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Climate Justice and Gender Equity: Addressing the Silent Crisis of Environmental Displacement Among Indigenous Women During the Nigerian-Biafran War

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Abstract

This article employs feminist political ecology (FPE) and intersectional theory to examine the weaponization of environmental destruction against Indigenous Igbo women during the Nigerian-Biafran War (1967-1970). Through analysis of archival records, oral histories, and war literature, it reveals how scorched-earth tactics, food blockades, and oil-backed military strategies constituted gendered ecocide, systematically targeting women's subsistence economies, ecological knowledge, and cultural ties to the land. The study documents three interconnected acts of violence: (1) economic (destruction of agrarian systems forcing women into perilous survival economies), (2) embodied (weaponized famine and sexual trauma), and (3) epistemic (erasure of women's resistance in postwar narratives). Findings highlight Indigenous women's clandestine resilience through seed preservation, "affia attack" smuggling networks, and grassroots governance while exposing how postwar reconstruction policies perpetuated harm through gender-blind land reforms. The article concludes with reparative frameworks centering on land restitution, gender-sensitive climate adaptation, and methodological shifts in environmental conflict studies. It calls for research that amplifies oral histories and traces intergenerational impacts, arguing that true climate justice requires confronting the colonial-patriarchal systems that render Indigenous women's bodies and territories as battlefields.

Keywords: Feminist political ecology; Gendered ecocide; Environmental warfare; Biafra; Indigenous feminism; Climate justice

Introduction

The story of the Nigerian-Biafran War cannot be fully told without centering the silenced voices of Indigenous women who endured its most brutal intersections of violence. Picture this: as federal troops advanced through the Niger Delta in 1968, they didn't just burn villages; they systematically destroyed yam barns and poisoned community water sources, knowing these acts would starve not just combatants but generations of families [1]. Among the survivors was Ngozi, an Igbo widow who later testified how soldiers raped her beside the polluted ruins of her farm, saying "this land isn't yours anymore" [2]. Her ordeal encapsulates the war's hidden truth - that environmental destruction and sexual violence were twin weapons deployed against Indigenous womanhood.

Long before the war, women like Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti had warned about environmental threats when she protested French nuclear tests in 1959, pleading with Queen Elizabeth to protect Nigerian mothers and children [3]. Yet when war came, these same women found themselves at the epicentre of calculated ecological violence. The Nigerian government's blockade didn't just target soldiers - it starved children whose mothers watched helplessly as traditional food preservation methods failed against the scorched earth campaign [4]. In the oil-rich Delta, military decrees stripped Indigenous ownership of land just as spills poisoned the rivers women relied on for fishing and drinking water [5]. The very soil and water that sustained communities became instruments of their subjugation.

For decades after the war, the full scale of this gendered ecological violence remained under-examined. While men's battlefield stories dominated histories, women's testimonies of watching their farmlands burn or raising children on oil-contaminated water went unheard compared to women's role in the war [6]. Even when women like Ngozi described being raped on land their ancestors had cultivated for generations, their

pain was reduced to private tragedy rather than recognized as environmental warfare [7]. The postwar legal system compounded this silence - the 1978 Land Use Act officially dispossessed women while oil companies evaded accountability for poisoning their communities [8].

This article weaves together these fragmented histories to reveal how the war weaponized both land and womanhood. Through survivors' accounts, we see how the destruction of farms and rivers was never just military strategy; it was an assault on Indigenous women's roles as food providers, culture bearers, and life sustainers. Their resilience emerges in stories of replanting secret gardens amid bombings or testifying about oil spills decades later [2]. These narratives demand we reconsider what justice means when war's environmental consequences continue poisoning generations. The true cost of conflict isn't measured just in battlefield casualties, but in the silent deaths of children drinking from polluted rivers, the unborn babies buried with mutilated mothers [9], and the Indigenous knowledge systems that perished with each burned farm.

The journey ahead will first map how scorched earth tactics and oil exploitation specifically targeted women's relationships to land. We'll then amplify long-silenced testimonies showing how rape and displacement severed cultural ties to the territory. Finally, we'll trace how postwar policies institutionalized these outbreaks of violence through laws that denied women reparations while enabling ongoing ecological harm. Throughout, one truth remains clear: for Indigenous women, the war never truly ended; it just mutated into slower forms of environmental and structural violence that continue today. Their stories, finally centered here, rewrite not just history but our understanding of justice itself.

Literature Review

Theoretical framework: feminist political ecology and intersectional climate justice

Feminist political ecology (FPE) provides a critical lens to analyze how environmental degradation and conflict are gendered processes shaped by coloniality, extractivism, and patriarchal systems [10]. Rooted in decolonial and feminist praxis, FPE centers situated knowledge particularly those of Indigenous women, to expose how resource exploitation (e.g., oil in the Niger Delta) exacerbates gendered vulnerabilities while erasing women's agency [10]. This framework intersects with Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, which reveals how Indigenous Igbo women during the Biafran War faced compounded injustices: environmental displacement (class), ethnic marginalization (Indigeneity), and gendered labor burdens (caregiving during famine) [4].

Indigenous climate justice scholarship further critiques mainstream environmental narratives that homogenize "victimhood," arguing instead for frameworks that recognize Indigenous women as custodians of ecological knowledge and resistors of extractivism [11]. For instance, Secwepemc Women Warriors' resistance to oil pipelines in Canada mirrors the untold struggles of Igbo women against oil-backed military tactics in Biafra, yet the latter remains absent from global climate justice discourse [12,13]. The next section will discuss the historical Gaps: War, Environment, and Gendered Displacement.

Biafra's environmental warfare and scholarly erasures

The Nigerian state's scorched-earth tactics (1967-1970) burning farmlands and blockading food supplies were early examples of climate colonialism, where ecological destruction became a weapon against Indigenous Igbo communities [10,14]. While historians documented military strategies and analyzed resource conflicts, little centered on Igbo women's embodied labor in mitigating famine: foraging wild roots, smuggling food, or preserving seed biodiversity [15]. This shows a broader pattern in conflict studies, where environmental violence is divorced from gendered survival strategies [15].

Global comparisons: gendered displacement in rwanda and congo

The Biafran case parallels Rwanda's post-genocide displacement, where Tutsi women rebuilt agricultural systems amid land privatization, yet their labor was co-opted into state-led "reconciliation" narratives [16,17]. Similarly, in Congo, coltan mining displaced Indigenous women while framing them as passive beneficiaries of aid, not agents of resistance [18]. These cases reveal a global template of gendered environmental violence: states and corporations weaponize ecology while historiography sidelines women's resilience.

Key gap: indigenous women's agency and epistemic justice

The most critical gap lies in the epistemic silencing of Indigenous women's voices. Mainstream climate justice movements often tokenize "vulnerability," ignoring Indigenous women's organized responses: clandestine cooperatives, oral histories, or protests against exploitation [13,19]. Feminist scholars argue that such erasures sustain colonial epistemologies, where Western frameworks privilege militarized or humanitarian narratives over Indigenous cosmologies that link land, body, and sovereignty [13,20]. For example, Diné matriarchs' resistance to fossil fuel extraction in Navajo Nation mirrors Igbo women's unseen battles, yet only the former enters academic discourse [13].

Synthesis: toward an intersectional historiography

By bridging Biafra's history with contemporary Indigenous feminisms, this review calls for re-politicizing climate justice not as a technical fix, but as a struggle against the triple erasure of gender, Indigeneity, and ecology in conflict historiography [12].

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Methodology

This study employs a qualitative historical analysis guided by feminist political ecology (FPE) and intersectional theory to interrogate the gendered dimensions of environmental displacement among Indigenous Igbo women during the Nigerian-Biafran War (1967–1970). Given the scarcity of firsthand accounts from Indigenous women, the methodology prioritizes critical archival analysis, subversive reading of secondary sources, and limited triangulation of oral histories (where available) to reconstruct silenced narratives of ecological violence and resilience.

research design

FPE-centered historical analysis:

a) Examines war-era documents (military reports, humanitarian records) through an FPE lens to expose how environmental warfare (e.g., scorched-earth tactics, food blockades) targeted Indigenous women's subsistence economies and ecological knowledge [21,22].

b) Adapts FPE's focus on embodied labor and everyday resistance (e.g., foraging, seed preservation) to highlight Igbo women's agency amid displacement [21,23].

Intersectional discourse analysis:

a) Applies Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality to analyze how Igbo women's displacement was compounded by ethnicity, gender, and class [24].

b) Critiques androcentric war historiography using Indigenous feminist frameworks (e.g., Agarwal 1995, and Shiva 1988) to reveal epistemic erasures [21,23].

Oral History Triangulation

Limited use of existing oral testimonies (e.g., Biafra Memory Project) to counter state silences, acknowledging their mediated nature through colonial archives [25].

Sources

a) Primary: Nigerian/Biafran government records on environmental warfare (e.g., land-burning policies); Reports on famine and displacement (1967–1970) and Memoirs/NGO accounts referencing Indigenous women's roles.

b) Secondary Sources: Peer-reviewed studies on gendered displacement in Global South conflicts (e.g., Rwanda, Congo) to identify transnational patterns of environmental violence [21,22] and Feminist critiques of humanitarianism to interrogate how aid frameworks erased Indigenous women's agency [22,26].

Analytical framework

The study adopts FPE's three-pronged approach (Clement et al, 2019; Naher, 2024):

a) Gendered Power Relations: How militarized ecologies weaponized Indigenous women's care labor (e.g., food smuggling as resistance).

b) Intersectional Subjectivities: Centering Igbo women's triple erasure (gender, Indigeneity, ecology) in war narratives.

c) Epistemic Justice: Contrasting colonial archives with Indigenous cosmologies linking land/body sovereignty (e.g., parallels to Diné matriarchs' anti-extraction struggles) [23,26].

Limitations

a) Archival Silences: State-centric sources obscure Indigenous women's voices; FPE's critical gap analysis is used to highlight absences.

b) Temporal Barriers: Reliance on extant materials risks reproducing colonial biases.

c) Scale Tensions: Balancing macro-war narratives with micro-level gendered experiences requires careful source juxtaposition.

Results and Discussion

Environmental warfare as gendered ecocide

The Nigerian-Biafran War (1967-1970) epitomized what Odogwu [27] terms "the first casualty of war": the environment, and by extension, the Indigenous Igbo women whose subsistence and sovereignty were inextricably tied to it. Feminist political ecology (FPE) reveals how militarized tactics of farmland destruction, water poisoning, and post-war land grabs were not merely collateral damage but deliberate instruments of gendered ecological violence [21,22]. These acts constituted a "triple assault" on Igbo women's bodies, labor, and epistemologies, mirroring patterns of environmental warfare in later conflicts like Rwanda [27] yet erased from mainstream historiography.

Systematic destruction of subsistence economies

The war's environmental violence targeted the Eastern Region's agricultural base, which had been the cornerstone of Indigenous livelihoods since the colonial era [1]. Scorched-earth policies ravaged collective farms, while blockades weaponized food insecurity, forcing women into perilous foraging and smuggling operations [7,28]. As Eni [28] notes, the war's casualties extended beyond "blood spillage" to include "sundry environmental degradation," with forests traditionally managed by women for agroecological balance transformed into sites of massacre and rape (Destination Biafra [DB], 134). The Nigerian military's shoddy disposal of toxins further rendered lands "unfit for tillage," exacerbating malnutrition and displacing women into refugee camps where, as in Rwanda, deforestation compounded ecological precarity [7,27].

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Oil, Coloniality, and Epistemicide

The war's environmental dimensions were inextricable from Britain's neo-colonial oil interests. As Eni [27] underscores, British actors sabotaged peace agreements to retain control over Eastern oil reserves (DB, 102), while Nigerian forces employed aerial bombardments to destabilize ecosystems and Indigenous lifeworld's (DB, 165). This aligns with FPE's critique of how extractivism fuels "centripetal and centrifugal" violence [1,29], disproportionately burdening Igbo women with ecological care labor amid displacement. The epistemic erasure of these tactics dismissed as "not systematic" by observers [30] reflects what Agarwal (1995) and Shiva (1988) identify as colonial knowledge regimes that invalidate Indigenous environmental relations.

Resistance and Epistemic Gaps

Despite archival silences, fragmentary evidence reveals Igbo women's resilience: seed preservation, covert farming, and ecological stewardship amid militarized landscapes [21,23]. Yet the absence of gendered data in post-war agricultural "redevelopment" programs [1] perpetuates what Hall [26] calls "humanitarianism's patriarchal gaze," obscuring women's labor in ecological recovery. These tactics of environmental warfare set the stage for examining gendered impacts of the war, which is the focus of the next section.

Gendered impacts of the nigerian-biafran war: economic, health, and cultural devastation

The Nigerian-Biafran War inflicted gendered ecological violence on Igbo women, whose economic, physical, and cultural survival was systematically undermined. Through a feminist political ecology (FPE) lens, this section reveals how wartime destruction of agrarian systems, maternal health collapse, and displacement from sacred lands entrenched intersectional precarity eroding Indigenous women's autonomy while demanding their resilience (Clement et al., 2019; Naher, 2024).

Economic: The Weaponization of Agrarian Livelihoods

The war's targeting of farmland and food supply chains plunged Igbo women into engineered poverty traps. As Achebe [4] documents, the Nigerian blockade forced women to risk "affia attack" missions smuggling food through enemy lines while militarized land grabs destroyed communal farming systems [28]. These tactics weaponized women's care labor, as 70% of pre-war Eastern Nigeria depended on agriculture [1]. Post-war, the collapse of subsistence economies pushed women into transactional survival: some bartered sexual favors for food in barracks, later facing stigma as agarachaa ("those who strayed and returned") [7]. Even "recovery" programs ignored women's agrarian knowledge, privileging male-headed cash crops over Indigenous food sovereignty [31].

Health: maternal collapse and intergenerational trauma

The war's gendered malnutrition crisis, kwashiorkor, ravaged children while pregnant women birthed in bombed forests [28] reveals how ecological violence becomes embodied. Akresh et al. [32] found that war-exposed women had lower prenatal care and earlier fertility, with impacts transmitted intergenerationally. Maternal mortality soared as hospitals were destroyed; Igbo women turned homes into makeshift clinics, using guava leaves (once considered inedible) as emergency nutrition [4]. Post-war, women bore double burdens: untreated STIs from wartime rape [7] and trauma from losing children symbolically named "Biafra" [28].

Cultural: sacred land and identity erasure

Displacement severed Igbo women from forest groves and ancestral lands central to their spiritual and governance roles [30]. Pre-war, women resolved disputes under village udala trees; post-war, these sites became military camps. Ritual reintegration ceremonies (e.g., for rape survivors) were led by elder women, yet many never recovered from the stigma of sexual violence [7]. The erasure of sacred spaces mirrored epistemicide: as Anurioha [15] notes, women's wartime leadership (e.g., cooperatives protesting soldier looting) was erased from state archives, reducing them to "victims" rather than custodians of Indigenous ecology.

Igbo women's invisible labor foraging cassava leaves, healing soldiers, and preserving seeds became acts of quiet resistance [4,31]. Yet FPE demands we ask: why must resilience be their burden? The war's gendered scars persist in Nigeria's unequal recovery: though women dominate teaching and NGOs, men still monopolize land and political power [31].

Agency & resistance: indigenous women's subversive networks and political reclamation

The Nigerian-Biafran War forced Indigenous Igbo women to transform traditional roles into revolutionary survival systems, creating informal economies, dispute-resolution networks, and political mobilization structures that sustained communities amid state violence. Through FPE, these acts of resistance often erased in androcentric war narratives show how women's embodied labor and collective agency became tools of ecological and social preservation [21,23].

Subversive subsistence economies

Facing what international agencies called "the most severe emergency since World War II" [15,33], Igbo women engineered clandestine food networks. They sold jewelry and wrappers to buy scarce food, smuggled salt through blockades via "affia attack" missions [4], and repurposed cooperatives to redistribute supplies until Biafran officials branded them "communist" threats [4]. These acts mirrored Eritrean and Ugandan women's wartime economic mobilization (Hughes & Tripp, 2015) [15] but were uniquely rooted in Igbo matriarchal trade traditions.

Grassroots Governance and Conflict Mediation

With men conscripted, women's kinship networks like Umuada (daughters of the lineage) and Ndinyom (married women's councils) became shadow governments, resolving disputes and

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maintaining social order [31]. Their hybrid conflict-resolution methods blending Indigenous restorative justice with Western mediation contrasted with the state's militarized violence [31,34]. As Anurioha [15] notes, figures like Madam Agafa organized direct resistance, mobilizing communities to defend land like Oguta from Nigerian forces.

Political awakening and its limits

Pre-war protests saw women marching with "wooden machetes" [4], but formal politics excluded them. Yet their invisible labor running kitchens for soldiers, coordinating international aid, and evacuating sick children kept Biafra functional [4]. Post-war, these networks birthed NGOs, though patriarchal structures still barred women from government roles [31]. Igbo women's resistance redefined "care as warfare", but their erasure from postwar power structures underscores FPE's critique of gendered ecological reparations [22].

Policy failures: the gender blindness of post-war reconstruction

The post-war reconstruction of Biafra systematically erased Indigenous Igbo women's agency, replicating the androcentric narratives that dominated wartime historiography [6,35]. Feminist political ecology (FPE) exposes how this epistemic injustice the exclusion of women's ecological and social labor from policy frameworks perpetuated intersectional precarity [21,24].

Gendered erasure in reconstruction

Post-war programs focused on macroeconomic "stability" (e.g., petroleum infrastructure) while ignoring the subsistence economies women had sustained during the conflict. As Okigbo [35] notes, postwar narratives were "written by men, for men, and about men," reducing women's roles to tropes of "moral laxity" or victimhood [6]. This obscured their material contributions: running cooperatives, managing displaced communities, and innovating famine foods like cassava leaves [4,31]. The few "rehabilitation" initiatives that targeted women, such as vocational training, framed them as passive beneficiaries, not architects of survival.

Ecological reparations denied

Reconstruction policies also failed to address gendered ecological harm. Scorched-earth tactics had poisoned farmland and waterways, yet postwar land redistribution favored male veterans over female subsistence farmers [7]. Meanwhile, women's wartime sexual violence trauma, a direct result of militarized ecologies, was excluded from medical or reparations programs [6]. This mirrored global patterns where, as Nnaemeka [36] argues, women's war fronts are "everywhere" but rendered invisible in policy.

Contrast with grassroots legacies

Igbo women's postwar leadership in NGOs and civil society [31] emerged despite state neglect, echoing African women's peacebuilding in Sierra Leone and Mozambique [33,35]. Yet without formal recognition, their labor remained precarious, a gap FPE links to colonial-capitalist patriarchy [22]. The reconstruction's gender blindness perpetuated wartime violence by other means. Centering Indigenous women's ecological knowledge remains urgent for reparative justice.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study employs feminist political ecology (FPE) and intersectional theory to expose how environmental warfare during the Nigerian-Biafran War (1967-1970) constituted gendered ecocide against Indigenous Igbo women [21,24]. Through qualitative analysis of archival records, oral histories, and war literature, the research reveals how scorched-earth tactics, food blockades, and oil-backed military strategies systematically targeted women's ecological knowledge and subsistence economies [1,28].

The findings demonstrate a triple assault: (1) economic violence through farmland destruction that forced women into perilous "affia attack" smuggling operations [4]; (2) embodied trauma via weaponized famine and sexual violence [7]; and (3) cultural erasure as displacement severed ties to sacred lands [31]. Despite this, women organized clandestine food networks, preserved seed biodiversity, and maintained grassroots governance through kinship systems like Umuada [4,15].

The study uncovers critical policy failures in postwar reconstruction, where androcentric narratives reduced women's roles to victimhood while land redistribution favored male veterans [6,35]. This epistemic injustice persists in contemporary climate justice movements that overlook Indigenous women's resistance to ongoing ecological violence [10]. By centering Igbo women's testimonies and survival strategies, the research challenges dominant war historiography and proposes an intersectional framework for reparative justice. It argues that true reconciliation requires recognizing women's ecological labor and addressing the intergenerational impacts of environmental warfare [22,32]. The study ultimately reframes the Biafran conflict as a watershed moment in understanding the gendered dimensions of climate colonialism.

Recommendation

The findings of this study demand urgent action across policy and research domains to address the enduring legacies of gendered environmental violence.

Reparations through land and climate justice

Post-war reconstruction's failures necessitate gender-sensitive reparations that:

a) Restore land rights to Indigenous women through revisions of Nigeria's 1978 Land Use Act, prioritizing those

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dispossessed by wartime destruction and postwar oil extraction [5,8].

b) Fund community-led climate adaptation programs that leverage Igbo women's agroecological knowledge, such as seed preservation and forest restoration [4,31].

c) Establish truth and reconciliation processes documenting environmental crimes (e.g., water poisoning, farm burning) with reparative healthcare for survivors of wartime sexual violence [6,7].

Decolonizing research praxis

To counter archival erasures, future studies must:

a) Center oral histories through partnerships with Igbo women's organizations (e.g., Umuada networks) to document ecological resistance strategies [25].

b) Apply embodied methodologies in environmental conflict studies, tracing how land degradation impacts maternal health and intergenerational trauma [23,32].

c) Amplify transnational parallels between Biafra and contemporary Indigenous struggles (e.g., Secwepemc land defenders), challenging Western-centric climate justice frameworks [12,13].

Future research directions

This study opens critical avenues for further investigation into gendered environmental violence. Future research should:

1. Expand Oral History Archives: Systematically document Indigenous women's ecological knowledge and wartime survival strategies through community-based participatory methods, partnering with Igbo women's organizations to counter archival silences.

2. Trace Intergenerational Impacts: Investigate how wartime environmental destruction continues to affect maternal health, food sovereignty, and land rights for subsequent generations using longitudinal and embodied methodologies.

3. Comparative Studies: Examine parallels between Biafra and contemporary conflicts (e.g., Sudan, Congo) where resource extraction and climate change exacerbate gendered displacement, centering Indigenous feminist frameworks.

4. Policy Engagement: Develop models for gender-sensitive reparations by analyzing global precedents (e.g., Rwanda's post-genocide land reforms) while centering local epistemologies.

Such work must prioritize ethical collaboration with affected communities, transforming research into tools for reparative justice.

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