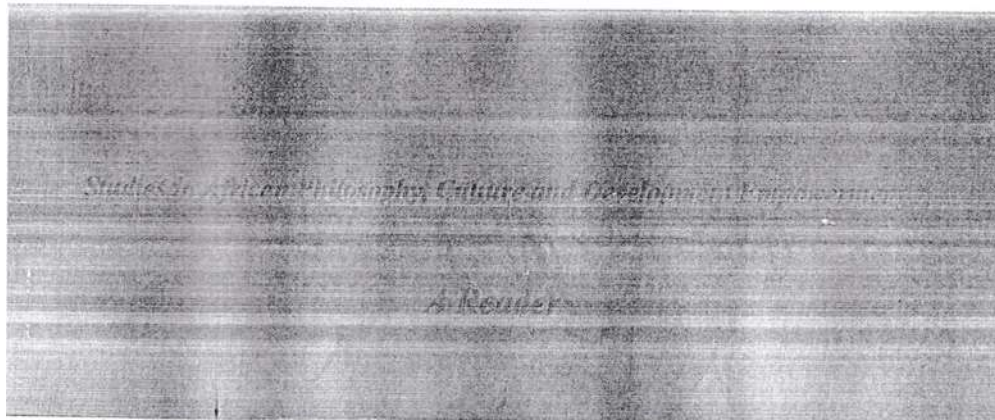


# The Kpim of Feminism

## *Issues and Women in a Changing World*

Edited by

George Uzoma Ukagba, Ph.D  
Obioma Des-Obi, Ph.D  
Iks J. Nwankwor, Ph.D



### Nigerian Women and the Civil War: The Minorities' Perspective and Akwa Ibom Women's Experience

Dominic Akpan

#### Abstract

Women in ethnic minorities before the Nigerian civil war were not accorded respect nor had deserved rights in the Nigerian project. The war eroded and made nonsense of the little of what was left for women as members of the society. With the war raking and raging both the Nigerian and Biafran soldiers had their field day. Using their uniforms and guns in a given area of insubordination; women were preyed upon by soldiers and made part of the repressive war. These soldiers became female captors, conquerors and terrorists of the day. Most women – married or unmarried were commandeered and used as pleasures of war time. The effect was that families were separated and fragmented, the people's culture defiled, education and future of the affected people shattered. The crash on the society remains depressively prostrate till date. The paper relies much on the oral interviews from war veterans and women who actually suffered from the carnage perpetrated by those soldiers. It concludes that if people who caused the war have been reintegrated and paid compensations, pensions and gratuities, women who suffered in the hands of soldiers deserve reparations and should equally be considered, thereby have their hurts and scars of the war oiled or placated.

#### Introduction

Years before the Nigerian civil war, women in Nigeria and related worlds were not accorded the respect and honour they deserved. Women were seen and not heard well in the society. Some were regarded as mills for manufacturing children, and others were treated as co-labourers in the production of food for the family. Only a few were able to break away from the disadvantaged position others deeply saw themselves in. With the outbreak of the civil war in 1967, women became vulnerable to the happenings during the period.

Scholars have written about the Nigerian civil war leaving for posterity a range of useful literature to understand what happened at that historical moment. Examples include, *A history of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* by Zdenek Cervenk, *Reflections on the Nigerian civil war. Facing the Future* by Raph Uwechue; *The Biafran Legend* by Fredrick Forsyth; *The Other Nigerian War Chronicles* by B. Oudes; Oyeleye, O; *Surviving in Biafra* by Alfred Uzokwe and *Nigerian Government and Politics under Military Rule-1966-1979*. Though



several of these works concentrated on the general suffering of women and children during that dark era; but no known work to me had gone deep enough to discuss the magnitude of the sufferings, such as the refugee and food problems, disease and malnutrition; and the harsh treatment meted to women and children by soldiers from both sides of the war – Nigeria and Biafra. This gap in the account of the war experiences necessitates this write up to accord the women's sufferings and dehumanization a context for policy issue.

The military were assigned the role of protecting Nigeria's territory and by extension, people living within. They equally had a duty to manage violence and to engage in other relevant areas in defense of the civil society. However, if the "Republic of Biafra" was worth the sovereignty she claimed, she also had the duty of a nation's responsibility to her territory and people. Whether the soldiers were of the Biafran or Nigerian side, their main function apart from defending their territories was to defend the helpless civilians in all ramifications. Another characteristics of sovereignty is caring for the population by making sure there is food and security for the people. For without good food and its regular supply, life is shortchanged. Though there was 'protection', but it would appear it was quasi-protection or "cosmetic" since a good number of soldiers abandoned their duties and responsibilities to these civilians and ventured into unwholesome practice of immoral acts inimical to people's welfare and care.

### Akwa Ibom State before the Civil War 1967-1970

Before the civil war, the area known today as Akwa Ibom was part of the South-Eastern State of Nigeria created in 1967 by General Yakubu Gowon's Administration (Akan, 2005). South Eastern State was excised from Eastern Region in 1967 when states were created by Gowon's Administration (AKS 1988). The society then was very docile devoid of inter-communal crises or disturbances of large magnitude. This is to say that the people were not used to fighting and engaging in excessive display of arms and ammunitions were not part of the cultural manifestation. Those who had official guns other than for hunting were licensed and were very insignificant. Indeed, there was fine and peaceful interaction among the people living in this geographical region. But the interaction did not involve soldiers. This was so because soldiers were rarely seen or interacted with in public in this part of Nigeria. Nigerian soldiers were stationed at regional capitals of Enugu in the East, Ibadan in the West and Kaduna in the North (Onwuka, 2000). Biafran soldiers were created out of Nigerian soldiers who were at Enugu, and those recruited and trained when the war started under the leadership of Lt. Col. Odemegwu Ojukwu, who was then the governor of Eastern Region. With the outbreak of the civil war on July 6, 1967, soldiers were found in our towns and villages interacting with the people. It was an interaction that left long and ugly memories on those who experienced it. Memories that usually invoke curses and blames on some people, personalities and groups are long lasting. The story may not finish being told in a piece of paper like this.

The declaration of the Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967 marked the beginning of the soldiers' constant interaction with the people from Akwa Ibom. Troops were moved from Enugu to different towns and other strategic places in Eastern Region. According to Onwuka (2000),

... it was in the course of the Nigerian civil war that the true nature of the military – civilian relations in Nigeria was best dramatized.

The people first interacted with the Biafran soldiers. The Biafran soldiers were composed or made up of people mainly of Eastern and some Midwest ethnic nationalities. These were the Igbo, Efik/Ibibio, Ekoi, Ijaw, Itsekeri, Isoko etc. However, it is sometimes believed that some foreign nationalities fought on the side of Biafra. Indeed, these soldiers were often seen in towns and villages on daily basis and they became part and parcel of the society at the time. As the war raged, things began to change. Before May 1968, many communities and towns within (what is now Akwa Ibom) began to fall to the Nigerian troops. The people now changed their relationship and embraced the Nigerian soldiers. Nigerian soldiers were made up of other Nigerian ethnic nationalities mainly from Western, Northern and some non Igbo soldiers of other ethnic groups who did not return to Eastern Nigeria before the outbreak of the war. These include the Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, Tiv, Idoma, Igala, Ibibio, Efik and other ethnic nationalities in the North and South-south. (Edet, 2008; Mfon, 2008). The change that occurred with Akwa Ibom annexed to Nigerian side left untold hardship and sufferings to the women as a last fight before Biafran soldiers departed. I highlight this episode in the following.

### Relationship between Biafran soldiers and the people of Akwa Ibom with special reference to women

The declaration of the Republic of Biafra was something of joy to many people of the Eastern Nigerian extraction. The movement and positioning of troops at strategic areas were nice to look at. Initially the relationship was very cordial except in some minor skirmishes. There was food for the soldiers and life too appeared promising in the new Republic of Biafra. However, as the war dragged on, Nigerian troops were aggressively dislocating and liberating many communities and towns from the Biafrans, as it were, things fell apart. Some of these communities such as Oron, Itu, Ikot Abasi were food producing areas in which the Biafrans depended on for regular supply (Titus, 2008). With the none- or little supply of food to soldiers, life became difficult and hardship set in. According to Dr. Axel Harneit Sievere as quoted by Onwuka (2000),

With the prolongation of the war, the dramatic worsening of the food situation, and an increasing scarcity of all resources, relations between soldiers and civilians became conflict ridden. Soldiers began to steal crops from farms and to kill animals belonging to the population they were supposed to protect. Molestation of women and girls by Biafran soldiers was also mentioned ... (Onwuka, 2000).



At the market place during the war, some hungry ones (soldiers) were often very hostile to the people. Of course, a hungry man is an angry man; so nobody dared to look them in the face.

In this part of Nigeria, farming (growing of food crops) was mainly the function of women except in few areas where men grew yams. Keeping of animals such as goats and birds for subsistence was also carried out by women (Ubong, 2008). It should be noted that, Nigerian government placed economic sanction on Eastern Nigeria – the Biafran enclave, in the wake of that secession. With time essential commodities such as salt, sugar, milk and so on became scarcely acute. Only very few families were able to afford these commodities. So Kwashiorkor – a disease associated with lack of salt or sodium in diet became common place (Eno 2008).

Apart from farming in which our women engaged in, another occupation was trading within the local markets. However, they traded on palm oil and kernel. Local petty trading was still going on, but the trade in palm produce was severely and conspicuously handicapped. Blocked income and exchange from that cash crop was a big blow to the people. In short, the war disrupted the sale of palm oil and kernel in large quantity since there were no markets for them. Economic hardship heightened and as people fleeing from warring zones, swelled the local population where they took refuge. Apart from stealing and pillaging the farm products, women were highly molested by these soldiers. They were sexually abused. They were equally compelled to carry arms. Their human rights were trampled upon at an alarming force of commandeering.

#### Relationship between Nigerian Soldiers and the Civil Society with particular reference to women

The experience the civilians had from the hands of Biafran soldiers was gruesome. Having liberated the areas that were held by Biafrans, initially, the Nigerian soldiers were seen by the people as saviours. With time they knew that "Soldiers are the same" whether Biafran or Nigerian. As an ex-soldier said, "where there is war there is violence and crime". That is, women seemingly are to be defined as part of issues of war. Nigerian soldiers committed equal atrocities as their Biafran counterparts. According to Okon Edet, 'women were called army property, sex escorts, because also they were seen at the war front, some women were killed after having sexual relations with the soldier. Those who accepted to marry them were taken away'. This attitude was exhibited by both armies – Biafran and Nigerian sides alike.

#### Akwa Ibom State Women and the Nigerian Civil War: Experiences

'Where there is war there is crime'. The dimension or scope of crime is difficult to measure. Men you thought could not commit crime were the worst criminals (Akpan, 2008). Generally, the soldiers and women's relationships during the war were absurd. Soldiers (both Nigerian and Biafran areas) made nonsense of women. Girls between 13 years and above were abused sexually and married women were not spared

the agony. Girls were 'commandeered', raped and sometimes used as mistresses at the warfronts. There were many cases in which some soldiers abused some married women sexually before their husbands. The husbands at that point were helpless because the soldiers were in possession of arms and ammunition. Where some husbands were at the war fronts, the soldiers who resided at the rear (town) were busy desecrating other peoples' wives. It was also believed that women who refused advances from these soldiers of fortune were punished severely and sometimes maimed or killed (Okon, 2008). It is a fact that some girls who were 'commandeered' by soldiers and later returned to their communities were rejected by would be suitors. Hence, many were frustrated and fled to far away towns such as Lagos, Port Harcourt immediately after the war. They were unable to withstand the shame and the devaluation of their womanhood in their own culture. At war time, women's rights were seriously abused. For soldiers to sleep with married women, they committed adultery. Adultery is an act that is highly abhorred in Akwa Ibom. The act itself not only desecrated the culture it also undermined its advancement – for which purification rituals would be called for.

As earlier mentioned, farming and keeping of animals was mainly the function of women in many communities in what is today Akwa Ibom. Most of these farms were plundered and in most instances, completely destroyed. Their food crops such as cassava, banana, and plantain were forcefully used or stolen by these soldiers. This led to food insecurity and many women suffered from want. There was an out-break of diseases such as Kwashiorkor etc. In some communities people were forced to abandon their farms and fled from their communities hence became refugees far away from their homes. This was very typical of Ikot Ekpene and its environs. The biggest casualties were women and children. Life was very difficult – no food, no water and sometimes no shelter at all. Settling down under the caves, big trees in the forest and palm plantations served as available shelter – foraging for food was the order of the day, therefore a Stone Age life relived. Many had to abandon their weak and feeble children to nature, for the sake of not wanting to see them die (Ikprok, 2008; Jonah, 2008).

Moreover, Biafran soldiers were sometimes very hostile to some communities especially when Nigerian soldiers were liberating some areas hitherto held by them. In retreating they would burn down villages completely as they were fleeing. In the words of Ejutuwu and Sorgwe (1999), the indigenous people were physically in Biafra but mentally in Nigeria. They were looking for the day they would be liberated from Biafra. This, it is believed was perpetuated by Igbo Biafran soldiers. Such villages which they burnt were Ikot Ekpennyong now in Ibiono Ibom Local Government Area, Ikot Okpara in Enyong now in Akamkpa Local Government Area among others (Okon, D, 2008). According to Aniche (2000), quoting Ihonvbere (1998), as saying that at the initial time, the military profession was looked down upon by the larger society as a place for dropouts, thugs and persons who could not succeed in other spheres of life. Their behaviour with women, however matched the contribution of the professor in that angle. Burning of residents spelt and put the people in a difficult situation. It was not easy to rebuild a community when the war was raging. So it drew out a large number of refugees within the system. However, it is difficult to say how many people were refugees during the war in this region. But certainly they were in large numbers. The entire Ikot Ekpene, Essien Udim, Ini, Ikono Etim Ekpo, Ukanafun Local Government Areas produced the largest number of refugees, mainly, women and children. It was estimated to be about 1.2 million. They were scattered over the liberated areas of the state such as Uyo, Ibiono, Etinan, Uruan, Oron etc. Before the war, those who lived in



298 northern region were forced home because of the pogrom which followed the 1966 coup. With the war on, the population of the refugees swelled daily (Madiabo, 1980).

Indeed, to a large extent, the Nigerian-Biafran war slowed down educational activities. Between July 1967 and 1969 many communities in Akwa Ibom had no access to education. For instance, such communities are the present day Ikot Ekpene, Essien Udim, Ini, Ikono, Etim Ekpo, Ukanafun, Ika Local Government Areas which are border Local Government Areas to Ukwu, Bende, Arochuku in Abia State. Abia is Igbo speaking and the war was advanced from Akwa Ibom to the Igbo heartland. So education was disrupted. As it was observed, not many girls went to school in this area. The advent of the war aggravated the situation. The people (Akwa Ibom) who were emerging from war were poor, traumatized, disarticulated, worn out and were insolvent hence; women education was seen as secondary matter. Poverty, as a result of war, robbed very many women who could have had western education. Thus increased the number of women who were unable to read and write in the society (Okorie, 2008).

Additionally, when relief materials were sent to the war ravaged areas of Akwa Ibom State, women were seen queuing in the sun for hours to collect food, called "ration" for the children. In the process they were exposed to insults, abuses from the relief agents and soldiers, sent to maintain orderliness. At St. Peters' School in Ibiono, it is reported that on a certain day five women collapsed and one died while the remaining were resuscitated. These were some of the ugly sights as well as what some women passed through. Women were exposed to cruel treatment from men in uniform authority. Women, at the epoch, were never accorded position and respect they deserved (Monday, 2008).

Monday also posits that many families were separated as a result of the death of their husbands either at the war fronts as soldiers; or killed because they refused conscription into the army – typical of Biafra; or by stray bullets during liberation by Nigerian soldiers. Some families were shattered since most women who were commandeered by soldiers and abused sexually, were rejected by their husbands. Distress and confusion widened disorder and local ethical solidarity. The effect of this development on children from separated homes undermined their growth and development in nearly all human perspectives. The effects of such disadvantageous conditions in which either men or women experienced or the children are enormous. Although the war was fought about forty years ago, the effects are still being felt among the people till date. Nkoyo in response to questions put across to her on her experience in the hands of the soldiers during the civil war, retorted thus:

Do not bring back the war memories, I suffered, was shamed, my dream shattered; I lost everything including respect from peers. My parents rejected me; I was raised up by my uncle ...

She was expressing the traumas of the civil war. Many women were subjected to all forms of dehumanized treatment, often lower than the status of a slave, a conquered person in distress.

The women issue during the civil war was not all negative though. Their contact with soldiers be they Nigerians or Biafrans, had some positive impacts. According to Onwuka (2000), some Biafran soldiers at times showed positive attitudes to the civilians. A report has it that

the soldiers (Biafran) used to give boiled corn to some hungry refugees and helped in controlling prices of commodities in the market.

At another instance, in spite of the negative attitudes of the Biafran soldiers, their civilian counterparts accommodated them, co-existed and still maintained good relationship with them. In the words of Onwuka:

We had good relationship with them (soldiers) because most of the time their commander came to ask us why we did not flee and warned us that if we fled [sic], they would occupy our houses. They also came sometimes to tell us to hide because there would be an attack by such a time or period. So we had a good relationship with soldiers. Although they were looting our farm crops ... For example, one time a soldier was in my farm stealing, and I (made him) surrender ... with my gun, and he started begging me, saying he was so hungry. So, I allowed him go with his loot.

The issue of stealing from farms was the function of the Biafran soldiers' way of war survival. They were always hungry because food supply to them was not constant. Nigerian soldiers were always supplied with food, cigarettes and other things to keep them on except when trapped in by the Biafran soldiers. Women provided home-front support for the soldiers, those who were sick or wounded. Win the war relationships played out in various moods – sometimes ugly, sometime peaceful. In the war front, ladies capable of fighting or so were trained as militias some of who provided sex-work tactics to weaken, judo, and kill their victims. Many soldiers lost their lives in that way – as in war times, anything goes as instrument and weapon of war.

### The End of the War and the Rehabilitation of Women

The slogan after the surrendering by Biafrans to Nigerians in 1970 – 'No victor, no vanquished' was an echo of hope – to restart lives. The Federal Military Government came up with a policy of rehabilitation of the people, and reconstruction of the destroyed infrastructure. Women in this area were never rehabilitated. The government did not show any positive stand to assist women develop after the war. The only thing done was that those in possession of Biafran currency whatever was the sum, were given £20.00 (Twenty pounds) (Nse, 2008; Idobo 2008). Such economic policy was to further undermine the economic capacity of the war survivors to make a good restart of their lives. Women's struggle became more desperate as many issues such as property loss, relationships, and neighbourhoods needed to be recreated. There

was no forum where women were treated with programs for rehabilitation having been immersed in war time experiences. Indeed, the political affair idea of rehabilitation in this part of the Nigerian experiment was self-making, and self-survival. Women's marginalization has always been a life experience of Akwa Ibom women both in peace time and war era.

### Conclusion

The civil war left a lot of scars on the populace especially women and children. The war claimed several lives, mainly children and women. At the end of the war, Nigerian Policemen and women who were in Biafra fought on the Biafran side. But the end of the war got them reintegrated into Nigerian Police force. They were also paid their compensations and gratuities. The same treatment was applicable to soldiers of both the institutional accommodation. Of recent, Lt. Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, the arrow man who plunged Eastern Region into the war, was pardoned, integrated into the mainstream of Nigerian politics, formally retired and restored to his rank in the Nigerian army and paid his gratuities. Women, who never were part of the problems but suffered incarceration of the war, have not been considered for any form of material and psychological compensation to help them put the agonies behind. Nigerians know those women who suffered at the time of the civil war. Their plight should be addressed as a part of the *kpim* sensitivity to feminism and remedialism.

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