



# Biafra women as combatants in the Nigerian civil war, 1967-1970

Rosemary Chinwe Eze<sup>1</sup> and Eze Jonas<sup>2\*</sup>

Department of Linguistics, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

Department of History & International Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

Correspondence Author: Eze Jonas

Received 3 Jul 2023; Accepted 14 Aug 2023; Published 25 Aug 2023

## Abstract

The Nigerian Civil War popularly known all over the world as the Biafra War was fought from July 6, 1967 to January 15, 1970. Since the end of the conflict in 1970, both the fictional and non-fictional accounts of the war tend to have peripheralized the Igbo women's roles in the violent historic conflict. Countless literatures provoked by the war seem to have confined the contributions the Biafra women made in the war to the maintenance of the home front in the absence of the men. Relying on interviews which I conducted in Nsukka, Enugu State between January 2020 and February 2021, official reports and gazettes, private papers and memoirs, newspapers, articles and different genres of secondary sources of evidence, this study examines the neglected but very critical roles of the Biafra women in the said Biafra Civil War. The study also interrogates how their critical roles as combatants in the war impacted and shaped their post-Civil War lives in the society.

**Keywords:** biafra women, civil war, infantry, nsukka, commandos, militia

## 1. Introduction

The Biafra War which was a watershed in Africa's continental affairs is almost consistently captured in existing literatures as an exclusive male preserve. Since the war ended in 1970, the story of the enviably unique roles and experiences of the Igbo women in the conflict have yet to be fully told and adequately recorded. The Igbo women's participation in the war's real hostilities as combatants remains obscured to present in the war's narratives, and so, remains a yet to be fully documented story of the conflict. Although the men in their claim of superiority restricted the Biafra women folk from fighting in this Civil War, most Igbo women refused to be bound by the restriction. Therefore, many Biafra women and young girls disguising themselves as men bore arms and charged to battle ([www.war-memorial.net/Ngeran-cvl-war-31](http://www.war-memorial.net/Ngeran-cvl-war-31)). Indeed, many of the women joined the Biafra Armed Forces, and formed a strong core of the infantry, the commandos, militia, spies, task forces etc ([www.war-memorial.net/Ngeran-cvl-war-36](http://www.war-memorial.net/Ngeran-cvl-war-36)). Like the men, these women soldiers fought the war, lived in camps, suffered in prisons and died horribly, yet heroically in their respective causes ([www.war-memorial.net/Ngeran-cvl-war-40](http://www.war-memorial.net/Ngeran-cvl-war-40)). Their contributions were no less valuable than those of their husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers who fought on the same battlefields. The women were also commonly known to have offered their services in the war as nurses, cooks, laundresses, supporters, organizers, and many more (biafrawar memories posted December, 2019, 1:42:47) <sup>[7]</sup>. The conventional notion of women in war as weak, fragile, on-lookers, and mere sexual elements for men's satisfaction which the women of Biafra disproved makes this study imperative. The work is also important as it showcases to the world the best in Igbo women folk (sic), their creativity, endurance, adaptability, indomitable will to be, sense of solidarity, sense of common cause, vigilance, collaboration, patriotism,

courage, determination and resolve. If not for the women of Biafra, and their courage, the Biafra race and nation would have been totally annihilated during the conflict (Audrey Chapman, 1968, 53) <sup>[8]</sup>. Therefore, giving the roles of the women a paper weight in this conflict as most literatures tend to do is both act of injustice and disservice. Besides, women and war have not only emerged as a new field of study, but have remained critical issues in all conflict discourses around the world.

## 2. Methodology, sources and significance of study

The study was organized under seven subthemes. These subthemes include the introduction, an overview of the Civil War, pre-war status of the Biafra women, combatant roles of the women in the conflict, the experiences of the Biafra women in the Civil War, the implications of their combatant roles and experiences on the society after the war and conclusion. The purpose of this thematic arrangement is for coherence and ease of understanding. Literatures consulted were acknowledged at the end of the study as references. The methodology employed in this study has already been stated in the abstract. The relevance of the study is rooted in its presumed capacity to bring to the fore the relevance of women in critical conflict and crisis situations as well as in its ability in freeing them from the egoistic superiority of the men folk in the society. The study brought to light the atrocities committed against the Igbo women in the Civil War and so adds a voice for the better treatment of women and children in war and violent conflicts. The work's area of focus and methodology distinguish it from a host of other related literatures on the conflict.

## 3. The Nigeria civil war: an overview

From July 6, 1967 to January 15, 1970 there was a Civil War in Nigeria. In that year (1967), Eastern Region of Nigeria under

the leadership of Odumegwu Ojukwu unilaterally declared itself an independent republic known as the Republic of Biafra. The Civil War resulted from the efforts of the Federal Government of Nigeria to stop the Igbo's secession from the union of the Nigerian Federation. The Igbo's persistence to break away and the Federal Government's attempt to stop them from breaking away produced the 30 months Civil War in Nigeria. It was 30 months of national disaster. The cost of the War to the nation in men and materials remain unquantifiable. It was the first modern war conducted in independent Africa (Njoku, 1987:91) [22].

On the outbreak of the War, the then Federal military Government of General Gowon read most incorrectly the Biafra War mission spirit, their capabilities and resistance capacity. This explains Gowon's erroneous statement to the world when the war broke out that his government would bring the Igbo back to the fold by mere police action and within 24 hours (Njoku, 1987:93) [22]. The war that the General calculated to last 24 hours lasted 30 months.

To Biafra, the Civil War was a war of the people against genocide, a war for peace, happiness, liberty and security. As such, they fought it with unique determination and the last drop of their blood. In the face of local and international oppressive actions-blockade, starvation and organized genocide, the Biafra or Igbo women demonstrated unique spirit of patriotism and nationalism towards Biafra's win-the-war efforts. The Igbo women's role in the war seemed to have been the direct opposite of their traditional stereotypical representations and objectifications before the conflict. Traditionally, the Igbo women folk were hitherto objectified as mere sexual objects, weak, fragile, and human elements that inhabited a space outside the affairs of the nation state (Oyewole, 2016:38) [6].

Contrary to all expectations, the Igbo women charged to battle and gallantly fought back the enemy in the war. They demonstrated survival acumen, hope and self-determination drive by the capable ways they discharged war time responsibilities imposed on them. Joining as combatants, they participated effectively in the hostilities and contributed a lot to the survival of both their families and the Biafra soldiers in the war field. They established networks through which they obtained the needed resources for their families and the soldiers in the Biafra sector. They fearlessly went behind the enemy lines to buy those very essential commodities needed in Biafra for the survival of the Biafra people (Jacob Onyechi, 1999: 13) [25].

Eze J.O, examined the causes of the civil war in Nigeria in his book entitled *Strategic Thinking* (Jonas Eze, 2014:36) [15]. According to the author, the Nigerian civil war had both remote and immediate causes. The writer traced the remote causes to colonialism and the immediate causes of the war to post-colonial politics of hatred, anarchy and distrust in the country. According to him, the war was more of genocidal violence with the Igbo women and children passing through excruciating and indelible experiences physically, emotionally and psychologically. The war left shame and humiliation on the Igbo women as repercussions of dehumanization they suffered from the inhuman soldiers of the violent conflict. Chimamanda

Adichie, in her historical novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, gave an in-depth exposure of the bitter experiences of women in the Nigerian Civil War. She regretted that although the war took a toll on women, the war's narratives only gave women a passing attention (Chimamanda Adichie, 2006:31) [3]. Unfortunate to mention is the fact that this war which took a toll on women was conceived, planned, declared and executed by the Igbo men without any consultation of the Igbo women of the time. No evidence exists whatsoever to show that the women's opinion was sought before the war was declared.

#### 4. Pre-war status of igbo women

It is not open to controversy that the traditional Igbo society is patriarchal one. It is also a truism that the Igbo society is a male dominated one and that men are more visible than women politically and otherwise. Nevertheless, in the pre-civil war traditional Igbo society, women were not a paper weight (O. N.. Njoku,2000:65) Their rights were widely recognized. If men took a decision objectionable to them, the women could cause them to reconsider the decision. They applied different strategies to this end including what Judith Van-Allen metaphorically refers to as "sitting on men" (O. N.. Njoku, 2000:67). In extreme cases the women can vote with their feet by abandoning their marital homes en masse. Therefore in the pre-civil war Igbo society, women played weightier roles in the socio-political process than their relative invisibility and conventional wisdom would seem to suggest (O. N.. Njoku, 2000:69). Generally, Igbo men recognized the hidden power of the women and deferred to their sensibilities. At the various levels of the Igbo political arrangement, women have their own councils.

#### 5. The Igbo women combatants in the Biafra war

As already pointed out, the Igbo women constituted quite a good number of the Biafra armed forces in the Nigerian Civil War. Historically, when the war was declared, the men in their assumed traditional superiority over women made it somewhat illegal for Igbo women to join the Biafra military fighting forces in the Civil War. The women were barred from joining the Biafra military combative force on account of their gender (<http://www.litencyc.com/theliteracymagazine/biafra.php>). To the men, the women of Biafra were to take up non-combative roles in the war such as cooks, laundresses, nursing etc. This was because in Igboland war was seen as the males' preserve. But contrary to this conventional plan of the Igbo male folk, many women of Biafra refused to be confined to such minor traditional roles assigned to them in the war. Be that as it may, many Igbo young women and girls disguised themselves as men and joined the Biafra armed forces in different capacities. Some joined as infantry/commandos, others as militia, spies, task forces etc (Chioma Dike, 2014: 51).

In the Biafra war, infantry soldiers formed the backbone and cornerstone of the nation's defense system. In the war no military formation of the State was more central to the action than the infantry soldiers (Chioma Dike, 2014: 51). In this war, members of the Biafra infantry as ground troops were the ones that engaged the enemy, (the Nigeria federal forces) in close-

range combat They formed the front-line fighting team that neutralized over time the enemy combatants. To Eze, the women's sacrifice by their voluntary enlistment in the Biafra infantry would be better appreciated when we remember that becoming an infantry is an incredibly dangerous job. An infantry being a foot soldier trained to fight the enemy puts his/her life on the line daily (Jonas Eze, 2014) <sup>[15]</sup>. Further, the infantry soldier is always at the heart of the war zone, a very dangerous and delicate environment. In the military the job of the infantry soldier is considered to be the most physically demanding and the most psychologically stressful and extremely dangerous ((Jonas Eze, 2014) <sup>[15]</sup>. They locate the enemy soldier, and develop surveillance intelligence on how to destroy the enemy most often at a close range. Ngozika in a focal discussion narrates the circumstances that compelled her to join the Biafra military as an infantry soldier. According to her, although the Nigeria soldiers had been coming to throw bombs at us in Nkpor, which they called air raid, but one morning in August 1968, they came hurling their bombs from war planes that descended as low as to the height of palm trees. Before the raid, I had gone to the farm leaving behind my husband and two kids. After the raid, I returned home to see flesh, parts of the body of my two kids and my husband scattered by the bombs. Having lost all members of my family, I had no other alternative than to enlist in the Biafra infantry to proceed against the enemy soldiers that destroyed my family, my life and happiness. We were trained for 7 days and given a Biafra army uniform, ash colour and brown. In the training, we had a common matching song: "Ojukwu nye anyi egbe, iwe di anyi na-obi". That is, Ojukwu, give us gun, we are all angry. After the training, I was drafted to the Enugu sector where I served till the end of the war (Ngozika, 2020).

Uba Idris (2014) in an interview with Oduah deepens our understanding of the effective presence and operations of the Biafra women infantry soldiers in the Civil War. According to him, of all the Biafra infantry soldiers, the most notorious and generally dreaded was Captain Mary. In the words of Idris, "Captain Mary was one of the most gallant Biafra soldiers that shot anything at sight without missing. In all our trips to and fro the East, we always prayed to Allah to save us, to keep away Captain Mary." Idris was a truck driver that was conscripted to be carrying food stuffs and ammunitions from the North to Nigerian soldiers in their different sectors in the East.

In the same vein, Igbo young women and girls also enlisted in the Biafra military as commandos (Uba Idris, 2014). In Biafra, the commando as a military formation was roughly equivalent to the infantry. The commandos were trained to employ guerrilla like shock tactics against the enemy ranging from hand-to-hand combat to hit-and-run raids and ambushing (Jonas Eze, 2014:73) <sup>[15]</sup>. In other words, in Biafra, commando soldiers were raised as a special strike squad for carrying out surprise attacks on the enemy. Oyiodo Idoko (2020) from Enugu-Ezike in Igbo-Eze North Local Government Area of Enugu State who enlisted in the Commando Unit of the 18<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Biafra Army in January, 1968 recounts in an interview with the author thus: I am now 79 and can still reflect on my wartime experiences as a commando in the Biafra Army.

I joined the Biafra army 18<sup>th</sup> Battalion at Uga, Anambra State as a girl of 26. We received only three days intensive training at Abatete training depot. In the training we learnt how to operate locally made weapons like Ogbunigwe (mass killer in Igbo language), Ojukwu catapult, Mc 4 riffle etc. Although, I was trained disguised as a boy, there were seven girls that trained with us that did not hide their identity as women. After the training I was deployed by the 18<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Biafra Army to Abagana sector as part of the Biafra guerrilla unit commanded by Major General Jonathan Uchendu. It was our commando unit that launched Operation Wipe Out against the Federal enemy soldiers that occupied Ikot Ekpene. From Ikot Ekpene we proceeded to Calabar

These Biafra women combatants in the war also as commandos participated with the men in laying ambushes for the enemy soldiers. Oyiodo's narrates in the interview deepens this assertion. According to her, my first major military engagement was in March, 1968. In that month information came that the Nigerian Army commanded by Murtala Muhammed were conveying logistics to Onitsha for the Nigerian Army Second Division that had entered and captured Onitsha. The trucks were in a convoy of about 100 flanked by armored cars. We had ambush for them and they fell into our ambush. Our team inflicted on them the greatest casualty never ever experienced in the war (Oyiodo Idoko, 2020).

Further, the Igbo women soldiers were also known to have put their lives on the line by being appointed just like the men to spy on the enemy troops. One of the riskiest assignments of a soldier is to be sent on Observation Post (OP) work (Jonas Eze, 2014: 92) <sup>[15]</sup>. A soldier on Observation Post (OP) is one assigned to spy the enemy and return information that would enable say an infantry or a commando unit etc to plan an attack. Adaku (2020) in an interview with the author threw more light on the importance of OP noting that without OP, and its accurate report exercise, our infantry unit found it difficult if not impossible to plan and launch a successful attack during the war. As Adaku (2020) laments, in one of my OP assignments at Oron, I almost lost my life in the hands of the federal troops. The OP work danger is that when sent on this assignment, one goes close enough to the enemy soldiers to be able to obtain the required information about them for accurate report and planning. Adaku from Aku in Igbo-Etiti Local Government Area of Enugu state in the same interview narrated her reasons for joining the Calabar infantry sector of the Biafra army. Her words: "When the war broke out, I first joined the Nigerian Red Cros Society which then bore the name Biafra Red Cross Society. After our training on treatment in cases of emergency, I was posted in December 1967 to the Calabar sector of the war. In Calabar, we were in a military hospital treating Biafra casualties. In the hospital, my only brother, a Biafra army was brought in badly wounded by the enemy troops. He died in my hands less than one hour after his treatment. This loss of my brother to death was what compelled me to leave the Red Cross to join the Biafra military service proper. But to present I recount with sorrow the problem of our unit. We only had the guns called the Ojukwu catapult, Mac 4 riffles and later the ogbunigwe," (Adaku, 2020),

Young Biafra women and girls also constituted a strong core of the militia and task forces during the war. A militia consists of citizens of a nation or subjects of a state that could be called upon to enter a combat situation, as opposed to a professional force of regular, full-time military personnel (Jonas Eze, 2014: 76) <sup>[15]</sup>. From day one of the conflict, the Igbo militia women demanded that they be thought how to shoot and be given guns to fight the enemy. In May 1969, they formed Women's Front requesting the Biafra leadership to allow them to enlist in the infantry (Jacob Onyechi, 1999:16) <sup>[25]</sup>. They were known to carry grenades about during the war. This may explain why the Northern military officers often advised the fresh men in the field thus: "If you took a girl in Biafra have her bag checked first. Sometimes, we would find grenades in their bags. Absolutely, I have at times found a hand grenade in the hand bag of Igbo (Biafra) women" (Uba Idris, 2014). Ifeoma Onuora (2020) in a focal discussion threw more light on this. According to her, the hand grenades were carried about by the girls and women of the civil defense militia units. The grenades they carried about spoke volumes of the war spirit in them, their nationalism and commitment to the Biafra cause.

#### **6. Biafra women: their other contributions and experiences in the war**

In the Nigeria Civil War, the Igbo women were very active participants in the win-the-war efforts by Biafra. One of their most outstanding traditional roles during the war was the provision of food for both their families and the Biafra Soldiers in the battle field.

Historically, the Nigeria Civil War was characterized by acute shortage of food for the people of the region. We may recall that to force Biafra to abandon its secessionist move, the Federal Government of Nigeria embarked on near total sea and air blockade of the Biafra region. This starvation policy was imposed on Biafra with the help of foreign governments especially Britain. Lyndon Johnson the then US President who seemed to have supported the blockade against Biafra alleged that Europe and America cannot afford to have a Japan in Africa (Emefina Ezeani, 2013:39) <sup>[12]</sup>. Therefore, from the onset of the war, there was drastic shortage of food in Biafra. The food situation grew worse as the war progressed for as the encirclement of the republic by the Federal forces increased, the food producing areas within the republic shrank (Obageri, Emeka, 2003:22) <sup>[13]</sup>. To have food on the table for their families, and the soldiers, the women engaged in extensive farming. They farmed both male and female crops as they grew yams, cassava, cocoyam, maize etc. So, they farmed and gave away part of their farm produce free to the Biafra soldiers.

As Obiageri noted, starvation policy was introduced in Biafra by the Federal Government of Nigeria in the spirit and principle of Igbo annihilation (N. K. Chukwuemeka, 2010:37) <sup>[10]</sup>. Statement by Brigadier-General Benjamin Adekule seems to authenticate this view. In his words, "I want to see no Red Cross, no Caritas, no World Council of Churches, no Pope, no Missionary, and no UN delegates. I want to prevent even one Igbo from having even one piece to eat before their capitulation. We shoot at everything that moves and when our

troops march into the centre of Igbo territory, we shoot at everything, even at things that do not move," (N. K. Chukwuemeka, 2010) <sup>[10]</sup>. Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the War time Finance Minister of the Federation seemed to have put the essence of the starvation of the Biafra community very aptly. According to him, "All is fair in war and starvation is one of the weapons of war. I do not see why we should feed our enemies fat in order for them to fight harder" (N. K. Chukwuemeka, 2010) <sup>[10]</sup>.

As already stated, The Igbo women seeing this obnoxious Federal policy towards Biafra rose up to fight the said government-imposed food crisis in the region by trying to meet the food needs of their families and the soldiers. They farmed extensively and imposed food levies on themselves at community levels. The women representatives in the Biafra War Council agreed on the quantity of food to be contributed by each community and the communities were levied accordingly (Emefina Ezeani, 2013) <sup>[12]</sup>. Each community submitted its share of the levied food for the soldiers through its woman representative in the Biafra War Council. The food gathered was taken to the Biafra military camps and trenches twice a month. Although this food contribution by women was voluntary, almost all women complied from time to time. Their compliance was sure evidence of their open clamor and patriotic commitment to the very republic of Biafra.

At a point in the war when it was apparent that the Biafra military establishment could not keep some of its soldiers in full-time kitchen duties, the women in the Biafra War Council worked out a time table for the women's preparation of food for the servicemen (Ann Oyewole, 2016:38) <sup>[6]</sup>. The group also worked out prayer schedule for women. In essence, the women prayed as of duty for both the safety of the soldiers in the battle and for their victory in the war.

Important to mention is that as the encirclement of the republic by the Federal forces increased, the food producing areas within the republic shrank. With this, terrible hunger started hitting the civil populace and the servicemen. Malnutrition set in mightily. Kwashiorkor hit the land. The women were unable to meet the food needs of their families let alone those of the soldiers. The hungry soldiers feeling abandoned by the people and the government of republic of Biafra, started raiding the women's farms and their places of abode carting away food items found in their possession. It is unfortunate to note that most often these soldiers in the process of raiding these women for food also abused them sexually (Mmadu Helen, 2020).

Further, Igbo women in other to support both their families and the Biafra war efforts engaged in two types of trade. They traded internally (within Biafra) and externally (in Nigerian-held Biafra territories). The latter, external trade, that is, trade in the enemy occupied zones of the republic of Biafra (ahia attack) was the most far reaching, and on it, we concentrate our attention here. As already noted ahia attack denotes trade in the area of the enemy's active military occupation and engagement (Jacob Onyechi, 1999: 19) <sup>[25]</sup>. Ahia attack was almost an all women's affair for only very few men were engaged in the trade. Ahia attack was very significant and central to the survival of the entire Biafra people. The trade played very



important part in prolonging Biafra's resistance and existence as a nation ((Jacob Onyechi, 1999: 36) <sup>[25]</sup>. This explains why the government of Biafra encouraged it officially. By this trade, the Igbo women went behind enemy lines to buy those very essential commodities needed in Biafra and returned to sell them to the Biafra people. Salt was the most priced of the ahia attack essential goods. Early in the war, the Biafra salt producing areas of Okposi and Uburu in Ebonyi State fell to the Federal troops. The automatic consequence was scarcity of salt in Biafra (Ann Oyewole, 2016) <sup>[6]</sup>. It could be said that almost all the salt consumed in Biafra during the war came from ahia attack, as salt from relief agencies was terribly inadequate. In addition to salt, the traders also smuggled in tobacco, cigarettes, bathing soap, matches etc. The Igbo women in this trade made astronomical profits. But the trade was both very risky and dangerous.

The ahia attack's border crossing involved crossing the enemy's active military operational zones with wares and cash (money). In the crossing, the Biafra women traders often ran into the enemy soldiers. The soldiers who called them saboteurs often raped them, and also relieved them of both cash and wares. Some of these women traders were abducted by the soldiers who forced them to become their compulsory lovers and wives (Ann Oyewole, 2016) <sup>[6]</sup>. Given what the women traders experienced in the hands of the enemy soldiers, the trade was identified with high level of immorality and death. In the words of Ven. Prof. Jacob Onyechi (1999) <sup>[25]</sup>, "If you go behind enemy lines, there are prices to pay." But all those risks and dangers did not deter the Biafra women in the trade. This risky trade embarked upon by the women was a clear testimony of their determination for survival and outright resolute resolve for the victory of the Biafra republic.

Further, in the civil war, Biafra women were subjected to all forms of sexual violence and rape. The indiscriminate raping of Biafra women by the federal military forces seemed to have been an officially approved Federal Government's war policy as the call to have Igbo women raped formed the theme song or war jingle of the federal Kaduna Radio of Nigeria. The said Federal Radio's war jingle went thus: "Let us go and crush them, We will pillage their property, rape their women folk, kill off their men folk, and leave them uselessly weeping. We will complete the pogrom of 1966," (Emefina Ezeani, 2013) <sup>[12]</sup>. The women's sexual horrors were manifested not only in the form of rape, but also in abductions, military sexual slavery, enforced marriages, friendships, etc. Rape is a situation of men having carnal knowledge of women by force. Rape in civil war in Biafra represents the Nigerian Army's oppressive machinery against Biafran women. It depicts plunder, misuse, and destruction. The unique rape scenario of the Nigerian civil war was what Ann Marie Adams (2000) <sup>[11]</sup> referred to as portion of the war that other narratives only gloss or allude to. It was perhaps on account of the Igbo women's brutal sexual experiences that female war novelists insist that the story of the Biafra war is incomplete until it addresses the sexual abuses, victimizations, and maltreatments against the Igbo women.

During the war, the federal also troops raped small and young school girls, married and unmarried women including pregnant

mothers. Therefore, in the war Igbo women of all ages were victims of sexual violence. These women were targeted for rape on account of their ethnic nationality or identity (Adams, Ann Marie, 2000) <sup>[11]</sup>. In the war, Igbo women were used as sexual objects by the soldiers through all manners of rape. Gang rape was rife. Many mothers were raped in the full view of their husbands and children before being put to death. So many women and young school girls were raped and abducted to become compulsory wives and friends of the soldiers.

The author of the book *Roses and Bullets* captured the abduction and rape of Lady Ginika by the federal troops thus:

She struggled to free herself but they held her and pushed her to the ground. She screamed but one of them clamped a rough hand on her mouth. Divesting himself of her clothes, the sergeant grubbed her legs and prised them open ... I go fuck you ashawo ... Dat thing you no give Sule, I go take am today. Ashawo ... make you do your own, he said pointing to one of the soldiers (Adimora-Ezigbo, 2010) <sup>[5]</sup>.

Put succinctly, innumerable Igbo women and young girls were raped and pounded to pulp by the federal soldiers. Many pregnant mothers were raped before cutting them up. Some machete welding federal soldiers split open the bellies of Igbo pregnant mothers "to find hidden rebels" (Silva, Celia, 2005) <sup>[26]</sup>. The above occurred despite the issuance of operational code of conduct to the Nigerian troops in line with the Geneva Convention that women shall be protected against any attack on their person, and in particular against rape or any form of assault.

The Igbo women were also raided by the federal forces for sex in their different habitats. The fear of being raped by the Nigerian soldier forced many Igbo women to spend most of the war days in hiding. Yet, the Nigerian soldiers bent on catching women for their sexual comfort and pleasure were not deterred by their going underground. Through the soldiers sudden, unannounced regular raids of homes and hiding places, many Igbo women were picked up and carnally abused (Gloria, I. Chukwu, 2002) <sup>[9]</sup>.

The repercussions of the rape on the Igbo small, young school girls, married and unmarried mothers were varied and multidimensional. Generally, the rape left their victims violated, tainted and stigmatized. The raping of some married women by the soldiers was often tragic as it destroyed many marriages (Nnabude Catherine, 2020). Some husbands rejected their wives after being raped. In the same vein, many young girls that were raped lost their marriage offers as men did not see them as marriageable elements again. Many of them having passed through incessant rape, men saw them as second hand ladies. Worse still, some of the girls so raped including married women got pregnant for unknown soldiers. They delivered the babies, and their status as unmarried mothers made their marriages by young men difficult (Ifeoma Ugwu, 2020).

Beyond rape, there were also willful and or intentional cohabitation and marriages between the Igbo women and the federal soldiers. Of course, many Igbo women and young girls made themselves available to the Nigerian soldiers on account of the soldiers' relative affluence and comfort (Immaculata

Enwo-Irem, 2011)<sup>[14]</sup>. The Nigerian soldiers had at their disposal cash and a lot of food, and relief materials which were out of the reach of the ordinary civilians in Biafra. Therefore, some Igbo girls threw themselves to these soldiers and even pressured to be married to them as a way of helping their families that were facing untold starvation in the land. In the same vein, some Igbo married women did not only present themselves to be carnally enjoyed by the soldiers for cash, but abandoned their homes to co-habit with these soldiers as wives mainly to share in the good life which the typical Nigerian soldier was enjoying. Ven. Prof Jacob Onyechi (1999)<sup>[25]</sup>, seems to have put it aptly, “*Some of our women offered themselves to the Nigeria soldiers because they needed what they had.*” It was on account of this economic interest that the relationship between the Nigerian soldiers and the Biafra women was described sarcastically as “tomapep” relationship or marriage (Ann Oyewole, 2016)<sup>[6]</sup>. However, only a few soldiers took steps to formalize such marriages at the end of the war. A good case in point was that of the then military commander, Lt. Col. Olusagun Obasanjo who took an Igbo “tomapep” (Ann Oyewole, 2016)<sup>[6]</sup>.

#### 7. Impact of the combative role of women and their experiences on post-civil war gender relations in the society

The Igbo women’s roles in the war contributed to the redefinition of the traditional roles of women in Igboland and in the reconfiguration of gender relations in the society (Elizabeth, Rehn, 2002)<sup>[11]</sup>. Before the Civil War, women were mostly confined to domestic affairs of training their children and looking after the compound. They engaged in petty trading and farming, pottery making, spinning, weaving and basket making etc. But during the war, as the Igbo women joined the Biafra army as cooks, nurses, laundresses, and many traded in contraband goods across the warfronts to make ends meet for their families, their post-war roles were enlarged. After the war, sewing became a prominent women’s profession as many Igbo women during the war were forced to learn to sew and stitch trousers and shirts for the Biafra soldiers. More so, many Igbo women maintained the external commercial networks they established during the war. Put succinctly, after the war, Igbo women became more adventurous like their men counterparts and engaged in all kinds of business and trade (Elizabeth, Rehn, 2002)<sup>[11]</sup>. Indeed, following the war, the lives of the women ceased to be centered around the household and family. They became more involved in public affairs such as politics and started to enjoy the opportunity of taking up political leadership roles in the society.

#### Conclusion

The study has provided some insights into the obscured and neglected roles of Biafra women during the Civil War. It attempted repositioning the Biafra war history as it relates to women by reconstructing the Igbo women’s experiences and roles in the conflict. The story of the Nigerian civil war really seems incomplete if it does not embody the combative roles of the Biafra women in the Biafra war sectors. The inclusion of

their roles in the hostilities showcases to the world the best in Igbo women folk (sic), their creativity, endurance, adaptability, indomitable will to be, sense of solidarity, sense of common cause, vigilance, collaboration, patriotism, courage, determination and resolve.

The paper recommends that women should no longer be excluded in war strategies, policies and combat. Women have their unique gifts, talents, and intuitions that are indispensable in decision making and policy formulations in crisis and conflict situations. Finally, in civil wars and the like violent conflict situations, women’s welfare should be central in national security policies and deliberations for it is only when impunities against women and children in war are addressed could a nation be built.

#### References

1. Adams, Ann Marie. “It is Women’s War Engendering Conflict”, in Buchi Emechata’s *Destination Biafra*, Callaloo, 2000, 24.
2. Adigun, Agbaje. “The War and the Nigerian State”, in Ehosa Osaghae, Ebere Onwudiwe and Rotimi Suberu (eds.), *The Nigeriaqn Civil War and its Aftermath*. Programme on Ethnic and Federal Studies (PEFS). (Ibadan: John Archers Publisher), 2002.
3. Adichie, Chimamanda. *Half of a Yellow Sun*, (Lagos: Farafina, 2006, 108.
4. Adaobi Olivia Ihueze. “Women and Violent Conflicts in *Destination Biafra*, *Half of a Yellow Sun and Roses and Bullets*”, 2001, 118.
5. Adimora-Ezigbo, Akachi. *Roses and Bullets*. (Lagos: Jalaa Writers’ Collective Print), 2010, 36.
6. Ann Oyewole. ‘Olokoro Women in the Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970’, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Department of History and International Studies, Kogi State University, 2016, 38.
7. Biafra war memories, 2019 June 26.
8. Audrey Chapman. ‘Civil War in Nigeria’ *Midstream*, 1968 February, 23-45.
9. Chukwu Gloria I. “Biafra Women Under Fire: Strategies in Organizing Local and Trans-Border Trade During the Nigerian Civil War” in Ehosa Osaghae, Ebere Onwudiwe and Rotimi Suberu (eds.), *The Nigerian Civil War and its Aftermath*. Programme on Ethnic and Federal Studies (PEFS). Ibadan: John Archers Publishers, 2002, 3-29.
10. Chukwuemeka NK. ‘Our Agony, their Victory: The Impact of the Nigerian Civil War on Women and Children of Biafra in U.D. Anyanwu and U.U. Okonkwo (eds.)*Perspectives on the Nigerian Civil War*, (Owerri,: Imo State University Press), 2010, 37-66.
11. Elizabeth Rehn, Sir Leaf Johnson Ellen. *Women War Peace. The Independent Experts’ Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women’s Role in peace-building*. UNIFEM, 2002, 35.
12. Emefina Ezeani. In *Biafra Africa Died: The Diplomatic Plot*, (London: Virtus Lumen), 2013.
13. Emeka, Obageri. ‘Ukpo Women During the Nigeria Civil War’. Unpublished BA Thesis, Department of History and

- Internatuinal Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2003, 22-63.
14. Enwo-Irem Immaculata. "Afikpo Women and the NigeriaCivil War, 1967-1970", Unpublished MA Thesis, Department of History and International Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, 2011, 31-55.
  15. Eze Jonas. Strategic Thinking, (Nsukka: Huvika-J Publishers), 2014, 12-20.
  16. Holsti Kl. Peace and War. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1991, 67.
  17. <http://www.litencyc.com/theliteracymagazine/biafra.php>
  18. <http://www.afrcamasterweb.com/biafranwarcauses>
  19. [hyattractions.wordpress.com/2014-Women and the Nigerian Civil War](http://hyattractions.wordpress.com/2014-Women-and-the-Nigerian-Civil-War)
  20. Kari Karame. "Improving the Security of Refugee and Displaced Women: Recommendations for Policy and Practice from International Experts." Seminar at Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Oslo, (Norway: Osio), 2002, 67.
  21. Laure, Clemence. "Women's Role during Biafra War in Half of a Yellow Sun" in Universited d'Abboney Journal. 2016;4:94.
  22. Njoku HMA. Tragedy without Heroes: The Nigeria-Biafra War, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers), 1987, 91.
  23. 'Nigeria Civil War'. Polynational war memorial Retrieved 2014 January 4.
  24. Rotimi Suberu (ed.). The Nigeriaqn Civil War and its Aftermath. Programme on Ethnic and Federal Studies (PEFS). (Ibadan: John Archers Publisher), 2002.
  25. Onyechi Ven. Prof. Jacob Guardian Newspaper, 1999 May 5, 2-19.
  26. Silva, Celia. "Representations of Rape in Selected Fiction by African Women", Unpublished Master of Arts Thesis Universidade de Aveiro, 2005, 18.