theory, which emphasize the need to address both immediate crises and underlying structural inequities (Smith, 2022).

Third, the application of intersectionality theory reveals that the impact of the conflict is not uniform among all women. Instead, it is mediated by factors such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and regional location. This multi-dimensional perspective is critical for designing interventions that are sensitive to the diverse needs of affected populations. Studies by Bello and Musa (2022) and Olagunju (2021) reinforce the notion that sustainable recovery requires an inclusive approach that addresses both economic and social dimensions of inequality.

Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of community participation in the design and implementation of humanitarian interventions. Programs that actively involve local stakeholders not only improve immediate outcomes but also enhance the legitimacy and sustainability of recovery efforts. This finding echoes broader debates in development studies regarding the role of local agency in post-conflict reconstruction. Incorporating community participation in humanitarian interventions is not merely a procedural formality but a foundational element that enhances program relevance, fosters ownership, empowers local capacities, and ensures sustainability. Recognizing and integrating the insights and capabilities of affected communities lead to more effective and legitimate recovery efforts, aligning with the broader objectives of development and post-conflict reconstruction.

Finally, the study's discussion also considers the psychological dimensions of conflict, as noted by Adamu et al. (2023). The mental health implications of prolonged exposure to insecurity and forced migration have a direct bearing on women's ability

to participate in economic activities. Integrating psychosocial support into humanitarian interventions is therefore essential for a holistic approach to recovery.

## CONCLUSION

This study has provided an in-depth examination of the Niger Delta conflict's multifaceted impact on women's livelihoods, focusing particularly on female-headed households. The research confirms that the conflict has led to significant economic, social, and security challenges, thereby undermining the capacity of women to achieve sustainable development. At the same time, humanitarian interventions especially those that integrate livelihood support with community-based security measures have emerged as critical mechanisms for fostering resilience and economic recovery. The integration of feminist, intersectional, and conflict theoretical frameworks in this analysis underscores the complexity of the challenges faced by women in conflict zones. It also highlights the need for interventions that address both immediate and structural issues. By situating empirical findings within these broader theoretical debates, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the gendered dimensions of conflict and post-conflict recovery.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Design Gender-Sensitive Policies:**  
Policymakers should prioritize the development of interventions that specifically address the unique needs of women in conflict zones. This includes ensuring that programs are designed with an understanding of the intersecting factors of gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.
2. **Promote Integrated Humanitarian Strategies:**  
Humanitarian organizations should adopt integrated approaches that combine immediate relief (e.g., food, healthcare, and shelter) with long-term development initiatives such as vocational training, microcredit, and educational programs.
3. **Enhance Community Participation:**  
Involving local stakeholders in the planning and implementation of interventions can improve both the efficacy and sustainability of post-conflict recovery efforts. Community-based security initiatives, in particular, have proven effective in creating safer environments and fostering collective resilience.
4. **Incorporate Psychosocial Support:**  
Given the psychological toll of conflict and forced migration, it is essential that humanitarian programs include components for mental health support. Such measures will help women rebuild not only their economic capacity but also their overall well-being.
5. **Undertake Longitudinal Research:**  
Future studies should adopt longitudinal research designs to assess the long-term impacts of both the conflict and humanitarian interventions. Such research is crucial for identifying sustainable strategies and for monitoring the evolving needs of affected populations.

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