

**THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF BIAFRA'S (IPOB) VIOLENT AGITATION ON
WOMEN'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES IN IMO STATE, 2012 -2023**

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Abstract

Women in Imo State are crucial actors in the informal economy, particularly in agriculture and trade, and are active participants in social sectors such as education and healthcare. The rise of agitation by the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), characterized by violence and the enforcement of "Sit-at-Home" (SAH) orders, has negatively affected these activities. This paper examines how the imposition and brutal enforcement of SAH orders have adversely affected the well-being and socio-economic livelihoods of women in Imo State. This paper covers the period from 2012 to 2023 and focuses on the lived experiences of women across six purposively selected Local Government Areas (LGAs). Using a qualitative methodology, primary data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions, complemented by secondary sources from academic journals and human rights reports. The study is grounded in Feminist Economics Theory (FET), which critically examines the gendered impact of conflict. Findings indicate that violent agitation and the enforcement of SAH orders have significantly exacerbated the existing socio-economic vulnerabilities of women, resulting in a decline in economic activity, a rise in unemployment, and a severe disruption of agricultural supply chains. Furthermore, the SAH mandates have critically crippled access to essential maternal healthcare and education. The paper underscores the urgent need for targeted, gender-sensitive policy actions to aid affected women and mitigate the long-term detrimental impacts of violence on gender equality and economic stability in the State.

Keywords: Imo Women, Socio-economic Activities, IPOB, Feminist Economics, IPOB Agitation.

Introduction

The positive influence of women's socio-economic activities in families and communities is extensively documented. Pioneering scholars like Boserup and Tinker have highlighted the pivotal roles women play in global socio-economic development.¹ More recently, Duflo observed that increased economic autonomy among women in developing nations often leads to healthier families and greater investment in children's education.² In Nigeria, women have historically made substantial contributions across various sectors, demonstrating resilience and agency, particularly in the informal economy.³

In Imo State specifically, women's socio-economic activities before 2012 were shaped by cultural and political factors. Amidst these factors, including the entrenched patriarchal norms in Imo State, women were pivotal actors in rural agriculture and trade, contributing significantly to household income and community resilience.⁴ They also played vital roles in education and healthcare, leveraging social capital and community networks as a primary strategy for economic survival. The pre-agitation market life was consistently described as vibrant in focus groups, a cornerstone of community interaction and financial stability.⁵

However, the rise of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in 2012 and its heightened agitation for secession have profoundly disrupted these activities. IPOB, formed to address historical injustices, gained prominence for its activism, characterised by protests and the imposition of Sit-at-Home (SAH) orders that disrupted local economies and women's livelihoods.⁶ Compounding this instability is the State's often forceful counter-insurgency security response, including military operations, curfews, and security checkpoints. This dual threat, creating a dual security dilemma stemming from IPOB's violent agitation and intensive state security operations,

¹ E. Boserup, *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970), 228; I. Tinker and M. Bo Bramsen, eds., *Women and World Development* (Washington, DC: Overseas Development Council, 1976), 4–5.

² E. Duflo, "Women Empowerment and Economic Development," *Journal of Economic Literature* 50, no. 4 (2012): 1051–79.

³ H. Abdullah, "Wifeism and Activism: The Nigerian Women's Movement," in *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective*, ed. Amrita Basu (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 30.

⁴ A. Chikwendu and N. Onuorah, "Women in Agriculture and Sustainable Development in Nigeria," *Journal of Agricultural Extension* 19, no. 2 (2015): 1–11.

⁵ Focus Group Discussion, Owerri West Local Government Area, September 5, 2025.

⁶ B. Ozibo and G. Okorie, "Sit-at-Home Order and Economic Growth of South Eastern Nigeria," *GOUni Journal of Faculty of Management and Social Sciences* 10, no. 1 (2022): 189–201.

has severely exacerbated existing vulnerabilities.⁷

Historically, women in Imo State utilised social and community networks to thrive within the informal economy. While much discourse has focused on the general security and economic impacts of IPOB's activities, a critical gap remains in understanding the specific gendered consequences of this disruption across sectors such as agriculture, trade, education, and health. Existing literature has failed to systematically address how the dual security dilemma stemming from both IPOB agitation and intensive state security counter-measures (e.g., SAH orders, military operations, curfews) exacerbates the pre-existing vulnerabilities of women in Imo State. Consequently, the precise ways in which this specific form of instability disrupts economic activities, health outcomes, educational pursuits, and the overall well-being of women in Imo State remain inadequately explored and empirically documented.

To address these inadequacies, this paper provides a comprehensive examination of how this new form of instability, especially how the SAH orders, has introduced multifaceted disruptions to women's socio-economic activities in Imo State. The general objective of this paper is to critically examine the consequences of IPOB's violent agitation on the socio-economic activities and well-being of women in Imo State between 2012 and 2023. Specifically, the paper contextualises the historical trajectory of the IPOB agitation, assesses the resulting militarisation of the State, and evaluates the correlation between imposed instability and disruptions of women's economic autonomy, market participation, and access to crucial social services.

The paper uses a qualitative methodology to explore the lived experiences of women in Imo State, collecting primary data through interviews and focus group discussions, complemented by secondary sources from academic journals and human rights reports. This triangulation of data enhances the credibility and robustness of the findings. By situating the IPOB agitation within the context of women's pre-existing activities, this research provides a comprehensive examination of how this new form of instability has introduced multifaceted disruptions to women's economic and social activities in Imo State.

⁷ A. Chiamagu and C. Chiamagu, "The State and Separatist Agitations in Nigeria: An Analysis of the Dynamics of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)," *Socialscientia: Journal of the Social Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2020): 16–35.

Scope of the Study

This paper is strictly limited to Imo State, Nigeria. It focuses on six purposively selected Local Government Areas (LGAs) representing the three senatorial zones: Oguta and Owerri West (Owerri Zone), Ideato South and Orsu (Orlu Zone), and Onuimo and Isiala Mbano (Okigwe Zone). The analysis of impact is restricted to the lived experiences of women within these specific LGAs. The study period spans from 2012 to 2023. This timeframe is critical as 2012 captures the rise and early stages of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) agitation, providing a baseline understanding that ushered in a definitive resurgence and subsequent escalation of disruptive activities. This includes the transition to and implementation of the violently enforced "Sit-at-Home" orders, and the resulting disruptions and decline in socio-economic activities among Imo State women. The Terminal Point 2023 represents a crucial shift in women's reactions from initial fear-driven compliance to growing discontent, opposition, and active "groaning" due to the unbearable cumulative costs of disruptions, as documented in 2023 reports that led to the widely reported "Imo women groan" phenomenon.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the Feminist Economic Theory (FET), which provides a crucial lens for understanding gender intersections in conflict. FET critiques traditional conflict theories that overlook women's experiences and emphasises the role of gender in shaping social relations and power dynamics. FET challenges the traditional market-centric view by foregrounding the Social Reproduction sector, the unpaid labour (care, domestic work, and household sustenance) primarily performed by women that regenerates the workforce and sustains society.⁸ The SAH orders disrupt women's paid work (trade/agriculture) but simultaneously intensify the demand for their unpaid labour as they must cope with closed markets, scarcity, and heightened illness, including trauma within the household. This shift places a disproportionate and invisible burden

⁸ N. Folbre, "'Holding Hands at Midnight': The Paradox of Caring Labour," *Feminist Economics* 1, no. 1 (March 1995): 73–92.

on women's time and well-being.

Scholars like Cynthia Enloe are instrumental in applying "feminist curiosity" to conflict. FET argues that conflict erodes the boundary between the "public" (militarised zones, markets, politics) and the "private" (home, family).⁹ IPOB's enforcement and the counter-security operations effectively militarise the market and public spaces. Women, traditionally reliant on the informal economy, are thus forced to operate in dangerous public spaces to secure sustenance, increasing their vulnerability to violence and economic loss. Furthermore, scholars like Butler and Yuval emphasise how the atmosphere of fear and the threat of violence reduce female self-worth and influence their daily economic and social decision-making processes.¹⁰

Biafra Agitation: Historical Perspective

The 1914 Amalgamation, orchestrated by Sir Frederick Lugard, forcibly joined over 250 distinct ethnic groups primarily for British administrative convenience. This created a critical educational and administrative gap because the North restricted Western education, while the South embraced mission schools. This led to educated Igbos migrating to the North to fill civil service roles, unknowingly creating economic jealousy and social friction that viewed them as culturally alien and economically dominant.¹¹ This escalating animosity found tragic expression in the anti-Igbo riots in Jos (1945) and Kano (1953).¹² The colonial power actively institutionalised this ethnic competition. The Richards Constitution (1946) entrenched regionalism and solidified the Northern Region's political dominance by granting it a clear majority in the federal legislature. Political parties formed during this period, such as the Action Group (AG), the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (which later became the National Council of Nigerian Citizens, NCNC), and the Northern People's Congress (NPC), were organised along ethno-regional

⁹ C. Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 42;

¹⁰ J. Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 1–3; N. Yuval-Davis, "Gender, Ethnicity and Citizenship: Women's Citizenship in a Multicultural Era," *Women's Studies International Forum* 23, no. 1 (2000): 20–32.

¹¹ C. Achebe, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 11–13.

¹² O. Nnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1978), 35.

cleavages. Their formation reflected deep-seated ethnic sentiments, resulting in a zero-sum politics in which the Igbo perceived themselves as systematically excluded from power.¹³

The post-independence era, commencing in 1960, was characterised by profound political instability and intense ethno-regional rivalry. Tensions reached a critical height following the military coup of January 15, 1966, an event widely interpreted in Northern Nigeria as an ethnically motivated Igbo power grab. This perception catalysed a violent counter-coup on July 29, 1966, precipitating a wave of targeted pogroms against the Eastern population that resulted in significant loss of life and a large-scale internal displacement. The federal government's failure to provide adequate security guarantees for the Igbo people necessitated a mass migration to the Eastern Region. This Movement culminated in the May 30, 1967, proclamation of the Republic of Biafra by Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, marking the onset of the Nigerian Civil War. The ensuing 30-month civil war (1967–1970) claimed an estimated three million lives, primarily due to famine and military actions. The subsequent reintegration process was significantly hampered by punitive economic measures, most notably the "£20 policy," which restricted all returning Biafran bank account holders to a maximum of £20 regardless of their prior savings, thereby effectively crippling the Igbo economic base and fostering a lasting narrative of systemic marginalisation.

This historical grievance remains a primary catalyst for contemporary secessionist agitation within the Nigerian polity. The resurgence of these sentiments began in 1999 with the formation of the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) by Ralph Uwazuruike. However, the group eventually fractured under the weight of state repression and internal dissents. Subsequent radicalisation occurred through factions such as the Biafra Zionist Movement (BZM), which pursued more confrontational tactics before being largely neutralised by state security forces. These precursors set the framework for the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), which, under the leadership of Mazi Nnamdi Kanu, utilised sophisticated media strategies to mobilise mass support. However, the Movement's trajectory has been significantly altered by the Nigerian government's designation of IPOB as a terrorist group. This legal and political

¹³ J. Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967–1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 29–30.

containment reached a definitive peak in November 2025, following the conviction and life imprisonment of Kanu on terrorism-related charges. This development continues to shape the discourse surrounding Igbo self-determination and national unity.

IPOB and the Militarisation of Imo State

IPOB emerged in 2012 as a reactionary movement against the perceived institutionalised exclusion of the Eastern region, seeking to actualise a sovereign Biafran state through a narrative of historical and contemporary injustice. The militarisation of Imo State refers to the sustained, heavy deployment of military personnel and equipment, and to high-intensity operations (rather than conventional policing) as the primary method of security management. This was seriously amplified by the emergence of the militant wing of IPOB, the Eastern Security Network (ESN).¹⁴ Formed in December 2020, the State perceived ESN as an armed agitation entity, which set the stage for direct conflict, primarily in the Orlu zone. The considered transition of IPOB to the formation of ESN and subsequent armed confrontations is viewed as a counter-resistance to the government's securitisation of their demands. The February 2021 crisis in Orlu, involving the deployment of combat helicopters and airstrikes against ESN bases, marked the definitive moment of complete militarisation. This response was widely perceived as repressive and disproportionate.¹⁵

The violence and subsequent weekly Monday Sit-at-Home (SAH) order, enforced violently, became an entrenched tradition in Imo State and the South-east in general. This civil disobedience campaign, implemented through fear, has resulted in massive economic losses, with estimates exceeding ₦10 billion each time the order is disobeyed.¹⁶ A critical consequence of the militarisation and security lapses was the emergence of "Unknown Gunmen" (UGM), an underground group combining criminal elements and radicalised IPOB factions that perpetrated

¹⁴ C. Nwangwu, "Militarisation of Security Management in Imo State: From Conventional Policing to High-Intensity Operations," *Journal of Modern Nigerian Studies* (2023).

¹⁵ Amnesty International, "Nigeria: At Least 115 People Killed by Security Forces in Four Months in Country's South-east," August 5, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/08/nigeria-at-least-115-people-killed-by-security-forces-in-four-months-in-country-s-southeast/>.

¹⁶ A. Okutu, "Sit-at-Home: South-East Loses N10bn Every Monday," *Vanguard News Nigeria*, October 11, 2021.

mass shootings, kidnappings, assassinations, attacks on a military convoy, including robbery. The UGM have exploited the atmosphere of insurgency, exploiting the high security tension, reinforcing the military's heavy presence, and thus perpetuating the cycle of militarisation and violence in the State, with its attendant consequences felt especially by Imo State women.

The Socio-economic Implications of IPOB's Sit-at-Home (SAH) Orders and Imo State Women

The pervasive militarisation of Imo State, coupled with the stringent enforcement of the Sit-at-Home (SAH) orders, fostered a climate of systemic instability that challenged the traditional survival strategies and informal economic networks utilised by Imo State women. These implications are multifaceted, operating through the mechanism of constrained mobility, loss of institutional trust, and market paralysis. The following sections critically analyse the impacts across four core areas in which women traditionally hold significant responsibility and derive income: Agriculture, Trade, Education, and Health.

Agriculture

The agricultural sector in Imo State, overwhelmingly driven by women's labour, has suffered severe disruptions due to the Sit-at-Home (SAH) orders and resultant insecurity. Women constitute a large percentage (75%) of the agricultural workforce in Nigeria and the South-east region, especially in subsistence farming.¹⁷ Their labour is concentrated on staple food crops vital for household consumption and income generation, such as *cassava*, water yams, and vegetables. They are involved in nearly all stages of the farming process: clearing, planting, weeding, harvesting, processing (e.g., *cassava* to *garri*), and marketing. Women in a focus group disclosed that "due to the civil disobedience and its accompanying violence, female farmers cannot access their farms on mandated days due to the risk of attack by armed enforcers or security forces. The inability to work safely has led to reduced crop yields, as time-sensitive schedules for planting,

¹⁷ *Sahel Newsletter*, vol. 7 (July 2021).

⁵ Focus Group Discussion

weeding, and harvesting are profoundly disrupted. Farmland has become overgrown with weeds, competing with crops for nutrients. Local testimonies from farmers reveal that "harvest of vegetables like water leaves and fluted pumpkins (*ugu*) is often very poor as the inability to water and weed the farm, especially during the dry season, results in scanty leaves."⁵ One interviewee summarised the situation: "We can't process our *cassava* staples because we can't mill them on Mondays, and the whole system has broken down. Violence affects the output of *cassava* and other crops, making them sufficient only for household consumption, as they are unhealthy and cannot be processed in large quantities into products like *garri*, *fufu*, or *abacha* (*cassava* garnished with local stew) for sale."¹⁸

The most significant economic loss comes from the inability to transport and sell produce. The paralysis of markets on Mondays results in catastrophic increases in post-harvest losses for perishable crops, such as vegetables, and processed food products that women rely on for their daily income. Findings show that women in rural Imo reported a 40% increase in spoilage rate due to interrupted access to storage facilities.¹⁹ And this has led to significant fluctuations in market prices, often forcing women farmers to sell their crops, including *cassava*, at lower prices to prevent spoilage, undercutting profitability and making it easier for intermediaries to exploit the situation.²⁰ For example, one group of *cassava* sellers was forced to sell their goods to intermediaries for N2,000, who then resold them for N8,000 in urban areas. The SAH orders have compelled women to adjust their farming techniques, with some shifting from cultivating multiple crops such as cocoyam, *cassava*, and water yam to focusing on a single crop, such as vegetables, often located closer to their compounds. Furthermore, farming groups/associations such as the *Umuada* (association of married women) and *Otu Olu* (labour-sharing group) have had their operations disrupted, resulting in lower productivity and increased workloads for individual farmers.²¹

¹⁸ N. Okoro (farmer), interview by author, August 20, 2025.

¹⁹ C. Izuogu et al., "Review of Opportunities and Challenges of Agricultural Extension and Advisory Services among Rural Farm Households in Nigeria During Pandemics," *Asian Journal of Agricultural and Horticultural Research* 6, no. 3 (2020): 1–12.

²⁰ N. Ibe, "Allocative Efficiency of Input Utilisation in Cassava Production among Farmers in Arochukwu LGA of Abia State, Nigeria," *International Journal of Development and Management Review* 20, no. 1 (2025): 248–61.

²¹ N. Ezech (farmer), interview by author, August 20, 2025.

Women involved in artisanal fishing around Oguta Lake also reported disruptions to fishing practices, income, and food sources. Fish farmers experienced a profound disruption of income streams, as women were forced to contend with price exploitation by intermediaries who could move products on alternate days.²² Lastly, the stress associated with farming disruptions, spoilage, and income loss has a significant emotional toll. According to Fadera et al, many women reported feelings of anxiety and demoralisation as their months of labour risked being lost, diminishing their motivation and affecting their mental well-being.²³

Trade

Trade and entrepreneurship were pivotal economic activities for women in Imo State. Imo State women are renowned for their commitment to trade, with market and small-scale enterprises historically defined as a woman's domain since pre-colonial times. This explains the vibrant energy of markets like *Ukwu Owerri*, *Afor Ogbe*, *Nkwo Origo*, and *Nkwo Emeke* on a typical market day, when women were predominantly seen buying and selling their goods before the heightened IPOB agitation in Imo State.⁵ The atmosphere of fear and the threat of violence reduce female self-worth and influence their daily economic and social decision-making processes.¹⁰ The effects of the SAH orders on traders and buyers are devastating and disproportionately target women in the informal economy. The closure of markets and business activities on designated days directly impedes their ability to generate income and sustain their livelihoods. Finding highlights that traders reported an income reduction of up to 60% during a particular SAH.²⁴

The climate of fear and economic instability caused by the escalating violence has led to capital flight and the relocation of businesses out of Imo State, reducing the number of financial activities available to women. Local Government Areas (LGAs) like Nkwor-Akpulu, Orsu, and

²² J. Nzeribe (fish farmer), interview by author, August 23, 2025.

²³ O. Fadare et al., "Stressor or Succour? Examining the Association between Conflict, Livestock Assets, and Farmers' Mental Health in Nigeria," *Economics and Human Biology* 49 (2023): 101234.

⁵ Focus Group Discussion

¹⁰ J. Butler, *Precarious Life*; N. Yuval-Davis, "Gender, Ethnicity and Citizenship.

²⁴ O. Johnpaul Nduba et al., "The Effects of the Sit-at-Home Order Enforced by the Indigenous People of Biafra in South-East of Nigeria (2020–2023)," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 8, no. 8 (August 2024): 1716–30.

Orlu are no longer recognisable due to abandoned homes and shops. Almost all the shops, including *mama put* (roadside eateries) owned by women, are closed down.⁵ A food vendor recounted breaking down in tears after arriving at a locked market with an estimated ₦100,000 worth of cooked food for sale. She expressed gratitude to traders along the road who bought part of the food.²⁵ The lived experiences of female traders in the study area of Orsu further illuminate this economic devastation. For instance, Ngozi Chumah, a petty trader, detailed the collapse of her livelihood as a direct consequence of insecurity. According to her, "I began hawking *abacha* (*cassava*-based local cuisine) in 2020. When violence erupted in Orsu in 2022, I experienced a decline in sales, which adversely affected my profit. Before the violence and Sit-at-Home (SAH) orders, I used to make about ₦5,000 a day. This allowed me to join a weekly Rotating Savings and Credits Association (ROSCA), locally known as *esusu*, for a ₦10,000 contribution, which helped pay my children's fees and provide food for my family. Due to the violence and the accompanying SAH orders, I stopped my trade, because every time I went to the market, the streets were empty and traders were absent. People were either running home or seeking safety from sporadic shootings. This forced me to reduce my weekly contribution from ₦10,000 to ₦5,000, until I eventually stopped hawking altogether because I was no longer making any profit."²⁶

Many small businesses rely on consistent supply routes and external suppliers. Regular SAHs and protests disrupt transportation networks, leading to shortages of goods and higher prices. Due to supply chain disruptions, the prices of essential goods skyrocket on non-SAH days. Women buyers, managing fixed or shrinking budgets, are forced to pay exorbitant prices for staples. This combination of reduced market access and higher prices means women can afford less food of lower quality, leading to nutritional stress within the household. This burden of managing scarcity falls directly on the homemaker.⁵

The disruption to trading caused by IPOB agitation has significant implications for social networks and community cohesion. The closure of markets disrupts the daily routines that enhance social interactions among women. The market, once the essence of social life, has been disrupted, bringing social isolation, as women can no longer rely on it for social capital, support, advice, and

²⁵ E. Igwe (food vendor), interview by author, September 6, 2025.

²⁶ B. Chumah (trader), interview by author, August 20, 2025.

⁵ Focus Group Discussion

information crucial to successful trading. This erosion of trust affects loan availability and repayment rates, leading to a cycle of fewer loans available to women and distorting the *esusu* (rotating credit system).⁵ The breakdown in social capital also threatens traditional governance within the market. The *Omufia's* role, the central figure in the governance of female economic activity,²⁷ is undermined. The mandatory and often violently enforced SAH orders introduce parallel, extra-legal authority that directly counteracts the *Omufia's* traditional governance. Traders obey the SAH orders out of fear of violence, thereby delegitimising the conventional leader's power in her core domain. The inability to meet in person means that disputes go unresolved, cultural practices are neglected, and social networks that strengthen trade are weakened.²⁸

Education

Education was a significant social activity for women in Imo State. In the informal sector, women were the first teachers for their children, imparting moral values, social etiquette, and cultural identity through traditional stories and proverbs. All of which are fundamentally dependent on stable social environments.²⁹ The mandatory SAH order and general climate of fear directly dismantle these key learning environments. The sustained closure or fear of violence in markets disrupts the daily, organic transfer of specialised knowledge to younger women and apprentices. One elderly woman noted that "mothers no longer sit out under the moon to transmit knowledge through folk tales to their girls as a result of the security challenge in Imo State."²⁹ Furthermore, elderly women who are the irreplaceable custodians of deep, multi-generational knowledge in traditional birth have been killed due to violence for attending to pregnant women on "Sit-at-Home" day. The brutal attack and death of the Traditional Birth Attendant (TBA) for attending to women on a SAH day resulted in a "death of knowledge" in the traditional health attendant sector.³⁰

In vocational activities, women transferred knowledge as proprietors of trades traditionally dominated by females. IPOB activities directly sabotage these pathways through its mandatory

²⁷ I. Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 1987).

²⁸ E. Azubike (Lolo), interview by author, September 5, 2025.

²⁹ N. Okerie (head of Umuada), interview by author, August 20, 2025.

³⁰ G. Orji (traditional health attendant), interview by author, September 5, 2025.

weekly SAH, compelling the closure of tailoring workshops, hairdressing salons, catering schools, and adult literacy centres.³¹ This has resulted in a significant loss of instructional hours and extended apprenticeships. One apprentice noted, "The disruption by IPOB has delayed the start of my cake business. Insecurity, particularly the fear of attacks by "Unknown Gunmen (UGM)", makes travelling to vocational training centres or apprenticeship workshops difficult for female learners."³²

This repeated loss of business days leads to a severe decline in revenue generation and erosion of operating capital. A woman who runs a small market stall and is enrolled in an adult literacy class, or is paying for her daughter's vocational training, must rely on daily sales. When sales are lost, the ability to pay tuition or transport fares for these non-mandatory educational activities becomes the first financial casualty, thereby setting back the informal educational progress of women and girls. This exacerbates the pre-existing cultural bias, especially for the girl child, where in times of scarcity, family resources are often prioritised for the male child's education or skill acquisition over the female's.³³ With deepening poverty, there is an increase in the pressure on poor families to relieve their financial burden through early or forced marriage for the girl-child, effectively ending any chance of future formal or informal education.³⁴ This was the case of one interviewee who was forced into early marriage after her parents could not pay for tailoring lessons due to the closure of businesses.³⁵

Findings reveal that many community training centres have cancelled empowerment programs for Imo State women due to fear of violence. In Owerri, various community-based organisations offer workshops specifically for women, covering topics such as entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and health education. Since IPOB's intensified activities, attendance has reportedly dropped, with many women citing concerns about safety and potential violence during

³¹ D. Owoeye et al., "Separatists' Strategy: Appraising the Effects of IPOB Monday Sit-at-Home Order on Political Economy of the South-East Region of Nigeria," *International Journal of Advanced Academic Research* 8, no. 1 (2022): 93–108.

³² J. Aniemeka (apprentice), interview by author, August 24, 2025.

³³ World Bank, *GIL Top Policy Lessons on Empowering Adolescent Girls*, Impact Evaluation no. 147 (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2020).

³⁴ E. Ishaku, "The Challenges of Girl-Child Education: A Case Study of Yobe," Kalu Institute, March 2021.

³⁵ J. Ifeoma (school dropout), interview by author, August 23, 2025.

scheduled sessions.³⁶

In formal education, the inability of students and teachers to access schools disrupts the academic calendar. Reports indicate attacks on educational institutions and students. A secondary school here in Umuzuwas attacked during a Junior Secondary School WAEC English exams on a SAH order day. IPOB members forcefully drove the students away, threatening them with gunshots.³⁷ The generalised fear created by these incidents reinforces the message that schools are not safe places. One school proprietress narrated that her school's student strength reduced from 137 to about 30, as a result of persistent violence and harassment, especially by the Unknown GunMen (UGM), who took advantage of the security challenge in the State, forcing her to shut down and resort to selling native gin.³⁸

With the increasing economic challenges associated with the sit-at-home orders, many girls were reported pulled out of school to assist with domestic chores. This was the case of Juliet Ezeifedi, "as the only girl in the house, the three boys attended school during the intense violence. Even with the economic hardship caused by IPOB violence that affected my parents' incomes, they struggled to pay fees for the three boys while I was left to remain at home, missing two academic sessions."³⁹ The disruption of socio-economic activities places a higher burden on women, who often must find new ways to provide for their families. This increases domestic and care responsibilities for older female children, diverting them from their studies to support their younger siblings and mothers. "I was using my two out-of-school sessions to assist my mother in her garri business (cassava flakes processing and trading) to see how to increase income and also take care of my junior brothers. As the Ada (first Daughter), I assumed caregiver responsibilities even as a teenager."³⁹

Health

In Imo State, women were deeply involved in healthcare, forming the backbone of nursing

³⁶ R. Ifeanyi (resource person), interview by author, September 6, 2025.

³⁷ F. Mbah (teacher), interview by author, September 5, 2025.

³⁸ M. Okoro (school proprietress), interview by author, August 20, 2025.

³⁹ J. Ezeifedi (student), interview by author, September 5, 2025.

and midwifery services in hospitals, clinics, and Primary Health Centres (PHCs). They provided maternal and child healthcare, including community health services, serving as the first point of contact for families seeking advice and treatment. The widespread civil unrest and mandated SAH orders have created an acute crisis in healthcare access, severely affecting women and maternal health outcomes. The SAH orders often impede access to healthcare facilities, particularly in flashpoint zones. Women are prevented from attending routine check-ups, receiving essential antenatal care (ANC), or accessing critical emergency services.⁵

The World Health Organisation (WHO) highlighted mobility restrictions during civil unrest as a factor hindering pregnant women from reaching facilities, thereby escalating the risks of maternal and infant morbidity and mortality.⁴⁰ Nearly all Primary Health Centres (PHCs) in Imo state were forced to close on mandated SAH days due to fear of attack on nurses and staff. This closure of formal facilities directly led to fatal consequences. One 28-year-old woman in Orsu LGA died from severe complications after giving birth because no hospital was open, and the delay in timely medical attention was fatal. Fear over the constant gunshots contributes to profound psychological distress and workplace mental health issues. This fear causes absenteeism, resulting in only skeletal services and compromising the quality of care. Furthermore, disruption affects treatment plans, as patients skip crucial doses due to their own fear of Movement on SAH days, impacting recovery negatively.⁴¹

This development has pushed pregnant women to rely on unskilled Traditional Birth Attendants (TBA), thereby heightening the risks of complications. The ultimate danger is that TBAs often cannot handle childbirth complications and are sometimes known to "dump" patients at formal hospitals.⁴² For some of the women, TBAs for us have emerged as the alternative healthcare provider, especially for pregnant women during the period of violence and SAH order in many communities. However, they still face the same movement restrictions; TBAs in communities lock their gates on SAH days, attending only to emergencies via phone calls, thus

⁴⁰ World Health Organisation, *Breaking Barriers: Addressing Gender and Equity in the Response to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights* (Geneva: World Health Organisation, 2019).

⁵ Focus Group Discussion,

⁴¹ Anonymous (nurse), oral interview by author, September 5, 2025.

⁴² C. Anyim, "Special Report: How IPOB Sit-at-Home in South-East Denies Residents Access to Healthcare," *Premium Times*, November 5, 2023.

limiting access.⁴¹

Beyond maternal care, the violence has negatively affected child health. UNICEF figures cited in a 2023 report showed that the South-east, including Imo state, recorded the lowest percentage of recommended vaccine intake in Nigeria, leaving approximately 61,000 children across the region unvaccinated.⁴³ One petty trader reported that her baby suffered polio/paralysis due to missed vaccinations on three occasions due to the SAH orders. Pharmacies and diagnosis centres also remain closed for fear of violence, making access to drugs and prescriptions impossible and leading to complications.⁴⁴

Discussion of Findings

The paper's findings provide critical empirical support for the core tenets of Feminist Economics Theory (FET), particularly regarding violence, the informal economy, and social reproduction. Cynthia Enloe's concept of militarising the boundary between the "public" and the "private" is central. Women traders, traditionally dominant in the markets (the public sphere), were forced to cease their daily economic activities not by market forces, but by fear of violence and the non-state authority of IPOB/UGM enforcing the SAH. The case of the abacha hawker in Orlu demonstrates how violence immediately rendered her highly mobile and vulnerable business model non-existent. The state security response and IPOB's actions effectively established checkpoints, curfews, and shutdowns, turning public market spaces into militarised zones where women's risk exposure outweighed potential profit.

The closure and disruption of markets did more than cut income; it actively destroyed social capital. The market served as a crucial site for social interaction, dispute resolution, and economic collaboration. When this space became inaccessible or dangerous, the informal support network, which FET recognises as a substitute for formal safety nets, collapsed, making women extremely vulnerable to shocks. The delegitimisation of the *Omufun* illustrates the transfer of governance authority from traditional, female-centric systems to forces of violence and coercion.

Feminist Economic Theory (FET) posits that the unpaid labour of social reproduction

⁴³ A. Okediran, "About 61,000 Children in South East Not Vaccinated – UNICEF," *BONews*, June 22, 2023.

⁴⁴ I. Agwu (petty trader), interview by author, September 5, 2025.

(caregiving, domestic work, household sustenance) is disproportionately performed by women and is intensified during crises.⁸ The SAH order caused rampant supply chain disruptions, leading to inflated prices of essential goods. While men lost income, the women (as household managers) bore the invisible burden of managing shrinking budgets against rising costs to ensure their families were fed. The loss of daily contribution by a trader directly translated into a failure to support her children's education and provide food for her household, demonstrating that the collapse of paid work immediately created a crisis in unpaid care work.

The closure of Primary Health Centres (PHCs) due to fear forced a problematic shift to unskilled Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs). This highlights that when formal health structures (the paid sector) collapse due to conflict, the burden of critical care falls back onto unskilled, informal, often unpaid female labour, significantly escalating maternal and infant risk.

The inability of women to safely access and work their farms due to the SAH and violence led to reduced crop yields and massive post-harvest losses. Since women control a large share of staple food production, this reduction in output directly translates into reduced household food security and income autonomy. The resulting economic hardship forced families to withdraw girls from formal and informal education to either save costs or increase domestic assistance. The cases of female youth being forced into early marriage or assuming caregiver responsibilities illustrate how financial shocks driven by conflict quickly reinforce pre-existing cultural biases, representing a substantial, long-term erosion of female human capital and future agency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study affirms that conflict reinforces women's unique vulnerabilities. The IPOB agitation did not impact a gender-neutral economy; it attacked the very mechanisms that include informal networks, public market spaces, and the financial autonomy derived from them, upon which Imo State women relied to sustain their families and exercise their limited but crucial agency. The violent imposition of Sit-at-Home orders, operating within a dual security dilemma, created multifaceted disruptions in agriculture, trade, education, and health, severely compromising the well-being and long-term socio-economic independence of Imo State women. The paper highlights the profound and enduring adverse effects of resurgent violence on gender equality and economic stability in the State.

The paper underscores the urgent need for targeted policy interventions that go beyond general economic relief. Future efforts must prioritise supporting the re-establishment of female governance structures like the *Omu* institution in the marketplace and facilitating the revival of *esusu* and other female credit/labour associations, providing security and essential resources to Primary Health Centers (PHCs), especially in rural flashpoint zones, and implementing emergency transportation for pregnant women on SAH days, and implementing specific economic programs to return displaced girls to vocational and formal education, including conditional cash transfers linked to female school attendance.

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