

THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR AND ITS EFFECTS ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN.

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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian Civil Conflict popularly known as the Nigerian Civil War or the Biafran War, started on the 6th July, 1967 and ended on the 15th January, 1970. It was caused by the attempted secession of the southeastern provinces of Nigeria under the leadership of Lt. Col. Ojukwu. Other causes of the war includes the 15th January, 1966 coup, Maj. Gen. Ironsi's miscalculated stabilization policy, the 29th July, 1966 counter-coup, the emergence of Gen. Gowon as military leader and the refusal of Lt. Col. Ojukwu to acknowledge him as Nigeria's Head of State. Some of the effects of the civil conflict on women and children were as follows: They suffered from hunger, death and diseases. To protect women and children during and after war, this paper has some recommendations. One, there should be effective policies applicable by international participation of humanitarian disciplines and institutions specifically in protecting women and children in the camps and places of refuge that should be considered safe environment. Two, provide psycho-social support for children and women stranded and displaced in any civil conflict. The paper concludes by asserting that war is terrific and a sucker of resources. It erodes human dignity, destroys and devastates mankind and property worth millions of naira. Nigerians should avoid the errors of the past and embrace peace.

KEYWORDS: war, conflict, women, children

INTRODUCTION

Conflict in a society or country may lead to clashes or even war. Thus, Nigeria as a country had its own experience through the Nigerian Civil War popularly referred to as the Biafran War. The word Biafran is believed to have taken its name from the Bight of Biafra, the Atlantic bay to its south. The Biafrans were mostly Igbo people and mostly Christians (<http://www.naija.ng>). The Nigerian Civil War started on the 6th July 1967 and ended on the 15th July, 1970. It was a war caused by the attempted secession of the southeastern provinces of Nigeria and the establishment of the territory named Republic of Biafra on 27th May, 1967 by Lieutenant Colonel Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, an Oxford trained military leader, then the Governor of Eastern Nigeria. The war was fought to reunify the country. It was fought between the government of Nigeria with General Yakubu Gowon as the military Head of State and the Biafran soldiers led by Ojukwu (<https://www.virtualkollage.com/2017/02/the-causes-of-nigerian-civil-war-of-1967-to1970.html>)

The Biafrans represented a nationalist aspirations of the Igbo speaking people whose leadership felt they could no longer live with the Northern-dominated federal government under the leadership of General Yakubu Gowon. The Nigerian Civil War resulted from political, economic, ethnic, cultural and religious tensions which preceded Britain's formal decolonization of Nigeria from 1960 to 1963.

During the war, both women and children were affected by it as casualties of violence, as internally displaced persons and as refugees. During the war, the violence against women and children harmed families, impoverished communities in the affected areas and reinforced other forms of inequality. In addition, women and girls suffered direct violations of their physical integrity, for example through reproductive violations and unwanted pregnancies. This war was rife with epidemic rates of sexual and gender-based violence, combined with high level of gender-based human rights violations (<https://www.virtualkollage.com/2017/02/the-causes-of-nigerian-civil-war-of-1967-to-1970.html>).

Women and children were starved to death due to lack of food.

In this paper, aside the introductory aspect, efforts have been made to divide the paper into sections, namely, definition of basic concepts such as conflict and war, causes of the Nigerian Civil War, effects of the war on women and children, recommendations on how to protect women and children during and after war in Nigeria and conclusion.

DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

For the purpose of clarity and avoidance of ambiguity, it will be pertinent to explain some basic concepts in the topic. The concepts are conflict and war.

Conflict: This occurs when people (or other parties) perceive that, as a consequence of a disagreement, there is a threat to their needs, interests or concerns. Although conflict is a normal part of organizational life, providing numerous opportunities for growth through improved understanding and insight, there is a tendency to view conflict as a negative experience caused by abnormally difficult circumstances. Disputants tend to perceive limited options and finite resources available in seeking solutions, rather than multiple possibilities that may exist 'outside the box' in problems solving (<https://hyattractions.wordpress.com/2014/12/02/women-and-the-nigerian-civil-conflict/>)

War: It is a state of usually open and declared armed hostile conflict between states or nations. (<https://www.talent.wisc.edu/onlinetraining/resolution/aboutwhatisit.htm>)

Causes of the Nigerian Civil War

The causes of the Nigerian Civil war are complex and numerous. However, for the purpose of this paper, we shall discuss a few of them.

One of the very remote causes of the Nigeria Civil War was the amalgamation of the north and the south by the British in 1914. This amalgamation was mainly for colonial administration since they were geographically close to each other. The British conveniently ignored the marked difference in the culture and the religion of these two major groups. This was a major foundation for battles in the years that followed (<https://www.virtualkollage.com/2017/02/the-causes-of-nigerian-civil-war-of-1967-to-1970.html>).

People from Central and Southern Nigeria believed that the British administration favoured the Hausa-Fulani people in running the affairs of colonial Nigeria. This was as a result of greater exposure of Southern Nigerians to western education, their role in the anti-imperialist nationalism and the Igbo people's republican spirit (Oneoziri, 2002). People from the Southern part of the country were considered such an unhealthy influence that they were allowed to stay and live only in Sabon gari areas. Oneoziri, (2002: 93-94) asserts that:

The primary effect of the British protection was that the whole nation never benefited from a fuller social integration of the major sections of the country. British favouritism and protection did not only translate into a pro-North posture, but also engineered northern dominance in the political structure of the country. The various mechanisms through which Northern dominance was built into the system was common knowledge. Geographically, the North was made larger than the country in a merged. The geographical dominance was given political power through both disproportionate political representation and favoured population policy. This arrangement was achieved by loading the census figures in favour of the North. The most obvious one was the fact that parts of the ethnic south like the Yoruba people of Kwara State and Benue State, were excised from their kith and kin and re-zoned, so as to make certain that the North attained a permanent numerical superiority over the southern part of the country. The population figure was not accurate due to the fact that it was not possible to reach the women in the Muslim communities in the North. This was attributable to prohibition by Islam, which was justifiable but offered no valid excuse in inflating the region's female numerical figure beyond normal estimates. However, the northern figure was used to justify giving the north a political representation that exceeded that of the rest of the country.

Furthermore, Amuwo (1992: 45) espoused that:

The constitutional arrangement that granted more legislative seats to the Northern Region than the rest of the other regions combined in the central legislature contributed to the Civil War. To him the Northern Region was given the powerful position and its insistence on maintaining same as well as attempts by the other regions to challenge the status quo contributed to the crisis that resulted in the Civil War.

This structural defect in the Nigeria state and the unequal struggle for power which it engendered provides strong support for the thesis of the inevitability of instability in Nigerians. The Igbo people challenged Northern dominance from 1960 to 1966. The crises of 1962 and 1963, 1984 general election, and the 1965 West Regional election, were all episodes in the Igbo attempt to burst out of the relative deprivation imposed on them by the existing political structure. The flagrant electoral abuses of 1964 and 1965 had destroyed the institution of election as the legitimate instrument for challenging power domination so resorting to military coup as a weapon for change of government became an attractive option (Oneoziri, 2002). The political isolation of the people from the North was an attempt to prevent the North from being infested by the dangerous ideas such as modern

western education which might lead them to demand the vote, the right to self-government and equal employment opportunities (Oneoziri, 2002).

Electoral fraud of 1965 election prompted Nigerians to embark on rioting, looting, mass killing and loss of faith in the ballot box. Another reason for the first coup was that corruption among government ministers was rife (Ogbebor 2013). This was also seen in almost every facet of life in the country. Also notable were lack of unity, nepotism and wrong words against our National Anthem ((Alabi-Isama 2013). All these provided the army officers, mostly Majors and Captains, the impetus to take over power through a coup on the 15th January 1966.

The coup was led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogu. All but one of the leaders of the coup were Igbo people. They were: Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu (Igbo), Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna (Igbo), Major Timothy Onwuatuegwu (Igbo), Major Chris Anuforo (Igbo), Major Don Okafor (Igbo), Captain. Emmanuel Nwobosi (Igbo), Captain Ben Gbulie (Igbo), Captain. Ogbu Oji (Igbo) and Major Adewale Ademoyega (Yoruba) (Ikime, 2006). The major victims of the coup were mainly of the Northern Region or their Southern allies. Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Premier of Northern Region, a Northern was killed. Tafawa Balewa, the Prime Minister was killed, a Northern (Siollun, 2009). Ladoke Akintola, the Premier of the Western Region, an ally of Ahmadu Bello, was killed. The Premier of the Eastern Region and the President of the country, Nnamdi Azikiwe, both Igbo people were not killed by the coupists. The casualties also included the most senior military officer Brigadier Mailamari from the northern part of the country and some senior officers from the West but none from the Igbo speaking region. The casualties list included Brigadier Samuel Ademulegun (West), Brigadier Zakariya Maimalari, (North), Colonel Ralph Shodeinde (West), Colonel Kur Mohammed (North), Lieutenant Colonel Abogo Largema (North), Lieutenant. Colonel James Pam (North), Lieutenant. Colonel Arthur Unegbe (East) the only Igbo and the Quartermaster of the Army who refused to co-operate, Sergeant Daramola Oyegoke (West), P C Yohana Garkawa (North), Lance Corporal Musa Nimzo (North) and PC Akpan Anduka (East). The coup was therefore dubbed 'the Igbo coup' (<https://www.quora.com/What-were-the-main-causes-of-the-Nigerian-Civil-War-What-were-its-effects>) or a revolution that went wrong (Ikime, 2006). The Igbo people termed it a war of survival (Alabi-Isama, 2013).

This coup resulted in General Johnson Thomas Umunakwe Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo and the Head of the Nigerian Army, taking power as the first military head of state. On the morning of 16th January 1966, one of the Igbo conspirators, in the person of the acting President of the federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr. Nwafor Orizu made a broadcast (Faruk, 2011).

The coup itself failed, as Ironsi rallied the military against the plotters. Ironsi then instituted military rule, alleging that the democratic institutions had failed and that, while he was defending them, they clearly needed revision and clean-up before reversion back to democratic rule (Meredith, 2006). It was the view of some people that the January 1966 coup was influenced by tribal sentiments and

therefore the five army officers who were implicated should have been punished for their role. This did not happen. He further surrounded himself with a dominance of Eastern bureaucrats and advisers, and contrary to the advice of the Supreme Military Council, he promoted eighteen Igbo officers to the rank of colonel out of a pool of twenty one officers. The Decree 34 of May 1966 that declared the country a unitary state by abrogating the civil services was made. This outraged Northerners, especially, and this resulted to violent demonstrations targeted only at the Igbo people. All these gave rise to counter coup on the 29th July 1966 staged by officers from the Northern part of Nigeria. The counter coup was tagged “Operation Araba” (Terhembe, 2008). Lieutenant Colonel Murtala Mohammed spear headed the coup. The coupists succeeded in installing Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon as Supreme Commander of the Nigerian Armed Forces. Gowon was chosen as a compromise candidate. He was a Northerner, a Christian, from a minority tribe, and had a good reputation within the army. In September 1966 a lot of Christian Igbo people living in the Muslim north were massacred due to ethnic tension caused by the coup and counter coup (<https://www.virtualkollage.com/2017/02/the-causes-of-nigerian-civil-war-of-1967-to-1970.html>).

Another cause of the 1967 Civil War was the personality clash between Colonel Gowon Yakubu and Lieutenant Colonel Odumegu Ojukwu. Colonel Gowon as the Head of State at the time was not the most senior military officer before he assumed his position. The most senior at the time was Brigadier Ogundipe. Lt. Colonel Ojukwu felt that Brigadier Ogundipe should have been made the Head of State (Ibeanu, 2002). Apart from that, Lt. Colonel Ojukwu was higher in rank than Colonel Gowon and therefore he was reluctant to take orders from him. This is believed to be the cause of his decision to take the Eastern region out of the federation. Ojukwu declaration of secession of the Eastern States from Nigeria under the name of Biafra on 30th May 1967 was the primary cause of the Nigerian Civil War (Faruk, 2011). He directed that every serving Igbo man must return to Biafra with his articles of trade (Faruk, 2011). The inhabitants of Biafra were mostly the Igbo people who led the secession due to economic, ethnic, cultural and religious tensions among the various peoples of Nigeria. Other ethnic groups that constituted the republic were the Efik, Ibibio, Annang, Ejagham, Eket, Ibeno, Ijaw, among others. The state was formally recognised by Gabon, Haiti, Ivory Coast, Tanzania and Zambia. Other nations which did not give official recognition, but provided support and assistance to Biafra included Israel, France, Spain, Portugal, Norway, Rhodesia, South Africa and the Vatican City. Biafra also received aid from non-state actors, including Joint Church Aid, Holy Ghost Fathers of Ireland, Caritas International, Mark Press and U.S. Catholic Relief Services (<https://www.quora.com/What-were-the-main-causes-of-the-Nigerian-Civil-War-What-were-its-effects>).

The discovery of vast oil reserves in the Niger delta, a sprawling network of rivers and swamps at the southernmost tip of the country, had tempted the southeast to annex the region in order to become economically self-sufficient. However, the exclusion of easterners from power made many fear that the oil revenues would be used to benefit areas in the north and west rather than their own. Prior to the discovery of oil, Nigeria's wealth derived from agricultural products from the south, and minerals

from the north. The north, up until around 1965, had had low-level demands to secede from Nigeria and retain its wealth for northerners

(http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Nigerian_Civil_War). These demands seemed to cease when it became clear that oil in the southeast would become a major revenue source. This further fueled Igbo fears that the northerners had plans to strip eastern region of the oil to benefit the North.

The Effects of the Nigerian Civil War on Women and Children.

The war finally ended with the final surrender of the Biafran forces in the last Biafra-held town of Amichi on January 13, 1970. Only a few days earlier, Ojukwu fled into exile by plane to the republic of Côte d'Ivoire, leaving his deputy, Major General Philip Effiong to handle the details of the surrender to the federal army. (Festus O. Egwaikhide and Oyeranti O. Alabi 2002). On the 15th January 1970, the Federal Government under General Yakubu Gowon announced that there was “no victor nor vanquished” (<https://www.virtualkollage.com/2017/02/the-causes-of-nigerian-civil-war-of-1967-to-970.html>).

The Nigerian Civil war which lasted for 30 months killed more than one million people. This was due to the blockade of food supply to the Biafrans during the war which led to severe famine such that over 100, 000 civilians died from hunger and starvation, most whom were women and children. <https://www.google.com>. It was a deliberate policy by Nigeria to ensure that the Biafrans surrendered. The Nigerian Civil War had eloquent effects on all but most especially the women and children who were the most vulnerable to all types of exploitation and abuses. The Nigerian Civil War destroyed infrastructural facilities such as health, education and other social services. The Nigeria Civil War left significant effects on the families and the individual in the areas. In the families, it led to disintegration and change of roles. It also led to forced migration. It had negative effect on women and children in terms of psychological, social and physical well being. The devastating effects of the Nigerian Civil War on women and children cannot be overemphasized (Emeka, 2017). Women and children suffered emotional burden and they were the worst affected by Nigerian civil war. They were the ones that received the hard end of the stick. Throughout the war, there were instances of terrible abuses against women and children. Many women and female children were raped or killed during the Nigerian Civil War.

Chuku (2002: 225) affirms that:

The unprecedented sufferings of Biafran people forced some of them to indulge in many unethical and immoral practices as survival measures. Some women for example, abandoned their marital homes and compromised themselves with soldiers in the army barracks where relief materials were relatively easier to obtain. Some of these unions or marriages with the northern or western soldiers was primarily for survival. Others went into such relationship purely to enjoy a good life which the Nigerian soldiers could afford to give them. The war time and post war marriages of convenience, some did survive while others crashed soon after the war ended. Some of the women were forced to return to their families and they were ridiculed at home with such derogatory names

as agarachaa must come back. Which means she who absconded with the soldiers must return home someday. It was a case of double jeopardy for this group of women. Families of such women benefited in one way or the other when their daughters' husbands assumed important political and military positions in the country. As a result of such marriages, Biafran families today have high ranking army officers and powerful political office holders as sons-in-laws. Some of them are former head of state, General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, General Olusegun Obasanjo, Major General Musa Bamayi, Colonel M. Buba Marwa and Lieutenant General Oladipo Diya.

Some women who were involved in trans-border trading compromised themselves for free access to border markets in Nigeria. Their participation in the trans-border trade was a booster to Biafran economy as some families owed their post war prosperity to it after the war. The reconstruction and rehabilitation led to the development of social organizations and women cooperative societies. There was accelerated rural development after the war. This was due to the fact that Igbo people left Benue state to concentrate their investments in their home land. The hardship made women and girls to go into prostitution. This resulted in an epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases in Biafra (Chuku 2002).

Some of the women who survived these atrocities during the Nigerian Civil War have lived with the vivid and terrifying images of rape, mutilation, humiliation and death for the rest of their lives. Some of the women also suffered from sexually transmitted diseases, stigmatization and sometimes unwanted pregnancies. They were faced with the daunting task of keeping families together after displacement, providing food, clothing and shelter in what is in most instances destroyed infrastructure for their children and the rest of their families. The women sexuality were disparaged and their physical integrity destroyed. The rape was gruesome and degrading. Most women suffered quietly as they fear stigma, reprisal and even execution. Women remained a minority of combatants and perpetrators of war; they increasingly suffered the greatest harm (<http://wwwpeaceinsight.org>). The effects of conflict were felt hardest by women and children. Many women were left widowed and many children were orphaned as a result of the Nigerian Civil War. Women struggled to sustain livelihood for their children after the War (<http://wwwpeaceinsight.org>).

For the women who had bid farewell to husbands, sons, brothers, friends or fathers, their lives were spent in anxious anticipation of their return. News travelled slowly at the beginning of the 20th century. Before today's communication technology the primary method of contact was the letter. Many months could pass by before a letter could even reach its intended recipient. Even then, it was highly likely that it would get lost in the post and never be received. Furthermore, with the government censoring the newspapers and letters about the war, family members were often oblivious of many of the realities faced by their loved ones. For many, the first and only time they would receive any news of their loved ones was when a clergyman appeared at the door with a telegram bringing news of their death (<http://wwwpeaceinsight.org>).

Millions of children were separated from their families, physically abused, abducted into military groups or starved to death (<http://www.peaceinsight.org>). Some were deliberately killed, mutilated or disabled, made homeless. They were forced to serve the troops. Shoddy disposal of military toxins caused environmental damage and made it unfit for tillage or cultivation. Women and children were exposed to killing, disability and imprisonment. Poverty, malnutrition and deteriorating health conditions were the order of the day. Displacement of women and children was common during the Nigerian Civil War. There were separated from the rest of the family and rendered homelessness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For paper of this nature, it will be pertinent to give a few recommendations on how to protect women and children during and after war. Some of the suggestions that can help to ameliorate the problems of women and children during wars include the following: there should be effective policies empowering international humanitarian organizations and institutions to participate specifically in protecting women and children in the camps and places of refuge considered as safe environments. To that end, women must be empowered politically and economically, and be represented at all levels of decision-making in any part of the country. There should be psycho-social support for children and women stranded and displaced in any War through a dedicated team under the supervision of international institutions. Government should come up with psychological and physical rehabilitation programme for children and women who have been subjected to acts of direct violence during war. Women should be included and involved in peace processes so that they can stand up for their rights and that of their children at any given time. Women must be allowed to play a major part in peace talks and post-conflict reconstruction.

Corruption and decline in the welfare of the people are still as serious as they were before the Civil war, even in the 21st Century. Majority domination, lack of equity and injustice in the distribution of the nation's wealth and resources should also be addressed. Improving the people's material condition and ensuring their general well being through poverty reduction, participatory democracy, power sharing and the elimination of unequal distribution of economic resources will go a long way in instilling a sense of belonging and integration amongst Nigerians. Nigerians cannot afford another devastating war again haven experienced the effects of the Nigerian civil war (<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317045854>).

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the Nigerian Civil War and its Effects on Women and Children. The paper succeeded in defining the concepts of conflict and war. It has revealed some of the causes of the Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970. Some of the causes are sectional bias and structural imbalance of the pre-1966 Nigerian federation, the January and July 1966 coups, the pogrom targeted at the Igbo people, Ojukwu's disregard for Gowon because he was Gowon's Senior in the military, Ojukwu's declaration of secession on the 30th May, 1967 and the eventual establishment of the territory he named Biafran, and the discovery of vast oil reserves in the Niger River delta. Some of the effects of

the Nigerian civil war on women and children were also elaborated. Some of them are the loss of more than one million people including women and children due to hunger, starvation and shootings, exposure of women and children to all sorts of exploitation and abuses, the destruction of infrastructural facilities such as health, education and other social services, disintegration of families and roles change, forced migration, psychology, social and physical negative effects on women and children well being, emotional burden suffered by women and children as they were the worst affected by Nigerian civil war, and the raping, killing and widowing of women during the Nigerian Civil War. The hardship made women and girls to go into prostitution. This resulted in an epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases, stigmatization, unwanted pregnancies, and marriages for survival. The paper concluded by asserting that there is no need for wars. Instead aggrieved groups should always have round table discussions to find lasting solutions to any negative issues as jaw jaw is better than war war”.

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