

A GENDERED ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF THE SIT-AT-HOME ORDER IN THE SOUTHEASTERN REGION OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the socio-economic impact of the Sit-at-Home order initiated by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) using a gendered lens. It aims to examine how this has impacted the women resident in the southeastern states. Rooted methodologically in the qualitative method, the paper draws on data from secondary sources to present insights into how women have been affected. Findings reveal that, despite the prevailing male-centred narratives in media coverage and scholarly discourses, women's economic activities have suffered significant disruptions, especially in the areas of entrepreneurship and market participation. Furthermore, women have faced heightened social burdens arising from increased care responsibilities and disruptions in access to healthcare services, with the vulnerability of women further compounded by heightened risks of sexual violence. The paper recommends that the outcry over the marginalisation of the Southeast by IPOB should be addressed by increasing the government's (especially federal) presence in the region through formulation and wholesome implementation of special intervention programs in critical areas of health, education, environment, infrastructure, and industry as well as a fair and equitable representation in the governance of Nigeria.

Keywords: *IPOB, Sit-at-home, gender, socio-economic consequences, Southeastern Nigeria.*

Introduction

The sit-at-home order was initiated by the Indigenous People of Biafra in the southeastern part of Nigeria in 2021 as a tactic to press home demands for the release of its jailed leader, Nnamdi Okwu

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Kanu (Ugwu, 2023) and has evolved into a polarizing issue, no less due to its considerable implications, particularly concerning local economies. Existing scholarship is unanimous that the tactic has precipitated significant destruction of economic structures, ensuring that the “economy of the Southeast has been battered” (Mbanusi, 2023, p. 106) through the creation of a climate of fear, which has ensured the dislocation of business activities and organizations and the consequent capital flight (Asogwa & Ochie, 2023). This is in addition to observable infringements on civil liberties and living conditions of residents (Odibo et al., 2024) who have been exposed to disruptions to income and livelihood systems (Ogba et al., 2024). However, the budding body of literature on the socio-economic dimensions of this disruptive social phenomenon lacks a gendered focus. It is often generalist and does not specifically consider its differential impact on various gender groups, which is in contravention of the well-established recognition of the overlapping intersections between gender roles and experiences of conflict and conflict dynamics (Theidon et al., 2011).

Thus, this paper’s contribution to the literature is designed to bridge this gap, producing a gendered analysis of the socio-economic dimensions of the sit-at-home order in the southeastern part of Nigeria using qualitative secondary data. This exploration proceeds in the form of a discourse structured into five sections. In the first section, the paper contextualizes the sit-at-home order, intending to track its origins and evolution. Within the compass of discussions here, the paper considers the “Sit-at-home” order as another repertoire of the tactics utilized by the IPOB in its challenge to the political authority of the Nigerian state over the southeastern region. This order cannot be understood independently of the dialectics of anti-government resistance, especially concerning the Nigerian state’s responses, which have gained voluntary and coerced compliance from civil society.

In the second part, the paper presents a brief review of the literature to map the state of knowledge on the socio-economic implications of IPOB’s sit-at-home order in the southeastern region. The idea of this section is to underscore the absence of a gendered focus in the analysis of the sit-at-home order, which, as the paper demonstrates, is the general characteristic of extant literature on the subject matter.

In the third part, the paper articulates the paper’s methodology. In the fourth part, the paper illuminates the gendered implications of the sit-at-home order. The paper draws on secondary data from newspaper reports and grey literature to demonstrate its specific impacts on women in the region. A conclusion section follows this discussion.

“Sit-At-Home” Order: Context and Origins

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has been the most vocal proponent of the agitation for the carving of a separate nation-state from Nigeria’s southeastern region since 2014 (BBC News, 2017) in continuation of a historically rooted political aspiration that stretches as far back as the Nigerian civil war, positioning itself as the emblem of “radical Igbo nationalism” which has experienced a revival since 1999 (Nwangwu, 2018). At the crux of the group’s struggle is a

delegitimization of the political authority of the Nigerian state over the geographical area in the southeast populated predominantly by the Igbo ethnic groups, which challenges Nigeria's territorial integrity and questions the feasibility of national integration (Henry et al., 2020) through the resuscitation of collective memories linked to the Nigeria-Biafra war (Onyemechalu & Ejiofor, 2023). In its quest, the group has deployed an assortment of tactics, mainly revolving around the use of aggressive 'propaganda' through electronic and digital communication tools and platforms, including social media and a dedicated radio station, Radio Biafra (Azubuike, 2018).

IPOB's agitation for a revision of Nigeria's territorial integrity has placed it at odds with the Nigerian state, prompting the latter to adopt an adversarial, repressive approach. This approach has involved deploying military forces and adopting a "police action" conflict management paradigm characterized by the utilization of extreme force. (Chukwudi, Gberevbie, Abasilim, & Imhonopi, 2019). It is within that context that the Nigerian Army's siege on the home of IPOB's leader, Nnamdi Kanu, and subsequent clashes with his supporters in 2017 occurred, resulting in casualties. (Asadu, 2017). In 2021, the Nigerian government effected the arrest and extradition of Nnamdi Kanu from Kenya for subsequent trial on treasonable felony charges, four years after it proscribed the IPOB following its designation as a terrorist group in 2017 (Ejekwonyilo, 2021). Kanu's detention, the latest in a series of running legal battles with the Nigerian state, remains a watershed moment in the transformation and evolution of the Indigenous People of Biafra. On the one hand, it marked the culmination of the Nigerian state response to the "militarization" of agitation signified by the formation of a vaunted regional self-defense paramilitary group in the form of the "Eastern Security Network" (ESN), which would engage the Nigerian military in a series of armed clashes and mount attacks on public infrastructure, such as police stations. It would also signal the evolution of the group's tactics, culminating in the declaration of a "sit-at-home" order, which was a tactic designed to pressure home the demand for the release of Nnamdi Kanu and announced as lasting until his release (Ujumadu et al., 2021).

The Sit-At-Home order has operated as a comprehensive lockdown designed to asphyxiate economic and social activities in the southeast region on selected days, typically Monday. Lockdowns have typically entailed the closure of educational, commercial, and banking institutions and facilities. Regardless of its 'totalitarian' nature, the lockdown has arguably drawn on assent from the civil society in the southeastern region. Initial acceptance of the order arguably could be tied to the substantial social capital denominated in widespread resentment of the post-Civil War political order and the revival of cultural and historical memories associated with the Civil War. This capital, specifically, drew on IPOB's ability to harness a group identity of the Igbos framed around marginalization and victimhood. (Chiluwa & Chiluwa, 2020).

At the onset, the sit-at-home order was embraced as a symbol of resistance and the demonstration of agency (Elem, 2023). Within that context, the order represents "...a guiding strategy to show Nigerian government that they are due to be politically free to be an independent nation" and "to remember the past heroes who worked assiduously to free Biafra from the negative situation in the past." (Elem, 2023, p. 236). Nonetheless, a more compelling reason for the consent of civil society

emerges from the use of violent methods of enforcement of the order, which caused fear and anxiety in the minds of residents (Okoroafor et al., 2023). Such issues intersecting with the internal fracturing of the IPOB group into various splinters ensured the endurance of the sit-at-home order regardless of the declaration of its cessation in August 2023 (News Agency of Nigeria, 2023).

Literature Review on The Socio-Economic Consequences of Sit-At-Home Order

The sit-at-home order has elicited considerable attention within regional studies, producing several studies designed to map and explore its economic consequences. The idea that the sit-at-home order constitutes a social and economic hazard is a trope that has been emphasised in the growing corpus of literature, with studies encompassing a broad range of qualitative and quantitative studies, some of which have been rooted in an empirical orientation.

Ikpozu, Chinwendu, and Chukwuebuka (2024), triangulating data from secondary studies, have demonstrated that the sit-at-home order has produced devastating economic consequences. Such effects have included the dislocation of investment capital and investors outside the south-eastern region, haemorrhaging of the internally generated revenue of south-eastern states, and reduced productivity in the transport sectors, which has affected both unemployed and employed people resident in the region. (Ikpozu, Chinwendu, & Chukwuebuka, 2024).

In one such empirical study conducted, Ekechukwu, Nwogu, Ugwukwu, and Emerho (2022), using a dataset constructed from in-depth interviews and key informant interviews (KIIs) in Anambra state, effectively argue that the sit-at-home order has comprehensively disrupted the lives of residents through disruptions to the social system. Among the effects identified, it is observable that the sit-at-home order has produced a decline in the educational standard owing to disruption to academic activities and social activities from religious gatherings to entertainment and has caused significant economic damage to major markets in the state, with such damage amounting to billions of Naira in losses and disruptions to inter-state trade.

However, such losses, as the authors argue, extend from the hijacking of the order by criminal elements who increasingly use the banner of IPOB to perpetuate criminal activities, which include mugging and looting of businesses. (Ekechukwu, Nwogu, Ugwukwu, & Emerho, 2022). The negative implications of the sit-at-home order have equally extended to other states in the region. In investigating the case of Ebonyi state, Elom (2023) has argued that there is a close relationship between the sit-at-home order and school dropout, joblessness, and increased insecurity. (Elem, 2023).

The literature does not explicitly address the impact of the sit-at-home on specific genders, focusing broadly on the socio-economic consequences with little consideration of the cross-gender differential impacts. Yet, women have historically been exposed to the dynamics associated with the Biafra agitation, within which the sit-at-home order of IPOB occurs. The Biafra War, for instance, produced observable transformations in women's conceptions of gender roles and identities (Chuku, 2017), even as it was defined by an increased vulnerability to targeted gender

and sexual violence that impacted their capacity to contribute optimally to social structures and processes (Nwachukwu, Otu, & Eni, 2021).

Methodology

This paper presents a gendered approach to analyzing the socio-economic consequences of the IPOB sit-at-home order, which is qualitatively oriented. It proceeds under an interpretivist philosophical paradigm, which upholds an understanding of social reality that is contingent on individual perceptions and interpretations of social reality while appreciating their relativity. (Ryan, 2018). This philosophical approach is consistent with the gendered approach to analyzing the socio-economic consequences of the IPOB sit-at-home order, given that such consequences are likely to be experienced differently by women and men. Adopting this approach allows for the appreciation and analysis of the diverse realities experienced by men and women in the southeastern region. In seeking out the diverse realities experienced by women, the study relies on qualitative data gathered from major dailies' reportage on the IPOB sit-at-home order since 2021. These sources are analyzed using content analysis.

A Gendered View of The Socio-Economic Consequences of The Sit-At-Home Order

Reports produced by local dailies on the impact of the sit-at-home order are dominated by “male voices” and demonstrate that the resulting consequences have affected men more. Such a conclusion draws from various samples such as:

- a. A May 2022 Premium Times report on the economic impact of the sit-at-home order, which featured at least fourteen male interviewees and a paltry three female interviewees (Ugwu, 2022).
- b. A July 2023 Premium Times news report featuring at least six male interviewees and no female interviewee (Agency Report, 2023).

Such tendencies arguably underpin the existing literature's gender blindness, which has produced an aggregated view that must not be taken as an indication that the sit-at-home order has spared women. As anecdotal evidence from news reports equally shows, female residents of communities within the region have been affected significantly, just like their male counterparts. Women entrepreneurs operating in the south-eastern region have reported extensive disruptions to their operations.

A hairdresser in Umuahia, Mrs. Ogbonna, for instance, reported difficulties in accessing business locations as a result of disruptions to the transport system on sit-at-home days, indicating that the sit-at-home has affected her daily earnings, which she depends on to cater for her family (Vanguard News, 2021). For Grace Emeka, a seller at the Ariaria International Market, Aba, the fear of opening shops on days declared as sit-at-home was business crippling but informed by the attacks experienced by ‘defaulters’ (Ugwu, 2022) and female heads of business premises like hotels report the same disruption (Ugwu, 2022). It is also more than arguable that the economic impacts felt by

women are also produced by the disruption of markets in remote communities, which women principally dominate (Action Aid Nigeria, 2021).

Sometimes, the impact on women is indirect and felt through the loss of a male breadwinner. Ngozi, a resident of Okporo in Imo State and a woman who lost her husband to a violent attack by an ‘enforcement team,’ emphasizes the ordeal in her narrative. She described a general inability to cover the costs of her children’s education since the death of her husband (Onyeji, 2022).

Such impacts cumulate to disrupt the lived experiences of women. As a respondent to a joint survey conducted by the Canadian Government/Action Aid did state:

“Every Monday women are forced to provide three meals a day when it is difficult to provide breakfast and dinner that we use to provide in the other days. Our care burden has doubled with the conquest of IPOB. Our children stay at home on Mondays doing nothing, as women, our businesses and work have been totally distorted. Some of us are violated in front of children who were meant to be in school.” (Action Aid Nigeria, 2021, p. 26).

The sit-at-home order more than interferes with the agency of women living in the area, specifically producing coerced consent. As a female nurse in Umulolo, Imo state, stated,

“I am a nurse and need to be in the hospital to attend to patients. I do not like staying at home doing anything instead of helping to save lives. I always stay at home on Mondays because I am afraid of going out on that day. I would rather stay at home on Mondays than go out and be killed by unknown gunmen.” (Ikezue, 2023, p. 8).

The restriction of freedom of movement for health personnel has produced devastating consequences for the health outcomes of women, especially pregnant women. In addition to recorded fatalities arising from delayed access to healthcare facilities, the consequence is recourse to traditional birth attendants across Enugu and Anambra states (Ugwu, 2023). Beyond interference with access to reproductive health, women living in the Southeast region have been documented to experience sexual violence arising from the conditions created by the sit-at-home order. (Fadare, 2022).

In summary, the gendered impact of the sit-at-home order can be appraised as follows:

- (i) Women entrepreneurs, predominantly female sole proprietors, who own micro-businesses such as hairdressing and petty trading enterprises, face disruptions due to business closures and the fear of attacks for defaulting. The impact is also particularly severe for women who manage rural, communal markets, which suffer from drastic

declines in commercial activity owing to market closures and reductions in customer turnout.

- (ii) The loss of male breadwinners from violence increases the caregiving burden for women as they experience the expansion of domestic responsibilities to incorporate hitherto male-dominated duties of providing for basic needs and covering the costs of educating their children.
- (iii) The sit-at-home order also interferes with the agency of female healthcare workers who experience severe restrictions on their movement, which often transfers into insalubrious consequences for pregnant women with attendant implications for the work of female attendants.
- (iv) Female residents within the hotspots of the sit-at-home order also have experienced sexual violence arising from the conditions created by the sit-at-home order.

Conclusion and recommendations

The IPOB sit-at-home order has altered social reality in the southeastern Nigerian states, producing consequences that have received substantial attention in the literature. However, deliberate attempts to map the differentiated impact of these consequences have been lacking, owing to the preponderance of generalist studies and media reports that have had a “male-centered gaze.” This article sought to discuss the impact of these consequences on female folk living in the southeastern region. Indeed, the experiences of female folk living in the southeast region overlap with those of their male counterparts, especially as they relate to the economic consequences. Beyond this, various gender-specific impacts have existed, with women experiencing exposure to sexual violence. However, the paucity of sufficient empirical literature makes this subject matter a vital area needing detailed research.

By way of recommendation, there is a need for the state and federal governments to consider, in earnest, the grievances raised by the agitators and take proactive measures toward resolution. For instance, the outcry over the marginalization of the Southeast should be addressed by increasing the government’s (especially federal) presence in the region through the formulation and implementation of special intervention programs in critical areas of health, education, environment, infrastructure, and industry as well as a fair and equitable representation in the governance of Nigeria.

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