

'Women and War' is the title of an art exhibition at the Goethe Institute (the German Cultural Centre) in Ozumba Mbadiwe Street, Victoria Island. It was organized by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in collaboration with the Nigerian Red Cross Society. The exhibition was the result of a competition launched in Lagos on the 8th of March, International Women's Day when young amateur painters were invited to participate.

The competition specifically invited women and girls to take part. Ironically, because of the subject, only a handful of females were among the exhibitors.

There were 62 entries, of which about ten were by female artists.

There were nine prize-winning entries, one of which came third (untitled) by Chinwe Felicia Anulude who also won a special prize for female artists. There was also a special prize, founder-16, won by Kingsley Uzom Opara Jnr. From St. Gregory's College, for his painting "Misery." Well done Kingsley and the art teacher at St. Gregs.

The majority of entries are oils and watercolors with several collages of different materials. An untitled work of Hodanu Whesu is unusual. It is presented on skin nailed to a frame, suggesting a crucified corpse.

The winning painting "No Bread for the Widow" by Silas Adelanke Adeoye depicts an emaciated, exhausted woman holding two crying children, one of whom clings to an empty bowl. All around the woman, dwarfing her are pages from newspapers with boldly headlined reports of mass graves, rapes, atrocities in wars.

I found several paintings more subtle than a few of the prize winners. One by Folami Rzaf, "Death of a mother" is particularly interesting: a blood-spattered shroud with vultures hovering. Another simply shows a red rose, caught in barbed wire.

Another painting presents the dramatic and unusual scene of a tank bursting through the walls of a hut in which a horror-struck woman and child sit up in bed.

A specific Nigerian situation: Ayaoge Christopher Ebiokubo's "in the heat of the crisis" is set in Odi town, Bayelsa State. A simple church in the background untouched by the fires further back. In front, a row of raiders marched through a group of fleeing women.

A painting titled, Protector/Oppressor, makes an ironic statement about the dual role played by many soldiers. In a field, a huge soldier in a camouflage uniform rapes a woman while a crying child watches.

Many paintings focus on paper by soldiers. One, "De-filed" by Sarah Oboh Amiegbe has a caption. "The ground which suffers the fight of elephants, in this case, is a woman."

Many of the paintings capture the agonized faces of women: one, by Tabiti Adeniyi, is simply titled: "Face of War." Interspersed with the paintings are framed black and white photos from ICRC, with detailed captions, highlighting wars and uprisings from all over the world: Bosnia, Lebanon, Cambodia.

One photo of a sad-looking woman pressed against the window bars of an office, holding a photo is captioned, "Missing persons" and reads: "Women usually carry the burdens of searching for missing relatives. It affects not only their emotional well-

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being but seriously undermines their value and opportunity in society. The biggest soldier in my opinion; while real soldiers fought at the front lines, we the wives fought our war." Another: "There were girls who were raped and now they have kids who did not have fathers." This is a crime that will never be resolved.

The hopelessness and ineffectiveness of the UN and ICRC are dramatized in several of the paintings, with im-

Women have been closely involved in independence. Women in Algeria, in Palestine, Mozambique and Angola, in Eritrea (one-fifth of the armed forces) and in the civil war in Sri Lanka where some women in the Tamil Tigers forces have served as suicide bombers. By now, it should be universally recognized that gender is no barrier to courage or violence. The current trial in Belgium of two Rwanda nuns accused of war crimes is an awful example.

In non-combatant operations, women provide arms supplies and serve as drivers, instructors, and intelligence agents. When captured in war, women combatants and civilians face extra hardships of lack of sanitary, health services and sexual violence, leading to the risk of pregnancy and gynecological problems.

While men and women in the civilian populations are equally vulnerable to air raids, bombardments and forced evictions; women have been systematically targeted for sexual violence—sometimes with the broader political objective of ethnically cleaning an area or destroying a people. From Bangladesh to former Yugoslavia, from Berlin in World War II to Nanking (China) under Japanese occupation (1930's), from Vietnam to Mozambique, from Afghanistan to Somalia, women and girls have been victims of sexual violence (International Review of the Red Cross 2000).

It is only recently that sexual violence has been recognized as a war crime and a serious violation of international humanitarian law. The International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda have prosecuted and convicted perpetrators of sexual violence against women. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court explicitly mentioned sexual violence as a war crime.

In Nigeria recently, there has been a discussion of reparations and war crimes arising from the Nigerian civil war. There is no doubt that many women in Biafra were raped by Nigerian soldiers. Women bear the brunt of the suffering caused by hunger and flee from one area to another as the war front expands.

However, women in Biafra also played important roles in the war, apart from serving as nurses, doctors and paramedics.

In the Nigerian civil war, women were more directly involved in wartime Biafra than Nigerians. They were recruited into responsible positions in the intelligence and propaganda directorates. When food supplies were desperately short and where all able-bodied men were liable to random conscription, women were forced to obtain foodstuffs from their families or watch them starve. They took over trade with non-occupied food-producing areas and even undertook "attack trade" that is crossing enemy lines into Nigerians-occupied territories to purchase food. Such trade was very dangerous and demanded courage and cunning.

Anyone—man, woman or child—who has experienced war always prays that, as Flora Nwapa titled her novel about the civil war, "Never Again" should there be war. That message comes through loud and clear in the art exhibition.

The ICRC explains that an estimated 80 percent of all displaced people or refugees in the world are women and children.

That is, women as members of civilian populations in areas of the war suffer the most along with children for whom they are the primary protectors. However, it is also important to realize that women are also increasingly involved directly in warfare as combatants and as non-combatant assistants.

ages of people fleeing past UN flags and checkpoints.

The message of the ICRC is projected very clearly in this caption; "Violations of International Humanitarian Law are carried out with impunity in armed conflict, but violations are not inevitable." The ICRC tries to spread knowledge about and encourage respect for International Humanitarian Law, the Geneva Convention. Unfortunately, as the ICRC handout at the exhibition states, "The rules are there but the will and ability to enforce them is, sadly too often neglected by the parties to a conflict.

Why focus on women in particular? In the Second World War, women served as reservists or support units as drivers, maintenance officers, ADCs as well as their traditional role in the medical corps. In the 1948 war of independence in Israel, women served as combatant soldiers and officers. In the 1990 Gulf War, 14% of active personnel were women (40,000).