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Black gold in Ghana: Changing livelihoods for women in communities affected by oil production



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores women's diverse situations in the oil-producing coastal communities of Western Ghana, and the institutions that frame those situations. It examines how women's private and public spaces have been reformulated by the production of oil in their community. The study engaged in different forms of qualitative inquiry: focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and participant observation. Findings reveal the oil exploration and production in Ghana has spawned a new social order in which women's activities and livelihoods are invisible, thereby increasing their vulnerabilities. The case provides valuable insight for understanding the potential gender imbalances the oil industry may produce, and aims to assist government officials with framing policies to preempt or mitigate some of the adverse community-level impacts that may arise.

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1. Introduction

On 15 December 2010,¹ Ghana joined the league of oil-producing nations (AfDB, 2012). The news of its oil find, discovered only a few years prior, was interpreted paradoxically by Ghanaians. On the one hand, it was seen as a revolutionary opportunity for prosperity, but on the other hand, there was some doubt that the proceeds from the oil would be used to improve the standard of living of the average Ghanaian. As the fuel of the modern economy, oil plays a vital role in both oil-producing and non-producing countries. An oil discovery can provide a sense of hope, an unbridled optimism often underpinned by the belief that the revenues to be accrued will improve the livelihoods, social and economic well-being of the populace (Darkwah, 2010; Gary, 2009). Unfortunately, one consequence of oil production, at least in a number of African countries, has been the exact opposite: specifically, the

marginalization of indigenous people, in particular, women (King, 2010).

Women are essential to the survival of their families because of their social role of providing sustenance. Ecofeminists have long argued that “development”, such as oil production, destroys the natural resources – land and water – that sustain rural women and that they and their families depend on for their economic well-being and survival (Braidotti et al., 1994). However, as O’Shaughnessy and Krogman (2011) explain, much of the research on resource extraction and its host communities has either rendered women’s experiences invisible or addressed gender issues in a cursory manner. It is imperative, therefore, to shift from “universalizing to particularizing and contextualizing women’s experiences” (Ray, 2006, p. 460).

In situations in which communities’ material and social foundations and sources of income are destroyed, rural women are often the first to recognize the threats to their livelihoods (Oluwaniyi, 2011). Such has been the case in the Western Region in Ghana, where the communities that are affected by the oil production are located and where subsistence farming and fish mongering are economic mainstays. Although Ghana’s oil exploration is offshore, the industry’s activities impact the environment and the livelihoods of the inhabitants of coastal communities. Since the start of oil production in 2010, there has been relatively little empirical research undertaken to investigate how extraction

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¹ Oil was discovered in 2007 in commercial quantities by Kosmos Energy, and production commenced in 2010.

is affecting local communities near the oil fields, in particular, women. A baseline study by King (2010) and exploratory analysis by Boohene and Peprah (2011) on women and oil communities in Ghana, Obeng-Odoom's (2014) work on sex workers in the 'Oil City',² and Ackah-Baidoo's (2013) study on fishermen in Cape Three Points certainly present some interesting ideas on the subject, but more comprehensive appraisal is needed.

Using feminist political ecology (FPE) as a framework, this paper attempts to bridge this gap by providing a more nuanced understanding of women's experiences in Ghana's oil communities. How have women's private and public spaces been reformulated by local oil production? Moreover, what coping strategies have they adopted in response to changes brought about by oil production? Exploring the position of women in oil-producing communities provides valuable insight into the potential gender imbalances the industry may exacerbate. However, none of these policies will become effective if the access and opportunities generated by the oil resources are not fully and broadly owned locally and if gender dimensions are not incorporated into them.

In the sections that follow, I discuss the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the analysis. The last two sections of the paper highlight the study findings and the conclusions.

2. Theoretical underpinnings

Many efforts have been made to explain the relationship between the exploitation of natural resources in, and the social, economic and political implications for, the nations that produce them. The scholarly literature on the resource curse posits that countries endowed with natural resources are more likely to experience poor development outcomes because of underlying political and institutional issues, such as authoritarianism and neo-patrimonial and rentier politics (Humphreys et al., 2007; Ross, 2001; Auty, 1998; Karl, 1997). According to the literature on the resource curse, countries that depend on extractive industries are among the most economically troubled, socially unstable, authoritarian and conflict-ridden in the world (Karl, 2005). The result is that in spite of increased income and possibly GDP growth, the development of the non-oil sectors in these countries slows or is reversed by the overvaluation of currencies, double digit inflation, capital flight, corruption, worsening social outcomes and rampant unemployment, and deteriorating environmental quality (Karl, 1997, 2005; Shepherd, 2013). Proponents of the resource curse explore the nexus between the paradox of resource abundance, conflict and economic growth (Obi, 2010). Their arguments, according to Obi (2010), are based on causal mechanisms that link resources and poor development outcomes. A long list of countries appear to have been "damaged" by the discovery and exploitation of oil, from Nigeria to Equatorial Guinea, Angola, Gabon and Sudan, to Turkmenistan and Venezuela (Shepherd, 2013). These countries, on the surface, reflect most of the salient features associated with the resource curse: corruption, conflict, instability and high levels of poverty (Obi, 2013). The wealth generated by resource extraction in these countries more often than not dissipates through corruption and other chicanery before it can be applied for the general welfare of the citizens of the country.³

The resource curse thesis has been challenged by a number of scholars over the years. Ayelazuno (2013), for example, posits that the resource curse thesis dwells mainly on the internal policies and economic causes of the problem and how they negatively impact

economic development without probing the historical and global dynamics of resource exploitation. As Obi (2013) asks: "How is the resource curse constructed and reproduced and whose interests does it serve?" (p. 65) In the same vein, Shivji (2009) asks: "What is the context in which resource extraction takes place, who appropriates the resources and how do they accumulate?" There are certainly deeper and more complex interrelated conditions that need to be carefully analyzed. By law, host governments own natural resources on behalf of their people. However, because capital-intensive technology is needed to extract these resources cost-effectively, and in most cases, the host governments do not have this technology, and are compelled to enter into agreements with the multinationals that do have the technology, as well as management skills and capital. These companies, therefore, have considerable leverage in negotiations with individual – largely "revenue collecting" – natural resource-dependent states (Obi, 2013; Sovacool, 2010).

As Le Billon (2001) explains, lucrative natural resources tend to be extracted and exported rather than refined locally to retain revenue, thereby creating very few productive links between resource extraction and other areas of the local economy. In the context of oil-producing Africa, the process of subordinating oil production to domination by oil multinational corporations and transnational elites and the demands of global markets have largely resulted in oil production and profits becoming concentrated in secured enclaves, providing little or no benefit to the population at large (Obi, 2010; Ferguson, 2005). The extractives sector largely constitutes an enclave economy and is inaccessible to most citizens except via revenues paid to governments in the form of royalties, taxes and profits (Le Billon, 2001). Many of these tendencies are now being witnessed in Ghana's oil industry (Panford, 2014). As Ackah-Baidoo (2013) elucidates, Ghana's offshore oil extraction now has the look of "enclave extraction [that] has very few linkages with the local economy and generates few possibilities for job creation for the average Ghanaian" (p. 153). The enclave thesis has been challenged by some scholars (e.g., Bloch and Owusu, 2012), who maintain that there exist some fiscal and consumption linkages, particularly with gold mining. In the case of Ghana, however, enclavism already persists in its extractive industries: as an African Development Bank report (AfDB, 2012) explains, the country's mining sector contributes less than seven percent to national GDP and employs only 0.69% of the working population.

Unequal power relations and structures in the global economy shape the conditions of resource-rich countries. As Campos-Serrano (2014) explains, the international principle of sovereignty is central in the political economy of oil extraction. Domestically, the nature of oil-related development reflects the contingent, historically constructed relationships between business, labor and broader civil society interests that shape state policies and governance (Cumbers, 2012). As Obi (2013) explains:

Rather an excessive focus of the way in which abundant oil endowment provokes the 'failure' of African states: poverty, corruption and violent conflict, much more attention needs to be directed at the ahistorical construction of grievance(s), nature of state-society relations and linkages between the local-national-global in what is in reality transnationally constructed relationship, which benefits all the dominant factions embedded in oil-led capitalist extraction, transfer and accumulation. [p. 74]

It is important, therefore, to consider the relationships between state and national economies and the incorporation of these economies into the broader global economy, in addition to how these dynamics affect development outcomes. Ayelazuno (2013) advocates using a critical political economy approach, which

² Since the discovery of oil in the Western Region in 2007, Takoradi, the regional capital of the Western Region has been automatically referred to as the Oil City.

³ Anonymous (2000). Oil and Hope for Chad. *Oil and Gas Journal*, 98 (24), p. 25.

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