



Gendered Violence and War: The Impact of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) on Women in Anambra State

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Abstract

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), also known as the Biafran War, was one of the most devastating conflicts in post-colonial Africa, with profound humanitarian consequences. While much scholarly attention has been given to the political and military aspects of the war, the gender-specific experiences of women, particularly in regions like Anambra State, remain underexplored. This study investigates the manifestations and impacts of gender-based violence (GBV) during the conflict, with a focus on the physical, psychological, and socio-economic toll on women. Drawing on historical records, oral histories, and existing literature, the study analyzes how war intensified structural violence, displaced women, subjected them to sexual exploitation, and exposed them to political repression. It further explores the cultural stigma faced by survivors in the post-war era and the limited institutional response to their suffering. The paper concludes that gendered violence during the Nigerian Civil War was not merely incidental, but a systemic outcome of both war and patriarchy. The research underscores the need to centre women's narratives in war histories and to develop gender-sensitive frameworks for historical memory, justice, and post-conflict policy in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigerian Civil War, gender-based violence, women, Anambra State, war trauma, patriarchy, sexual violence, historical memory

Introduction

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), a conflict rooted in ethnic tensions, political mistrust, and regional inequalities, claimed an estimated one to three million lives and displaced countless civilians. While the war's catastrophic toll on the general population has been widely studied, less attention has been devoted to the gendered dimensions of the conflict, especially the unique forms of violence and marginalization experienced by women in the Biafran region, including Anambra State. Women in southeastern Nigeria were not merely passive victims of war; they were simultaneously caregivers, traders, refugees, community mobilizers, and, tragically, targets of structural and physical violence. During the conflict, many women endured sexual assault, economic displacement, forced migration, and the trauma of losing children and spouses. Post-war, these experiences were compounded by cultural stigma and the silencing of survivors, leaving lasting scars on both individual lives and collective memory.

This study seeks to explore the under-documented impact of the Nigerian Civil War on women in Anambra State, focusing particularly on the manifestations of gender-based violence and their long-term consequences. By analyzing war-era accounts, historical records, and oral testimonies, this research addresses the following core questions:



Firstly, what forms of gender-based violence did women experience during the Nigerian Civil War in Anambra State? Secondly, how did war-induced gender violence affect women's physical, psychological, and economic well-being? Thirdly, what socio-political, and cultural responses emerged during and after the war, and how adequate were they in addressing women's suffering? Finally, how has patriarchal culture shaped the historical memory and public discourse surrounding women's wartime experiences?

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to gender-sensitive historiography of conflict in Nigeria. By centering women's voices and experiences, the research illuminates the ways in which war intersects with existing structures of inequality. Moreover, it highlights the need for inclusive post-conflict policies and reparative justice initiatives that acknowledge the full human cost of war.

Historical Context of Gendered Violence during the Nigerian Civil War

Overview of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970)

The Nigerian Civil War, widely referred to as the Biafran War, was a devastating internal conflict that engulfed Nigeria from July 6, 1967, to January 15, 1970. This war arose from deep-rooted ethnic tensions, political instability, and uneven economic development in the post-colonial Nigerian state. Following Nigeria's independence from Britain in 1960, the country experienced increasing regional and ethnic polarization, particularly among the three dominant groups: the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West, and the Igbo in the East (Achebe, 2012). These divisions were exacerbated by a series of military coups in 1966, which created an atmosphere of political turmoil and suspicion. The first coup, led largely by Igbo officers, and the subsequent counter-coup, characterized by retaliatory killings of Igbo military personnel and civilians, ignited widespread anti-Igbo violence in Northern Nigeria (Madiebo, 1980).

In response to these events and the perceived marginalization of the Igbo ethnic group, Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the military governor of Nigeria's Eastern Region, declared the region's secession and the formation of the independent Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967. This declaration marked the immediate trigger for the Nigerian Civil War, as the federal government under General Yakubu Gowon viewed the secession as an existential threat to national unity and responded with military action (Achebe, 2012; Madiebo, 1980). The conflict was catastrophic in both human and material terms. Estimates of the total death toll range between one and three million people, the majority of whom were civilians who succumbed not only to direct violence but also to starvation, disease, and mass displacement caused by a relentless federal blockade of Biafra (Uche, 2008). The blockade severely restricted food and medical supplies, contributing to a large-scale humanitarian disaster.

Biafra, particularly regions such as Anambra State, became synonymous with images of famine and suffering, attracting international attention and relief efforts, though these were often hampered by the political complexities of the conflict. Although women were not typically combatants in the war, they were among the most severely affected by its consequences. The collapse of essential infrastructure, widespread internal displacement, and the social breakdown that accompanied the war left women and children especially vulnerable. Many



women faced sexual violence, loss of family members, malnutrition, and a collapse of traditional support systems. They also took on new roles as providers and caretakers in the absence of men, thereby bearing the brunt of both emotional trauma and economic hardship (Uche, 2008). The war thus left a lasting impact on Nigerian society, particularly in shaping post-war gender dynamics and contributing to long-term socio-political tensions in the country.

Women's Status and Roles in Pre-War Nigerian Society

Prior to the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War, women; particularly among the Igbo ethnic group in southeastern Nigeria occupied complex and influential roles within their communities, both economically and socio-culturally. In regions such as Anambra, women were central to the functioning of society through their involvement in diverse sectors such as agriculture, trade, midwifery, and community governance. Igbo women were prominent market traders, often controlling the distribution and sale of agricultural produce and household goods. This economic agency not only provided them with financial independence but also established them as key actors in regional commerce and inter-ethnic trade networks (Amadiume, 1987). Socially and culturally, Igbo women participated in powerful female-led institutions such as the *Umuada* (a collective of daughters of a lineage who retained rights and responsibilities in their natal villages) and the *Nne Mmanwu* (a women's masquerade society). These groups functioned as informal yet authoritative bodies responsible for maintaining social order, enforcing moral standards, and mediating disputes within communities. In many cases, these women-led organizations exercised a form of grassroots justice, especially in matters relating to family disputes, land conflicts, and violations of social norms (Amadiume, 1987).

Historically, Igbo women were also engaged in political resistance and collective activism. A notable example is the Aba Women's War of 1929, during which thousands of women from southeastern Nigeria organized a large-scale protest against colonial taxation and administrative abuses. This uprising, led primarily by market women, challenged both colonial economic policies and the imposition of male-dominated political structures by the British. The event demonstrated not only women's capacity for political organization but also their centrality in challenging unjust power structures (Van Allen, 1972). Despite these active roles, pre-war Nigerian society remained fundamentally patriarchal. Leadership roles, both in formal governance and traditional chieftaincy systems, were overwhelmingly dominated by men. Women's authority, though significant, was often confined to gender-specific spaces and rarely translated into formal political power. The advent of British colonial rule further entrenched gender hierarchies by marginalizing indigenous female political institutions and recognizing primarily male interlocutors in governance structures. Colonial policies, such as the imposition of warrant chiefs, effectively erased the dual-sex political systems that once ensured a degree of gender balance in leadership (Amadiume, 1987; Van Allen, 1972).

This dual marginalization, first by indigenous patriarchy and subsequently by colonial administrative frameworks, left women in a structurally subordinate position by the time of Nigeria's independence. Consequently, when the civil war erupted in 1967, the socio-political position of women profoundly shaped how they experienced the conflict. While many women had been active contributors to community life and decision-making before the war, their marginalization limited their ability to influence wartime policies or access resources during



the crisis. Nevertheless, their pre-war experiences with communal organization, resistance, and resilience became vital tools for survival and adaptation during the war years.

Institutional and Humanitarian Responses to Gender-Based Violence

During the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), both the Nigerian federal government and the Biafran administration failed to adequately address the gender-specific consequences of the conflict, particularly in relation to gender-based violence (GBV). As the war escalated, state policies on both sides remained overwhelmingly militaristic, with minimal attention given to the protection of civilians, let alone to the specific vulnerabilities of women and girls. Neither government developed formal mechanisms to monitor or respond to incidents of sexual violence, despite emerging reports of widespread abuses, including mass rape, sexual exploitation by military personnel, and coercive survival sex in refugee camps and war-affected communities (Gbadamosi, 2003). These violations were either deliberately silenced or dismissed as collateral damage in the broader context of war, reinforcing the invisibility of women's wartime suffering in national discourse. The absence of institutional accountability mechanisms contributed to a climate of impunity for perpetrators of sexual violence. Survivors, often stigmatized by their communities, had limited access to justice or psychosocial support. The prevailing patriarchal norms and the shame associated with sexual violence further discouraged women from speaking out. In both federal-controlled and Biafran territories, the lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure, such as safe spaces, specialized health services, or legal redress, meant that victims of GBV were left largely to fend for themselves (Olaosebikan, 2006). Moreover, the war's destruction of medical facilities and breakdown of civil institutions made any coordinated response to gender-based crimes virtually impossible.

In contrast to the inaction of state institutions, international humanitarian agencies played a more visible, though still limited role in addressing the broader humanitarian consequences of the war. Organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Caritas, and World Council of Churches were among the most active in delivering emergency relief. Their efforts primarily focused on food distribution, medical assistance, and shelter for displaced populations, particularly in the famine-stricken Biafran region. While some international field reports acknowledged the plight of women, especially widows, pregnant women, and nursing mothers, gender-based violence was not yet a central focus in the operational frameworks of most humanitarian organizations (Olaosebikan, 2006). At the time, international humanitarian law and relief practices lacked the gender-specific protocols and protections that would only begin to develop more robustly in the 1990s and beyond.

Despite the absence of formal support from governments or global institutions in addressing GBV, indigenous responses emerged at the grassroots level. Local women's groups, faith-based organizations, and informal community networks filled critical gaps in the protection and care of vulnerable populations. In Biafra, Catholic and Anglican women's fellowships mobilized resources, often drawn from local congregations or diaspora support, to provide emergency aid to war widows, orphaned children, and displaced families (Nwoko, 2010). These groups offered food, basic medical care, spiritual counseling, and makeshift shelters, particularly in rural parishes and community halls. Some informal women's networks also served as spaces for emotional healing and mutual support, especially for survivors of sexual



violence, although these efforts often went undocumented and were constrained by the scarcity of resources and the dangers of operating in conflict zones.

While limited in scope and largely informal, these grassroots efforts represent some of the earliest forms of post-conflict women's advocacy in southeastern Nigeria. They laid the foundation for later movements aimed at addressing women's rights, trauma recovery, and political inclusion in the post-war era. The collective memory of wartime suffering, especially the gendered experiences of displacement, widowhood, and sexual violence played a significant role in galvanizing women's participation in civil society in the decades following the war (Nwoko, 2010).

Gender-Based Violence as a Weapon and Consequence of Armed Conflict

Armed conflicts disproportionately impact women and girls, exposing them to unique forms of violence that extend beyond the battlefield. The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) was a clear example of this gendered vulnerability. As the war unfolded, gender-based violence (GBV) including sexual assault, coercive sex, forced marriages, and exploitation became not only a consequence of the war's social disintegration but also an intentional tool of domination and humiliation used by armed actors. Sexual violence was weaponized by both state and non-state forces as a means of instilling fear, asserting military control, and punishing communities perceived to be aligned with the enemy (Ugwueze, 2011). In many instances, rape was not merely a byproduct of undisciplined soldiery but functioned as a calculated act of warfare. Women and girls in contested areas, particularly in Biafran territories and zones recaptured by federal troops, were often subjected to mass sexual violence. These acts were designed to violate not only the individual victims but also the collective morale of their communities. In a deeply patriarchal society, the defilement of women was also a symbolic attack on family honor and ethnic pride, aimed at demoralizing the opposition and reinforcing the dominance of the victors (Ugwueze, 2011; Olupona, 2008).

Outside of direct combat zones, displaced persons' camps and refugee settlements, supposed sanctuaries for civilians, often became sites of continued exploitation. In these precarious environments, where resources were scarce and survival uncertain, many women were coerced into transactional sexual relationships. Food, medicine, or the promise of physical protection were frequently exchanged for sex, often under conditions that nullified the possibility of true consent. Young girls, widows, and unaccompanied women were especially vulnerable. This form of survival sex underscores how war exacerbates economic dependency and forces women into exploitative dynamics in the absence of state protection and social support (Ede, 2013). The collapse of institutional frameworks during the war, such as law enforcement, judicial systems, and community-based conflict resolution mechanisms, further enabled impunity for perpetrators. In many cases, state authorities and military commanders either ignored allegations of sexual violence or implicitly condoned them as inevitable outcomes of warfare. With no legal recourse, and operating in a context where cultural taboos rendered discussions of rape deeply stigmatized, survivors were often silenced, isolated, or shamed into secrecy (Ugwueze, 2011; Ede, 2013).

Moreover, the patriarchal structures embedded in both Igbo and wider Nigerian society compounded the invisibility of sexual violence in the war's historical narrative. Victims were



frequently blamed for their own assault, viewed as having brought dishonor upon their families or communities. As a result, many women never reported their experiences or received medical or psychological support. The collective silence around these atrocities has meant that gender-based violence during the civil war remains one of the most underreported and understudied aspects of the conflict. Despite these challenges, a growing body of feminist and post-conflict scholarship has begun to recover these erased narratives, recognizing GBV not only as a humanitarian concern but also as a political weapon used systematically in wartime. This reframing is crucial to understanding the full scope of civilian suffering during the Nigerian Civil War and to shaping contemporary efforts toward justice and reparations for survivors of wartime sexual violence.

Manifestations of Gender-Based Violence During the War

Gender-based violence (GBV) during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) was pervasive, multifaceted, and largely under-acknowledged in both contemporary reports and historical narratives. Though the war was formally fought between military forces; the Nigerian federal government and the secessionist Republic of Biafra, its most enduring consequences were borne by civilians, particularly women and girls. GBV manifested in a variety of forms, ranging from overt acts of physical and sexual violence to more insidious expressions of coercion, exploitation, and psychological trauma. These acts were not isolated incidents but were deeply embedded in the fabric of wartime society, often normalized within the broader collapse of state authority and the erosion of social norms (Ugwueze, 2011; Nwankwo, 2009). Forms of GBV included, but were not limited to, rape, molestation, coerced sex in exchange for food or safety, verbal abuse, forced labor, and beatings. Many women were subjected to severe psychological trauma following the violent death or forced conscription of male family members; fathers, husbands, sons, upon whom they were economically and emotionally dependent. The loss of male protection in a patriarchal society left women exposed to further violations, with few avenues for legal redress or communal support (Nwankwo, 2009). Perpetrators of these abuses included a wide spectrum of actors; federal soldiers, Biafran troops, local militias, opportunistic civilians, and in some cases, humanitarian aid workers taking advantage of the lawlessness that prevailed during the conflict (Ugwueze, 2011).

Although the battlefield was the official arena of war, civilian environments; markets, schools, refugee camps, and homes frequently became surrogate war zones. Women and girls were regularly targeted at military checkpoints, on deserted rural roads, or near supply depots. Some were abducted for sexual slavery or conscripted into domestic servitude for soldiers, often under the guise of "protection." In rural communities, particularly those caught between shifting frontlines, the phenomenon of forced marriages became increasingly common. Young girls were forcibly paired with combatants or local men under wartime justifications, often without family consent and with little possibility of escape (Ugwueze, 2011). The systemic nature of these crimes was compounded by their invisibility within both wartime reporting and post-war reconciliation frameworks. Deeply ingrained patriarchal values prioritized female sexual purity and familial honor, making survivors of sexual violence reluctant or entirely unable to report their experiences. The fear of ostracism, shame, or abandonment by one's husband or community often silenced victims. In many Igbo and Nigerian cultural contexts, sexual violation was perceived not merely as a crime against the individual but as a stain upon the family's reputation, thereby disincentivizing disclosure (Nwankwo, 2009).



Consequently, much of the gendered violence of the war remained hidden or buried in private memory, oral testimony, and the intergenerational trauma passed down in silence. Formal documentation of these crimes was scarce, and the lack of gender-sensitive mechanisms in both local and international humanitarian institutions at the time meant that women's experiences were largely omitted from official war records. Only in recent decades has feminist scholarship and oral history begun to uncover the full scale of gendered suffering during the conflict, challenging the male-dominated historiography of the war (Ugwueze, 2011). Understanding GBV during the Nigerian Civil War thus requires not only attention to the violent acts themselves but also to the structural conditions; patriarchy, militarism, poverty, and displacement that enabled and concealed such violence. It also calls for the recognition of these crimes as central, rather than peripheral, to the war's legacy and the lived experiences of millions of Nigerian women.

Socio-economic Displacement and Destabilization of Women

The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) unleashed profound socio-economic dislocation across the country, particularly in the Eastern Region, where the secessionist state of Biafra was established. The conflict decimated economic infrastructures, disrupted local markets, and rendered vast swathes of the population destitute. Women bore the brunt of this economic collapse, not only as caregivers and dependents, but as central actors in pre-war economic life. Prior to the war, many women were engaged in subsistence farming, petty trading, craft production, and food processing. These roles enabled them to sustain their households, especially in rural areas and peri-urban centers like those in present-day Anambra, Abia, and Imo States (Nwoko, 2010). The war, however, stripped women of access to farmland, trading networks, and raw materials, effectively dismantling their livelihoods. As inflation soared and food supplies dwindled due to the federal blockade of Biafra, everyday survival became a near-impossible task. Women; particularly widows, single mothers, and internally displaced persons found themselves in extreme poverty, with no reliable sources of income or social support. The informal support systems they had once relied on, such as kinship ties and communal labor groups, were severely weakened by the displacement and deaths of male relatives and community leaders. In desperation, many turned to churches, religious missions, or charity organizations for food and shelter, while others were forced into begging or engaged in high-risk survival strategies, including informal and often coerced sex work (Nwoko, 2010; Okonkwo, 2025).

Conditions in refugee camps and urban displacement zones were often dire. Women who fled from conflict-affected villages to supposedly safer towns or camps frequently encountered overcrowded and unsanitary environments, with insufficient shelter, clean water, or healthcare services. Health facilities, where they existed, were overstretched and understaffed, and maternal and child health services were almost entirely absent. Displaced women and girls, especially those without husbands or male protectors, faced heightened vulnerability to exploitation and abuse by those in positions of power, including soldiers, camp guards, aid workers, and even fellow refugees (Okonkwo, 2025). The desperation of wartime displacement created an environment in which coercion was normalized and predation went largely unchecked. The economic disempowerment of women was compounded by the collapse of traditional gender roles and expectations. In many households, women became de facto heads of families due to the death, conscription, or separation of male relatives. This shift in



household structure placed immense burdens on women who had to navigate unfamiliar roles in decision-making, resource management, and family protection; all within a context of insecurity, hunger, and emotional trauma. The traditional structures that once defined female identity such as lineage-based support networks, age-grade systems, and religious or cultural associations were eroded by war, leaving women isolated and overwhelmed (Nwoko, 2010).

Yet, even amidst this destabilization, women demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience. Many formed informal support networks in refugee camps or displacement zones, organized food sharing systems, and mobilized limited resources for childcare and mutual aid. Some re-entered local markets through black-market trade or by repurposing traditional crafts with limited materials. Others engaged in clandestine economic activities to provide for their families, despite the risks involved. These coping mechanisms, though precarious and often exploitative, reflect the central role of women in sustaining civilian life during a period of total societal collapse. Importantly, the socio-economic upheaval experienced by women during the war had long-term implications for gender relations in post-war Nigeria. Many women, having become primary breadwinners and decision-makers during the conflict, continued to assert greater economic and social agency in the years that followed, even as patriarchal norms reasserted themselves in peacetime. The war, therefore, not only destabilized traditional gender roles but also catalyzed new forms of female participation and leadership in post-conflict reconstruction and civil society.

The war triggered a total breakdown of economic life in Biafra, resulting in food scarcity, loss of livelihoods, inflation, and widespread internal displacement. Women, many of whom were small-scale traders, farmers, or artisans, lost access to markets, farms, and sources of income. Widows and mothers with dependent children became particularly vulnerable, relying on makeshift support systems such as begging, charity from churches, or risky survival strategies (Nwoko, 2010). Women who fled to safer towns or refugee camps often faced squalid conditions, with inadequate shelter, sanitation, or access to health care. Without husbands, property, or kinship protection, many women and girls were exploited by aid workers, security personnel, or even fellow refugees. This era witnessed a rise in informal sex work, frequently coerced or transactional, as a means of basic survival (Okonkwo, 2025).

Beyond physical poverty, displacement disrupted traditional gender roles and social identities. As heads of household by default, many women were forced to make life-altering decisions in a context of war, hunger, and uncertainty, while still bearing the emotional burden of family losses.

Political Repression and Targeting of Women Activists

Although women were largely excluded from formal political leadership during the Nigerian Civil War, many assumed informal leadership roles as market heads, welfare organizers, or peace advocates. These roles sometimes placed them in direct opposition to military or political interests, making them targets of state-sanctioned or vigilante repression. In Biafra, where war mobilization extended to all aspects of society, women who questioned conscription policies, hoarding practices, or food distribution corruption were often accused of sabotage or subversion. Some were publicly humiliated, detained, or subjected to forced labour as punishment. Reports indicate that outspoken women in marketplaces, particularly those who



refused to bribe soldiers or comply with exploitative rationing systems, were harassed or beaten. Local women's associations such as the *Umuada* or *August Meeting* groups, which had historically served as spaces for collective female voice, were sometimes viewed as threats when they resisted local warlordism or unfair practices (Amadiume, 1987).

On the federal side, women in occupied Igbo towns were also subject to repression. Those whose husbands were suspected Biafran fighters were often arrested, interrogated, or held hostage to pressure their male relatives into surrendering. Women were also targeted for their ethnic identity, as Igbo women were sometimes treated with suspicion or hostility by federal troops. In extreme cases, entire households were razed in acts of reprisal or ethnic cleansing (Nwankwo, 2009). Importantly, wartime political repression was not always overtly violent. In many instances, it manifested through silencing mechanisms, such as controlling women's mobility, banning gatherings, or threatening those who questioned military authority. The erasure of female voices from official war records and peace negotiations further reinforced their political invisibility (Bazza & Korinya, 2020). Despite these constraints, some women persisted in forms of resistance, often through symbolic means. They organized clandestine food distribution, provided shelter to wounded soldiers, or served as messengers and intelligence conduits. In the post-war years, many of these women became key players in community rebuilding efforts, though their wartime sacrifices were rarely acknowledged in formal narratives (Uche, 2008; Nwoko, 2010).

Consequences and Post-War Realities for Women

The cessation of hostilities in January 1970 did not signify the end of suffering for women in Biafra, particularly in Anambra State and across southeastern Nigeria. Instead, for many women, the post-war era brought with it new layers of hardship, shaped by physical exhaustion, grief, economic collapse, and deeply entrenched patriarchal structures. While the war is often analyzed through political and military lenses, its gendered aftermath reveals a more complex and enduring struggle for survival, dignity, and social reintegration that women had to navigate in the absence of institutional support or societal recognition. In material terms, the war devastated homes, infrastructure, and farmlands, leaving many women without shelter or access to basic resources. Female-headed households, many of which emerged as a result of widowhood, displacement, or the conscription and death of male relatives, were among the most economically vulnerable. With the economic hubs in the southeast destroyed and agricultural systems collapsed, women who had once been traders, subsistence farmers, or artisans were left to rebuild their lives from nothing. Compounding this hardship was the Nigerian federal government's controversial "20 Pounds Policy," which allowed returning Biafran citizens to access only 20 pounds of their pre-war bank savings, regardless of prior holdings. This disproportionately affected Igbo families, many of whose businesses and accounts were female-managed, plunging them into further destitution (Achebe, 2012; Nwoko, 2010).

Psychologically, the emotional toll of war remained deeply etched in the lives of women. Many had lost husbands, children, siblings, and entire communities. Yet the burden of grief was often carried in silence. Cultural expectations discouraged open expression of trauma, especially among women, who were expected to resume their domestic and maternal roles without complaint. This silencing was compounded by the broader societal reluctance to publicly



acknowledge the widespread experiences of sexual violence, displacement, and emotional trauma suffered by women during the war (Nwankwo, 2009). Reintegration into society posed another set of challenges. Widows, former refugees, and women who had engaged in transactional sex for survival during the war were often stigmatized and marginalized. Some were viewed with suspicion, blamed for wartime moral decay, or seen as symbols of the war's shame. Others faced legal and customary barriers to reclaiming property or accessing inheritance, especially in the absence of male relatives. In patrilineal societies like the Igbo, where land rights and lineage are tied to male identity, women often found themselves without legal protection or economic recourse in the post-war years (Okeke-Ihejirika, 2004).

The post-war reconstruction process itself was also highly gendered. State and federal rehabilitation programs primarily focused on infrastructure, political reconciliation, and male veterans, with little consideration for the specific needs of women. Relief and reintegration efforts seldom addressed trauma healing, reproductive health, or the social reintegration of women affected by sexual violence or forced displacement. The exclusion of women from formal decision-making roles in post-war planning further reinforced their marginalization. Despite their immense contributions during the war, as caregivers, food providers, organizers, and informal peacebuilders; women were largely absent from public narratives of heroism and recovery (Nwoko, 2010). Nevertheless, the post-war period also saw the gradual emergence of grassroots women's movements and local advocacy networks. In communities across Anambra and southeastern Nigeria, women's groups began mobilizing around welfare, widow support, healthcare, and education. Churches, particularly the Catholic and Anglican denominations, became platforms for organizing women's ministries that addressed not only spiritual renewal but also the socio-economic rehabilitation of war-affected families. Though these efforts were largely informal and under-resourced, they laid the groundwork for later feminist activism and women's rights advocacy in post-conflict Nigeria (Okonkwo, 2025).

In sum, the post-war realities for women were marked by a complex mix of resilience and repression. While women played a crucial role in holding communities together during and after the war, their experiences were often excluded from official history and state policy. The patriarchal structures that shaped wartime suffering continued to influence recovery processes, limiting access to justice, economic opportunity, and public memory. A gendered reading of post-war Nigeria thus reveals not only the long-term consequences of conflict on women's lives but also the persistence of systemic inequalities that war both exposes and exacerbates. The gendered consequences of the Nigerian Civil War extended far beyond the cessation of hostilities in January 1970. For many women, the end of the conflict marked the beginning of new forms of suffering; physical, psychological, economic, and cultural. The war not only stripped them of homes, livelihoods, and loved ones but also left enduring scars that shaped their post-war realities in deeply gendered ways. This segment explores how these impacts unfolded in the lives of women, particularly in Anambra State, and how patriarchal structures influenced recovery, memory, and reintegration.

Physical and Psychological Trauma Experienced by Women

The Nigerian Civil War inflicted a devastating toll on civilians, and among the most profoundly affected were women, whose bodies and minds bore the layered and enduring consequences of the conflict. For many female survivors, the war left not only visible wounds; physical injuries



sustained from assaults, bombings, or forced labour, but also deep psychological scars that were largely unacknowledged and untreated in the immediate post-war period. Physically, women were exposed to extreme conditions that undermined their health and bodily integrity. Many suffered direct injuries from air raids, shelling, and violence at the hands of soldiers or militias. Those subjected to sexual violence frequently reported lasting reproductive health complications, including untreated sexually transmitted infections (STIs), pelvic trauma, chronic pain, and, in severe cases, long-term infertility (Udeagbala, 2025). Access to medical care during the war was scarce, particularly in blockaded Biafran territories, where hospitals were overwhelmed or destroyed and basic pharmaceuticals were unavailable. As a result, many of these conditions remained untreated, exacerbating women's suffering and reducing their chances of recovery.

In cases of rape-induced pregnancy, the trauma was compounded by intense social stigma and familial rejection. Women who bore children conceived through sexual violence were often ostracized by their communities and, in some cases, forced to give up their babies or raise them under conditions of secrecy and shame. In a culture that placed immense value on sexual purity and legitimate motherhood, such women were marked as "defiled" or "damaged," effectively stripping them of their social capital and marriage prospects (Udeagbala, 2025; Nwankwo, 2009). This social abandonment added another dimension to their trauma—transforming victims of violence into pariahs. The psychological toll of the war on women was equally profound. Many endured the horror of witnessing the violent deaths of spouses, children, and other family members. The abrupt loss of familial structures, combined with displacement, hunger, and the burden of caregiving under conditions of extreme scarcity, resulted in widespread emotional distress. Though conditions consistent with modern understandings of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety were common, these psychological experiences were rarely recognized or treated as medical or social concerns in post-war Nigeria (Nwoko, 2010). At the time, mental health services were virtually non-existent, especially in rural and war-affected areas, and trauma was largely pathologized as weakness or spiritual affliction rather than a legitimate health condition requiring care.

Compounding this invisibility was the pervasive cultural silence surrounding mental illness and emotional suffering. In patriarchal Igbo and broader Nigerian society, expressions of grief, despair, or psychological vulnerability, especially by women were often discouraged. Female resilience was idealized, particularly in maternal roles, and women were expected to suppress personal pain in service of family survival and community restoration. As such, many women internalized their trauma, navigating their suffering in silence and isolation (Okeke-Ihejirika, 2004). Traditional healing systems and communal support structures that might have provided psychological relief were themselves strained by the mass casualties, displacement, and social dislocation of war. Rituals of mourning, kin-based care networks, and women's community groups (such as the *Umuada*) were often disrupted or overwhelmed. This left a critical gap in post-war emotional recovery, particularly for widows, rape survivors, and displaced women who had lost access to both formal and informal social protection (Nwoko, 2010).

Yet, despite the lack of systemic support, many women found informal ways to cope and rebuild. Some turned to religious faith for solace, while others relied on peer networks in refugee camps or post-war communities to share food, stories, and emotional support. These grassroots spaces of resilience, though undocumented in state-led recovery narratives, became



vital for women navigating the aftermath of collective and personal trauma. Ultimately, the physical and psychological injuries endured by women during the Nigerian Civil War reveal a critical, often overlooked dimension of conflict. Their experiences underscore the importance of integrating trauma care and mental health services into post-conflict recovery frameworks, an area that remains underdeveloped in Nigeria to this day.

Economic Devastation and Post-War Livelihood Struggles

The economic impact of the Nigerian Civil War was catastrophic for the southeastern region, particularly in areas like Anambra State, which had been a center of agricultural production, small-scale manufacturing, and vibrant trade networks before the outbreak of hostilities. The war systematically dismantled this economic foundation: farmlands were razed or left untended, commercial hubs were destroyed or rendered inaccessible, and the Biafran currency became worthless after reintegration into the Nigerian federation (Achebe, 2012; Nwankwo, 2009). Women, who had historically played central roles in local and regional economies as traders, food producers, and informal financiers, found themselves abruptly disempowered and impoverished. In pre-war Igbo society, market women in towns like Onitsha, Nnewi, and Awka dominated daily commerce. These women ran expansive trade networks that stretched across regional borders, dealing in foodstuffs, textiles, palm oil, and household goods. However, the physical destruction of roads, marketplaces, and transportation infrastructure during the war effectively collapsed these networks. Post-war, the majority of women returned to find their trading stalls destroyed, their capital erased, and their goods either looted or rendered valueless due to hyperinflation and the sudden rejection of the Biafran currency (Ugwueze, 2011).

The federal government's refusal to reinstate former Biafran citizens' access to pre-war bank accounts, granting a flat compensation of 20 pounds regardless of prior savings, exacerbated women's economic marginalization. For many widows and single mothers, who relied on informal savings, rotating credit associations, or their husbands' financial contributions, this policy effectively wiped out any chance of restarting their businesses (Achebe, 2012; Nwankwo, 2009). In the immediate aftermath of the war, the collapse of formal economic structures forced women into informal and often exploitative labour markets. Some engaged in petty trading with whatever goods they could salvage or barter, while others hawked food on streets, worked as domestic servants, or took up seasonal agricultural labour. In extreme cases, particularly among displaced, widowed, or destitute women, transactional sex emerged as a last-resort survival strategy. Though often stigmatized in post-war discourse, this reality underscored the gendered desperation that emerged from the economic vacuum created by war (Nwankwo, 2009).

Despite these structural disadvantages, women emerged as key agents in grassroots economic recovery. Many formed or revived cooperative societies, locally known as *Isusu* or *Adashi*, which allowed members to pool savings and extend small-scale loans. These cooperatives, often organized through church groups or kinship networks, provided vital financial lifelines for restarting micro-enterprises, farming activities, and household provisioning. Some women also re-established community farms, food processing ventures, and local market systems, gradually reviving the social and economic fabric of post-war Anambra (Ugwueze, 2011). Yet, these efforts went largely unrecognized by post-war federal and regional policies, which focused disproportionately on male-dominated sectors such as road construction, government employment, and veteran compensation. Women were excluded from formal reconstruction



dialogues and often denied access to credit facilities, agricultural extension services, and land ownership, privileges that were mediated through patriarchal structures favoring male heads of households. This policy gap reinforced pre-existing gender hierarchies and further marginalized women from the formal economy, even as they sustained the survival and gradual rehabilitation of their communities (Okeke-Ihejirika, 2004).

Importantly, women's post-war economic resilience also had long-term implications for gender roles in southeastern Nigeria. As many women assumed the dual role of breadwinner and caregiver, traditional domestic boundaries began to shift. Although patriarchy reasserted itself in many domains, the wartime and post-war period planted the seeds for later feminist and women's rights movements in the region, many of which emerged from the very market associations and cooperatives that were born out of war-era necessity.

Patriarchy and Structural Marginalization in the Post-War Era

The end of the Nigerian Civil War in 1970 marked not only a political resolution but also the reassertion of deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that defined the gender order of both pre-war and post-war society. While the federal government's "No Victor, No Vanquished" policy was framed as a gesture of national unity and reconciliation, it failed to recognize the differentiated impacts of the war on various groups, especially women. The state's reintegration and reconstruction efforts were overwhelmingly male-centered, focusing on former soldiers, civil servants, and infrastructure, while neglecting the civilian population, and women in particular, who had borne the brunt of the war's social and economic devastation (Achebe, 2012; Nwoko, 2010). Male ex-combatants were, in many cases, offered jobs in public service, reabsorbed into the army, or given training and limited financial support through state initiatives. However, whether the women were survivors of displacement, sexual violence, or heads of war-affected households, were not officially recognized as legitimate victims or agents in the conflict's aftermath. Their roles as caretakers, informal peacebuilders, economic stabilizers, and war survivors were largely omitted from official recovery narratives and policies (Ugwueze, 2011). The structural exclusion of women from post-war rehabilitation mechanisms not only marginalized them materially but symbolically erased their experiences from national memory.

Customary law further entrenched women's marginalization. In many Igbo communities, including Anambra State, one of the regions most affected by the war, traditional inheritance laws barred women from inheriting land or property. Widows whose husbands had died in combat or from war-related causes were particularly vulnerable. In the absence of legal protections, their in-laws frequently seized their late husbands' property, leaving them and their children destitute. These acts were justified through appeals to customary norms that privileged male lineage and patrimony, even though such practices directly contradicted the goals of national reconstruction and equitable development (Amadiume, 1987; Okeke-Ihejirika, 2004). Post-war legal reforms failed to meaningfully address this gap, as customary law retained supremacy in personal and family matters under the Nigerian legal system. The structural marginalization of women was also deeply embedded in the reintegration of female survivors of sexual violence and captivity. Women who had been abducted, forced into sexual servitude, or impregnated during the war were met with social ostracism upon returning to their communities. Rather than being recognized as victims of wartime atrocities, many were



stigmatized for having “lost their purity” or violated societal expectations of female chastity. This judgment extended to their children, who were often labeled as illegitimate or “children of the enemy,” regardless of the non-consensual circumstances of their conception (Udeagbala, 2025).

Cultural discourses of honor and purity positioned such women outside the bounds of acceptable femininity and marital eligibility. Even women who had merely lived in refugee camps or been displaced without experiencing sexual violence were sometimes viewed with suspicion, their wartime movements and associations interpreted through a lens of moral scrutiny. This post-war moral policing reflected broader anxieties about the breakdown of patriarchal control during the war and represented an attempt to reassert social order by re-disciplining women’s bodies and roles (Amadiume, 1987; Nwankwo, 2009). Rather than being rewarded for their resilience or acknowledged as central actors in wartime survival and post-war recovery, women were frequently blamed for their own victimization and burdened with the responsibility of restoring familial and communal stability under conditions of economic deprivation and emotional trauma. Their experiences, needs, and aspirations were rendered invisible in both state policy and public discourse, reinforcing a gendered hierarchy in which male suffering and heroism were centered, and female endurance and sacrifice were dismissed or pathologized.

This structural and symbolic marginalization had long-term consequences. It curtailed women's access to education, economic resources, legal justice, and political participation in the post-war period, while also reinforcing a culture of silence around gender-based violence and female trauma. Nevertheless, many women resisted this erasure through grassroots organizing, community rebuilding, and the preservation of memory through oral history, informal storytelling, and intergenerational transmission. These acts of agency laid the foundation for later feminist activism in southeastern Nigeria and challenged the state's neglect of gender justice in post-conflict reconstruction.

Cultural Stigma and Silencing of Female Survivors

One of the most pervasive and enduring consequences of gendered violence during the Nigerian Civil War was the systematic silencing of female survivors. Women and girls who endured rape, abduction, forced marriage, or other forms of sexual violence were often left to grapple with their trauma in isolation, discouraged from speaking out due to deeply entrenched cultural stigmas. In many cases, survivors feared, or were made to fear social exclusion, ridicule, or being permanently marked by shame. Families frequently played a role in this silencing, advising victims to remain quiet in order to “protect” the family's reputation or to safeguard the future marriage prospects of their daughters (Nwoko, 2010). In this context, silence was not only a survival strategy but a socially enforced condition of reintegration into post-war life. This enforced silence extended far beyond the private realm. At the level of public discourse and historical memory, the experiences of women, especially those involving sexual and gender-based violence, were systematically marginalized. Dominant narratives of the Nigerian Civil War have historically focused on male-dominated themes: military campaigns, political rivalries, battlefield heroism, and ethnic nationalism. In these portrayals, women have largely been rendered invisible or confined to the roles of passive victims or supportive caregivers. Their suffering, particularly that rooted in sexual violence, has been



omitted from history textbooks, war memorials, official speeches, and national commemorations. The absence of these stories from the historical record contributes to a distorted and incomplete understanding of the conflict, one that overlooks the gendered dimensions of war and its aftermath.

This silencing is especially significant within Igbo society, where oral tradition, collective memory, and communal storytelling are central to cultural identity and intergenerational knowledge transmission. The exclusion of women's wartime experiences from this narrative tradition constitutes a profound rupture, not only a loss of historical accuracy but a failure of communal healing. Without public acknowledgment and societal validation, many survivors are left to carry their trauma in silence, while communities are denied the opportunity to reckon with the full moral and human cost of the war. Moreover, this historical erasure has significant implications for justice and reconciliation. By neglecting the gender-specific harms suffered during the war, post-conflict narratives fail to address the full scope of suffering, thereby limiting possibilities for redress, remembrance, or reparation. This oversight perpetuates structural inequalities and reinforces the marginalization of women in both historical discourse and contemporary society.

Nevertheless, some grassroots efforts have emerged to challenge this silence and reclaim marginalized histories. Community-based initiatives such as women's storytelling circles, faith-based memory projects, and local oral history documentation have begun to provide platforms for survivors to share their experiences in safe and affirming environments. These initiatives, often led by women and supported by churches or NGOs, offer crucial spaces for healing, empowerment, and historical reclamation. However, such efforts remain fragmented, underfunded, and largely excluded from mainstream historiography and national reconciliation processes (Uche, 2008). To confront the legacy of gendered war violence meaningfully, it is imperative to integrate women's voices into the official and collective memory of the Nigerian Civil War. Doing so not only honors the resilience and humanity of survivors but also fosters a more inclusive, honest, and just historical narrative.

Conclusion

This study has examined the multifaceted impact of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) on women in Anambra State, with a specific focus on the manifestations and consequences of gender-based violence. Drawing from oral histories, scholarly analyses, and war records, the study has brought to light the gendered experiences of a conflict often remembered primarily through its political and military dimensions. Again, the historical context of the Nigerian Civil War and the pre-war status of women in Igbo society has been examined. While women were active participants in trade, agriculture, and local governance structures, they were already disadvantaged by patriarchal norms that shaped their roles and societal expectations. The war further deepened this marginalization. The study further highlighted how gender-based violence manifested during the war. Women were subjected to a range of abuses including sexual violence, coercive sexual exploitation in refugee and military zones, displacement, forced labour, and political repression. The war transformed women's bodies into contested spaces of domination, while also destabilizing their social and economic livelihoods. Findings of the study reveals that women faced severe psychological and physical trauma, apart from being economically disempowered, they suffered from the enduring effects of structural



patriarchy. Survivors of sexual violence were particularly stigmatized, often silenced by cultural taboos and excluded from official narratives of the war. Post-conflict recovery processes largely ignored their needs, and the contributions of women to survival and community rebuilding were undervalued.

Apparently, the Nigerian Civil War was not only a national and political crisis; it was also a deeply personal tragedy for countless women who endured unspeakable violence and lasting deprivation. The war exposed the gendered vulnerabilities embedded in societal structures and revealed how conflict disproportionately affects women, especially those living in already marginal conditions. Yet, these women were not merely victims. Many played vital roles in sustaining families, mobilizing local aid, resisting political repression, and reconstructing post-war life. Their resilience deserves recognition, and their suffering requires redress. Gender-based violence during the Nigerian Civil War was systematic and shaped by both war conditions and cultural patriarchy. The war reinforced pre-existing inequalities and created new layers of marginalization for women, particularly in Anambra State. Historical narratives of the civil war have largely excluded women's voices, further deepening their invisibility and impeding healing. Therefore, national and academic efforts to record and commemorate the civil war must include women's voices and experiences. Oral testimonies, archival research, and survivor narratives should be prioritized in historical scholarship and public education.

Similarly, future post-conflict frameworks; whether in Nigeria or elsewhere, must include gender-based assessments. Support mechanisms such as trauma counselling, reparations for survivors of sexual violence, and economic rehabilitation programmes for women should be systematically designed. Moving forward, traditional practices and legal codes that deny women access to land, inheritance, and justice should be reviewed. Women's rights, particularly in post-conflict contexts, must be protected through legislation and grassroots advocacy. Survivors and women-led organizations that preserve the memory of the war and support women affected by conflict should receive institutional and financial backing from government and international agencies. There is a need for sustained scholarly engagement with the gendered dimensions of Nigeria's conflicts. This includes studying long-term trauma, inter-generational impacts, and the roles women played in peacebuilding and community resilience. The war may have ended over five decades ago, but for many women, its consequences still shape their lived realities. A just and truthful reckoning with this past must begin with listening to their stories, learning from their pain, and honouring their strength.

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