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**The 2016 International women’s Day (IWD) Forum on: “Pledge for Parity: Support Women in Agriculture in Niger Delta”, organized by the Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in Niger Delta (PIND) in collaboration with Working Fingers Initiatives International and USAID-MARKETS ll Project on Tuesday March 8, 2016 in Asaba, Delta State.**

**Background**

As part of activities to celebrate the 2016 International Women’s Day theme of ‘Pledge For Parity’ and in solidarity with women across the world, the Foundation for Partnership Initiatives in the Niger Delta (PIND) organized a forum on Pledge for Parity: Support Niger Delta Women in Agriculture on March 8, 2016 in Asaba, Delta State.

The forum was held in partnership with the USAID-Maximizing Agricultural Revenue and Key Enterprises in Targeted Sites (MARKETS ll) project, a project implemented in partnership with PIND in Niger Delta. A second partner was the Working Fingers Initiative International (WOFII), a coalition of women-focused organizations in Delta State, promoting women’s empowerment and gender equality. The Forum brought together women farmers in Aquaculture, Cassava, Palm Oil and Poultry value chains, government, financial institutions, the media and other key actors from Niger Delta States.

**Commencement/ Welcome Address**

The event started with safety moment. The contribution of women to safety was highlighted by the Security Manager of PIND, Col. Mike Ekpe as he brought to the knowledge of the participants that popular bulletproof vest worn by security operatives all over the world was invented by a woman - Stephanie Kwolek of United States of America.

The PIND Field Projects Manager, Sylvester Okoh, in his welcome address acknowledged the presence of all invitees from governmental and non-governmental organizations, international development organizations and the media. He extended special greetings to women farmers from the nine(9) Niger Delta states who travelled from far away locations to participate in the event.

He informed the forum of PIND’s four distinct but mutually reinforcing program areas: Economic Development, Capacity Building, Peace Building, and Analysis and Advocacy programs all geared towards empowering communities to achieve a peaceful and enabling environment for equitable peaceful economic growth and sustainable development in the Niger Delta.

In line with the 2016 International Women’s Day theme: “Pledge for Parity”, PIND focused on “Pledging Parity to Support Women in Agriculture” because Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy of the Niger Delta and women are key players in the sector.  Addressing the barriers that reduce the participation of women along the agricultural value chains is critical in transitioning their roles and in empowering them to access resources and close income gaps with men. He advised that women involvement in agriculture should transit from livelihood to enterprise.

**Goodwill Messages**

Goodwill messages came from various participating institutions. Among them were those from Dr. Gregory Osubor of African Development Bank (ADB), Chevron, Working Fingers Initiative International (WOFII), MARKETS 2 Project (a partnership between USAID and PIND) and representative of the Secretary to the Government of Delta State.

Their different messages centred on the need for women to celebrate their achievement and support one another in other to bridge gender gap. Mr. Deji Haastrup, General Manager, Policy, Government and Public Affairs of Chevron represented by Mr. Wole Agunbiade at the Forum in his message, emphasized that women are the engine room of development in any society and as such should be continually supported in their development strides. Mr. Archibong Bassey of MARKETS ll, enjoining that pledging for gender parity should be backed-up with sincere commitment and action in all spheres of endeavors, noted that from his experience Chairing Fund Raising Committees, people pledged without commitment.

**Lead Presentation**

Dr. Etim Frank, Director of the Women United for Economic Empowerment, who also heads the Clement Isong Centre for Development Studies, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State in his paper titled *Pledge for Parity: Support Women in Agriculture in Nigeria* noted thatthe IWD globally is a day for women to take stock, celebrate successes in the face of enormous obstacles, which are results of process of socialization. According to him, like the proverbial ‘Agama lizard’ women need to beat their chests, appreciate each other and chart the way forward. He listed socio-economic and political women achievers like Angela Merkel of Germany, Hilary Clinton of United State of America globally and later zeroed to the Niger Delta region where he extolled women like Prof. Alele, William, Folorunsho Alakija and Ngozi, Okonjo Iweala.

He went on to interrogate Niger Delta women opinion on the World Economic Forum (WEF) 2015 prediction that it will take up to the year 2133 before parity (equality, fairness) between man and woman would be achieved. The response was an overwhelming ‘no’. According to him the women position was in conformity with his position as globalization is making skills and capabilities handy and women in the Niger Delta and around the world are making use of these opportunities. He illustrated this with a success story in Itung community in Akwa Ibom State where women had no title to land nor position in the village council and other social structures, but after five years of intensive work by civil society supported by ActionAid, women now own land and are members of village councils.

He expanded on the rationale of 2016 IWD theme, “Pledge for Parity”, as he posited that men and women contributed equally in the creation of the ‘social contract’ which gave rise to the human society in which we live. He further stated that parity is one’s conscious effort and decision to give and take because ‘the other person is as human as you are’. He substantiated his points with a story in the Holy Bible concerning women and inheritance. Daughters of Zelophad, (a Jew who died without a son) petitioned Moses for inheritance. Moses in turn consulted with God and Moses was ordered to give inheritance to the daughters by God. Etim also made passing reference to the Holy Qur’an on sharing wealth including land between men and women. Frank stressed the need for women to advocate for their rights as Zelophehad daughters did.

He gave a statistical presentation of gender disparity in the National Assembly with eight women out of 109 Senators, and 14 women out of 360 House of representative members. His data also showed that out of 231 Legislators in the nine Niger Delta States Houses of Assembly, only 20 are women. This still indicates a far cry from the 30 percent affirmative action in the 1995 the Beijing Conference Plan of Action.

Statistics in his presentation further showed that about 60 – 79 per cent of Nigerian women reside in the rural areas and are engaged in agriculture. Niger Delta has an estimated population of about 31 million people yet only 7. 2 per cent of the women engaged in agriculture do so in land owned by them. This ownership constraint reduces outputs and incomes for women.

Challenges responsible for high level of disparity especially in the Niger Delta as identified by Dr. Etim included lack of adequate access to land, finance, cultural obstacle, the use of rudimentary tools and agricultural practices,limited knowledge of modern technologies, poor public policies which partly exclude the rural areas, imbalance in the distribution of infrastructure between the urban /rural areas, inadequate capacities, and rural - urban drift occasioned by neglect of rural areas by governments. These challenges manifest in all facets of agricultural value chains including cassava, palm oil and aquaculture.

To reduce gender gap in Niger Delta, he recommended government policies that are women-centred, support women’s access to land, financial institutions to develop women friendly schemes with respect to their peculiarities and government to address the rural-urban drift by providing basic amenities in the rural areas and to promote cluster/cooperative farming land for women. He enjoined women to take advantage of cluster farming, pointing out that cluster farming requires women to demonstrate cooperative spirit. He stressed the importance of capacity building in all spheres: “Capacity building is required for women to be able to increase agricultural yields, add significant value to farm produce, operate profitably in the local and global markets, access farmlands and finance, build networks and engage in advocacy, create enabling agricultural environments, influence political and legal decisions”.

**PANEL DISCUSSION 1**

The eight panelists (African Development Bank, Bank of Agriculture, Lift Above Poverty, Media Insights Communications, Family Resources Development Centre, Nigerian Women in Agricultural Research for Development, Representatives of Governments of Delta, Imo and Ondo States) discussed efforts by their respective institutions to mainstream gender and narrow the gap of disparity between men and women. Representatives from African Development Bank, Bank of Agriculture and Lift Above Poverty (LAPO, a micro finance bank) informed participants of their various loan and development programs specifically designed for women. They gave their contact information to participants willing to reach out to their institutions for further information and support. Mrs Rita Okorie, representing Bank of Agriculture admonished women in agriculture to grow gradually. Majority of women that sort for loan according to her wanted to start big despite the fact that they might not have the technical knowhow in that agribusiness. She insisted that women should not despise the days of small beginning. She also advised women from Niger Delta to be diligent in paying bank loans as women in the North. According to her, BOA’s work with Niger Delta women showed the need for ND women to improve on repayment rate.

Representative from Ondo State Wealth Creation Agency, Mrs. Olufunke Ogunlade and that of Imo State Government, Mrs Esther Ejiogu admonished women to appreciate and celebrate each other, embrace teamwork, mentor each other, and focus on enterprise agriculture rather than livelihood to bridge the gap with men.Mrs. Emmanuella Ewuonye, Nigerian Women in Agricultural Research and Development (NIWARD) a Senior Researcher with the Nigerian Institute for Oil Palm Research (NIFOR) who reiterated challenges women faced in oil palm value chain suggested that the way out is through increased access to land, finance, modern equipment and continuous capacity building of women. Mrs, Uju Osadebey Delta State Director of Fisheries, on her part called on women to rise and take action rather than waiting to be pitied. She called for mentorship, capacity building, advocacy and sensitization of women.

**Ms. Adeshola Komolafe, Executive Director of Media Insight communications, narrated media challenges faced by women in agriculture ranging from inability to publicize their activities, rejection of agro news by print and electronic media to failure of women, inappropriate media/channels used by government and financial institutions to pass information. She cited situations where government and banks advertised loans opportunities for rural women in newspapers and social media noting that majority of rural dwellers do not have access to such media. She advised that to reach women in rural areas, radio and town-criers and community gatekeepers are better options. Even with the radio, she counseled that the days and time in each locality are factors that should not be ignored for greater impacts to be achieved.**

**Experience Sharing (Panel Discussion 2)**

Panelists in this session were Madam Roslyn Jaja, a Palm Oil merchant from Edo State; Madam Josephine Acquaye-Ehoho, UUFA Aquaculture Farmer from Delta State; Madam Biola Akindipe from Ondo State Women Cassava Farmers Association; and Madam Deborah Nwosa from Delta State Micro, Small and Medium Scale Enterprise. They shared their practical experiences in each field of their agricultural endeavors in terms of opportunities, challenges encountered and how they were able to surmount them. Ms. Nwosa particularly talked on strategic agricultural engagement, and cluster farming now helping women to overcome challenge of access to land. According to her, women should know what type of crop to plant, when, and how to maximize profits. She cited example that tomatoes and other vegetables could be grown on empty cement bags for good profits without necessarily owning a land. This view was reiterated by Mr. Adams Inhianso of Bank of Agriculture.

Mrs. Acquaye-Ehoho advised on the need for women to understand their farming business, earn salary from profit, take time off for vacation. She was the immediate past General Secretary of the UUFFA, she ensured her successor is a woman who she mentored. She advised women to mentor women to take on leadership positions in associations. All discussants said women are good managers of homes and businesses and should be given equal opportunity with men to showcase their worth. They also advised women to start small and grow gradually in the absence of loans or collateral to secure loans. One of the panelists said demonstration of capacity to achieve by women farmers, will attract financial institutions that will then be willing to support expansion.

Some key messages from the panelists and participants: women should love, appreciate and encourage each other, interact and learn from both men and women, mentor upcoming women and share information on opportunities available, diversify sources of farming income and invest in capacity building. They also put emphasis on taking care while making income. The popular mantras during these sessions were: No woman!, No Nation !; No woman!, No food on the Table!; Great Farmers!, Great Nation!.

The two panel discussion sessions received a number of questions and comments from participants and panelists responded. Some of the questions centred on banks stringent measure for loan, insensitivity to women’s plights, confiscation of women property for inability to pay back loans, inexplicit information on loan process and high interest rates. Many of the questions went to representatives of BoA and LAPO. The representatives gave their phone numbers to participants for further interactions.

As part of the day’s program, students from a Senior Secondary School, Noble Academy, sang a song to the admiration of participants with the title, “Women are the backbone of National Development” which itemized and eulogized contributions of women to economic growth and development of any society. A short movie on HIV/AIDS prevention and management of mothers that tested positive with the virus to prevent transmission to new born babies sponsored by Chevron was screened. Also a short didactic drama that captured challenges women face in search of loan to expand their agro-business especially stringent measures by private and government banks with no recourse to the cultural barriers faced by women and the neglect of rural women by various government policies was presented by the Department of Agriculture of Delta State College of Education.

**Major Outcomes**

1. Women to love, appreciate, acknowledge, network, mentor, take actions and celebrate each other while intensifying actions to narrow gender gap.
2. Challenges faced by women in agriculture including lack of access to land, finances, modern technologies though enormous are surmountable with women friendly policies by public and private institutions.
3. Loans are growth drivers, enabling access to land, modern equipment, resources, linkages, agric. service providers.
4. Women need business development skills to effectively use loans and other resources.
5. Women should be empowered and supported to take leadership positions.
6. Use appropriate media to reach out and highlight activities and achievements of rural women farmers.
7. To increase income streams, women farmers should engage in mixed or multi-crop farming - adding crops that can be harvested within very short period to long term crops, tomatoes and okro were given as examples of short term crops.
8. Exposure to continuous capacity building is required to overcome gender disparity since appropriate knowledge acquisition leads to change in attitude and practice (KAP).
9. Pledge for parity should be backed with commitment and action.

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**Rapporteurs**

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