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From Hapless Victims to Collaborators: Exploring the Janus Voices of Women in the Aguleri-Umueri Conflict in Igboland, Southeast Nigeria

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Abstract

This article explores the *Janus-faced* voices of women in the Aguleri-Umueri communal conflicts, highlighting the contradictions inherent in their roles, not merely as victims but also as perpetrators and collaborators. While existing literature has predominantly examined the role of women in conflict resolution, less attention has been paid to their ambivalent positions as both victims and active participants in conflict dynamics. This duality represents a paradigm shift in understanding the narratives surrounding the Aguleri-Umueri communal conflicts. The article challenges conventional portrayals of women solely as passive victims of war and violence, instead investigating the complex roles they played. These included being inadvertent victims, active collaborators, and instigators of violence, as well as peacebuilders who engaged with traditional conflict resolution mechanisms during the post-conflict period. The central argument is that the multifaceted involvement of women in this protracted conflict remains underexplored in scholarly discourse. By addressing this gap, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gendered experiences in communal violence and post-conflict peacebuilding.

Keywords: Aguler, Umueri; hapless victims; collaborators; Janus voices; women; *Umuada.*

Introduction

Globally, the place of women during conflicts has constituted a major subject of intense debates among scholars. Some scholars, such as Mokwugo Okoyo (1977), Bonny Duala-M'Bedy (1984), Claude Ake (1985), and Herman Cohen (1995), have studied the role of women in conflicts in Africa. They have classified women, children, and youths as the most vulnerable groups and victims during armed conflicts and wars. There is a conventional tendency to identify and blame men as the main perpetrators of disputes, while women have been absolved of similar actions. Moreover, some studies have recognized and examined the woman's agency in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Given these perceptions of the role of women during conflicts and wars, this article aims to challenge the conventional perception of women as victims of violent conflicts by concentrating on women's agency as active collaborators, enablers, and instigators of the Aguleri and Umueri conflict.

Extensive literature exists that explores the Aguleri and Umueri conflict, yet much is not known about women's active participation as perpetrators and collaborators. Extant works that have examined the causes of the Aguleri and Umueri

communal conflict include Obiakor (2016) and Ibeanu (2003), while Iwu (2019) looked at the adoption of Indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms in resolving the Aguleri-Umueri conflict. While many scholars, such as Udom (2020) and Turshen and Twagiramariya (1998), have perceived women as the major victims of wars and conflicts, this article seeks to investigate and establish that women were also instigators, enablers, and collaborators in conflicts. Conventional stories on conflicts often gloss over the role of women in driving and escalating such conflicts. In the Aguleri and Umueri communal conflict, women's role as combatants and/or fighters has remained obscure, as has women's agency, which was vital in the resolution of the conflict. In many cases, women took the lead in organizing grassroots initiatives to promote peace and tolerance. Amaechi and Ibenau's works have concentrated on the significant role of women's agency in conflict resolution. The literature on inter- and intra-communal conflicts entirely neglects the role of women in the escalation of conflicts. Due to this neglect, this chapter investigates the vital, but often overlooked, roles of Aguleri and Umueri women in the conflict. Narratives of women's engagement in conflicts often emphasize them as the most vulnerable group. However, this chapter marks a significant shift from the vulnerability narrative to the nuanced explanation of the women's participation in the conflicts as collaborators and peacebuilders. Women's roles ranged from provision of logistical support through palliatives, food, accommodation for displaced persons, and encouragement of men and youth fighters to direct involvement as spies, porters, saboteurs, and active combatants. These roles were vital in sustaining and perpetuating the conflict. Investigations have shown that women were engaged in covert activities during the Aguleri-Umueri conflict, thereby displaying the Janus-faced voices that contributed to increasing their vulnerability to targeted attacks. Their multifaceted and conflicting roles contributed to prolonging the conflict, leading to many deaths (including women), destruction of property, internal displacement, human suffering, and other vulnerabilities.

The extant literature on the Aguleri and Umueri conflict has focused on the causes, impact, and women's involvement in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. This has been documented in the works of Ibok and Ogar (2018), Nzomo (2002), Nwoye (2007), Onwuzuruigbo and Eboiyehi (2013), and others. Conversely, studies that focused on the role of women as perpetrators, combatants, and enablers of conflicts are scant. Although the literature on women's roles in conflicts and wars is robust, the victim-cum-perpetrator portrayal of women in the conflict has been neglected and often glossed over and is thereby missing in the previous studies. To bridge this lacuna, this article explores the Janus voices of women, whose activities oscillated between those of victims, collaborators, instigators, and perpetrators/fighters in the conflict. It contends that the significant, yet neglected, Janus voices of women who morphed from victims to fighters remain an understudied aspect of women's experiences in the conflict.

Literature on women's roles in wars and conflicts in African and global perspectives is robust. Chris Coulter, Mariam Persson and Mats Utas argue that young women have been involved in wars and armed conflicts in contemporary Africa, but despite their multiple roles, their participation has been neglected, especially by scholars of the Global North. This has resulted in their non-inclusion in the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programmes during the post-conflict periods. They suggest that there is a need to recognize the roles of women in war and peace times to have a proper understanding of young women's roles and participation in armed conflict in Africa in the past and present time (Coulter et al., 2008).

Tsjeard Bouta, Georg Frerks, and Ilan Bannon (2005) examined the gender dimensions of intra-state conflict by drawing case studies from conflict regions in Africa. They contend that despite increased attention to the gender, conflict, and development nexus, many studies have not comprehensively recognized the multifaceted and dynamic roles of women in conflict situations (Bouta et al., 2025). They argue that evidence abounds on the increased women's active involvement in armed conflict, which varies in regular armies and irregular armies. The regular army has a large number of women compared to the irregular army, which has a smaller number of women in the military force. They aver that women have also served non-combat roles as cooks, porters, administrators, spies, and sex slaves for male soldiers. They also supported warfare by instilling hatred against enemy groups in their children, thereby contributing to the militarization of men and society.

In a similar vein, Robin Arnett examines the participation of women and girls in armed conflicts, drawing case studies from developing countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. This includes civil conflicts in Nepal, Colombia, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Mozambique. The conditions of these women when they returned to their home communitieswere not taken into consideration during the DDR programmes (Brett, 2002).

McKay and Mazurana (2003), in their book, explore girls' involvement in regular and irregular military forces from 1993 to 2003. They discovered that girls were part of fighting forces in internal conflicts in 55 countries and were involved in armed conflict in 38 countries. In addition, girls participated in several international conflicts in Uganda, Sudan, Macedonia, and Lebanon. Although female participation varies in armies, guerrilla forces, or armed liberation movements, generally they constitute between one-tenth and one-third of combatants. McKay and Mazurana asserted that the girls joined the armed struggles for survival and, at times, by conscription or coercion. The authors contend that the eruptions of the conflicts in the

postcolonial era represent some of the worst eras of militarism in the West African sub-region. They assert that incessant militarism in the postcolonial era disrupted democratic governance, social justice, and security, especially for women, in post-war societies in Africa.

This chapter builds on the extant literature by shifting attention from the conventional victim narratives to the collaborative roles of women in conflict escalation and conflict resolution. Given the emerging nuanced evidence of women's Janus voices that significantly contributed to the escalation of the conflict, this study seeks to understand the complex roles played by women in the Aguleri and Umueri conflict. In this respect, the following questions guide this article: What roles did women play during the conflict? What were the causes of the shift in women's roles from hapless victims to perpetrators of the conflict? What was the identity of the women perpetrators? To what extent did their roles contribute to their vulnerabilities and killings? What roles did women play in the resolution of the conflict in the post-conflict era?

Methodology

This article employed qualitative research methodology by employing both primary and secondary sources of data collection. It relied heavily on the extensive use of primary data, collected mainly from oral interviews with key informants, women, community leaders, youth, and other people from both communities who shared personal eyewitness accounts and experiences and had credible knowledge of the conflict. The key informants were selected, mainly from the warring communities. Selection was based on their knowledge and, in some cases, their active involvement in the conflict to obtain metropolitan voices that narrated the women's roles in the conflict. The oral interviews and focus group discussion sessions were recorded by taking notes and using a tape recorder during the fieldwork between January and September 2024.

FGDs were held with selected men and women from the two warring communities, including academics who were experts and studied the conflict and other stakeholders who witnessed the conflict. FGDs were utilized because they enabled informants to freely give accounts of their experiences during the conflict. The FGDs increasingly helped to obtain different perspectives that were cross-checked with the views of oral informants to ensure the validity of the data. The aim was to obtain first-hand, credible information from the informants. FGDs were held with selected women who had good knowledge of the nature of the women's participation in the conflict. Oral interviews and FDGs were recorded by taking notes during the fieldwork at the communities in 2024.

Ethical considerations when researching communal conflict necessitate obtaining the consent of informants before engaging them in interviews and FGD sessions. At the onset, the informants' consent was obtained when they were duly informed that the objectives of the research were for academic purposes and knowledge production. They were also obliged, at their discretion, to disclose their identities and share their lived experiences of the conflict. The different kinds of narratives from individual informants and FGDs made the findings more representative, credible, and reliable and assisted in checking and validating the perspectives of others. Objectivity, the hallmark of research ethics, was deployed in the data collection, interpretation, and analysis to eliminate subjectivities, sentiments, and biases by not interfering with the opinions, views, and perspectives of the informants from the two communities. Informants from each community tended to present their stories and perspectives to suit their personal and collective interests. The collection of primary data is vital in exploring varied accounts and perspectives of the informants.

The authors encountered some challenges in the collection of oral data. Conducting fieldwork on communal land conflicts is one of the most difficult engagements for any researcher because of the precarious nature of security in the area of the study. Although the conflict had ended, there were still some seemingly uneasy relations and tension between the two communities that could easily relapse into violence with little or slight provocation. There was also the problem of getting informants to provide useful information on the conflict. This was because the conflict was largely discussed in hushed tones/voices due to the uneasy relations and tense atmosphere that still existed between the communities. This made informants very careful about those to whom they spoke, realising the potential backlash of being attacked by fighters from the communities.

Some informants were reluctant to divulge information. However, with persuasion and explanations of the study's purpose, they obliged and provided useful information on the condition of anonymity. This is because the conflict created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty and engendered suspicion, hatred, and distrust between the communities. Some informants could not be easily reached physically after several attempts. The authors resorted to conducting interviews with them through phone calls and sending emails, to which they responded, stressing their need for anonymity. The authors agreed to abide by these conditions, given the ethical issues. In addition, some of the informants were not educated, which constituted a communication barrier. To overcome this challenge, research assistants were employed, who helped interpret the contents of the interview questions and communicate with them in the communities' dialects of the Igbo language. The data collected were later

transcribed and critically analyzed. Another challenge was that the specific names of women who lost their lives in the conflict as victims or collaborators and mercenaries were not well documented. Therefore, they were not easy to access from records and informants. This lack of proper documentation is attributable to the fact that a significant amount of literature overly focuses on the men's role in the conflict while consigning the women's roles to the background. The aforementioned challenges imposed limitations and shaped the findings of this study. This is not to express pessimism about the results of the research but to indicate its limitations. To overcome them, the data was subjected to rigorous analysis to eliminate biases, sentiments, heresy, and innuendoes inherent in the sources.

Secondary data comprised articles in journals, edited books, and media reports. We maintained objectivity in data collection, interpretation, and analysis by not interfering with the views and perspectives of the informants. Primary sources were complemented with secondary sources. Critical historical methods were applied to expert oral sources to complement secondary sources and obtain varied, nuanced, salient voices to deconstruct the Janus voices of women in the conflict. Thus, this article seeks to shift the conversation from the women's roles as hapless victims to those of perpetrators, armed combatants, and ultimately peacemakers in the Aguleri and Umueri conflict.

Causes of the Aguleri-Umueri Conflict

The Aguleri and Umueri communities are located on the eastern bank of the Omambala River in Anambra East Local Government Area of Anambra State, in the Igboland region of southeastern Nigeria. They are neighbouring, separate, autonomous communities without a clear delineation of boundary, only demarcated by a road leading to other neighbouring communities, such as Awkuzu and Nteje (Obiakor, 2016, 168-169).

The causes of the communal land conflict between Aguleri and Umueri are well known; needless to reiterate or render them comprehensively here. Some scholars, who have studied the conflict, including Ibeanu (2023), Obiakor (2016), and Iwu (2019) agree that the conflict was primarily caused by struggles over ownership of land at Otuocha, which began in the colonial era. The conflict was caused by the contestation over the rightful ownership of Otuocha land. They share a common ancestry of being the descendants of Eri, the acclaimed founder of the two communities. They also share similar political and social institutions, economic activities, traditions, culture, and language, with few dialectical variations, but their fraternal relationship has been punctured by the indigene-settler dichotomy.[7] It was also caused by inequalities in access to political, economic, and social resources, leading to a collective feeling of difference between the two communities (Onwuzuruigbo, 2011).

The Aguleri and Umueri communal clashes date back to 1933 over a portion of land at Otuocha. The sporadic clashes continued in the post-independence period. Pockets of conflict heightened and reached epic proportions between 1990 and 1999, when the conflicts escalated into full-blown war, causing many deaths and the destruction of property and other social and economic infrastructure.

It was during the 1990s and 2000s conflicts that women became fully involved. Women from both communities, including as well as women mercenaries from the neighbouring communities and elsewhere, served as spies, collaborators, and fighters. This collaborative women's role is one of the hidden roots of the escalation of the conflict. To consider the Janus voices of women is to comprehend the dynamics of the conflict, since the women's agency in the conflict has remained obscured in previous studies.

Women as Victims

The framing of women as victims during wars and conflicts is not only rife in Africa but is a global phenomenon. Global perspectives on women and girls being victims of wars and conflicts were experienced during the two World Wars, and conflicts in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. There was mass rape and murder of Chinese women by Japanese soldiers during the Chinese-Japanese War of 1937–1945. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reported that there were mass abductions, rape, and other forms of sexual violence against women in the Myanmar Crisis (Rohingya) (Thillo, 2022). In the Middle East, women were victims of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) during the Syrian civil war. Women were victims of conscription and sexual violence by armed groups in Colombia. In Africa, women were victims of rape and sexual abuse during the Rwandan Genocide of 1994. It was estimated that between 50,000 and 250,000 Tutsi women were abducted and sexually violated by the Hutu militias (United Nations, n.d.).

Women were victims of sexual violence during the Darfur conflict and civil war in South Sudan. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), women and girls were victims of rape and sexual violence by the government and rebel forces. The

rampaging Boko Haram insurgents in the northeast of Nigeria have killed and abducted many women and girls, including the 276 schoolgirls at Chibok in Borno State in 2014. Some secondary school girls were also abducted at Dapchi in Yobe State in 2022, and some of them were forcibly married by insurgents and served as sex slaves and used for suicide attacks. In the Bosnia and Kosovo wars of the 1990s, the Serbian army was accused of raping and sexually violating Bosnian and Albanian women. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reported that Russian troops have committed sexual violence against Ukrainian women in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War since 2022 (Amnesty International, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2024). Apart from men and youths who lost their lives during combat operations, women were also victims. They suffered the loss of their loved ones—husbands, sons, and relatives—their residences, and lost their means of livelihood. As victims, women are killed and displaced, and they seek refuge in camps, neighbouring communities, and other places. They suffer all manner of trauma and the emotional and psychological strains and stresses of conflicts. Women also live in fear and uncertainty of the unknown throughout conflicts.

In the Aguleri and Umueri conflict, women were among the victims. While some lost their husbands, sons, and brothers, who constituted the fighting force, others suffered different forms of abuse, including sexual molestation, harassment, and rape. Women had varied motives for becoming involved in the conflict. One plausible explanation is the age-old tradition of intermarriage between the two communities. The inter-marriage provided a new dimension to the conflict, which exposed the women's conflicting roles, especially during the 1999 conflict. Most mothers and wives who were married in Aguleri or Umuleri were accused by their husbands' kinsmen of divulging vital security information to their parents, brothers, and relatives in Aguleri and Umuleri, and the opposite way round (Onwuzuruigbo & Eboiyehi, 2013). They were subsequently viewed and treated as saboteurs, spies, and collaborators. To discourage their alleged sabotaging activities and espionage and regain the confidence of their husbands' kinsmen, the women were compelled to take the traditional oath of secrecy, irrespective of their religious faiths and ideological persuasions. Commenting on the precarious condition of women, the President of Aguleri Women Development Association asserts that:

> It was a trying moment for us from Umuleri, but we married in Aguleri. We were put under a lot of pressure to take ritual oaths by our husbands. It was a horrible experience, but some of the women took it even against their will. (Cited in Onwuzuruigbo & Eboiyehi, 2013, 48)

Women were subjected to different ill-treatments and violations of their fundamental human rights, including taking ritual oaths to prevent them from returning to their marriages or visiting their relatives, and limiting their movement (Fagbemi & Okonkwo, 2002, 63 cited in Onwuzuruigbo & Eboiyehi, 2013, 48).

A widow who lost her husband during the conflict narrated how her husband, who was not among the fighters, was killed while showing two strangers safer routes to another neighbouring community. She sorrowfully maintained that, since the brutal killing of her husband by Aguleri fighters, she and her children had been traumatized and were yet to get over the shocks (Anonymous widow interviewed 2024). Another woman, Mrs. Adagu, was said to be traumatized and died of heartbreak when her only son was killed by a stray bullet (Nkune interviewed 2024). Another scenario where unsuspecting women became victims during the conflict was during tactics deployed by some transporters from the warring communities that plied the Onitsha and Aguleri routes. According to an informant, some fighters from both communities, disguised as transporters, picked up unsuspecting passengers and drove for some distance. They diverted their vehicles to the undisclosed forest, where they raped some women passengers and killed others. The fighters were able to identify their kinsmen and women because of the subtle dialectical differences in the pronunciation of words by the Aguleri and Umueri people (Anakwe interviewed 2024).

Janus Voices of Women: From Victims to Collaborators

The concept of being Janus-faced originates from the god, Janus. The god of doorways or passages, transitions, and duality, Janus, is reputedly the oldest of Roman gods. It is usually physically presented as an image with two faces because it is all-knowing, existing in the present by looking to the future as well as the past. The term "Janus-faced" describes any person or situation with no distinguishing aspects (Okolocha, 2019, 218). Being Janus-faced symbolizes contradiction, duality, or having two opposing aspects simultaneously. This idea is applied to women's contradictory roles in global wars and conflicts, as they have been historically cast as mothers, caregivers, warriors, victims, active combatants, and peacemakers.

Women have played diverse, ambivalent roles in the conflict, though with varied motives. Like their male counterparts, women made financial and material contributions towards the war through their organizations. The *Oluokala*, Women Development Association in Umuleri, and Aguleri provided support by contributing money to buy foodstuffs for the combatants of their respective communities. Women were responsible for preparing and distributing food and water and providing logistical

support to the combatants. Although these activities were undertaken to mitigate the severity of the conflict, they invariably contributed to fuelling it by strengthening the combatants and their resolve to resist their enemy.

Different categories of women actively participated in the conflict. The first category was the *Umuada*, that is, married women from both communities. Every community in Igboland has the association of all married or single daughters born into a community. They contribute to the development of their paternal homes and ensure the good welfare of their members. *Umuada* is an influential political pressure group in women's paternal communities that settles quarrels and disputes between individuals, husbands and wives, and families, including clans and villages. They sometimes intervene and resolve issues bordering on the violations of customs and traditions of their natal villages and mete out strong sanctions to the defaulters. Their decisions on any issue are always seen as final and are accepted by the affected parties (Onwuzuruigbo & Eboiyehi, 2023).

The *Umuada*'s participation in the conflict was motivated by varied factors. Some *Umuada* became active participants in the conflict based on their beliefs that their kinsmen were fighting for a just cause to protect and reclaim their ancestral land. They, therefore, identified with their kinsmen and supported them during the conflict (Observation by an author from one of the warring communities, 2024). Most women-primarily *Umuada* from both communities who were married to men from Aguleri, Umueri, Umuoba Anam, and other villages in Anam-were identified as key participants, either actively or as proxies. Some women were involved in espionage, gathering vital information on the war strategies through their husbands, which they revealed to their paternal communities. Their covert activities significantly contributed to the escalation and prolongation of the conflict for decades. A typical instance was during the 1964 conflict, when Theresa Tansi and other young women from Igboezunu quarters in Aguleri were caught spying on Umueri by women church leaders of St. Gabriel's Anglican Church, Otuocha, Umueri. The women's church leaders protected them from being harmed or arrested by the Umueri fighters (Anonymous 111 interviewed, 2024). However, some women were killed for alleged involvement in spying and other covert acts. Some innocent, unarmed women were caught in the crossfire between the contending fighters. There were also cases of abduction of women and young girls. Aguleri warriors abducted Madam Eziemu from Umueri, and her whereabouts are still unknown (Anonymous 111 interviewed, 2024).

Some *Umuada* women who had allegiance and conflicting interests between their husbands and kinsmen became involved actively and by proxy in the conflict. At the height of the conflict, especially during the 1995, 1999, and 2000 conflicts that were considered the bloodiest, some women became active participants. They were operating as spies and informants, gathering vital intelligence and security information, which they divulged to the men at the frontlines. Women also served as porters, smuggling arms into the communities. Others were directly involved in the conflict as combatants or fighters and took part in the destruction of residential houses and market stalls and looting of the rival community's property.

Women played some roles during the conflicts and were perceived as saboteurs. After the ceasefire, the *Ikonme* ritual was performed by the Umueri-Aguleri elders to restore severed relationships. It also marked the cleansing of the land, desecrated by killings, and ushered in good and harmonious relationships in the social, economic, and political affairs between the hitherto warring communities (Anikpe interviewed, 2024). Women, either from Umueri or Aguleri, were not allowed to cross to the other side of the divide because they were suspected to be saboteurs by men. They were subsequently challenged and monitored, and a few were caught and reprimanded (Anijah interviewed 2024).

Women were subjected to oath-taking to deter them from revealing information and war strategies from both sides. Warlords usually obtained information about their and their enemies' war strategies, movements, and nature of attacks from their daughters (Ndigwe interviewed 2024). During the conflict, some women voluntarily participated actively by joining the fighting force. An Aguleri woman described the courage and bravery of women: "You know there are some young women who feel they can do what men do. They fought alongside the men" (Onwuzuruigbo & Eboiyehi, 2023, 48-49).

Women also contributed to the conflicts by recounting and narrating the harrowing experiences of previous conflicts they had witnessed to their children. Most women-out of their patriotism and avowed loyalty to, and identification with, their communities-took up arms in support of their kinsmen to reclaim what they believed rightly belonged to them. Elaborating further on the primordial attachment to one's community, Okechukwu Ibeanu asserts that the 1995 and 1999 conflicts marked a significant shift from resource control to animosity conflict. Bitter memories of loss, hurt, and humiliations of earlier conflicts, passed on from the parents to their children, became significant in renewing and intensifying future conflicts (Ibewuike, 2006). Animosity conflict denotes new conflicts that tend to be nostalgic representations of the past and age-old hatred, in which the parties make use of powerful narratives that build on memory and mobilize for war (Kaldor, 1999, 123, cited in Ibewuike, 2006).

An unnamed woman was reported to have been caught by fighters of one of the communities for espionage and warned to desist from such covert activities. She continued and was later caught and shot to death. According to an informant:

> A woman from Umueri who married in Aguleri was suspected to be a spy who gave out vital security information to her kinsmen about her husband's fighting strategies and movements. One day, unknown to her, some Aguleri fighters hiding on top of a tree caught her dropping some leaves on the bush path leading to a particular spot where Aguleri fighters were camping. The dropping of leaves signifies giving direction to her kinsmen to lay an ambush and make a surprise attack on the Aguleri fighters. She was caught and immediately killed by Aguleri warriors. (Anonymous 1 interviewed 2024)

The woman was a diehard collaborator who, despite taking an oath of secrecy to desist from such covert activities, continued until she met her Waterloo. She represents a good example of a Janus-faced collaborator and victim.

Investigations have shown that some women participated in the conflict voluntarily as collaborators, spies, and saboteurs in pursuit of their interests. It was observed that some women divulged information to their husbands and their kinsmen despite taking an oath of secrecy. All the daughters married in Aguleri and Umueri were compelled to take an oath of secrecy not to reveal their war strategies and movements to the Aguleri people (Anakwe interviewed 2024). An informant recounted the ordeal women went through in this way:

> We were prevented from visiting our relations at Umueri, and, likewise, women in Aguleri could not visit us because some women were believed to be spies and saboteurs who leaked vital information about war strategies to their enemies. (Anakwe interviewed 2024)

Among the Aguleri women who lost their lives during the conflict were Ekwutosi Ndife, Ajanta Ogwua, and Mrs. Onegbune. They married in Umueri and were killed for allegedly spying and revealing information to their kinsmen (Anakwe & Anyati interviewed 2024).

Women mercenaries were armed combatants who were contracted and recruited by both communities from the neighbouring communities, especially Umuoba Anam and other Anam villages, to fight for them (Anonymous 11 interviewed 2024). Corroborating this, one of the informants maintained that the two communities used both men and women mercenaries from the neighbouring communities. One of the prominent women mercenaries, a witch doctor known as *Eze Nwanyi* (a woman who is believed to possess exceptional spiritual powers), contracted by Umueri as a fighter and spy, was killed by Aguleri warriors in combat (Akorah interviewed 2024). Some influential women were involved in the mobilization and recruitment of youths during the conflict. They were said to have encouraged their husbands, sons, and other youths to join the conflict to protect and reclaim their ancestral land from the opposing community. They provided moral support to the men on the front lines through songs. They sang motivating war songs to boost the morale of the men and youth combatants by glorifying their bravery, doggedness, and resistance.

Beyond Victims and Perpetrators Narratives: Women's Role in Peace Negotiation and Conflict Resolution

Women performed supportive roles in the conflict by contributing and distributing food, water, accommodation, and other palliatives to their families, including men fighters. This support was crucial in sustaining and prolonging the conflict. For example, at the peak of the conflict, especially in the 1990s and 2000s, women supplied food and other logistics to the fighters at the battlefront. They donated money, relief materials, food and clothing, and other palliatives to the victims, those who were displaced, and other affected persons.

Despite the women's contributory roles during the conflicts, they were neglected in the peace negotiations. They were neither represented nor consulted during peace negotiations because their peace movement was mistaken by men, who perceived and cast them as saboteurs, traitors, and spies. Some of them lost their lives while visiting their natal homes to establish a dialogue with their people. Nonetheless, the fact remains that while some women had clear and genuine objectives of working towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict, a few acted as spies, gathering information on their opponent's strengths, weaknesses, and strategies. Their roles helped in defusing or easing tensions and restoring cordial relationships for the resolution of the conflict. Given the overwhelming emerging evidence of the contributions of women in peacebuilding, they are overtly underrepresented in the formal peace process due to cultural stereotypes, which suppress the voices of women in male-dominated public spaces. The extant literature has focused on the dominance of traditional and state authorities in conflict resolution in African societies. There is a lack of in-depth study of women's role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Women's involvement in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in African societies predated colonialism. Since then, women have continued to play an immense role in resolving conflicts in Africa, including the Aguleri-Umuleri conflict in Igboland, Nigeria. Women actively participated in the conflict through new roles, providing supportive services, such as donating money and food to the male fighters, and taking care of the household responsibilities while their husbands joined the fighters. Other women's engagement included mediation through providing access to information, gathering intelligence, and offering prompt responses to emergency cases (Igemu interviewed 2024). The *Umuada* women are the custodians of culture and preservers of their traditional values. The communal conflict forced them to navigate between upholding tradition and adapting to the outbreak of conflict that compelled them to become perpetrators, armed combatants, victims, and peacemakers. This ambivalent role helps in comprehending women's multiple roles in both perpetuating and resolving conflicts.

Conclusion

Women have played an active role in both inter- and intra-state conflicts globally, sometimes constituting up to 30 per cent of the armed combatants. However, women's involvement is often overlooked and glossed over, and when their roles are recognized and acknowledged, they are wrongly considered as helpless victims rather than active participants. It is this sweeping generalization that this article contests by establishing that in the Aguleri-Umueri conflict, women were not passive onlookers but active participants. Like in many localized conflicts in Nigeria and Africa, in the Aguleri and Umueri conflict, women played various roles as victims, perpetrators, and peacebuilders. The multifaceted roles of women reflect the dynamism of the gendered aspect of the conflict, as women were not merely passive victims but rather active participants, though less documented in the extant literature compared to men. This woman's victim-cum-collaborator role is missing in the extant literature. This study critiques the reductionist perspectives by incorporating the multiple women's roles during conflicts. Findings from the study have shown that women were victims by default and those who engaged in covert acts were distrusted, criminalized, policed, placed under surveillance, and cast as saboteurs and spies.

Despite these measures to dissuade them, some continued to smuggle weapons and provide logistical support and safe shelters for displaced persons. Others fought for their communities, families, and themselves and lost their lives. However, they also served as caregivers and peacemakers. One of the most important insights scholars have shared is that women were the most vulnerable victims during conflicts and wars. However, this study has shown that women contributed significantly to instigating, perpetrating, and sustaining the conflicts in addition to mediatory roles in the post-conflict period. Although women are usually perceived as passive elements in any conflict, the Aguleri-Umueri conflict has established that they actively participated in promoting the conflict, which invariably increased their vulnerability as victims. The reasons for the women's shift to combative roles were based on their convictions: patriotism, primordial sentiments of attachment to their communities, a desire for revenge for the death of their loved ones, and monetary incentives, as in the case of women mercenaries.

Most studies on conflict have overly focused on male combatants with less attention paid to women, especially in the roles of collaborators, combatants, and peacemakers. Thus, women serving as collaborators and perpetrators as well as peacemakers in the Aguleri and Umueri conflicts are often eclipsed by the dominant roles of men. However, in between these binaries, women have displayed ambivalent, Janus voices by being victims, collaborators, and perpetrators of the conflict. The Janus-faced nature of Aguleri-Umueri women's roles in war and conflict reflects their dynamic, contradictory experiences that oscillated between victims and fighters and peacemakers. This article has explored these dual realities, offering nuanced portrayals that challenge traditional gendered narratives of women's victimhood. Thus, women's involvement in war and conflicts defies simple categorization, encompassing roles of victims, the oppressed, and peace agents. This study will be a good addition to the literature on women's experiences in conflicts in Nigeria and Africa. It will be relevant to governments and policymakers to inform the implementation of actionable transitional justice mechanisms in post-conflict settings. The study will also amplify the voices of marginalized women who have played active combative roles but are often disproportionately neglected by scholars in transitional justice and post-conflict programmes at all levels.

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