

## AROCHUKWU WOMEN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS AFTER THE NIGERIA-BIAFRA WAR

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### Abstract

Arochukwu women and community development efforts encapsulates the experiences of Aro women in the task of developing their society. Centering on Arochukwu, this paper highlights the impact of Nigeria-Biafra war and the specific roles Aro women played in rebuilding their community. In narrating the specific case of Arochukwu women, the paper tries to connect gender with post-conflict reconstruction using primary data assembled from oral testimonies. This paper relies mainly on primary sources derived from oral information (in-depth interviews with various persons in Arochukwu, but especially women. The snowball sampling technique was used in selecting interviewees that would provide reliable and accurate information on the subject of research. The theoretical thrust for this paper is derived from the challenge and response theoretical model propounded by Arnold Toynbee in which he used the key words Challenge and Response to describe how various civilizations rose and fell over time.

### Introduction

Women's history deals with the roles women have played in their societies and the effects that historical events have had on them. It focuses on women both as a group and as individuals, and understudies their economic, political, religious and social activities.<sup>1</sup> As Gerda Lerner noted, women are important to every society; they play vital roles in the society and very often serve as the bedrock of their societies.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, their contributions to the society cannot be neglected or merely mentioned, but deserve adequate historical attention. Incidentally, in Africa, where women have played significant roles in nation building, this has not reflected in the number of studies on women.<sup>3</sup>



Figure I: Map of Igboland<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gerda Lerner, 'Placing Women in History: Definition and Challenges', *Journal of Feminist Studies*, 3 (1975): 5-14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> James L. Gibling, *A History of the Excluded: Making Family a Refugee from State in the Twentieth Century Tanzania* (Ohio: University Press, 2006), 3-12.

<sup>4</sup> Source: Google Map.

This submission is a discussion on Arochukwu women of the Cross River Igbo area of Southeastern Nigeria. This distinct linguistic group belongs to the Igbo ethnic group that has historically occupied the Eastern part of Nigeria, once known as Biafra. Arochukwu, situated in Abia State, is a community of more than 30,000 inhabitants<sup>5</sup> and covers 250 square miles.<sup>6</sup> It is positioned on the east bank of the Cross River; some 74 kilometres to Bende and 102 kilometres to Uzuakoli, southeast of Umuahia, the Abia State capital.<sup>7</sup> Arochukwu's neighbours are: to the north and northeast, Ihechiowa and Ututu in Abia State; to the east and south by the Ito of Cross River State; and to the south and south-west by the Ikpanja, Iwerre and Makor of Akwa Ibom State.<sup>8</sup>

This paper relies mainly on primary sources derived from oral information (in-depth interviews with various persons in Arochukwu, but especially women) and focus group discussions (FGD). The snowball sampling technique was used in selecting interviewees that would provide reliable and accurate information on the subject of research.<sup>9</sup> These interviews constituted vital sources of material as few studies have been done Arochukwu women.

### **Laying the Background**

The Aro people are generally referred to as the Cross River Igbo. This is as a result of the community's location within a system of waterways and its enclosure by the Cross River and its tributaries.<sup>10</sup> Arochukwu is made up of 19 villages, each with a chief, *Eze Ogo*, who is responsible for administering the village and reports to the Eze Aro of Arochukwu (King of Arochukwu).<sup>11</sup> Apart from the Aro living in the homeland, Arochukwu (*Aro-ulo*), there are a large number of Aro communities in the diaspora, (*Aro-uzo*). Dike and Ekejiuba identify more than one hundred and fifty colonies of varying demographic and political strengths that the Aro founded between 1680 and 1890, and most of these colonies exist till date.<sup>12</sup> Aro activities in, and infiltration of, other parts of Igboland and beyond would have been difficult without the establishment of these settlements. These Aro settlements still owe allegiance to the Eze Aro, the symbol of Aro hegemony, whose office has remained current.<sup>13</sup>

According to Simon Ottenberg, the Aro did not always regard themselves as Igbo but simply Aro. As he noted, they spoke a distinct Igbo dialect, Igbo Aro, which differed from any other Igbo sub group. This variation of Igbo dialect is tinted with Ibibio and Efik words.<sup>14</sup> The Aro run a patrilineal social system with well-defined roles for the male and female genders. The oldest man in the family was the head and took decisions for others at the family level. Traditionally, women had no right of inheritance

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<sup>5</sup> Chijioke Okoro, 'The Practice of Uzi and Sexual Health Risk in Arochukwu' (Unpublished Monograph, HECOD Initiative Arochukwu, 2000), 1.

<sup>6</sup> H. F. Mathew, 'Anthropological Report on the Aro Subtribe', File: ARO DIV 3/1/55, National Archives Enugu (NAE).

<sup>7</sup> J. Okoro Ijoma, *Building on the Debris of a Great Past: Heroes of Our Recent Past Proceedings of the Second All Aro National Conference 2000* (Enugu: Magnet Business Enterprises, 2001), xii.

<sup>8</sup> Mathew, 'Anthropological Report on the Aro Subtribe'.

<sup>9</sup> Snowball sampling is a technique used for gathering research subjects through the identification of an initial subject who then provides the names of other actors. In this method, the research participants are asked to assist the researcher in identifying other potential subjects. Where the topic of the research is not sensitive and personal, it may be acceptable for subjects to provide researcher with names and contact information of people who might be interested in assisting with the research by providing information.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Onwuka Dike and Felicia Ekejiuba, *The Aro of Southeastern Nigeria, 1650-1980: A Study of Socio-Economic Formation and Transformation in Nigeria* (Ibadan: University Press Ltd, 1990), 197.

<sup>11</sup> Adiele Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture* (Ibadan: University Press Ltd, 1981), 189.

<sup>12</sup> Dike and Ekejiuba, *The Aro of Southeastern Nigeria*, 197-198.

<sup>13</sup> Several Aro communities in diaspora have remained proud of their origin. Most were feared and held with high both during and after the colonial experience. For their colonial history, see Mr. T. M. Shankland's 'Intelligence Report on Aro', File: ARODIV 3/1/55, National Archives Enugu (NAE).

<sup>14</sup> Simon Ottenberg, *Farmers and Townspeople in Changing Nigeria: Abakaliki during Colonial Times 1905-1960* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books limited, 2005), 27.

especially if they did not bear a male child.<sup>15</sup> Prior to the outbreak of the Nigerian-Biafran war (the Nigerian civil war), men were traditional breadwinners. Arochukwu had age grades for men and women groups, which played important roles in administration and development of the community before the mid-1960s.<sup>16</sup>

Being a rural environment, a great majority of the people in Arochukwu were subsistent farmers and petty traders and the average per capita income was far less than the national minimum wage. Social amenities, namely, pipe borne water, electricity, roads and health centres were inadequate where they exist. Arochukwu is served today by one Government General Hospital and about six other health centres spread across different villages. However, one of the biggest difficulties in Arochukwu, which has continued to the present, is the lack motorable roads. Movement within the community has remained fraught with difficulty. The commencement of Abia State College of Education Technical in the mid-1990s brought an influx of students and, consequently, an increase in commercial transport and trading in the locality. The College of Education augmented the extant five secondary schools in the community, two commercial banks and a micro finance bank.

The main Aro market, *Avia ovuru* (new market), is held every Nkwo day, the fourth day of the Igbo market day; and women, mostly, dominate the market much like they did in well over a century of Aro history. Besides being in the control of the market,<sup>17</sup> women regulate the activities in the market and ensure that stealing, fighting and other acts of indiscipline did not take place within the market premises.<sup>18</sup> The majority of the Aro are Christians and worship in the more than sixty Christian congregations found in different locations in the community. Some professing Christians also embraced traditional beliefs and practices. Indeed, one of the most visible things current with Aro Christians is that they retain a strong inclination to traditional beliefs and ways of doing things. This is perceived as the way to preserve Aro culture and identity.<sup>19</sup>

### **Contextualizing Arochukwu Women's Community Development Efforts**

Community development, as used in this paper, refers to self-help efforts of a group of individuals to improve their community without much assistance from the government or any development agency. At the end of the Nigerian-Biafran War in 1970, there was much infrastructural destruction and decay in Arochukwu. The federal government's policy of Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Rehabilitation (3Rs) was poorly implemented in Arochukwu.<sup>20</sup> This situation made Arochukwu women to take up the challenge of rehabilitating themselves first and then their community. They took on various self-help projects geared towards transforming their community from a war-torn community into a stable society. The women individually and collectively carried out several developmental programmes and projects, some of which would be discussed below.

The two main objectives of this paper are: to give attention to Arochukwu women and bring them within the focus of historical scholarship; and to document the developmental roles they played in Arochukwu society after the civil war. Without a doubt, they were particularly instrumental to the changes that occurred in Arochukwu since 1970 as the society recovered from a very brutal war. An additional objective of this paper is to identify an appropriate theory that could help better appreciate the dialectics and dynamics of women, both as individuals and as groups. In the meantime, the

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<sup>15</sup> Chijioko Okoro, 'The Practice of Uzi and Sexual Health Risk in Arochukwu'.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> My field visit to Arochukwu afforded me the opportunity to get acquainted with the environment. The field work took me to the College of Education, General Hospital and many other important places. Moving around the community was not without difficulty because of the nature access-roads to villages farther in the interior.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Mrs. Chinasa Donald Ikechukwu Kanu, 55 years, Agbagwu Arochukwu, 9 September 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Chinedu Nkemka Samuel Okoro, 'Preservation and Sustenance of Aro Culture and Traditions in the Twentieth Century' (unpublished BA Thesis, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, 2010), 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Mrs. Juliana Nnennaya Kanu, 56 years, Agbagwu Arochukwu, 27 August 2013.

theoretical thrust for this paper is derived from the challenge and response theoretical model propounded by Arnold Toynbee in which he used the key words Challenge and Response to describe how various civilizations rose and fell over time.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Toynbee's model provides both an insight and a useful framework for proper understanding of the issues to be dealt with in this paper.

According to Toynbee, the prevailing outmoded descriptions—environment, race, leadership, possession of land, access to natural resources are too narrow when deployed to explain the success or failure of any society. By challenge, Toynbee refers to a variety of unpredictable factors that threaten the ways in which a group of people lived and made their livelihood in the past. “Challenge was not all negative; it could also carry the seeds of opportunities. Response, on the other hand, refers to actions taken by the same group of people to cope with the new situations. A challenge would arise as a result of such things like a civil war, population growth, exhaustion of a vital resource or climate change, among others. Often. It was something that nobody intentionally and knowingly created. Response, therefore, requires vision, leadership and proactive actions to overcome the threats and to create a basis for survival. It could embody the development of new technology, social organizations, economic activities, or a combination of various innovations and factors. Response was never predictable, and its outcome would only be known over time. Herein lies the risks humans take that result in either success or failure.<sup>22</sup>

In relating this theory to the experience of Arochukwu women, their challenge<sup>23</sup> was impact of the Nigerian-Biafra war that placed the community in a deplorable state. Their response therefore, became the various projects and developmental programmes they embarked on that helped transformed the entire Aro community from a war-torn community to a stable, reasonably rehabilitated society. To Aro women, the only solution to avoid a horrific existence after the trauma of the war was to band themselves—put their mites, hands and brains together—and generate work and business for themselves. The uniqueness of this theoretical model as aptly demonstrated by the Arochukwu case study remains that it did not necessarily lead to the conferment of any political honour on Arochukwu women for the strength they showed in the role they played towards their community's development after the war. Indeed, this outcome recurs in other cases of women's contributions to their societies, welfare after a major social, political, economic or military challenge.<sup>23</sup>

Several women have realized, as Egodi Uchendu shows, that as tragic as wars and other crisis situations are, there could be positive aspects to them. These come in the form of the development of inner strength and the acquisition of abilities to do what they previously could not do'.<sup>24</sup> This observation is in line with the framework of this paper and further explains the post-civil war role of Aro women in the development of Arochukwu.

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<sup>21</sup> Arnold Toynbee, *Reconsiderations: A Study of History*, Volume 12 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* The examples Toynbee used to demonstrate his “challenge” and “response” model was the emergence of agriculture and cities in the ancient Near East. One challenge was a regional shift in rainfall patterns. North Africa, Egypt and Mesopotamia were no longer tracked by Atlantic storms which, for unknown reasons, moved further north. With less rain, the traditional lifestyle of hunters and gatherers in this region could no longer be supported. As a result, several response strategies emerged. Some people, however, did nothing. They held on to their old ways and eventually perished. Others migrated and discovered better climatic conditions, and remained hunters and gatherers. Another set of people did not only survive, but prospered in the new environment by inventing the domestication of plants and animals, and irrigation agriculture. With these “responses”, the civilizations of Egypt and Sumer were born.

<sup>23</sup> See Jenny Hammond and Nell Druce, *Sweeter than Honey, Ethiopian Women and Revolution: Testimonies of Tigrayan Women* (Trenton, N. J.: The Red Sea Press, 1990) and Tanya Lyons, *Guns and Guerilla Girls: Women in the Zimbabwean Liberation Struggle* (Trenton, N. J.: Africa World Press, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Egodi Uchendu, *Women and Conflict in the Nigerian Civil War* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007). 3.

### **Nigeria-Biafra War in Arochukwu**

Nigeria-Biafra war, which started on 6 June 1967 ended on 15 January 1970.<sup>25</sup> Arochukwu was one of the last major towns in Biafra to be conquered by the federal (Nigerian) army. The 56 Brigade of the Twelfth Division of the Biafran Army was based in Arochukwu under the command of Colonel Ifeanyi Uwakwe.<sup>26</sup> The Biafran police also stationed in Arochukwu used the residence of Mazi Isiah Ajaegbu in Agbagwu village as their headquarters.<sup>27</sup> The Biafran Special Task Force formed in January 1968 was also stationed in Arochukwu and headed by Major Chidiebere. The special task force was charged with ensuring an effective control of all Biafran forces operating in the areas of Arochukwu, Ohafia and Bende.<sup>28</sup> This special task force had a lot of difficulties to combat, such as the long distance between its base and the Biafran Army Headquarters, inadequate fire arms and military supplies and the problem of bad roads. All these impaired easy communications between the Biafran Army headquarters, the 56 Brigade and the special task force.<sup>29</sup>

According to Alexander Madiebo, the Nigerian troops commenced a massive daily air bombardment of Arochukwu on 9 March 1968. No town, village or important institution was spared.<sup>30</sup> There was constant air raid on Ncheghe market, which was the main Arochukwu market before the outbreak of the war. Even the General Hospital at Arochukwu came under heavy air bombardment. The death rate was very high from concerted federal aggression and from hunger, starvation and the various diseases that afflicted the populace, particularly kwashiorkor and cholera, which became predominant during the hostilities.

The war exposed noncombatants to various risks, the most predominant being death. It disrupted all economic activities causing scarcity of food to the degree that on several occasions unavailability of food became the greatest problem faced in Arochukwu during the crisis. Food producing areas like Ohafia, Uburu, Abakaliki, Ohaozara and Ogoja that the Aro and other Igbo communities previously depended on for their supplies came under heavy bombardment during the hostilities, thus compounding the general food problem in Biafra. And when food was sourced, bad roads increased the time it took to get to Arochukwu. With several casualties from air raids, individuals adopted different survival strategies. Several families relocated to their farmlands or other bushes. Schools were shut down and the timing for Ncheghe market was changed. Market sessions sometimes started as early as 5 a.m. and ended by 8 a.m. Most Aro markets were moved to more remote places. There were lots of infrastructural damage in Arochukwu during the civil war. The Nkana Bridge that linked Arochukwu with her Ibibio neighbours was destroyed. In response to the food crisis, the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic-based Caritas Internationalis shipped food into Arochukwu.<sup>31</sup> The main supplies were rice, formula two (it was a food formula that was high in protein), salt, and sugar, corn meal, dry milk, dry egg and drugs. These were among the items in urgent demand in war-ravaged Arochukwu. The Red Cross Society also attempted to assist war victims in Arochukwu with food and drug supply, but did not achieve much because of inadequate human and financial resources.<sup>32</sup> Children suffering from kwashiorkor were helped by the World Council of Churches that flew them to Gabon for treatment. A few young girls from Arochukwu were taken along to Gabon to look after the child patients.

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<sup>25</sup> For a detailed account of the Nigerian Civil War otherwise known as the Biafran War, see Axel Harneit-Sievers, Jones O. Ahazuem and Sydney Emezue, *A Social History of the Nigerian Civil War: Perspectives from Below* (Hamburg: Lit Verlag, 1997). Other relevant texts on the Impacts of the conflict on Igboland include: Paul Obi-Ani, *Post-Civil War: Political and Economic Reconstruction of Igboland, 1970-1983* (Nsukka: Great AP Express Publishers Limited, 2009) and Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (USA: Penguin Group, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Alexander A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1980), 239.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Elder Chief Isaac Okwara Onoh.

<sup>28</sup> Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War*, 329-330.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> I owe this information to Elder Chief Isaac Okwara Onoh, the village chief of Agbagwu. I was reliably informed that his house was used as a relief centre during the civil war.

As the gravity of the war situation deepened, Aro women began to organize themselves to help their community before the war came to an end. At the head of this effort was Mrs. Onyeador who rallied fellow women through Nzuko Inyom Arochukwu to facilitate communal survival during the war. For instance, women in each of the Aro villages sourced and donated food for feeding children with kwashiorkor.<sup>33</sup> Most were so weak to feed themselves and therefore, necessitated the women coordinating and spoon-feeding them.<sup>34</sup> The brief outline above captures the situation in Arochukwu during the civil war. At the end of it all, the community was in a deplorable condition. Nzuko Arochukwu women (that is, Association of Aro women) became the major institution through which Arochukwu women mobilized themselves to develop their community after the hostilities.<sup>35</sup>

### **Post-War Women's Development Efforts**

The immediate post-war task in Arochukwu community was the dismantling of the refugee camps. Some who had worked in those camps were perceived and treated by the victorious federal soldiers as enemies of the Nigerian government and were forced into hiding as a result. Several women, namely, Mrs. Igboko, Mrs. Mercy Onoh and Mrs. Maria Achinivu, were among those who returned to Arochukwu soon after the war help out in the community. Sir Alex Onyeador and his wife, Mrs. Onyeador, already had connections with organizations like United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) during their time in the employ of Shell Petroleum (Nigeria). They put their contacts to use on behalf of the community. Sharing with their acquaintances on the ugly situation in Arochukwu, a lot of assistance came through that window.

The 3R policies (Reconstruction, Reconciliation and Rehabilitation) instituted before the end of the Nigeria-Biafra war by the military government of General Yakubu Gowon that executed the war were not fully implemented in the entire Eastern Nigeria<sup>36</sup>. Their impact was not felt in many Igbo communities, including Arochukwu.<sup>37</sup> This was the main "driver" that propelled Arochukwu women to take on the many projects that altered their war-torn community with activities back to normal and economic activities considerably improved within a few decades.

The first major project that Aro women undertook after the war was the total rehabilitation of the General Hospital Arochukwu. This was completed in 1983. Since then, Arochukwu women have continued to contribute immensely towards the improvement of health care delivery in Arochukwu. The health centres at Ugwuavo, Atani, Amuvi and Obinkita were also built by the women. Ugwuavo health centre was originally meant to serve as a maternity home, but was upgraded to a health center because of a high demand for Medicare in the community. Construction of Ugwuavo health centre started in 1984 during the regime of Mrs. Maria Achinivu as president of Nzuko Inyom Aro (1982 to 1992). It was completed in 1994 and handed over to Arochukwu local government. Mrs. Eme Nwakamma Okoro donated medical equipment to the center. An orphanage was equally constructed for abandoned and motherless children.

The women also undertook the rehabilitation of schools in Arochukwu. A new classroom block was added to the Mary Slessor Memorial Secondary School. This was completed in 1984.<sup>38</sup> In 1987, Aro women joined efforts with their men to build a local government secretariat, which again was handed over to the state government. This last project led the creation of Arochukwu Local Government Area in July 1989.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Mazi. Alichu Otusi, c. 77 years, Agbagwu Arochukwu, 4 September 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Elder Chief Isaac Okwara Onoh.

<sup>36</sup> Obi-Ani, *Post-Civil war: Political and Economic Reconstruction of Igboland*, 36.

<sup>37</sup> O. K. Elechi, 'Ewe Refugees visited by Presbyterian Church (Nigeria) Women's Guild', *Arochukwu News*, 5 (1994), 11.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Madam Ugo Okwara, c. 73 years, (President Nzuko Aro Women's Wing Home Branch), Amannagwu Arochukwu, 3 September 2013.

Groups of women in various villages came together and built evening markets for their needs and to complement the Aro main market (*Avia Ovuru*), which, until then had continued to hold every four days, on Nkwo, according to the Igbo market calendar.<sup>39</sup> Among the new evening markets were Ugwu Akuma and Ogwumabiri both in Agbagwu and several others.<sup>40</sup> Unlike with the Aro main market that held every four days, the evening markets enabled members of the community to restock their supplies whenever they ran short of food items without waiting for a four-day interval to do so. To make food items and other essential commodities readily available to the members of the community, Arochukwu women eventually changed the schedule of the Aro main market to a daily market.<sup>41</sup>

Three decades after the civil war, Aro women continued with their community development projects. In 2010, they built a centre for skill acquisition. This time, the structure was handed over to the federal government for use by the National Directorate for Employment. Several Arochukwu youths had been trained in a variety of skills including catering, interior decoration, carpentry, video operations, and dress-making. Lately, mobile phone repair skills were added.<sup>42</sup> Arochukwu youths that were trained at the center were also equipped by Aro women to function in their acquired vocations. For example, those who learned hair-dressing received hair dryers so that they could open hair-dressing shops without delay. Those who were trained on video operations were given video cameras, while those trained on dress-making received sewing machines.<sup>43</sup> Among those trained at the women's skill acquisition centre were Chinyere Onoh, Victoria Sopuruchi Ogbonnaya, Chinedu Okoro, Abigail Okoro, Lewechi Ukwu, Nnennaya Ukwu and Ogbonnaya Okoro. Miss Chinyere Onoh, who was trained in dress-making, attested to the women's efforts in providing employment and thereby improving living conditions for rural citizens as follows:

Arochukwu women have tried so much. They have rendered so much help to us that helped solve our problems. They gave me a sewing machine more than four years ago. There were other people they gave other equipment, depending on the vocation they learnt. Since I received this sewing machine, it has provided a regular income for me.<sup>44</sup>

Although there were no set rules for enrolment into this scheme, Arochukwu women adopted eighteen 18 years as the minimum age for anybody who wished to be trained in any vocation at the skill-acquisition centre, which since becoming operational has reduced the rate of unemployment and served as an intermediary activity for secondary school graduates awaiting entrance into the university.

Arochukwu women also contributed immensely towards enhancing the level of education in the community. They encouraged children and youths to go to school through the establishment of several scholarship schemes that catered for students at all educational levels, ranging from the primary to the tertiary level.<sup>45</sup> Their scholarship schemes were of different categories: the scholarships given to orphans and vulnerable children who had no means of receiving formal education, and the scholarships awarded to exceptionally brilliant students. Several students were, thus, sponsored from primary school to the university. Scholarship awardees received free textbooks and writing materials, school uniforms and free tuition. At the end of each academic year, the students were assessed by their sponsors in order to determine their progress level.<sup>46</sup> One of the organizers of the scheme reports:

Twenty-three orphans and vulnerable children in the town were offered scholarships at the primary school and secondary school levels. The organization paid WAEC and NECO examination fees for secondary school students, provided them with exercise

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Elder Mrs. Maria Achinivu.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Mrs. Nwada Igwe, 57 years, Umuahia, 19 September 2013.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Miss. Chinyere Onoh Abah, 25 years, Agbagwu Arochukwu, 15 September 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Mrs. Chinasa D. I. Kanu.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Madam Ugo Okwara.

books, school uniforms, text books, bags, sandals, and also paid their development levies for them.<sup>47</sup>

Aro women also took care of the aged for whom they started an endowment fund in 2001. From the endowment, money, food, provisions and drugs were given to the elderly across the nineteen villages of Arochukwu. In the area of peace and conflict resolution, their impact was felt. Typical instances include during the Eze Aro tussle that lasted from 1987 to 1995. This was between the period when Eze Kanu Oji died to when Mazi Vincent Ogbonnaya Okoro won the court case to become the next Eze. There were other instances where Arochukwu women have had to intervene in serious communal crisis. One of such was a case of rape in 2009 in Obinkita in which an old woman was raped by a young man and killed in the process. Arochukwu women took it upon themselves to ensure that the right legal action was taken against the perpetrator. There was also a case of maltreatment involving an elderly woman in Amoba village in 2010 whom villagers accused of witchcraft and decided to banish from the village. After a series of investigation by Arochukwu women, the woman was absolved of the crime and she was brought back to her village.<sup>48</sup> In the Aro village of Ugbo, a widow at the death of her husband was forced by her husband's relatives to forfeit all her husband's properties. Arochukwu women rallied and gave her the necessary support and she was able to overcome those intimidating challenges.<sup>49</sup>

Additional projects executed by Arochukwu women in the decades after the war include the provision of a portable drinking water to Arochukwu community. This was achieved during the tenure of Mrs. Doris Orji as the president of Nzuko Inyom Aro (1999 to 2006). Four villages—Oror, Ujari, Ibom and Amuvi—were beneficiaries of this water project. The same regime constructed bus stops in the following villages: Atani, Ibom, Amannagwu and Ugwu Akuma.<sup>50</sup>

Another agency that played a pivotal role in the women's development programmes was Arochukwu Women's Cooperative Society. This was formed with the primary goal of raising the living-standard of members of Arochukwu community through the creation of self-sustaining projects.<sup>51</sup> The cooperative society gave loans to women who wanted to start their own enterprises or small-scale businesses. The organ of disbursement was Arochukwu Micro-Finance Bank. Other needy persons such as indigent parents and the physically challenged were assisted with funds to cushion major financial difficulties. The women's cooperative society also ran its own vocational centre where training in tailoring, soap and pomade-making were taught along with skills necessary for a variety of agricultural projects. The members of the cooperative society financed their projects. Monies raised were invested in poultry farming, sewing workshops and grain processing. The society regularly sold the products from their projects to members of the community.

Alongside the pan-Aro cooperative society existed similar cooperative societies at the village level. They include Amuvi Women Cooperative Society, Atani Women Cooperative Society and Akama Ato Women Cooperative Society.<sup>52</sup> These cooperative societies also provided loans and credit facilities for their members in addition to running skill acquisition centres for women and youths.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Mrs. Chinasa D. I. Kanu, interview.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Madam Ugo Okwara.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Akama ato is a northwest wards of Arochukwu comprising the following villages: Agbagwu, Ugwu Akuma and Utughugwu.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Madam Ugo Okwarah.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has briefly examined the contributions of Arochukwu women in the development of the post-civil war Arochukwu community. These contributions constitute their response to the challenges posed by the civil war. The women did not wait until the complete cessation of hostilities to commence their response actions. However, the end of the war enabled a rigorous engagement with their projects, now executed under a less-risky atmosphere. The fate of Arochukwu during the civil war was by no means peculiar. Several parts of Igboland shared similar experiences, but the degree of community responses differed from place to place. From the findings of this study, it is obvious that the resilience of Arochukwu women stands out clearly. Their individual and collective responses to the challenges of the civil war would remain one of their greatest legacies.