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Exploring the Cultural Shifts in Olaudah Equiano's 18th Century Igbo Women: Some Matters Arising

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Abstract

Women in 18th-century Igbo society, as documented in Olaudah Equiano's classic autobiography *The Interesting Narrative*, were highly industrious and self-sustaining. Today, this gendered image increasingly appears to be an illusion, as some able-bodied Igbo women are visibly taking to the streets of Igbo land as beggars. Notably, many of these women either suffer from or feign various forms of deformity. This reality presents a stark contradiction to Equiano's depiction of early Igbo society, where women thrived in agriculture, trade, and craftsmanship, and where begging and deformity were virtually unheard of. What accounts for this dramatic reversal? This article explores how begging, once unknown among women in Igbo society, emerged and evolved into a widespread phenomenon. It argues that this shift is not a product of mere laziness or a dereliction of cultural values but rather a catastrophic consequence of the Nigerian-Biafran War (1967–1970). Specifically, it examines how the war disrupted traditional gender roles and suggests that women's largely passive combat involvement left enduring socio-economic vulnerabilities. Employing a qualitative historiographical approach, the study adopts a thematic-narrative, comparative, and exploratory framework to analyze this transformation. By understanding the historical roots of this issue, societies can better safeguard the dignity and future of their women by addressing the balance of gender roles in both peace and conflict.

Keywords: Cultural, street, women, matters, beggars

Introduction

Women in the 18th century Igbo society were famed for their extraordinary industry and self-sustenance. Olaudah Equiano (1996), the first Igbo slave freed in England in 1800 elaborately documented this in his classic autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African* published in 1789. Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* excited a great deal of interest in many parts of the globe for its classic account of his slavery and post-slavery experience savoured with man's inhumanity to fellow man. It is in Equiano's vivid portrayal of the cultural life of his Igbo people, marked by the industriousness of its women, that the splendor of his narrative truly lies. Equiano's account presents a striking visualization of an Igbo society where the spirit of enterprise and industry was deeply ingrained and the drive for competition flourished among all, including children. In this society, laziness was ridiculed, and begging was regarded as a cultural taboo. Notably, the deformity was an alien phenomenon among the people. While men, women, and children held vital roles within society, women were held to particularly high standards due to their extraordinary industriousness. These women excelled in agriculture, trade, and craftsmanship, often serving as spirit mediums. And when not assisting men in tillage, the women engaged in weaving and spinning. Hard work and self-sufficiency, especially among women, were defining characteristics of Igbo society two centuries ago. As Equiano observed:

“Everyone contributes something to the common stock and as we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars” (Equiano, 1996:8).

Today, the industrious image of women and children in early Igbo society, as vividly portrayed in Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative*, is becoming increasingly distorted. In urban centers like Enugu, Onitsha, Awka, and Nsukka, some Igbo women, along with their children, have visibly colonized the streets as beggars. A walk through these bustling areas reveals a growing population of women and children in tattered appearances, their presence a stark contrast to the industriousness once celebrated in Igbo culture. The Igbo women Equiano described as paragons of industry and self-sufficiency now have some descendants who not only beg but have transformed it into a profession, practiced by both the disabled and those without visible impairments. This reality presents a sharp irony and a profound reversal of the 18th-century Igbo society Equiano depicted—one where women and children dominated agriculture, trade, and craftsmanship; where deformity and begging were unknown; where the spirit of enterprise thrived; and where labour and contributions to the common good were universal. The causes of this dramatic transformation are deeply puzzling and warrant further investigation to understand the factors behind this societal shift.

Over time, social scientists across the globe, particularly in Nigeria, have approached the issue of street begging as a social phenomenon rather than a historical one. The tendency has been to facilely focus on modernization factors like poverty, without addressing critical questions such as when, why, and how begging originated within the specific context of any society under study. It is our firm stance that begging in Igbo land is more historical than social, and any meaningful attempt to address it must consider its origins as a *sine qua non*. In this article, we reviewed Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative* with a focus on industry and self-sustenance among the women and children of early Igbo society. This emphasis aims to illustrate the extent to which laziness was abhorred and begging was unknown, creating a stark contrast with the growing population of gendered beggars in contemporary Igbo society. Toward this end, we examined the phenomenon of street begging among Igbo women and children today.

Our objective is to highlight the great contradiction between the past and the present in Igbo society, thus fostering a sense of puzzle and fascination among readers.

Begging among Igbo women finds its roots in the aftermath of the Nigerian-Biafran War of 1970. The role of women during the war—largely relegated to the home front, where they supported the war effort through non-combat duties—left them particularly vulnerable to the invading Nigerian forces. The pain and devastation of this period, combined with the disintegration of their former roles, led many women to a life of street begging in the post-war years, a phenomenon that starkly contrasts with the industrious image of Igbo women in earlier centuries. In the 18th century, as captured in Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative*, Igbo women were celebrated for their resilience, their self-sufficiency, and their active participation in both agriculture and trade. Far from passive, they were integral to the economic and social fabric of their communities. However, by the time Achebe’s

Things Fall Apart was written—reflecting the Igbo society of the 19th and early 20th centuries—gender roles had begun shifting. Women had moved from being warriors and agricultural leaders to largely passive figures on the home front, their roles confined to supporting men in times of war, rather than engaging directly in combat. To fully understand this drastic shift in gender dynamics, it is necessary to compare the earlier portrayals of Igbo women as active, industrious members of society with the reality of the post-war period. This study undertakes a comparative analysis of *The Interesting Narrative* and *Things Fall Apart* to trace the origins of begging among Igbo women and children back to the end of the Nigerian-Biafran War. It explores how the traditional roles of women, once marked by strength and self-sufficiency, became passive and vulnerable in the face of war. This vulnerability, exacerbated by the trauma of war, led many women to seek sustenance through street begging in the years that followed. Our research adopts a historiographical qualitative approach, with a thematic-narrative, comparative, and exploratory design. We utilized both primary and secondary sources, critically assessing them through the lens of historical source criticism. Where necessary, the notion of "historical presence" was invoked to enrich our understanding of the past.

Ultimately, this work illustrates the tragic irony of the post-war condition of Igbo women, who transitioned from being the pillars of their society to struggling beggars on the streets. It challenges us to reconsider the long-term consequences of war on women, especially in terms of how gender roles are altered during conflict. Furthermore, it calls for a reevaluation of gender-based laws and protections during times of war—reminding us that societies must protect the dignity and humanity of their most vulnerable, particularly women and children, in the aftermath of violence and destruction.

Olaudah Equiano and *The Interesting Narrative*: Women and Labour in 18th Igbo Society

Olaudah Equiano, one of the most influential figures in the abolition movement, was an Igbo man who was born into slavery but ultimately freed in the second half of the 18th century. Born in 1745 in the fertile valley of Essaka in Eboe (Igbo), Eastern Nigeria, Equiano's birthplace was described as being under the suzerainty of Benin. His father, a distinguished member of the Ndi Ichie—a class of revered chiefs—was responsible for administering justice and resolving disputes. As the youngest of seven children, Equiano was particularly cherished by his mother, whose love and attention shaped his early years. At the age of eleven, Equiano was kidnapped, along with his younger sister, and forcibly sold into the transatlantic slave trade. Though initially bound for the West Indies, much of Equiano's life in bondage was spent serving the captains of slave ships and British naval officers. Through these turbulent years, he found himself traveling extensively across Europe and the Americas. This experience, while horrific, granted him opportunities to engage in minor trade ventures, which he used to his advantage. Over time, Equiano saved enough money to buy his freedom in 1766. Before achieving his freedom, Equiano was resold several times, and with each transfer, he was given a new name: Michael, Jacob, and finally, Gustavus Vassa, bestowed by Lieutenant Henry Paschal, the captain of a British trading vessel. It was under this name, Gustavus Vassa, that he would become widely known, though he published

his famous autobiography under his African name, Olaudah Equiano. Following his emancipation in 1766, Equiano settled in England in 1767, where he sought education and worked as an assistant to Dr. Charles Irving, a prominent scientist. His relentless drive for knowledge and experience did not wane; instead, it fueled his ambition for further travel. Far beyond the adventures of the legendary Marco Polo, Equiano voyaged extensively, visiting Europe, South America, North America, and Asia, often aboard British trading vessels.

To some extent more than the footloose Italian Marco Polo, he made several voyages aboard trading vessels to Europe, South America, North America, and Asia. Equiano published his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, in 1789 in which he espoused the cultural history of his Eboe society, his life and times in slavery characterized by horrible experiences, his post-slavery life characterized by his struggle to survive as a free man, his role in the abolition of transatlantic slavery and the foundation of Sierra Leone. Equiano married Susanna Cullen in 1792, with whom he had two daughters, Joanna Vassa and Anna Maria Vassa. Equiano died in Westminster, London on 31 March 1797 being the first Igbo to write the cultural history of his people (Carretta, 2005).

Through Equiano's *The Interesting Narratives*, one gets a firsthand picture of life in early Igbo society. Egalitarianism, village democracy, social customs, ancestral worship, voodoo, healing with herbs and sacrifices, and sanctity and dignity of human life all rooted in industry and self-reliance characterized life in Equiano's early Igbo society. All activities and streams of life in Equiano's society, illustrate the necessity for hard work. According to Equiano, "all our industry is exerted to improve those blessings of nature" (Equiano, 1996:7). Industry and self-reliance were the hallmarks of Equiano's 18th century Igbo society but within the sexes and gender of the society, it was the sanctum of women. Men, women, and children take importance in the society but within the districts, women were held to higher standards because of their extraordinary industriousness. Women were agriculturists, spirit mediums, traders, and others. They engaged in agriculture, trade, and local crafts. Writing about the economy of pre-colonial Igbo society, Afigbo (1981) notes that farm work is gender-complementary. "In areas where the land was first tilled before yam mounds were made, that was done by both men and women" (Afigbo, 1981:129). Equiano notes that Agriculture is his society's chief employment and when the women are not employed with the men in tillage, their usual occupation is spinning and weaving cotton, which they afterward dye and make into garments. The women also manufacture many kinds of earthen vessels for the society. Despite their extraordinary industriousness, "they are uncommonly graceful, alert, and modest to a degree of bashfulness" (Nwaezeigwe, 2007). Instances of incontinence amongst the women before marriage were never heard. Their industry is enlivened with remarkable cheerfulness. Their devotion to farm work, trading, and manufacturing never robbed them of their cute and neat physical appearance. Although dressing was relatively simple and nearly unisex women of distinction wore golden ornaments which they disposed of with some profusion on their arms and legs. The women are also indefatigable warriors and boldly march out to fight along with men. The absence of inhibition to social

mobility in early Igbo society is further reiterated by Nwaezeigwe (2007) who notes that the socio-political organization of the Igbo society does not recognize classes based on the right of birth; instead, it maintains that every free-born has equal opportunities to attain the highest position in the community like any other person.

Due to the culture of hard work and industry that prevailed in Equiano's Igbo society, begging was unknown. This, along with nature's graceful providence, made deformity equally rare, so that faked beggars rarely found justification to disguise as handicapped and extort the members of the society. As Equiano observes, "Everyone contributes something to the common stock; and as we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars" (7). He further notes, "Deformity is indeed unknown amongst us, I mean that of shape." The spirit of hard work, resilience, intelligence, integrity, and zeal that pervaded Equiano's 18th-century Igbo society made the West Indian planters prefer slaves from this region over those from other parts of Guinea. Extrapolating from this, Equiano's early Igbo society celebrated the industrious, while the lazy were ridiculed through ribald songs and social stigma. It was a community where the drive for enterprise was deep and powerful, deformity was rare, and begging was unheard of. The spirit of competition flourished, with those who worked hard climbing the social ladder, while those who shirked work were cast aside. This ethos is encapsulated in numerous Igbo proverbs and idioms, which emphasize that the more one works, the higher one rises in society.

A Closer Look at the Complexities of 'Ogbenye' and Street Begging in Equiano's Society

Recently, a walk in the streets of Igboland Nigeria clearly reveals clusters of women and children beggars in dirty outfits, soliciting for alms from passersby. Some of the women show signs of deformity while some are healthy and sound. Observations and direct interviews with these women and children indicate that the greater majority are of Igbo extraction that migrated from various parts of Igbo land into other towns. The Igbo women who were known for their industriousness now have some of their folks developed the sense and art of begging such that begging has become a profession for both the disabled and persons with no trace of disability. Although critics of Equiano's assertions about begging to be unknown in early Igbo society readily disagree that there is no society without beggars. Because the word *Ogbenye* has been in usage in Igbo society since antiquity and literary connotes 'community gives or assists' many now take it to mean beggar. Unfortunately, this interpretation is a misconception of the actual meaning of 'Ogbenye.' There are about three words in the Igbo dialect that need to be clarified. These are 'Onye-Aririo,' 'Ogbenye' and 'Ogbenye Onuntu.' 'Onye-aririo' implies a beggar or one who begs. In the church, one often hears 'nyere ndi aririo aka' meaning render help to the beggars. On the other hand, 'Ogbenye' is the English variant for 'the poor.' Thus, in Igbo land, one often hears 'Chineke gozie umu ogbenye' meaning God bless the poor. 'Ogbenye Onuntu' means destitute. This category is addressed as 'ndi o n'enweghi ka o ha fa'- people who have nothing. It is an extreme level of being poor (ogbenye) in which one cannot afford his necessities of life like food, water, clothing, and shelter. It is this situation that leads to 'aririo'- begging. Thus, one thing is striking; anybody can be poor but not all poor are beggars. The fact that

one gets help from the community does not make him a beggar, in so far, the socio-cultural structure of Equiano's early Igbo society was largely communal in nature. Thus, Equiano was correct in his assertion that 'begging is unknown to us' when the meaning of 'ogbenye' is understood to mean the poor rather than the beggar.

The industrious Igbo society that Equiano described has evolved into a community where gendered street begging has become increasingly prevalent in many cities. While, historically, beggars in Igbo land were mostly Nigerians from the northern parts and those with physical disabilities, this trend has notably shifted. Today, there is a significant rise in the number of Igbo women and children engaging in begging. Many of these women use their babies, sometimes twins or triplets, to solicit alms. Others carry disabled children, while some instruct their other children to run after every passerby, collecting any money and returning it to their mothers, who sit at a distance, gathering the alms.

Daily, these women and children beggars are seen sitting at busy spots, especially in the Enugu metropolis, Nsukka town, and Onitsha. Common locations include Upper Iweka, MCC Flyover, Main Market, and Ose Market, where they often sit with rolled umbrellas and polythene bags beside them. Their children pursue every passerby, sometimes refusing to release their hold on strangers unless money is given, or they are rebuked harshly. These women, some alone and others with children, typically begin their begging from 7:00 am to 10:00 am, and again from 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm, establishing a routine that sustains their daily begging business (Ezeaku, Obi-Ani & Ikem, 2023; Chukwude, 2021).

Their physical appearance is far from flattering. Both the women and children are dressed in shabby clothes, which contrasts sharply with the 18th-century Igbo women who, despite their hard labor, maintained neat appearances. Some of the women sport skin-punk-style haircuts, while others leave their hair tangled and unkempt, often covering it with ruffled headscarves. They wear worn-out, dirty slippers, a stark contrast to the neatness expected in a city that is often visited by tourists. Some of them and their children eat in the open such foods as soaked cassava flakes and eye-sour fufu with sight-boring soups contained in poor and old plastic plates that under normal circumstances should be taken indoors. When a passerby stops to share money, these women and children often try to overpower and stampede each other, and in such circumstances, violent war of words, blackmail, and rendering of curses become common among them. Rather than stay in one place, some of these women and children beggars prefer to roam about the street. Often, they appear deformed either blind, deaf, dumb, or tend to exhibit some kind of terrible ailment like partial stroke, cancer, tumor, and so on. This category is often led by an individual known as the "beggar's assistant," who plays a crucial role in explaining the nature of the ailment, recounting the victim's painful and tragic experiences, and ultimately soliciting help. They typically carry a polythene bag to collect the alms received. Some beggars also patrol the streets with bells or wooden gongs to attract attention, while others sing deeply emotional songs designed to evoke sympathy from passersby.

Indeed, it is benumbing to see how much of the streets and urban centers in Igboland are dominated by mostly women and children street beggars of Igbo extraction. They constitute a common sight in almost every nook and cranny of

these urban centers. This was once an Igbo society where women were reputed for their industry and ingenuity and where begging was unknown. Today not only begging is becoming an acceptable culture, but both women and children now either seriously suffer from deformity or they feign it in order to attract sympathy for alms. Rather than rise to the challenge and face grim situations via undertaking tasks either in trade, craft, or agriculture; some of these women decided to express their submission by taking to street begging despite the accompanying scorn and shame in the art. When and how did this significant shift in the people's way of life begin?

Reverse in Gender Roles of 18thc and 20thc Igboland

By the 20th century, cultural life in Igbo society as had been since the days of Olaudah Equiano remained intact except for the reverse in war gender roles of women. The 18th century Igbo society as recorded by Equiano knew no begging. This culture survived up to the first half of the 20th century, as mirrored in Chinua Achebe's (2008:10) *Things Fall Apart* published in 1958. Using the fictional character, Unoka, Achebe provides what the situation of the beggar was like in the Igbo land of the 19th century and early 20th century. Beggars were seen as failures because they were thought to be lazy improvident and quite incapable of thinking about the future. They are mocked, besmirched, and caricatured and the family members live in perpetual shame. Achebe fictionalizes this in these clauses: "Unoka, the grown-up, was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back" (Achebe, 2008:10). In another instance, the artist scribbles: "When Unoka died he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt". Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him. "Unoka, for that was his father's name, had died ten years ago. In his day he was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow" (Achebe, 2008:9). The place of begging and industry in the 18th century is therefore entirely the same in the 19th and 20th century Igbo land. Women's core domestic role in the 18th century such as cooking, weeding on the farm, manning household chores, and procreation 18th century also received no jolt by the 19th century and early 20th century Likewise, palm wine tapping and selling, hunting, and etcetera which were the exclusive reserve of men.

Although culture against begging and other aspects of life in early Igbo society may have survived those of gender roles, especially concerning war and conflict were discovered to have started diverging at least by the 20th century as Achebe represented in his *Things Fall Apart*. In Equiano's 18th-century Igbo society, men and women engage in combat side by side. Bloody war was not common but when it did erupt, both men and women took an equal role in executing it. Equiano, notes that they had all kinds of traditional weapons in which usage is taught to all including women, and that complementary fighting- a situation where women and men fight on each other's side marks the conduct of each war (Equiano, 1996:8-9). Women's active participation in combat alongside men was a *sine qua non* to securing slide victory in the 18th century Igbo land. Unfortunately, by the 20th century, women had declined from engaging in active combat to becoming domicile as home front and auxiliaries mainly for the supply of food, water, clothes, and sex

to their husbands and sons in combat. This is extrapolative of Achebe's (2008:15) *Things Fall Apart* in which attention is brought to bear on the combat exploit of men personified in the character of Okonkwo. Okonkwo is depicted as a fierce and unbeatable warrior. He is capable of bringing a human head home from every war and he drinks his palm wine with his first human head (Achebe, 2008:15). What Achebe is indirectly telling readers is that the active combat role that initially was for both men and women in Equiano's 18th century Igbo society had become the exclusive reserve of men by the 20th century. The author demonstrates this as he mirrors how Umuofia village convened to take war decision in the face of the murder of a woman of Umuofia by another neighbouring clan (Achebe, 2008:15). By gendering the murdered victim in a woman, the author insinuates that Igbo women by the 20th century had become weaklings to the extent of not even being able to defend self. The author further clarified this as he highlighted the profile of villagers who gathered in the marketplace to make war decisions to be solely men. Paints the artist; "At last Ogbuefi Ezeugo stood up in the midst of them and bellowed four times, 'Umuofia Kwenu,' and on each occasion, he faced a different direction and seemed to push the air with a clenched fist. And ten thousand men answered 'Yaa!' each time" (Achebe, 2008:15). Women's combat role as home front in the 20th century was further illustrated in Buchi Emechita's (2008) *Joys of Motherhood* which tells the story of how Igbo men were preferred by the British colonialists in their fight in the First World War and Second World War. The basis of women as mirrored in the character, Nnu-Ego is the necessity for a woman to be fertile and above all give birth to sons who would fight and defend women.

The situation of Igbo women in the 20th century was that of a passive combat role. Their eighteenth-century conflict gender role by the 20th century turned out to be a direct reverse. Any question then of what the gender role of Igbo women would be like in the Nigerian Biafran war of 1967 to 1970? The cause of variation in the gender role of women in the 18th century. Igbo society and the gender role of women in the 20th century are still shrouded in obscurity. However, while Alice Clark suggests that the domesticity of women's role, worldwide started sometime in the preindustrial past and by the later period; Davidoff and Hall (1987) clarified by noting that the rise of capitalism and industrialization withdrew public women from productivity and confined them to their homes.

Gendered Street Begging in Igboland: A Post-Nigeria-Biafra Civil War Experience

The Nigerian-Biafran war formally began in early July 1967 when officers and men of the Nigerian army invaded the Igbo land border towns of Ogoja and Nsukka proved to be a declaration of war. This was coming after a month when General Odumegwu Ojukwu under the mandate of the people of Eastern Nigeria known better as the Igbo people declared the sovereign state of Biafra in response to the series of incessant political turmoil in the country that endangered the Igbo people (Madiebo, 1980:94, Achebe, 2012:121). Following the first invasion of Igbo land, Ojukwu was mandated to declare war. During his war communiqué, able-bodied men with rippled muscles elbowed shoulders and chanted 'Ojukwu nye anyi egbe! (Ojukwu equip/give us guns) (Madiebo, 1980:95). This war song is significant for one thing about gender roles on the eve of the conflict: for men to have chanted it

alone is a metaphorical pointer that active combat engagement is no longer part of the female gender role but rather a sole responsibility of the men. It is in this direction that Okyere (2018:83) notes that wars and revolutions have been viewed as an exclusive preserve of men, a situation in which women are characterized in their capacity as daughters, wives, mothers, grandmothers and considered vulnerable". In his article, "Gender and Conflict" Lomas (2000) provides practical justification when he reveals that during the Great War, recognized army wives in Britain undertake tasks within the regiment, such as washing, sewing and mending.

In the effort to repel the invasion by Federal forces, Igbo men were rapidly enlisted, armed, and dispatched to the frontlines to defend Biafran territory. In contrast, women and children, predominantly girls, remained behind on the home front. Their primary responsibilities included providing for the children and elderly within their families while ensuring that their husbands and sons at the war front were supplied with food and resources. However, not all men went to battle; some evaded conscription by hiding in the bush, avoiding detection. These men would stealthily emerge at night, seeking sustenance from their wives, mothers, or daughters before retreating once more into hiding (Odo, 1999:37-44). The onus of supporting these men also fell on the women. This non-combatant role assumed by women during the Nigerian-Biafran war was not only a direct extension of their prewar gender responsibilities but also underscored their vital role in safeguarding the survival of both their families and the soldiers at the front, often at great personal cost.

The invasion of Igbo land in July 1967 did not come politely; it came in a swoop with air and naval bombardments. The farms, stores, markets, and even rivers were bombarded and blasted in perpetuity. Famine fell on the land. Things that were normally taboo for consumption became choices. In each Biafran community and defense line that is conquered, the soldiers in charge would evacuate and retreat to another defense line leaving the women and children in such communities at the mercy of the invaders (Odo, 1999, Obi-Ani, 2017). Women safeguarded the home front role position by engaging in what has been generally referred to as an '*Ahia* attack' a phrase connoting a trade conducted under the threat of bomb blasts, gunshots, butcher, kidnappings, sexual violence, and nocturnal travels that were conducted in strict secrecy back and forth through the enemy zone. According to Ezeogueri-Oyewole (2016:78-87), '*ahia* attack; is fraught with enormous risk for the participants and seen generally as an illicit trade, culprits of which are expected to face damning consequences. Survival of families depended on it but the enormous risk was not enough deterrent to discourage participation. By this and their being the ones at home to be met by the invading soldiers, Igbo women's war gender role rendered them vulnerable to all forms of inhumanity. Writing about the First World War and women's work in England, Abbott (1917) provides that working women were more adversely affected than working men because the army offered an immediate alternative employment to men. German women in the world war years also found themselves in a similar shoe. "The War had catapulted them from the adoring wife and self-sacrificing mother of Nazi ideology to the head of household and sole breadwinner while their fathers and husbands were fighting on battlefields all over the world" (Esser, 2003).

The end of the war brought into sharp focus the profound miseries it had caused. Scenes of bombed crops and farmlands, once tended by women, and destroyed shops, often partly owned by women, became haunting remnants of the war's devastation. Many of the returning war veterans – husbands and sons – returned as amputees (Andrews et al., 2017; Obi-Ani, 2017), requiring care and sustenance. The elderly and children who had survived on the home front also needed support. Adding to this burden, many women and girls found themselves as single mothers, raising children born out of the violence and chaos of the war (Obi-Ani, 2017, 2023). They bore the brunt of nursing the children born out of unwanted pregnancies gotten from rape, gang rapes, or prostitution. Indeed, gender shapes the varying impacts of war on the sexes (Andrews, 2017:511-515). Inextricably the civil war in addition to any other description may also be tagged as a war against the gendered dimension of Igbo folk. By the time truce was declared in January 1970, most of the women survivors of the horrendous conflict were economically handicapped, emotionally devastated, socially an object of societal ridicule, shame, and stigma, and physically either burdened with unwanted babies or unhealthy out of sexual violence (Okoye (2018:83). This situation bears evidence to Smyth's assertion that "it is only in the post-conflict phase that the full psychological and emotional impact of armed conflict can emerge" (Smyth, M. (2001). Writing about the First World War and women's work in England, Abbott provides that working women were more adversely affected by the dislocation of trade than workingmen because the army offered an immediate alternative employment to men (Abbott, 1917:641-678). The accompanying result of these cataclysmic consequences was the challenge of survival.

In the immediate aftermath, the women sought help from every available avenue, though the response was limited. Many who had lost all hope of survival tragically resorted to suicide, while others turned to begging as their last means of survival. Despite the efforts of the federal government, through its National Commission for Rehabilitation and the Nigerian Red Cross Society, to alleviate the situation by providing some relief materials (Obi-Ani, 2009, 18), the aid was insufficient. For example, the Red Cross Society had stockpiled 13,000 tons of food and was planning an additional 7,000 tons by the end of January 1970 (Obi-Ani, 2009). Enugu, the capital of the Eastern region at the time, was the first recipient of these reliefs, with plans to distribute them to other parts of Igbo land. However, much like the post-World War I situation in Dublin (Buckley, 2018), the relief efforts fell far short of meeting the overwhelming immediate needs of the people. The estimated 20,000 tons of aid were grossly inadequate to address the severe post-war conditions in the Eastern region of Nigeria.

Several factors contributed to this grim situation. First, while the Federal Government provided relief packages, it restricted the aid from countries and humanitarian organizations that had supported Biafra during the war. Second, the estimated population of the Igbo and the entire Eastern region was 7.5 million and 14 million, respectively, yet the relief efforts were based on the ill-projected figure of just 700,000 war victims (Obi-Ani, 19). Third, the distribution of relief materials was further complicated by corruption, with many supplies stolen or diverted to unknown locations before reaching their intended destination in Enugu (Obi-Ani, 19). Finally, even the limited quantity that made it to the capital city was not

adequately dispersed to other parts of Igbo land. Remote areas in Anambra, Ebonyi, Imo, and Abia received no assistance, as the relief efforts were both insufficient and ineffectively managed, with the distribution confined to city dwellers (Obi-Ani, 19).

Particularly women and children, the worst victims and survivors of the war engaged in all sorts of petty crimes including selling their babies when possible (Obi-Ani, 25). Dillenburg, K., Fargas, M., & Akhonzada, R. (2005), differentiate that victims are those who have given up and are helpless, while survivors are those despite the situation fighting back in whatever means to survive better. Some other women who were desperately desperate also journeyed to Enugu in an attempt to benefit from the relief aid that normally end up in the haven of urban dwellers (Godwin Okechukwu, personal communication: 2020). Yet some other women unable to stand the shame accompanying the sexual violence meted on them, wandered far off from their indigenous communities into the capital (Enugu) either to engage in one form of menial activities or to beg from patriotic city residents and by this hide from the stigma and ostracism (Godwin Okechukwu, personal communication: 2020). The nature of this stigmatization and ostracism is better grabbed in the context of those the German women suffered in occupied Germany as captured by Teo (1996) in his article 'The Continuum of Sexual Violence in Occupied Germany, 1945-1949' thus:

During the 1945 Battle for Berlin and in the immediate postwar period, approximately one in three Berlin women were raped by Allied troops – mostly from the Red Army – while 10,000 women in Berlin died from sexual assault. Many women committed suicide after rape, some forced to do so by their fathers because of their 'dishonour', while others were shot and killed by their husbands for consenting to sexual relations with Allied soldiers. Many German women were verbally abused by German soldiers on the streets or in their homes for being 'Allied whores', many received threatening letters from German men, and in at least one extreme case, a German woman had her head shaved by a returning POW for consorting with Allied troops.

Even in the city, life was often described as a dreary struggle for survival, where only the fittest thrived. Many Igbo women found ways to survive, resorting to strategic begging from urban dwellers and shopkeepers (Godwin Okechukwu, personal communication, 2020). Some carried plates, moving from one store section to another, receiving small but unsustainable support. During that time, the societal expectation was for every Igbo person to be generous to a fellow in need. Ogbete Market, the third-largest market in the Eastern region and the largest in the capital, was swiftly reconstructed through voluntary efforts and soon became a bustling hub of activity (Godwin Okechukwu, personal communication, 2020). By the mid-1970s, as conditions gradually improved, many women in Igbo land, known for their resilience and industriousness, had regained much of their former strength and energy. However, the experience of begging left an indelible mark on them, and a sense of dependence and conscience had developed.

Conclusion

The devastating consequences of the Nigeria-Biafra war—poverty, ill-health, unwanted pregnancies, social stigmatization, and the loss of family breadwinners—fell disproportionately on women, forcing them to assume full responsibility for their families' survival. Before the war, Igbo women were never associated with begging and were not seen soliciting alms on the streets. However, the war's end in 1970 marked a turning point, shattering this prewar image. Traditionally regarded as caretakers and supporters within the home, Igbo women were thrust into new roles as breadwinners and survivors during the war, enduring severe economic hardships, sexual violence, and inhuman brutality. These roles extended into the post-war period as women struggled to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities.

In the words of Okyere (2018), "As survivors of violent conflict, women bear the burden of reconstruction." For many Igbo women, this burden included venturing into homes and streets to beg, a practice previously unknown in Igbo society. The emergence of begging in Igbo culture can thus be traced to the intersection of women's traditional gender roles and the traumatic upheaval of the war. While begging may have initially been a survival strategy born out of necessity, it has since evolved into a mindset for some, shaped by the enduring legacy of the war. This shift reflects how the war reshaped women's roles and introduced practices that, over time, became ingrained in the social fabric of post-war Igbo society.

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