



Women, War and Trauma: Perspectives from South-Eastern Nigeria

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Introduction:

The study relying on the narratives of women who witnessed the 30-month civil war in Nigeria sought to capture how these women experienced and dealt with traumas of the war and their opinions regarding the recent activities of the nascent Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB). Hence, the study is anchored on the experiences of women who witnessed the Nigerian civil war that occurred between 1967 and 1970 and their opinions on the current agitation for independence or secession of the south-eastern region of Nigeria by the IPOB. The war largely pitted the federal side led by the mainly Moslem North against the breakaway South-east and mainly Christian Biafra. The civil war was the culmination of a lot of structural and ethnic problems in the nascent Nigerian nation and exposed the fragility of the then Nigerian state (Kirk-Greene, 1975). In other words, the failure of the emergent Nigerian state and its political leaders was instrumental in setting the stage for the war. The above does not remove the fact that a range of other factors can be adduced as the roots of the civil war in Nigeria. Some of these cogent factors include inter-regional economic rivalry, ethnic politics, unbridled political competition, class struggle, elitist in-fighting, ambition of the military class, imperfect colonial heritage etc. Be that as it may, this paper is not about discussing or establishing the cause of the Nigerian civil war which I believe should be left to the experts and political historians but is focused on the role of women especially in emotional and trauma management of the war. Without doubt, human beings make wars and are ironically the victims of war also. Therefore, the civil war which raged for almost three years took a heavy toll on human life and generated severe pains, anguish and family dislocation. These situations occurred both during and after the war and challenged especially the skill and resilience of women who are traditional care givers in the African setting.

As the robust literature show, trauma has become one of the critical interpretative categories of contemporary culture and politics (Alexander, 2004; McNally, 2003). As Kansteiner (2004) posits, trauma has emerged as a conceptual tool with both historical application and the moral specificity of concrete psychological dynamics triggered by events. It is therefore not surprising that trauma has gone beyond being the exclusive concern of psychologists and psychoanalysts but is now the preoccupation of such other social science disciplines as sociology, anthropology, social work and even politics. In relation to the human cognitive schemas Janoff-Bulman (1972) argues that people usually and unconsciously maintain an 'illusion' of 'invulnerability' until they are confronted with trauma. This type of event is taken as capable of shattering the individual's fundamental assumptions that the world is benevolent and meaningful and that the self is worthy. For the author, the individual survivor uses a couple of cognitive strategies to rebuild her inner world. The most compelling of these is to compare oneself with less fortunate others. In this sense, women who were raped, assaulted or exploited during the war situation try to achieve psychological and social balance by making reference to those that did not survive or those that had more damaging traumatic experiences. Even though a lot of reasons have been adduced for the Nigerian civil war and even blames apportioned here and there (Obasanjo, 1980; Ekwe-Ekwe, 1990; Cronje, 1972 etc.), what is incontrovertible is that the war readily conforms to Janoff-Bulman (1972) insightful characterization of trauma. Therefore, the war to the women in the Biafra enclave was out of the ordinary; was largely directly experienced and more critically was (and is) a threat to the survival of themselves and their families. In the case of Biafra, the adoption of this frame of reference was common and found worthy ally in the cosmological orientation among the Igbo that half-life is better than death. Often, the social group uses this idiom and others like it in encouraging the victim to come to terms with the reality confronting him or her.

Be the above as it may, there is no gainsaying the fact that women globally are usually in the forefront of the repercussions of war especially at the household level. Hence, while the men are engaged in the battle, women especially in the case of Africa keep vigil at the home front as both caregivers and the lynchpin of family stability. However, while a good number of articles and other publications have been devoted to the civil war in Nigeria (Korieh, 2012; Soyinka, 1996; Kirk-Greene, 1975; Streamlau, 1977), not much has been done in terms of documenting how individuals and families came to terms or dealt with the trauma and emotional consequences of the war. Therefore, this paper seeks to establish the ways and manners women as untrained care givers within the Biafra enclave (the theatre of the war) dealt with trauma and what they think of the current IPOB's demand for independence or secession from Nigeria. This is crucial given that IPOB is literally sounding the drums of war in calling for the re-emergence of the Biafra. There is no gainsaying the fact that women who have experienced or lived through the war are best placed to reflect on such experiences and ponder on the desirability or otherwise of another looming war.

Methodology :

The study focused on Nsukka Senatorial zone of Enugu state, Nigeria. This zone is made up of seven (7) Local Government Areas (LGAs) viz: Igbo-Etiti LGA, Igbo-Eze North LGA, Igbo-Eze South LGA, Isi-Uzo LGA, Nsukka LGA, Udenu LGA and Uzo-Uwani LGA. This choice was informed by the fact that this zone was one of the parts of the eastern region of Nigeria where the war was concentrated. The sample size was fifty (50) and this number constituted of women 60 years and above as these were considered to have been born as at the time of the civil war and would definitely have experienced the war directly or indirectly. These women were selected using the purposive sampling to ensure that those selected fitted into the gender and age limit needed for the study. The sample size also comprised of women from different spheres of life to ensure that the information gotten exposes the experiences of educated/uneducated, high, middle and low income earners in the region. The instrument for the study was the interview and the information derived from the interviews served as the narratives with which the arguments of this study were substantiated. The data for the paper was therefore collected through key persons' interviews (KPIs) with a cohort of forty-five (45) women who witnessed the war and five (5) men who really fought the war. The interviews took place within a six months period in 2014 (February – July) and another three months period in 2021 (March – May). This study is part of a larger study on the role of social work in trauma management in Nigeria.

The Nature and Reality of Trauma :

Kammerzell, (2021) defined trauma as exposure to event which was perceived as intensively threatening to the mind, body or spirit accompanied by feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness and horror. In the opinion of Legg & Leonard (2020), trauma is a response to an event that a person finds highly stressful such as wars, natural disasters or accidents. Tull and Block (2020) further defined trauma as any type of distressing event or experience that can have an impact on a person's ability to cope and function.

According to the American Psychological Association (2021), trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Given that trauma can be caused by a wide range of incidents, it can also be said to be either psychological or emotional depending on the contributing factors to the traumatic experience. In line with the above, Allarakha & Uttekar, (2021) contends that trauma may be used in different contexts. According to these authors, in the physical context, trauma means a physical injury inflicted on a person by some external agent while in the psychological context, trauma means an emotional response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event such as loss of a loved one, an accident, rape, war, or natural disaster. Several perspectives have been adduced in the literature to understand psychosocial recovery from trauma or exposure to traumatic experience. One of these is the Horowitz model (see, Horowitz, 1976) in which the process of overcoming trauma starts with an 'outcry' at the realization of the trauma, followed by a need for integration of the experience in a person's cognitive schemas till some form of 'completion' occurs. However, at the centre of this process of integration is an oscillation between intrusive repetitions (i.e. recurring memories of the event) and numbness, repression, and denial of such events as means of blocking out the adverse or negative consequences of remembrance). Perhaps the definition of trauma offered by Landsman (2002) is very insightful here. Hence, "trauma overwhelms our abilities to cope and adjust, calling into question the most basic assumptions that organize our experiences of ourselves, relationships, the world and the human conditions itself" (Landsman, 2002:13).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) are of the belief that two major ways of handling stressful experiences exist. The first is through changing the troubled person-environment relationship (active, problem-focused coping) and the second is focused on changing the emotions that are implied (passive, emotion-focused coping). On their own, Tedeschi et al (1998) proffer a benefit-finding or posttraumatic growth model. Therefore, they described the experience of positive change as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises. For them, the change occurs in three domains viz. perception of the self (feeling stronger), interpersonal relationships (becoming closer to relatives and friends) and philosophy of life (for instance changing priorities). However, as important as these perspectives sound, it is necessary to understand that trauma is by definition a personal experience that often overwhelms general explanatory schemes. Therefore, the nature, degree of exposure and social context beyond the experience of trauma are all very critical variables in the understanding of trauma.

While the reality of trauma remains universally similar since it is all about the human nature and disturbing as well as dispossessing emotional states there is little doubt that the level, nature and reaction to trauma varies from one social context to another. Perhaps, the trauma of war remains the most unyielding and difficult to tackle since it can remake human beings and even leave them frozen in a zombie like state for the rest of their lives or in the case of the now popular PTSD elicit even violent altercation from the individual who now reacts and responds to the injuries inflicted on his personality and psyche by war. It is only logical to expect that trauma is much more pervasive in situations where wars are not fought within the dictates of the Geneva Convention and outside the ideal norms of armed combat. In this situation, non-combatants especially women and children easily become critical victims of the consequences of such wars. In war situations like is common in most developing nations where socio-cultural differences play a role in establishing opposing combatants or where political factors drum up the need for war, there is the usual tendency for such wars to be fought on lines of mutual suspicion, fear and acrimony that often makes all strategies acceptable to both sides. This scenario is quite common in Africa where, "ethnic cleansing, mutilation, murder, mass rape, forcible conscription of minors, ritual violence, the deliberate creation of famine and a great many other unspeakable practices have replaced conventional military tactics as central modes of warfare in recent decades" (Jackson, 2006:21).

Probably, the above insights would help our appreciation of the circumstances that confronted women immediately after the Nigeria civil war and the immense challenges they had to face in dealing with both their own traumas and the trauma of the surviving members of the Biafra army. But even more appropriate here is that trauma as in the case of the Biafra experience was at both the individual and group levels. This is in keeping with the consensus in literature that in spite of being primarily used in describing individual experience, trauma can be ascribed to a group as a collective. In

other words, the idea of collective or cultural trauma (with usual baggage of fear, anguish, loss, and grief, loss of self-meaning/worth or reality) is the type of trauma that affects a group (see, Alexander, 2004; Payne et al, 2004; Caruth, 1996). In relation to the case of Biafra, trauma was experienced as a collective affliction through individual experience of trauma even amongst the women of Biafra differed on the basis of experience and /or depth of physical and psychological loss (death of loved ones; amputations; loss of home-steads; loss of land; loss of income etc.).

From a social work perspective, human invulnerability is violated by trauma and reliving trauma and cognitive balance can be achieved through sharing experience and comprehension of the extreme human sufferings. More crucially, looking beyond the experiences is critical to overcoming trauma. Without doubt, traumatic experiences are complex and vary in nature. Perhaps, the trauma of war is the most complex and can last a lifetime. In most accounts in the extant literature, it would appear that that the consensus is that trauma is taken mainly as the shattering of the victim's view of him/herself and the world he/she lives in (see for instance, Stocks, 2007; Leys, 2000; Everly, 1995). Hence, handling trauma of war deserves expert and professional counselling and programmed healing through time.

Theorising Trauma and Women's Experience of the War :

The study adopts the resilience perspective or theory in examining the trauma and experience of women in the Nigerian civil war. The resilience theory is a well-known theoretical perspective both in the disciplines of social work and psychology. Resilience has been apprehended as the ability, capacity, or process to overcome environmental or external imbalance or turbulence (see, Holling, 1973; Bruneau et al, 2013; Masten, 2014a). From a war study perspective, resilience theory is very pertinent as it ideally focuses on the ability of the group or community to overcome adversity or adapt to the deleterious impacts of the environment. In other words, it is reposed in the commonly shared traits and resources in a given group.

Thus, in the case of women in the former Biafra enclave resilience would embody the peculiar socio-cultural resources and traits in communities in that enclave that enabled the women to overcome the imbalance or trauma of the war. Resilience entailed equally the ability to tap into kin networks, seek support of social and consanguine ties and even provide care for other members of one's family or community considered more vulnerable even as one deals with her own trauma or ordeal. The above may be why Daniel (2011) sees resilience as the measure of a system [social] to absorb changes in states, conditions, parameters but continue to endure or exist, external disturbances notwithstanding. So, in the case of the women victims of the war they showed inner strength drawing from their community to endure and forge ahead with life. As a result, these women in as much as they were victims, lived in a social or group setting where one was not only encouraged and exhorted to live beyond her weaknesses but also play a role in enabling the most vulnerable cope with the threatening situation or external turbulence.

From the above, resilience emphasizes persistence, adaptability, resourcefulness, and strength over problems. In this situation it may be cast as including the ability of the women to engender and exploit social capital in coming to terms with trauma and grief. So, adaptation to the war had depended on social capital and the resilience of the social system in which the women found themselves. Both resilience and social capital have been found expedient in coping with trauma and environmental debacles (see, Masten, 2014b; Masten et al, 1990; Adger, 2003; Pretty and Ward, 2001).

Women in War Situations :

Women are usually targets during war situations, attacked either to inflict pain on their spouses if they are married or on their parents and siblings if they are single. Opposition usually abduct them to be used as slaves, sex tools raped over and over again and at some other times, forced into marriages. Even when married, some men who find them appealing take them forcefully from their homes thereby separating them from their husbands and children. Their families sometimes willingly give them away to these men in a bid to save themselves.

Though considered as the weaker sex in the traditional African context, women are usually left to fend for their families as their husbands are either forced to go to war or into hiding in order not to be murdered by the opposition. These incidences are usually common in war situation in developing nations and are heightened when militants or rebels engage in battle with soldiers of a given nation. However, in the African situation cases abound to show that even the trained soldiers who are fighting on the side of the state often deviate from the standard codes of war and inflict barbarism on their enemies and their dependents especially women and children. In fact, the above non-conformity with standard military codes of war may be what has been described in the sentiments that, "the nature of actors in Africa's war rarely conforms to the conventional conception of organised hierarchical and disciplined professional armies who fight in identifiable military uniforms" (Jackson, 2006:19).

The above situation was not different during the thirty month Nigerian Civil War in which women were treated largely by rampaging soldiers of Nigeria as mainly the spoils of the war with the rebel Biafra Republic. As I discovered in the course of my investigation, women were visited with different levels of trauma and fear both during and immediately after the war. The psychological afflictions of the war were not helped by the fact that the women had to deal with both the separation the war brought on their families and the disorganization of normal community life with all its consequences. For instance, during the Nigerian civil war, an elderly woman with pain still in her eyes as if it was just yesterday, recounted

"my father had to go to war against his wish, leaving us with our young mother who had to struggle to take care of us and my elderly grandparents. She walked endless miles looking for food and most times, stayed hungry because she never found enough for everyone and she didn't want to lose us to hunger" (Bertha: Artisan; Nsukka). In confirmation of the above assertion, an elderly man in his late 70s said,
"I was just about 18 then; young but was not considered too young to join the Biafran troop then. I have lived with the haunting memories of my mother and sisters being raped repeatedly by the soldiers while we watched from our hiding places. It was the horror of that that forced us to come out

from hiding and submit to the Biafran troop. On one occasion, my mother tried to resist them and they nearly shot my younger sister who was barely 13 in the head but for my mother's timely scream of surrender. The poor girl had been raped by all three soldiers and was at the point of losing her life because of my mother's resistance; that was all the motivation we needed to come out and fight. For years, I prayed to God not to allow me give birth to girls because I have never gotten over the phobia of young girls and women being sexually assaulted. It's a pain I have lived with and may definitely die with" (Jonathan: retired Lecturer; Nsukka)

Sexual violence was the order of the day as even young men used the war period as an opportunity to violate the girls they had been lusting after but could not have. This led to a loss of self-esteem and identity in most of the young women especially those of them who were raped publicly. Other social menace and evils were all over the place but the fact that in the context of war, rape is one of a number of possible traumas and that it is so evidently linked to the overall process of social destruction makes it difficult to distinguish a full set of reactions which are unequally related to rape (Lunde and Ortman, 1992).

At some point, some women had to sell their bodies for whatever can be spared by the soldiers and so-called wealthy men in the society so as to be able to cater for their families. In the words of one woman in her eighties (80s),

"I had to sneak out to the borders between Obollo-Afor and the now Kogi State to have sex with the Nigerian soldiers. They usually treat me well, giving me not just money but food items and sometimes clothing for my family and I. These items I knew were either stolen or forcefully taken from their owners but I didn't mind then because I had a family and a sick elderly mother to look after" (Monica: Teacher; Obollo-Afor). According to her also, *"when mothers could not go themselves, they encouraged their daughters to do so, that way, they avoid being raped, or forcefully taken away from their families and also earn some form of income and sustenance for themselves and their families"*.

These experiences were not peculiar to Monica as an elderly Priest in his early 80's indicated,

"My father, my brothers and I were conscripted and forced to fight. This left my mother alone in the house with no means of fending for herself and our elderly grandparents. I was very young and scared stiff. I was usually sent home to check on our mother and I always noticed that men trooped in and out of our house; my pain knew no bounds the day my mother confessed to me that she had to do what she was doing because she had to feed herself, our grandparents and the new baby in her womb. My father didn't survive the war but my brothers and I did though not without very visible scars. My brothers never accepted the baby boy our mother later gave birth to as their brother because according to them, though she claimed he was my father's son because she was already pregnant before the war broke out, they still believed he was cursed because he was contaminated by the semen of all those men who slept with her when she was still pregnant" (James: Priest; Edem).

Most painful to both mothers and their young daughters is the fact that sometimes, men were forced to have sex with their daughters while their wives watched. Those of them who had the courage to refuse lost their lives as they were shot dead by the soldiers while those who lacked such courage went ahead and defiled their daughters in the presence of their wives while the soldiers watched. This left the women (both the mothers and their defiled daughters) totally devastated, while the men died slowly as they never get over the fact that they had canal knowledge of their daughters, their own flesh and blood. In some cases, these girls conceived as a result of these sexual interactions with their fathers and one can imagine how both the girls and their families perceive such pregnancies and eventually children.

When stories of wars are retold or rumours of an imminent war go around the society, women shudder and fear builds up, the tension is so much that it can be felt as they already know due to the past experiences or stories heard from their parents what they are about to go through. Fear of either being raped, forced into marriages or worse still into prostitution, losing a pregnancy due to anxiety, hunger, ill health or rape, losing a husband to the war or having their daughters assaulted both sexually and emotionally overwhelm these women as these are amongst the major experiences they have in war situations. There is therefore no price that is too much to pay as far as women are concerned as long as it prevents wars, leaves their husbands alive and their daughters or even they themselves free from being defiled and assaulted sexually. According to a woman now in her late 70s,

"I rather be sacrificed for peace and tranquillity to reign in this country than witness what I saw during the Nigerian civil war again or have my daughters pass through the same ordeals as I did. I was raped severally in the presence of my parents but they could not do anything, I suffered different kinds of infections later. In fact, it is a miracle and by God's mercy that I have kids today after all the infections I contracted. Living with my husband was not easy initially because sexual intercourse was a terrible reminder of my experiences during the war" (Grace: Artisan; Opi).

Biafran Women and the War :

As in other war situations, women were direct sufferers/victims during the Nigerian civil war. The brave men joined the army willingly while the weak ones were forced to join so as to defend the Biafrans. This left women in the home front to cater totally for both the young and the elderly ones including those who were either sick or disabled as a result of the war. In order to understand the experiences of these women better, here are some testimonies from women who had first-hand experiences during the war:

"When we heard that the war had reached Obollo-Afor, fear gripped everyone. Before we knew what was happening, it had reached Isieniu and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. People headed for the forests (Egu) as the soldiers and missiles flooded the area. Homes were abandoned and hunger struck and killed a lot of the elderly and young ones. Unfortunate women both married and single who were caught by the soldiers were molested sexually in the presence of their spouses and families. People lost their loved ones as they ran from the military and the most painful part was that they could not even bury them as they hurried away for their own lives. Mothers left their hungry babies behind when they cried uncontrollably for fear that

their cries would give them away. When the military discovered the way to the forests (Egu), men ran further into the forests leaving farming and caring for family totally to the women. This increased hunger as these women did not have enough physical strength to produce enough food for their families. In some cases, houses were burnt and people's vital documents were lost in the process. This burning of houses was worse whenever they discovered that the owners of the houses were educated. This group of people they usually referred to as "Dogo trunchie" meaning "people with big grammar", who of course would amount to nothing without their certificates. People in the community on their part used this period as an opportunity to deal with their enemies by either arranging for them to be kidnapped and killed or tipping off the soldiers on their whereabouts. Kwashiorkor (malnutrition) was on the increase as people had little or nothing to eat. The lack of salt with which to cook the little food they had did not help matters at all. A lot of people lost their lives due to trekking as they were always on the run from one zone to the other. I in particular trekked from Ekwulobia in Anambra State down to Eha-Alumona which is well over 300km" (Berna: Teacher; Eha-Alumona).

The above sentiments are neither isolated nor uncommon. In the words of another trauma survivor,

"I was in my late 20s during the war and having married early I had five (5) children and very heavy with the 6th one. I could hardly feed my family as my husband had joined the army and I was left to care for the children and my youngest sister who was in her teens. On one occasion, my youngest child, a girl was so thirsty I had to go look for water by all means. The owner of the nearest Buka (cafe) I could see would not help me with a glass of water as I had nothing to pay for it. After much pleading and my daughter was about passing out, I had to give her water used in rinsing plates. The idea was, "anything to quench her thirst". A few weeks later I went into labour and gave birth to a boy. Luckily for me, my husband had sneaked home to the forest where we were hiding and where he left us but we had a problem, we had no clothing for the baby and I could not feed him as my breast milk would not flow. How could it flow? When I had not had a good meal ever since I took in, his cries attracted some soldiers to our hiding place but luckily for us, they were Biafran soldiers. The sight of the baby and his cries elicited pity from them, they immediately rallied around and provided us with both food and clothing for the boy and before they left, they named him "Aghaegbunam" meaning "the war will not consume me". (Maria: Teacher; Igugu).

Yet another respondent, even though a survivor of the trauma of the war, saw her experiences as the roots of her current physical ailments. Thus,

"Why wouldn't I suffer from diabetes and even worse conditions? If you had the same experiences I had during the civil war, you would understand better. My husband and sons died brutally in my presence as they refused vehemently to join the army. I had my daughter, my parents-in-law and myself to fend for. A couple of times, I ate raw food and drank dirty water to quench both hunger and thirst and keep both body and soul together. Whatever was left of our little hut was completely destroyed leaving us to be beaten mercilessly by the rains and scorched by the sun, you know human beings are different and also so are our immune systems. I had it rough, I developed pneumonia and that has left me with this incurable cough/respiratory tract ailment after several treatments. Now I'm already in my 80s, on my way home to rest finally but I pray my grandchildren and even generations to come never witness what I and my children did" (Augustina; Businesswoman; Umakashi).

From the above testimonies, it can be seen that the terrible experiences of women during the civil war cannot be elaborately discussed as women have various horrible stories to tell about the war and what they went through but they all cannot be interviewed. Some of the women who were raped suffered from reproductive diseases and had fertility issues that eventually affected their lives and married life as a whole. According to Sharma, Lama, Ale and Maharja (1995), sexual torture poses fertility problems and in some cases, result in permanent impairments of the reproductive organs. In agreement with the above assertion, Allodi & Stiasay (1990); Groennberg, (1993) and Sideris (2003) state that disturbance of menstruation, non-specific pains in the lower abdomen and pelvis and fears of having contracted a sexually transmitted disease are commonly reported during discussions with survivors of sexual violation which most times is very rampant in war situations. According to Sideris (2000) also, the biological body provides a record of trauma not only in physical scars but in the embodiment of external violation through the senses. This most times leads to a loss of self-esteem of the women as they feel degraded as a result of the sexual assaults received and this degradation according to Suieaass and Axelsen (1994) is inscribed on the bodies of these women through their senses. Consequently, their lives are altered as these memories affect them even in later lives either as mothers or wives.

Women and Dealing with Aftermaths of the War: Handling physical and emotional changes:

The actual problems usually do not exist during the war period, a greater portion of the problems erupt after the war because the destruction of family and social surrounding during the war reduce the sources of social support and this affects women significantly. According to Sideris (2003), those social arrangements and relationship which provide people with inner security, a sense of stability and human dignity are broken down. This leaves women especially those of them affected by the war directly struggling to regain the dignity and self-esteem the war stole from them. Caring for the family which was left to them becomes more intense as they do not just have to provide food but also care for those injured during the war. Unfortunately, fear did not allow a lot of people to return from their hiding places in the forest and even those who did, returned empty handed to nothing. They were literally forced to start life afresh. According to one 68 year old woman,

"life became worse when the Biafran currency was declared valueless. This left a lot of the Biafran Folks penniless and made sustenance very difficult; those who had assisted those who had nothing. Students lost many school years and a lot of them became mentally deranged as a result of their involvements in the war. Use of substances like Marijuana, Indian hemp and dry gin became very common and those addicted to them became terrors to the people". A similar account of rejection and desolation from another woman also in her late 60s goes thus, "those women who were forcefully taken by the Nigerian soldiers who succeeded in returning after the war were received with joy and celebrations but the children they came back with

were not accepted. They were seen as strangers with strange blood and this left the women with mixed feelings” (Jacinta: Lecturer; Amaeze Nsukka).

The women cared for those who were maimed by the war in addition to feeding their families and when it became obvious that their efforts were not enough such groups like the Red Cross and Caritas stepped in to assist in saving lives. According to Veronica, a 79 year old retired Staff Nurse/Midwife from Eha-Alumona,

“those who were suffering from Kwashiorkor and those who returned with different forms of amputation were assisted by the Caritas and those elderly women who were not confiscated by the soldiers during the war. The Red Cross helped with clothes and such food items like corn meal which was used in preparing numerous dishes. Given that salt was nowhere to be found, the Red Cross also supplied the people with stock fish from the sea as that was a good source of

salt. Unfortunately, these food stuffs did not get to every one due to the insufficient quantity and the corruption of those in charge of the distribution”.

Given that the Red Cross could not get round to all those who were either injured, suffering from Kwashiorkor (malnutrition) and those raped by the soldiers, they gave rudimentary training to those women at the home fronts on how to care for these people. In agreement with this, Chinelo, the 79 year old retired Nurse/midwife stated,

“after the war, the Nigerian government confiscated all trained nurse/midwives to work in collaboration with the Red Cross and Caritas in caring for the less privileged, the injured and the sick in the various regions of the country. Each nurse/midwife was used in his or her region and even those women who were deemed fit to give care were taken in as auxiliary nurse to make sure there were enough hands to give care to those in need of it. These groups of women were also used in distributing the food stuffs and other items brought by the Caritas and the Red Cross”.

Today’s Biafran women and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) controversy:

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is a separatist organization in Nigeria founded in 2012 by Mazi Nnamadi Kanu, a British Nigerian with the sole aim of restoring an independent state of Biafra in the south eastern part of Nigeria (Simon, 2017). This group draws its support from mostly the Igbo in the south-eastern region of the country. Adeshokan & Mahr (2019) and Gaffey (2015) indicated that this group has criticized the government for its poor investment in the region, inequitable resource distribution, ethnic marginalization and heavy military presence in the erstwhile Biafran region of the country. Since the emergence of this group in 2012, there has been increased tension, violence and fatal altercations between it and security agencies of the government. Data from the US-based Council on Foreign Relations shows that the south-east regions of the country have averaged 2.5 deaths daily since the formation of the Eastern Security Network (ESN) by the IPOB in December, 2020 as against the 0.5 deaths prior to that (Michael, 2021). The crisis in the south-eastern part of Nigeria has continued to rage as the government’s opposition to the IPOB separatist group continues to intensify. Perhaps, the confrontation became heightened in the case of what has been described as the “Orlu Crisis” on the 22nd of January, 2021 during which the Nigerian Army moved to crush the paramilitary wing of the IPOB, the ESN (Peckham, 2021; BBC, 2021).

In the light of these constant clashes with between the separatist group and the law enforcement agencies in the country, fear and anxiety has become a way of life for the indigenes of this region as they live in fear of falling victims to stray bullets and other accompanying evils that have infiltrated the country with these crises. According to a woman from Udenu Local Government Area,

“we live in constant fear as we go about our daily activities. We cannot lock ourselves indoors all day expecting not to die of hunger. We have to continue with our jobs and businesses, praying and hoping that God hears and keeps us safe from stray bullets from IPOB, the Police or the Army” (Ugonne: Teacher; Obollo-afor).

There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigerians have more security issues to deal with than they envisaged. According to Duerksen (2021), Nigeria faces an array of security challenges beyond Boko Haram and distinguishing their threats and understanding their socio-geographic contours is essential for adapting customized solutions. For the author, understanding the state of emergency in Nigeria to be as a result of the Boko Haram insurgency alone is an understatement of the complexity and multidimensional nature of the country’s security challenges. Interestingly, some of my respondents shared the above viewpoint. In the words of Mrs Chinyere, a 60 year old Tailor/Fashion stylist from Nkpanano,

“a few years ago, our fears were that Boko Haram will one day come upon us and wipe us all out if we refuse to convert to their religion. But as it seems today, our closest doom is from these young men and women who were not yet born during the civil war. All they know are stories they heard from their parents about the war; if they had experienced the war themselves they wouldn’t be crying out for another war by creating this IPOB and asking for the Republic of Biafra”.

The nature of insecurity in the country continues to worsen as its dimensions and frequency continue to worsen and increase with each passing day and these make it easy to understand why Olurounbi (2021) stated that government’s efforts to fight criminality, kidnapping and rebel activity are not producing results. On face value therefore, it seems Nigeria is steadily heading towards another civil war. An outcome that brings back the sad memories of the past and imaginations of the trauma among those who saw the Nigerian civil war. For instance, an elderly woman in her 80’s stated

“each time I hear stories of the things happening in Nigeria, especially in our part of the country, I shudder with fear. I see a situation where another civil war will break out; I fear for our sons who do not seem to know what they are asking for; I fear for our daughters who will be captured, raped and

even killed; I fear for us the elderly ones who will either starve to death or be butchered by enemy troops because we can neither run nor defend ourselves anymore; these are the things we witnessed during the civil war and these young ones are ignorantly asking for a repeat of these evils again” (Mrs Ngwu: Retired Med. Doc.; Amaeze).

The above statements notwithstanding, some observers are of the opinion that things will only get worse South-eastern Nigerians if they keep quiet and do not get their independence from Nigeria soon. In an interview with BBC News on the 17th of July, 2017, Mr Njoku, a 69 year old man who fought in the Nigerian civil war and lost his kneecap in the process said

“we went to that war with nothing; we went empty handed; some held machetes, some had sticks while they (Nigerians) had machine guns. We still need Biafra because Nigerians are treating us like slaves; if you come to Igbo-land you can see there is no development there and in almost 30 years of democracy, Nigeria hasn’t had an Igbo president”.

The above statement captures the opinions of a number of people in the South-eastern region especially youths and even a few other women interviewed. Thus these people see fighting back and insisting on gaining their independence from Nigeria as the only solution to the perceived maltreatment they are receiving in the country. According to a woman in her late 70’s who witnessed the war,

“our sons have to fight for their rights; they have to fight for the future of their children and generations yet to be born; at the rate Nigerians are going, if we do not fight them now, if we do not match them strength for strength now, they will either wipe us out as a people or make us their slaves forever. So the only solution is for them to grant us our independence or give us our rights in the country” (Ngozi: Retired Civil Servant; Amokwe).

Despite the fact that some south-easterners believe that they have to fight for their rights, they still nurture the fears of what it would be like for them should another war break out. According to Ngozi,

“I am not deceiving myself about what it will be like should another break out. I witnessed the civil war, I can still remember it is if it were yesterday. It wasn’t an enjoyable experience in any way but as it is now, some of us will have to die for the survivors to live good lives. Let us all see it as the sacrifices we have to make to gain better life for our people”.

In affirmation to her statement, another elderly woman in her 80’s concurred,

“yes, it will be bloody if a war starts but why shy away from war? It is already bloody even without a war; our sons and daughters are being butchered in our farms and homes on a daily basis; our crops and farmlands are being destroyed in their numbers every day; we are already starving as if we are in a war situation. Let the war begin! I have seen it once; some died and some survived. Even if there are just 10 of us left after the war, let those 10 represent the rest of us and enjoy good lives in Igbo-land for once in this lifetime” (Nkechinyere: Petty Trader; Nkpuruikwere).

Discussion of Findings :

As the findings of the study elaborately show, women in the erstwhile Biafra suffered great trauma during and after the war. It also, highlights that the trauma apart from the psychological dimension involved externally inflicted injury (see, Allarakha and Uttakar, 2021). These women were exposed to the war, an event that was from all indications threatening to their minds and body and produced feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, and horror (see, Kammerzell, 2021). The extensive scope of the trauma these women suffered as my findings indicate would lead one to assert that the Biafra experience is in tune with the contention of scholars regarding the existence of group or collective trauma (Alexandar, 2004; Payne et al, 2004).

Perhaps, more revealing, or insightful is the fact that despite the obvious paucity of formal institutional support, a good number of these women were resilient and thus overcame the trauma a best as they could. Therefore, the findings validate the resilience perspective and showed that these women dug-deep into communal solidarities and ties to overcome their trauma while providing care and support for younger members of the society affected in various ways by the war. In other words, social capital (especially in terms of kin networks) and resilience (the spirit of never giving up) were crucial elements for dealing with trauma by these women. The mere fact that these women could still talk about their experiences and ordeals freely says a lot about their survival and adaptation.

The above notwithstanding, the study shows that in spite of the horrible experiences of the civil war, some women have chosen to pitch tents with the IPOB on their demand for secession as they seem not to see any meaningful future or hope for the south-eastern region if they continue being part of the Nigerian nation. This still speaks to that spirit of resilience as stated above.

Conclusion :

While there is inherently nothing amiss with the view of individual trauma as a pathological state that requires psychoanalysis to heal (see Lifton and Mitchel, 1995), there is the feeling that when individual trauma is embedded in the cultural or group trauma, isolated treatment may become unwieldy and largely cosmetic. Therefore, the above situation privileges the likelihood of a group oriented approach often favoured in social work to counter the effects of trauma. Be that as it may, a critical first step in the case of Nigeria may be to engage in the systematic process of closure or significant memorialization led by the government or its appointed agency.

The study has exposed the traumatic and harrowing experiences of the women of Biafra during the Nigerian civil war. It can be seen that while there have been various accounts and narrations of the war that was a watershed of sorts in Nigeria's march to nationhood, not much attention has been given to the ordeals of the women. It is obvious from the above that women even in the war were treated as mere chattels and even more depressing as the spoils of the war to be plundered and exploited in whatever way in spite of the fact that these women were also critical to both family survival and healing after the war. It is only logically to expect that the efforts to achieve any meaningful closure to the memories of the war can only be successful against the background of the realities confronted by different demographic groups in the population. There is no gainsaying the fact that wars even when women are not defined as combatants take a heavy toll on the women.

Hence, scholarly and official narrations of wars must embody the critical gender dimension to them. This is no less the case in the Nigerian civil war. Again, women as the accounts in the paper show have shown themselves are resilient as the fulcrum of society's survival and healing during and after bitter and mostly internecine wars in Africa. Hence, policies and regulations on conflict resolution, social rehabilitation and re-integration must treat women as peculiar category that often suffer more indignity, trauma and horror than the real combatants in war.

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