

*Daughters of the Niger Delta*, Documentary Film (55:30 min). Directed by Ilse van Lamoen, featuring Hannah Tende, Naomi Alaere Ofofi, Rebecca Churchill. Abuja, Nigeria: Media Information Narrative Development (MIND); Nijmegen, the Netherlands: FLL.

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*Daughters of the Niger Delta* is a compelling documentary by and about women of the region. Nine Delta women were equipped with filmmaking skills to make the documentary through a partnership between MIND (Media, Information and Narrative Development), a Nigerian non-governmental organisation that empowers local women to document human rights issues, and FLL, a Dutch organisation that offers training in participatory video. The result is a film described by its makers as a ‘bottom up production’ which sympathetically profiles three local women: Hannah and Rebecca, who live in rural communities in marked poverty, and Naomi, university-educated and a member of the film crew. The documentary focuses on a particular challenge that each of these women faces. In so doing it reveals some of the larger, patriarchal dynamics that produce these challenges and shape the women’s lives. Inevitably the documentary implicates in the women’s troubles the environmental and social degradation caused by crude oil extraction in the Delta. Yet oil is not the central story. By focusing instead on the everyday lives of women, *Daughters of the Niger Delta* offers new angles on some of the pressing issues in the region, illustrating the feminist insight that there is much to be learned from women’s perspectives.

Hannah is a widow struggling to provide for herself and her children, having been ejected from her marital home by her husband’s family after his death. While Hannah invokes ‘culture’ to explain this experience, she recognises clearly that she has suffered an injustice and that, in her community, culture is largely and somewhat arbitrarily defined by men for their benefit. For instance she questions why the cultural injunction against widows’ remarriage does not equally apply to widowers. Rebecca, the second woman in the film, farms on land informally allotted to her by her husband,

to whom she is married by customary rite. In one scene we hear Rebecca say that she cannot be driven from this land because she has children with her husband. The film then cuts to Hannah talking about her experience of just this dispossession. Customary marriage does not guarantee women legal property rights, nor does motherhood guarantee social and economic protection. While I am of the feminist camp that would insist that it is not because women are wives or mothers that they should enjoy their basic rights, the point is that the situation of a woman like Rebecca is a lot more precarious than she seems to assume.

Rebecca's central narrative in the film concerns the harsh realities of childbearing in the Niger Delta. Pregnant again, Rebecca recounts that only six of her eleven children are still alive. Viewers learn that the problem of maternal mortality in the region far outstrips the more media-reported issue of kidnapping. We watch a visibly pregnant Rebecca struggling along with other women in the highly polluted environment to find water that is clean enough to simply bathe their children, much less drink or cook with. Clean water for domestic use is seen as women's concern and so the lack of it becomes their problem and expense. This is just one of several examples in the film revealing how the well-known problem of oil pollution in the Delta has particular gendered effects that are often overlooked in public and even activist discourse. As with the appalling maternal mortality rates in the region, the lack of basic infrastructure that the film starkly evidences is a serious indictment of both the Nigerian government and the multinational oil companies that have reaped fortunes from the Delta for over 50 years now.

The third woman in the documentary, Naomi, has a rather different story. She recounts facing what is now a too-common experience for young women in Nigerian universities: sexual harassment and sexual blackmail by male lecturers. Naomi tells that her refusal to have sex with a particular lecturer, coupled with her lack of both formal and informal recourse within her university, meant that she was punished with a third-class degree. This qualification did not reflect her true academic achievement and also hampered her later search for employment. Naomi's example complicates assumptions within neoliberal economic development discourse that greater access to formal education equals 'women's empowerment.' It shows that deeper and more structural transformations are needed. Naomi provides a telling counterpoint to the two other women in the documentary, too,

especially when we hear them voicing aspirations to educate their daughters as a route out of poverty. By juxtaposing the particular struggles and hopes of its three protagonists, the film is particularly effective in showing how women in different social positions face interlocking and shifting conditions of patriarchal oppression.

*Daughters of the Niger Delta* ends on a hopeful note nonetheless. Naomi finds a good job; Rebecca's husband agrees to consider family planning options; Hannah initiates discussion within her community about the unfairness of certain widowhood practices. One immediately wonders if and how much the women's participation in the film project contributed to these positive developments, through the certain 'consciousness raising' that may come with reflecting upon and articulating one's experiences of injustice. In their writing about the film, the producers claim that the use of a local and all-woman film crew was central to encouraging Hannah, Rebecca and Naomi to speak so openly about their lives; and that the familiar and everyday identities of the crew members allowed them to venture deeper into the Delta's creeks than foreign and even local journalists may go. I imagine, too, that the local positionality of the crew shaped the film's framing of each woman's story, contributing to its certain sense of integrity and nuance.

Thus the participatory, peer-filmmaking model of *Daughters of the Niger Delta* suggests the potential, the new insights and voices that may emerge, if more Africans are enabled to make critical films and documentaries about their communities and local issues. As well as the projects of non-governmental organisations like MIND, there are a number of regional and pan-African initiatives that aim to train and support filmmakers on the continent. These include 'Imagine,' the film school in Ouagadougou founded by the Burkinabe film director, Gaston Kaboré; 'Maisha's Film Lab,' started by the director Mira Nair in Uganda; and 'Nyerai Films' initiated by author and filmmaker, Tsitsi Dangarembga, in Zimbabwe. We need more of such initiatives in Africa, for which it is vital to devise strategies for independent and sustainable fundraising. It is worth noting here that *Daughters of the Niger Delta* was funded by the Dutch government and Dutch international development agencies.

There is the also structural matter of who is likely to have the opportunity to see such films. *Daughters of the Niger Delta* has been screened at more international than Africa-based film festivals, the latter being relatively

few in number. It has been very well-received; it won the award for best documentary at the 2013 Abuja International Film Festival and at the 2013 LA Femme International Film Festival, and the audience award at the 2013 London Feminist Film Festival. According to its producers, the film has also been used in development programming in various sites in Nigeria, including outside the Delta. This last point is important for putting diverse Nigerian communities into critical conversation. Perhaps most significant and encouraging is that an effort has been made to screen the film within the Delta via a grassroots, mobile cinema initiative. The project of advancing critical and activist filmmaking in Africa must be matched with these kinds of creative efforts to reach local audiences – for us as Africans to increasingly frame our own stories.

### **Cited websites**

<http://www.daughtersofthenigerdelta.org/>

<http://www.mindng.org/>