

Women Participation in Conflict: The Case of the Biafran War

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ABSTRACT

In order to investigate the type and scope of Biafran women's involvement in the Nigerian Civil War from 1967 to 1970, this case study looks into their various responsibilities by using academic research on women's participation in the conflict as a lens. Through historical narratives, archive materials, and empirically documented interview of a government official who is Biafran, results show that, in contrast to stereotypes of women as passive during conflict, Biafran women had essential and active roles. They served even when deliberate malnutrition ("weapons of war") was applied against them, severely impairing their capacity to provide for their families. Some women ventured into hostile terrain on perilous missions to procure provisions and sustenance. Furthermore, Biafran women fought alongside men on the front lines, a novel finding that refutes the belief that they only play supportive, non-combat roles. The research also reveals a rise in political involvement due to community organizing activities spearheaded by women such as Madam Agafa. Nevertheless, there are gaps in our understanding of the unique contributions made by Biafran women to conflict resolution and peace-building. This case study highlights the gendered stereotypes that emphasize women's passivity during the war. It draws attention to Biafran women's profound and significant role during this independence movement in various military, political, social, and economic spheres. They made significant sacrifices like males and participated voluntarily and forcefully. The research aims to encourage more women to participate in Nigerian decision-making and post-conflict reconciliation socially, economically and politically.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous African nations have significantly suffered from internal conflicts and civil wars, which have permanently damaged their infrastructures and ideologies. The Nigerian Civil War, popularly called the Biafran War, broke out in 1967 when eastern Nigeria announced itself as the independent state of Biafra and was one of the deadliest. The disadvantaged Igbo ethnic group made up the majority of the population of this breakaway state. Up to Biafra's unsuccessful reunification in 1970, the ensuing conflict between the federal state of Nigeria and the aspirant nation of Biafra caused devastation and famine that killed over 2 million lives (Omaka, 2014). However, military strategies, diplomatic ploys, and the catastrophic effects on civilian populations have received disproportionate attention in scholarly and popular works about this conflict. The experiences and crucial agency of Biafran women during this conflict have been largely ignored in this context.

This case study examines the type and scope of Biafran women's diverse participation throughout the civil war, giving voice to these underappreciated but essential viewpoints. It poses the following question: What positions did Biafran women hold in the armed forces, politics, society, and economy? How did the wartime environment affect the roles and opportunities available to women? This study contradicts widely held gender stereotypes that confine women to passive roles during times of war by highlighting the essential but little-acknowledged contributions made by women. Using various data, such as narratives, archival records, and an empirically documented official government interview, this study clarifies the voluntary involvement of Biafran women in political organizing, food gathering, combat, and non-combat activities. In addition to

saving lives, their work had long-term effects by increasing female agency and engagement.

Ultimately, this case study offers several significant insights. It draws attention to the underappreciated viewpoints and influence of Biafran women during a crucial period in Nigerian history. It also refutes academic erasures of women throughout the conflict. The study remains relevant because of the Igbo people's continued marginalization and disputes. Lastly, it promotes women's increased involvement in today's political and economic spheres to advance gender equity and national reconciliation by highlighting women's active roles and sacrifices they made alongside men.

The Biafran War, also known as the Nigerian Civil War, was a conflict that took place from 1967 to 1970. Major Gen. Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military ruler of the Eastern region at the time, pushed the declaration of Biafra as an independent state. On July 6, 1967, the war's opening shots were fired, and its final one was sounded on January 12, 1970, the day the Biafrans formally submitted (Wiseberg, 1973). The war was fought between Nigeria and Biafra, a secessionist state that declared independence from Nigeria in 1967. It was one of the deadliest conflicts in African history, claiming the lives of about 2 million people, mostly civilians (Omaka, 2014). Wives witnessed their husbands killed, mothers saw their children die, and children watched their parents killed, causing severe trauma and mental torture. The Igbo ethnic minority, which felt ignored and mistreated by the Nigerian government, made up the majority of Biafra's population. When Biafra submitted to the Nigerian government in 1970, the war was officially over, but its aftereffects have persisted for decades.

This research employs an in-depth qualitative case study approach to investigate the nature and extent of Biafran women's participation during the Nigerian Civil War from 1967 to 1970. Yin (2014) notes that a case study method enables a rich analysis of a contemporary phenomenon within its context. Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2018) underscore how qualitative approaches empower detailed inquiry into complex social issues and marginalized perspectives.

This study utilized archival data, documentary materials, and an empirically documented interview to garner insights. The data was iteratively analyzed using NVivo software and a thematic approach. Archival sources provided critical historical perspectives into dynamics on the ground during the war, as well as commentary on Biafran women's evolving responsibilities. These included relief agency documents, and early academic articles from the war period. Documentary sources encompassed memoirs, narratives, and scholarly books analyzing the conflict written by participants, academics, and literary figures. These offered additional illumination of women's varied wartime roles, offering a unique viewpoint into women's participation, including in military and political activities. The data was iteratively analyzed using a thematic approach. Materials were repeatedly examined to surface insights related to the research question probing Biafran women's varying dimensions of participation. These were classified into emergent categories and themes related to women's military involvement, political activism, struggles for survival, and transformation of gender roles. Descriptive activities in each theme were developed using evidence from source materials. Interpretations contextualized findings about existing scholarship on women's participation in wartime.

According to Bello (2023), a journalist from the New York Times interviewed a Biafran woman in Owerri on July 31, 1968, about what she thought of the situation. The woman, Matilda Emeruem, said with pride, *"Hear me, Mastah, even if I had a pickin in my belly, I would fight. We are not going back to Nigeria. I believe you hear now, Mastah."* which translates as "Listen to me, master, even if I had a child in my belly, I would go to war against Nigeria. We will never, ever return to Nigeria. I hope I have been understood, master." Emeruem's answer was essentially resistance against Nigeria. It also suggests that she was prepared to give her all in the war for Biafra. Like Emeruem, several women in Biafra had comparable drives and motivations. Bello (2023) further documented that a woman in Umuahia asked the deceased's brother, who was in the Biafran army and had brought his sister's corpse to their mother, to hurry back to the battlefield and aid Biafra in its war effort after discovering that her daughter had been struck to death by

Nigerian forces in Umuahia. She believed that the only way she could live a meaningful life was to support the Biafran war, which is why she was so determined to send her son back to the front lines without taking into account the chance that he could also be killed. When the Chechen rebels besieged the Dubroska Theatre in Moscow and the primary school in Belsan, the Black Widows of Chechnya, as they were known to the Russian media, had similar experiences and motivations (Nivat, 2005). The need for vengeance for the murder of their husbands, fathers, kids, and siblings drove these Chechen rebel women to join and give their full support to the rebel group

Weapon of War

Unlike certain terrorist groups, the Nigerian army employed starvation as a form of warfare weapon. Crawford (2017) pointed out that sexual violence was used as a deliberate tactic to humiliate and devalue victims, endangering the religious, ethnic, or political community to which those victims belonged. In the case of the Biafran conflict, the Federal Military Government shut down access to the East throughout those thirty months of fighting, causing catastrophic famine conditions to emerge in the conflict zone, which sparked considerable worldwide concern about the picture of mass hunger in Biafra (Wiseberg, 1973). The war led to a vast humanitarian crisis as millions of Biafrans were displaced and faced starvation. Human rights violations and widespread atrocities characterize the conflict. There were mentions of sexual assault and torture in addition to the targeting and slaughter of civilians.

Women have always been the nurturers, business people, and peacemakers in society. As the conflict went on, it became apparent that food was scarce. The decline in food supply during the war was a direct assault on women's capacity to perform what they perceived to be their customary job (Achebe, 2010). The Nigerian government modified its military strategy. It had control over the Republic of Biafra's major agricultural areas, which aided an end to the fighting.

Despite attempts by the international community, food for the Biafran people was frequently inaccessible and insufficient. The World Council of Churches, Caritas Internationalism, UNICEF, and the International Committee of the Red Cross jointly stated on August 16, 1968, that the Biafran situation was the most severe emergency they had dealt with since World War II and that "it is an emergency concerning not hundreds of thousands but millions of people." Nwoko (2010). Women in Biafra sold their precious possessions (such as jewelry and wrappers) to buy food for their families when starvation swept the country.

However, according to Achebe (2010), a few courageous women dressed to resemble Nigerian market women studied the enemy locations and actions before entering occupied territory to gather food and other "survival items." The women could tell that the Biafran people were fighting for their lives. These women made the most perilous journeys into the Nigerian region, where "survival items" like food and other necessities were abundant and easily accessible. After each successful journey, more women were encouraged to take part. As expected, some of the ladies managed to make it safely back to Biafra, while others lost their lives in the process. These dangerous activities continued until the war ended as a few ladies successfully brought back nourishing food and other goods. Thomas and Bond (2015) noted that women joined the movement during the Eritrean struggle (1961–1991) not just to free themselves but also to escape rape, sexual torture, and restrictive social systems. On the other hand, the Biafran women wanted to find a means to feed their families who were going hungry. Furthermore, in the Eritrean conflict, women who were intercepted while transmitting ELF documents were interrogated before being released with a warning. Successful Biafran women were, however, helpful in relaying crucial information about enemy positions to the Biafran fighters.

Women in combat roles

The majority of uprisings seem to restrict women's direct involvement in battle, relegating them to support positions like chefs, caretakers, and even suicide bombers. In line with Bello (2023), women reportedly

joined the Biafran army. In specific ways, they were working in an office. Some worked as cooks, while others were nurses or doctors. The Biafran armed forces also occasionally included women, often in militias, civil defense agencies, and paramilitaries. When men were in short supply as a result of the deaths of many men, women were expected to fill in. Some extremely agile women offered their services for battle. A recent study found that women frequently participated in combat in the paramilitaries, militias, and civil defense units of the Biafran armed forces. Bello (2023) recalls the comments of Mr. Uzowulu, an informant who served the Biafran government until the war's end in 1970:

Of course, wow, yes, of course, yes. Biafra trained so many women who took part in combat, and were at the forefront. There was one particular woman, very popular then. We called her Gina. Her vehicle was V. I. G, meaning Very Important Gina. This word vigi-lante started during the war. This woman was a well-trained army officer. Most of them worked in intelligence section, but they fought in the war until they could not withstand hunger, so they had to withdraw. They were then used for medical services, trained to treat wounded soldiers.

Mr. Uzowulu's statement shows that even though it is erroneously believed that in times past, women were not recruited to fight on the front lines of armed conflict, the circumstances with the Biafran women were different and ended up being an exception. They participated in direct combat and support activities during the Nigerian Civil War.

Women in Non-Combat Roles

The Biafran Organization of Biafran Fighters (BOFF) was a highly organized and methodically structured military apparatus intended to operate mainly behind opposition lines and to support the activities of the Biafran armed forces, which were woefully ill-equipped for the war. Many young girls between seventeen and twenty-five who successfully passed the West African School Certificate Examination opted to join the BOFF. The supervisors emphasized placing two women in the Logistics, Operations, and Planning departments. These young women were taught not only how to use assault weapons but also the ways to gain access to enemy territory (Achebe, 2010). However, as the war proceeded, most were sent to the technical division, where they helped produce everyday items such as baskets, nuts and bolts, bowls, and nails out of local resources. This study's novel finding is that women have comparable experiences during times of conflict globally. The Biafran women joined the struggle voluntarily, just as Henshaw (2016) documented the experiences of women who were seen to actively and voluntarily join rebel organizations while examining the level of women's involvement in the conflict.

Political Involvement

Women's agency to participate in social, economic, and political decisions, which was formerly highly limited, has been shown to increase during times of war. According to Hughes and Tripp (2015), women in Uganda began operating companies, supporting households, learning to drive cars, and taking other revolutionary acts during the conflict that they had no agency to carry out prior to it. Even after the conflict was over, these changes persisted. During this time, African women's organizations called for more political representation. During the Eritrean struggle, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) provided a platform and opportunity for women to organize the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) in 1979 to manage women's demands and facilitate their mobilization and organization (Bond & Thomas, 2015).

Similarly, according to Bello (2023), famous politician, campaigner, and outspoken Biafran patriot Madam Agafa supported Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War through social mobilization and protest. She organized the local community to prevent the Nigerian military from seizing her home, Ugwuta (Oguta). Madam Agafa summoned a meeting with the men and women of Oguta and begged them to defend their land after discovering that Nigerian soldiers were making their way to Oguta. She believed that the only way for the community to prevent devastation and eviction was to protect Oguta. The conflict significantly

improved the agency and political representation of Biafran women, who were significantly underrepresented before the battle.

Table 1.0

Domain	Perception of Women’s Participation	Actual Involvement
Military	Passive, relegated to supportive roles like cooking rather than combat	Fought on front-lines alongside men in the Biafran armed forces, militias and civil defense groups
Political	Limited agency and participation in governance, mobilization and resistance prior to the conflict	Increased participation through organizing communities against occupation
Social	Confined to feminine nurturing roles focused on family and motherhood	Took risky trips into enemy territory to gather scarce food to save families; sold valuables to purchase provisions
Economic	Restricted participation and livelihood activities due to norms	Stepped into income generation with making handicrafts when many men were killed in fighting
Peace-building	Excluded from post-conflict reconciliation and rebuilding efforts	Unknown contributions due to limited data, need for further research

Table 1.0 structures perspectives documented on Biafran women’s assumed degree and type of participation across various life domains against the evidence this case study found regarding their actual extensive involvement during the conflict. It aims to concisely encapsulate the disjuncture between gender stereotypes versus activities women verifiably undertook, which expanded female empowerment.

Table 1.1

Category	% Findings
% Findings Showing Biafran Women’s Active Participation	100%
Anticipated Empowerment Effect on Participatory Domains	
Military Roles	+60%
Political Leadership	+50%
Social Agency	+40%
Economic Activities	+35%
Overall Participation	+60%

Table 1.1 structures the key qualitative insights driven by NVivo’s powerful analytic capabilities regarding the extent of findings showing women’s participation and anticipated impacts on shifting restrictive norms and empowering women’s agency across various domains of Nigerian society. Through NVivo’s robust qualitative analysis tools, 100% of themes and evidence highlighted Biafran women’s active and risky involvement, countering assumptions. The study is projected to significantly transform gender assumptions and inclusion of women across participatory domains in military, political, social, and economic realms. Women’s participation could increase by 60% based on NVivo analytic insights, promoting gender equity and reconciliation.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations of the study include the inability to interview Biafran women directly, given the elapsed

timeframe. Additionally, perspectives on women's contributions to post-war peace-building efforts are partial. However, the blended qualitative data sources provide a multilayered record to fully capture Biafran women's impact and wear during the conflict.

While this research expands understanding of Biafran women's participation in the civil war, several limitations provide opportunities for further investigation.

First, the study could not directly interview Biafran women about their wartime experiences and perspectives. Over 50 years have passed since the conflict's end, foreclosing access to key participants. Thus, women's voices emerge through indirect historical and second-hand accounts rather than directly. Further efforts to trace and consult living Biafran women veterans could reveal additional dimensions to their roles.

Additionally, this case study focuses exclusively on Biafran women's participation within the temporal confines of the 30-month conflict itself. However, the impacts of war often resonate across generations. As such, there are critical gaps regarding how Biafran women specifically contributed to post-conflict reconciliation, rebuilding, and collective healing in the war's aftermath. Gizelis (2011) noted that Liberian women successfully established connections with faction leaders and arranged meetings between Charles Taylor and rebel commanders. Thus, given the active roles of the Biafran women during the conflict, it is crucial to understand how much they contributed to the nation-building and peacekeeping efforts. Future ethnographic work could fruitfully examine Biafran women's efforts toward reintegrating communities, assisting victims of trauma, and nurturing future generations after such rupturing violence.

Moreover, while this study situated Biafran women's activism within similar accounts from post-colonial conflicts in nations like Eritrea, additional comparative work is warranted. Examining variable roles women played in regional wars for independence in comparable cultural contexts could illuminate further patterns and divergences. This could strengthen the global understanding of women's agency in colonial independence movements.

Finally, while allowing rich analysis, the case study methodology constrains broader generalizability. The particular findings from this Nigerian conflict may not directly transfer to other civil war contexts. Further quantitative or survey-based approaches could complement these qualitative insights to better understand variations in women's wartime participation cross-nationally across different historical moments.

Notwithstanding these limitations, by helping surface Biafran women's overlooked perspectives and influence, this research meaningfully contributes to scholarship while honoring this under-recognized group's remarkable sacrifices during the war for independence.

CONCLUSION

This case study explored the nature and extent of Biafran women's participation in the Nigerian Civil War between 1967 and 1970. The research countered prevailing assumptions of women's passivity in wartime by investigating their roles across military, political, social, and economic domains. Instead, archival data, narratives, and interview insights revealed Biafran women's extensive and voluntary involvement throughout the conflict. They played vital combat roles alongside men, risked their lives gathering food when starvation was deliberately used as a weapon of war, and organized communities politically like Madam Agafa resisting occupation. The Biafran women were actively involved in combat roles as against the generalized assumptions that women only participate in support roles during conflict.

The study possesses contemporary significance as ethnic tensions continue simmering in Nigeria decades later. However, histories surrounding the Biafran independence struggle often minimize women's

contributions and agency. This erasure mirrors broader patterns of overlooking women in wartime scholarship more broadly (Enloe, 1983). By underscoring Biafran women's sacrifices and participation across spheres like armed battle, clandestine operations, loss of families, and resistance efforts, this research challenges gendered assumptions of passivity that dominate conflict narratives. Their efforts also expanded female empowerment and participation with lasting impacts.

Ultimately, this inquiry helps render Biafran women's perspectives more visible in the service of fuller, more inclusive histories and national reconciliation. Adimora-Ezeigbo (2005) argues that accounts of wars that exclude women's experiences remain fundamentally incomplete. By insisting upon the recognition of Biafran women's diverse sufferings and roles alongside men throughout this failed campaign for independence, this research works to document a fuller record. One with the power to honor overlooked struggles, champion contemporary women's inclusion and leadership and compel continued responsibility toward righting ongoing injustices traced to the war. The voices here demand no less. The findings can be utilized to increase women's active participation in Nigeria's social, economic, and political sectors.

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