

Ethnic agitations and threat of secession in Nigeria: What can social workers do?

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Abstract

The enormity of ethnic groups in Nigeria and rising agitations for separation of major ethnic groups have made discussions on ethnicity topical. Nigeria has seen unprecedented socio-political and economic turmoil, as well as violent conflicts, since gaining independence in 1960. This is due in part to Nigerian nationalism's petty-bourgeois origins and the polity's politics of ethnicity. Fear of dominance, economic and political concerns, social and religious prejudice, and economic exploitation have all undoubtedly occurred because of this ethnic tension. This paper explored the views of participants on the persistent ethnic agitations and threat of secession in Nigeria and the implications it holds for social work practice in Nigeria. The study adopted the qualitative approach of data collection from 12 purposively selected participants using in-depth interviews. Data were thematically analysed. Findings show that marginalisation, ethnic hatred, exclusion from the national resources, fake news and misinformation were notable factors fuelling ethnic agitations, especially in the southeast and southwest region. The study recommends active engagement of social workers in the forefront of intense community education as well as advocacy for fairness, equitable distribution of resources, and opportunities for all citizens.

Keywords: Conflict resolution, ethnic agitations, Nigeria, Social workers, threat of secession

Introduction

Ethnicity is a cultural trait that connects two groups of people. The theory is founded on the idea of societal groups, which are identified by shared nationality, tribal ties, religious faith, language, or cultural and traditional roots. Ethnic groupings are described as "human groups (other than familial groups) kept together by the belief in their common origins" (Mbaku et al. 2001). The concept of ethnicity connotes the unique identification of a social group based on religion, language as well as cultural attributes. As noted by King (2002), Ozoigbo, (2008) and Salawu et al. (2011), ethnicity refers to a process whereby language, religion, colour, genealogy, and culture are assigned social meanings and around which identity and group formation evolve (Nagel, 1995). More so, ethnic groups often share unique identities which are different from other ethnic groups. The ethnic identities are often reflected in the way others who share different ethnic backgrounds are treated. In other words, the idea of oneness and bond tends to be stronger within a particular ethnic group. This is particularly the case of Nigeria where there is a clear-cut division among the major ethnic groups resulting in an unending struggle for resources control and the threat of secession.

The enormity of ethnic groups in Nigeria and rising agitations for separation of major ethnic groups have made discussions on ethnicity topical. Nigeria has seen unprecedented socio-political and economic turmoil, as well as bloodshed, since gaining independence in 1960. This is due in part to Nigerian tribalistic origins and the polity's politics of ethnicity. Fear of dominance, economic and political concerns, social and religious prejudice, and economic exploitation have all undoubtedly occurred as a result of this (Rahim, 2007). Several factors contribute to Nigerian ethnic politics. These underlining factors included domination, favouritism, discrimination, and ethnic marginalization all of which have unwittingly contributed to the Nigerian state's ethno-religious issues. Despite the long-running ethno-religious conflicts, Nigeria is also affected by ethnic politics, ethnic separatist movements, resource control, and state formation are examples of these. There are arguments that the distribution of power across the regions in the country is unfair, which is fundamental to the various clamours for restructuring and/or secession by most quarters (Edino & Paul, 2015).

Among the six geopolitical zones currently in Nigeria, only the South-East has five states, whereas the rest of the zones have six, except the North-West, which has seven. In response to this oddity, the South-East zone has continued to demand an additional state to balance Nigeria's six-state systems, but to no avail. This has fuelled agitation among many separatist groups operating within the zone. However, it has been observed that part of the reasons why tension and agitation are increasing seems to be the number of misconceptions being circulated through unverified news precisely through the internet. It must be stated here that fake news has contributed to several violent clashes between various ethnic groups, especially between Christians and Muslims. Such fake news is usually created to incite ethnic hatred and unrest (Ghosh & Shah, 2019; Pate, 2018; Hankey, Marrison & Naik, 2018; Verjee, Kwaja, & Onubogu, 2018).

The seed of Ethnic agitations is perceived by some scholars to have been presumably sown by the colonial administrators in Nigeria (Dibua, 2005; Lenshie & Johnson, 2012; Paul, Alih & Eri, 2014). Since the formation of federalism in 1954, the issues of restructuring, resources, and power-sharing formula, ethnic sentiments and agitations, economic disparity have continued to generate unhealthy tension in the polity. Some schools of thought have blamed the colonial masters for this situation, which has resulted in a national unity question, (Anugwom 2000; Nnoli 1978; Osimen, Akinyemi, & Adenegan, 2013; Suberu 2001). Looking at the growing agitations and threat of session by some groups, the future of Nigeria hangs on a balance and begs the question; Can Nigeria be completely united in the near future as one impartial nation where everyone is treated with fairness despite your ethnic background?

The history of ethnic domination and biases is not farfetched from the regional segregation brought about by the creation of regions as well as unequal state creation (Suberu, 2001; Ozoigbo, 2008). The state-creation efforts were primarily to mitigate ethnic agitation inside Nigeria's political framework. However, despite these laudable efforts, the country's unity appears unappreciated in some quarters. With the formation of states, the concept of a country of national unity became less important (Attoh & Soyombo, 2011, Eghosa, 2001). Instead of directing efforts towards national unity and

nationhood, ethnic sentiments, nepotism and favouritism have taken the lead. This is undoubtedly the bane of the failure of Nigeria's federalism.

The need to restructure the Nigerian nation stems from ethnic politics, which resulted from the discrimination, marginalization, and favouritism of a few tribes. The implications of this ethnic politics in Nigeria are most visible among Igbo speakers and maybe other small ethnicities such as Tiv, Ibibio, Jekun, Effik, and the Middle Belt. These people give a large portion of the resources used to govern the Nigerian state, even though their districts are the poorest. However, the commencement of the Nigerian-Biafra conflict in 1967, which lasted until 1970, was based on ethnic feelings and politics, primarily for domination, supremacy, and control of all government apparatus (Amiara et al. 2019; Omotola, 2006; Vande, 2012). The military administration, led by General Yakubu Gowon, proclaimed the war's aftermath to be "no victor, no vanquished," meaning that the parties involved would be reunified under a single political entity, Nigeria. Since then, the distribution of authority and the distribution of government resources have essentially remained unchanged and negatively affecting minority ethnic groups.

The split-class theory was used as the theoretical framework of this study, which is a variation of Marx's split-labour theory. The basic assumptions of this theory noted that most societies are divided into two classes, with the lower classes being exploited for economic gain. It further posited that ethnicism is a technique employed by the higher or dominant class against the lower or minority group and strong racial and ethnic consciousness frequently leads to conflicts of interest and crises. Consequently, the adoption of this theory is based on the premise that Nigeria has been split from pre-colonialism, colonialism, and post-independence into majority and minority ethnic groups, rulers and ruled, educated and ignorant, Muslims and Christians, and north and south regions. Nigeria's post-independence ethnic divides were exacerbated as a result of this scenario. Nigeria's identity as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country began to develop in 1914, when the country was united. Ethnicity, according to both academic and popular views of Nigerian politics, is the major animating force in the country's political system (Agbese, 2001:246). It first revealed itself during the struggle for political independence in 1956, when Anthony Enahoro (A Southerner) introduced a motion that was rejected by Ahmadu Bello (A Northerner).

Adding credence to the preceding statement, Ozoigbo (2008) stated that Nigeria has seen cries of marginalisation and dominance from one area of the country to another since the merger of the Southern and Northern provinces. As a result, once Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the struggle for regional and ethnic supremacy shifted to a fight between Muslims and Christians. For example, the northern part of Nigeria is predominantly Muslim and has a majority of Hausa/Fulani ethnic groups excluding those in the middle belt; the western Yorubans are a mix of Christians and Muslims, whereas Igbo people, as well as other southeastern minorities, are Christians (Olasupo & Olaofe, 2017). In Nigeria, the exploitation of ethnic minorities and the lower class by the majority and upper class has been the subject of much discussion (Agbese, 2001; Suberu, 2001). Summarily, taking a cue from the assumptions of the split-class theory, it can be said that the reoccurring crises in Nigeria are closely associated with tribalism and ethnic sentiments.

Policies have been established in Nigeria to ethnic agitations various levels of government. Using re-distributing and redressive policies and formulas, such as the system of quota, the federal character principle, periodic reviews of the structure of the allocations of revenue, establishment of more Member States and local governments, and development commissions such as the Committee for the Production of Oil Minerals (OMPADEC) and the Development of Niger Delta Commission in addition to remedial and catch up development measures for educationally disadvantaged candidate states, such as reducing cut-off rates (Eghosa, 2001). However, these policies have not succeeded in dousing ethnic frictions as agitations and separatist groups continue to emerge owing to unabated injustices and domination by some favoured ethnic groups in Nigeria. Thus, there is a need to engage social workers at the forefront of conflict resolution, protection of human rights, social justice and peace-building processes in Nigeria (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014; Marsh, 2005; Morgaine, 2014; Tyler et al. 2019). Social workers have been instrumental in resolving conflicts in India (Nadkarni & Sinha, 2016) and can proffer workable solutions to the growing agitation for secession in Nigeria if given recognition.

Social workers as professionals committed to the task of advancing the overall wellbeing of humanity are well positioned to intervene in conflict resolution through preserving human rights, promoting social justice, supporting peace-building processes, and engaging warring parties. There is a need for social workers to constantly engage different ethnic groups to harness their conflicting interests in the overall best interest of one indivisible Nigeria. More so, peace-based social work would minimize hatred and violence while promoting institutional growth, communication and reconciliation, all-important for progress and advancement of collective responsibility and respect for diversities (IFSW, 2014). To ensure social inclusion of minority and vulnerable groups, scholars such as Mupedziswa (2006) and Yesufu (2009) urged for the social work profession's participation in peacebuilding if it was to be a relevant and viable profession. As noted by Mullaly (1997) social workers should be more aware of peace concerns and incorporate the peace paradigm into their work. Engaging social workers in community-wide education (Hernandez and Carling, 2012; Okafor, Agwu, Okoye, et al., 2018; Okoye, 2019; Wakefield et al. 2010) on peaceful coexistence and the need to verify the authenticity of news before acting is imperative at this time.

Social workers are committed to the promotion of human dignity and worth which form one of its core mandates. This goes to show that human beings notwithstanding race, ethnic background, sexual orientation, socio-economic position, religious and political groups should be respected and allowed access to all entitlements. It is logical to suppose that in this context, the inclusion of human rights and social justice in social work core values stresses equitable treatment for everyone (Butterfield & Korazim-Korossy, 2013; Lombard, 2015 Okoye, 2019; Onalu, Agwu, Okoye et al., 2020a). Social workers in Nigeria can understudy the root causes of oppression, hatred and injustice and engage relevant stakeholders in proffering solutions to these problems. This can also contribute to the development of fear-free, effective, accountable, and inclusive communities, resulting in genuine long-term growth (Akintayo, 2006; Lombard, 2015). However, despite being a profession that initiates measures that could

engender equitable distribution of resources and tackling of ethnic agitations, social work as a profession in Nigeria is still not professionalised (Ebimngbo et al 2021, Odo et al. 2021; Onalu, Agwu, Okoye, et al., 2020a).

Previous studies have examined ethnic agitations in Nigeria from varied perspectives. For instance, Amira et al. (2019) examined the implication of inherent ethnic politics and clamor for restructuring on the national development. A qualitative study by Ojonemi et al. (2017) investigated the rising ethnic agitations as an offshoot of the irregularities of the general election in 2015. More so, Osaghe (2010) explored the contemporary ethnic politics in Nigeria. However, literature that underscores the crucial and distinctive roles social workers could play in tackling ethnic agitations and the threat of secession in Nigeria are relatively few. Against this backdrop, the current paper contributes to the existing literature in reexamining the growing ethnic agitations in Nigeria and exploring how social workers could be engaged at various levels in resolving these problems. To this end, the following questions will be answered in the study: i. What are the underlying causes and impacts of ethnic agitations in Nigeria? ii. In what ways can oneness and nationhood be promoted in Nigeria? iii. What implications do the findings hold for social work practice in Nigeria?

Materials and Method

Study area

This study was conducted in North in Enugu-North Senatorial District, precisely in Udenu, Igbo-Eze South and Igbo-Eze North Local Government Area, Enugu State Nigeria. The population of Udenu, Igbo-Eze South and Igbo-Eze North was 327, 340 with 276,135 aged 18 years and above (NPC, 2010). The researchers' choice of this study area was informed by the proximity of the LGAs to each other and by implication helped save cost during the data collection. More so, two of the researchers are originally from the study area and thus helped in facilitating communication with the study participants where necessary.

Sampling procedure

Using the stratified random sampling procedure, the researchers selected three Local Government Areas (LGAs) which were Udenu, Igboeze-South and Igboeze-North LGAs. The researchers used simple random sampling by balloting in selecting one community each from the three LGAs namely Ibagwa Ani in Igboeze-South LGA, Imilike in Udenu LGA and Aji in Igboeze North LGA. 12 Participants aged 18-60 years were selected through purposive sampling thus, age, gender, level of education, occupation and marital status were aptly captured in the socio-demographics (see table 1). This was to ensure that the participants were knowledgeable and well informed to discuss the problem under study (Bryman, 2016; Ritchie et al. 2014). The choice of 12 participants was informed by the researchers' desire to manage the data collected bearing in mind the study's time frame (Cresswell and Poth, 2018; Nelson 2017). While trying to get the consent of the study participants, the researchers gave them detailed information about the study and the participants gave their oral consent afterward.

Table 1: Socio-demographics

S/N	Participants	Gender	Age	Level of education	Occupation
1.	William	M	45	Tertiary education	Civil servant
2.	Chika	M	28	Tertiary education	Civil servant
3.	Ndidiamaka	F	32	Secondary education	Artisan
4.	Ngozi	F	39	Tertiary education	Nurse
5.	John	M	50	Secondary education	Trader
6.	Angela	F	40	No formal education	Farmer
7.	Ginika	F	30	Secondary education	Trader
8.	Ada	F	27	Secondary education	Trader
9.	Chidi	M	34	Tertiary education	Civil servant
10.	Chinemerem	F	33	Secondary education	Teacher
11.	Benjamin	M	57	Primary education	Retiree
12.	Eddie	M	37	Secondary education	Farmer

Source: Data collected on rising ethnic agitations and threat of secession in Nigeria, 2021.

Data collection

The in-depth interview was used to collect data for this study as it can deeply probe and extract participants' subjective views and opinions regarding a given phenomenon under study (Bryman, 2016; Denzim & Cicoln, 2011). In collecting data for this study, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants. Participants were issued with an information sheet where the aims of the study as well as their rights and roles were documented and thoroughly read out to them. While one research member moderated the discussions, the other took notes before and after the interviews to complement the recordings. The in-depth interviews took place in the participants' homes and business places depending on preferences and convenience. The researchers conducted the in-depth interviews both in Igbo and English language and lasted between 30 to 40 minutes. More so, the in-depth interviews were recorded with an audiotape having obtained permission to record the conversation. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the anti-infection safety protocols were duly observed to avoid any risk of infection both on the part of the researchers and the study participants throughout the data collection period. 6feet distance was kept between the interviewer/speaker and the study participants and facemasks were worn by all parties.

Data analysis

The data collected were first translated into English and then transcribed at the University of Nigeria, with the help of an expert at the Department of Linguistics. In order to maintain the original meaning of what participants stated, the transcription conversations were checked with the recorded discussions of one researcher who took notes during the interview. This enabled researchers to confirm that during translation,

no information was lost. It helped validate viewpoints and improve the reliability of the data (Kalof et al., 2008). We used NVivo 12 for the analysis of data, after coding quotes into thematic categories. The data analysis was conducted independently of a previously constructed analytical theme in the NVivo12 software using what is called observational triangulation (Padgett, 2008). The study participants had imaginary names (pseudonyms) supplied to guarantee confidentiality and privacy (Bryman, 2016; Willis et al., 2016). For instance, William, M, 45' refers to a 45-year-old male study participant pseudonym William. An inductive approach was adopted during the coding and analysis, having no already existing code outline, and reading through the transcripts until we identified emerging codes and patterns which were then organized in themes (Bryman, 2016). We wrote the findings using selected quotes from the interviews as supporting evidence.

Results

Ethnic agitations and the threat of secession especially among the Southeast region in Nigeria have become an overarching concern to the federal, state and local government. More worrisome is the overwhelming security threat posed by the upsurge of violent separatist groups such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Eastern Security Network (ESN). Three major themes emerged from the study findings: the first theme examined the underlying factors fuelling ethnic agitations; theme two illustrates the effects of ethnic agitations while the third theme shows ways by which oneness and nationhood can be promoted in Nigeria.

Underlying factors fuelling ethnic agitations and separatist groups in Nigeria

Ethnic agitations have continued unabated due to the overwhelming factors fuelling the trend. The Southeast zone in particular; is seriously decrying marginalisation and exclusion from the allocation of federal resources such as employment quota, award of contracts and other prominent political appointments. This has given a morale boost to the activities of the separatist groups in the region such as the IPOB and ESN leading to recurring wanton destruction of lives and property. However, findings show that ethnic agitations and expression of marginalisation cuts across other regions who equally are seeking possible secession from Nigeria. Thus, separatist groups such as Oduduwa group seeking the emergence of the Yoruba have equally emerged.

The imbalance in the allocation of government key political positions and resources has created a sharp divide among the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Findings show that some regions are highly favoured by the number of high-profile positions they occupy and the resources they control. This has created tension and a sense of abandonment among the less represented ethnic groups "Some people take over everything and some of us are suffering...All the executive positions are occupied by the Hausa people, but we claim to be united (William, M, 45). A 28-year-old Chika and 32-year old Ndidiamaka further stated:

The increasing ethnic agitation in Nigeria is caused by the imbalance in the current government appointments... it has led to agitation of many ethnic groups including the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) led by Mazi Nnamdi Kanu and the Oduduwa group led by Sunday Igboho... if you check very well, most people appointed by the president are mainly Hausa/Fulani...other

people are now having of feelings of marginalization, corruption and lack of good governance (Chika, M, 28).

There is unrest in the country because people are somehow marginalized. Some ethnic groups more favoured than others and the result is obvious looking at the way our president appoint his people to key positions and award contract...It is true we the Igbos are not represented but I must say that it is not only us. Some Yoruba and Hausas are oppressed too. Our government is our problem, and the best thing is for everybody to stay on their own... for me, if they are still interested in One Nigeria, these injustices have to stop (Ndidiamaka, F, 32).

Findings also show that ethnic agitations are grossly fuelled by ethnic hatred and nepotism. For a country that claimed to be one and united on all fronts, one would expect that citizens can go to any part of the country and access certain resources such as political appointments and employment opportunities. However, participants noted that the reverse is the case as one could easily lose job opportunities simply because you are not from that region "When I was living in Kaduna, I once lost a big stationary supply contract just because they found I was an Igbo man...It was a painful experience I will never forget in my life" (Ngozi, F, 39). It is quite disheartening to note that the culture of ethnic hatred is fast becoming endemic as the older generation are passing the trend to the younger generation thereby fuelling more ethnic tension and secession threats. Youths are not left out of the problem as majority of the NYSC members who serve in the North, West or in the East are denied employment where they served based on their ethnic background. A 35-year-old John and 40-year old Angela recounted:

It is only when you go to the other region that you will realize that you do not have a say. What then is the essence of claiming to live together when we know we are not united... for me, I feel that we are just hoping for what we will never get as long as Nigeria is concerned. For instance, bearing an Igbo name alone is enough to deny you good job opportunity. It happened to me where I served during my NYSC in the North. I was better than most of my colleagues whom I served with... most of them were retained after service because they were from the North and I was thrown out. Till today, I am yet to get a good job after two years of service. It is just too painful you know (John, M, 35).

Well for me, I think the problem is ethnic hatred and lack of nation-building spirit. I am hurt because of what is happening right now. If you go to the north, you will see the number of Igbos that are being killed every day. If you come to the Igbo side, the Fulani people are hated. There is no sense of brotherhood in this country, and we are strangers. That is why everybody wants to pull away (Angela, F, 40).

Findings show that the current ethnic agitations particularly among the Southeast region are an offshoot of the Nigerian civil war as government machinery is used against the region that attempted to secede. Participants expressed concerns over the militarization of the region and over the deployment of security forces to suppress any form of uprising. However, evidence abound to show that other regions which incidentally happened to have more ungoverned spaces are left at the mercy of bandits

and killer herdsmen “my brother...here in Southeast, you see police pole to pole on the road and the soldiers are everywhere harassing innocent youth... in the north, bandits walk freely on the street collecting ransom from their victims” (Chika, M, 28). Another participant added:

Well even after saying no victor no vanquish when the civil war ended by the then military head of state, the Igbos are still not integrated into the mainstream of the country. Government rather cares more pampering bandits and agitating for ranches for the Fulani headers. If you go to Owerri and raise your hand up as an IPOB member, my brother, the military will use you to play ball (Ginika, F, 30).

Findings show that fake news and misinformation remain an outstanding factor fuelling ethnic agitations and regional tensions in Nigeria. Participants noted that a series of fake and adulterated information is flying in the air breeding confusion and inciting violence and restiveness especially among the youth “My brother, we don’t know which one to believe again... anytime you online, you will see all kinds of fake news just to create hatred between the north and the south” (Chika, M, 28). This goes to show that some violent clashes often witnessed between the Igbos and Hausa were caused by fake news and misinformation. A 45-year-old William and 32-year old Ndidiama narrated:

I remember the day news broke out that an Hausa man who was a butcher killed a tri-cycle (Keke) rider here in Nsukka... before you knew what was happening, the keke riders organised themselves and went rampaging...destroying all the properties belonging to Hausa people...that day, they pulled down almost all the mosque in Nsukka. It was later discovered that the keke rider did not die and he only fought with the Hausa man. It is only God that will save us (Eddie, M, 34).

I am very afraid these days because people spread fake news anyhow and that is why we are fighting ourselves. Some people make and post videos or comments which will make us believe that Hausa or Yoruba people hate Igbos. If you are not wise you will believe them... I pity all these boys dying every day in the name of being IPOB members (Ndidiama, F, 32).

Effects of ethnic agitations in Nigeria

Findings show the overwhelming effects of growing ethnic agitations and the threat of secession by different ethnic groups in Nigeria. The rising cases of insecurity in Nigeria are not farfetched from the tensions occasioned by marginalization and exploitation of some regions. People are being kidnapped in hundreds and millions demanded as ransom. Some unfortunate victims are eventually killed by their abductors either for delayed payment of ransom or an attempt to involve security personnel in the rescue operations “well for me, there is no point denying the fact that most of these kidnapping cases and destruction of property in some states in the east were carried out by angry and violent separatist groups” (Ngozi, F, 39). Other participants corroborated the above claim and quotes from two of them are presented below:

For me, I think the greatest and the worst effect of these agitations is the security threat. You will agree with me that nowhere is safe in Nigeria. If you are not careful, you may be kidnapped by the Fulani Herders, IPOB, Bandits

and the rest...The agitations have led many people to their graves. Many people have died, and more are dying. Just imagine many people that died during the operation Python dance and the rest. Even now, Imo State is a no-go-area. Before you know, you will hear that unknown gun men have killed so and so people. All these are because of agitations (William, M, 45).

The effect of this thing is that we can no longer travel in peace. Even me, I don't go anywhere anyhow. The way people get missing these days is scary. The country is not secure anymore and that is why I am praying for Biafra so we can rest...Most federal roads are death traps where bandits lay ambush to kidnap and kill innocent people...the worst is that the kidnappers and bandits now demand millions as ransom. Who have that kind of money to dash criminals...? I rather stay in my house for now (Ada, F, 27).

Findings show that favouritism and nepotism which are notable push factors of ethnic agitations have succeeded in planting less qualified individuals in key and sensitive positions resulting in further crumbling and stagnation of Nigeria's economy. On the flip side, the highly qualified individuals who have all the expertise needed to propel the economy are left out because such individuals lacked connections and godfathers "with all your qualifications and degrees, you will still be thrown out because you have no one in the high places...funny enough, the job would be given to someone who does not know left from the right" (Ginika, F, 30). Two other participants noted also:

For me, the ethnic agitations and favouritism has only succeeded in bringing people who are clueless into position of power...some people are who less qualified are given the opportunity to occupy certain sensitive post just because they have all the connections. Now, our economy is seriously suffering with Billions of dollars borrowed already. People are qualified are the ones roaming the streets due to unemployment...Therefore the Igbos in particular wants to stay and develop their region (Chidi, M, 34).

All these favouritism in this country is because of the struggle to be independent by some ethnic groups. This thing has brought about selfish interest instead of coming together to build our economy. We the Igbos for example want Biafra and I hope it will happen. Tell me why I won't favour my fellow Igbo person who is suffering with me before any other person (Chinemerem, F, 33).

Ways of promoting oneness and nation-building

Ethnic agitations in Nigeria are an issue in need of a prompt and more engaging solution. Findings show that despite the deteriorating ethnic tolerance, peaceful coexistence and hatred, dialogue is still feasible in resolving the conflict and attaining compromise capable of dousing the tension. Participants stressed the need for the government especially at the federal level to listen to the yearnings of these agitating regions and proffer long-lasting solutions to the conflicting issues. One overarching issue to be addressed is the need to uphold the federal character principles which were originally carved out to address equal representation of all regions in accessing government resources "let the government be employing everybody, not Hausa people alone. They should know how to stop these Fulani herders from destroying crops

without being questioned...all these things provoke violence and ethnic hatred” (Benjamin, M, 57). A 34 and another 35-year-old participant added:

What I think should be done regarding maybe to solve this problem is to dialogue. The government should listen to the agitating ethnic groups and dialogue with them. Government should know that they cannot solve this problem with force as the people demands for change and because of that they shouldn't be treated like terrorist or criminals because they are demanding for good governance (Eddie, M, 34).

For me, we should try to develop love for one another. Even though we think we are treated badly, we should understand that killing one another will not solve the problem. Instead, we should see ourselves as brothers and sisters. Even if we cannot live together in peace, let us not kill anybody (John, M, 35).

The need to restructure Nigeria through the processes of drafting a new constitution was proposed by some participants as the way forward in resolving most of the issues attempting to tear Nigeria apart. Such gestures will nip in the bud issues arising from such things as inequality in state creation at each region, state autonomy to manage its affairs, equal opportunities for each citizen as well as the eradication of all forms of militarization of certain regions and the use of other state mechanisms to entrench violence and oppression on the innocent citizens. “For me what I think should be done is that the government should stop their act of terrorizing their citizen with force rather they should listen and engage these agitating groups in dialogue” (Ada, F, 27). A 30-year-old Ginika stated:

For Nigeria to be one again and live in unity, I think there should be power restructuring and let there be total restructuring of the political system of Nigeria so that the centre will have little control over the resources. It will no longer be a situation where elected leaders only go to Abuja to make money. The state should have the capacity to employ, create jobs and have the capacity to utilize their resources...Let the state decide on what to do with their resources and pay tax to the central or the federal unit or the federating unit so that that different regions will not kill each other in order to get to the position of President (Ginika, F, 30).

Discussion

This study explored the opinions of 12 participants on the underlying causes and effects of rising ethnic agitations and separatist movements in Nigeria as well as ways of promoting oneness and nation-building. The study makes an invaluable addition to the existing handful of literature on ethnic agitations in Nigeria. Findings from the in-depth interview conducted show that ethnic agitations are on the rise owing to several underlying factors (Anugwom, 2000; Nnoli 1978; Paul, Alih & Eri, 2014; Suberu, 2001).

Marginalisation and exclusion of minority ethnic groups from the national resources were identified as notable factors fuelling ethnic agitations especially among the Southeast, Northcentral and Southsouth regions that are often ill-represented at the federal level. This reinforces the theoretical stance of this study which believes that the concept of ethnicism is an exploitative tool and technique employed by the higher or

dominant ethnic group or class against the lower or minority group and that strong racial, as well as ethnic consciousness, frequently leads to conflicts of interest and ethnic crises (Agbese, 2001; Suberu, 2001). In other words, ethnicity is socially constructed and influenced by dominant ethnic groups and imposed on minority groups. Participants decried endemic marginalisation and exclusion from the allocation of federal resources such as employment quota, award of contract and other prominent political appointments. This has given a morale boost to the activities of the separatist groups in the region such as the IPOB and ESN leading to recurring wanton destruction of lives and property. However, other regions were equally identified as laying claim to and are pushing for secession as could be seen in the activities of the Oduduwa group seeking for the declaration of Yoruba nation. Studies bothering on causes of ethnic tensions and agitation have been documented (Eghosa, 2002; Otite, 1975; Otite, 1999; Rahim, 2007; Edino and Paul, 2015). Fake news and misinformation were identified as a propelling factor fuelling ethnic tension in Nigeria. Previous studies documented similar findings (Ghosh & Shah, 2019; Pate, 2018; Hankey, Marrison & Naik, 2018; Verjee, Kwaja & Onubogu, 2018).

The ethnic agitation and threat of secession in Nigeria were found to be responsible for the growing insecurity currently in most regions in Nigeria. The study found that rising cases of insecurity in Nigeria are not farfetched from the tensions occasioned by marginalization and exploitation of some regions. People are being kidnapped in hundreds and millions demanded as ransom. In some cases, some unfortunate victims have lost their lives at the hand of bandits and kidnappers. However, many respondents were of the view that while IPOB and Oduduwa members, as well as youths, are heavily repressed in the Southeast, Southsouth and Southwest, the bandits and criminal herdsmen in Northeast and Northwest walk freely in the streets and even approach victims in person to collect their ransom. Although this may not be very correct but their views align with the studies of Amiara et al. (2019), Attoh and Soyombo (2011), Eghosa (2001) and Vande (2012) who noted that ethnic politics have resulted in marginalisation and discrimination against minority ethnic groups in Nigeria. Though how this leads to the so-called protection of criminal elements is not really clear. More so, the belief in the application of favouritism and nepotism were noted by participants to be responsible for the emergence of less qualified individuals in key sensitive positions because they have connections and godfathers. This has unequivocally set the economy aback (Eghosa, 2002; Otite, 1975).

Finally, findings show ways through which different ethnic groups can unite and develop a passion for nation-building. Most participants highlighted the need for the government especially at the federal level to listen to the yearnings of these agitating regions and proffer long-lasting solutions to the conflicting issues. Dialogue with the agitating ethnic groups is imperative as insecurity is deteriorating on daily basis. There is a need to treat everyone equally notwithstanding their ethnic background. Participants identified restructuring through the drafting of a new constitution as the way forward. It is believed that the most outstanding issues fuelling ethnic agitations and the threat of secession will be exhaustively addressed and ironed out in the course of restructuring the country. A similar proposal has been put forward by (Eghosa, 2001).

Implications for social work practice in Nigeria

A closer examination of the notable underlying causes of ethnic agitations in Nigeria will reveal an obvious case of social injustice, violation of human rights, disrespect for diversities and neglect of collective responsibility. This underscores the relevance of social workers in conflict resolution particularly where injustice and discrimination are meted out on people based on race and ethnic background (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014; Marsh, 2005; Tyler et al. 2019). The rising ethnic tension in Nigeria should be a clarion call to social workers as a profession that prides itself as the last hope for saving humanity. As noted by O'Brien (2010), social workers are primarily interested in challenging social conditions and all aspects of injustices that distorts wellbeing as well the fulfillment of aspirations of humans. Against this backdrop, social workers are expected to engage relevant authorities in Nigeria who are key government stakeholders in ensuring that the overarching cases of social exclusions and marginalization fuelling ethnic agitations are tackled and resolved. Ensuring a just, equitable and egalitarian society is undoubtedly the fundamental purpose and mission of social work (Morgaine, 2014; Nictora, 2019; Thompson, 2016).

Social workers stand to challenge and advocate for fairness in the face of partiality undue favouritism of certain populations at the detriment of other populations (Anderson, 2010; Burke & Harrison, 2002; Dominelli, 2002; Thompson, 2016). This is exactly what is obtainable in Nigeria where few selected ethnic groups are favoured. Social workers must as a matter of urgency rise to the challenge of speaking up against such injustice by ensuring that resources are always shared equitably. Unfortunately, social work is yet to be professionalised thereby limiting the powers of social workers as agents of social change and social action (Okoye, 2019; Onalu, Agwu, Okoye et al., 2020a). Social workers should be engaged to be at the forefront of championing the development and implementation of relevant policies that will engender equality, fairness, and social justice (Butterfield & Korazim-Korossy, 2013; Lombard, 2015; Morgaine, 2014).

There is no gainsaying that fake news and uncensored information have continued to breed ethnic hatred and tensions in virtually every region in Nigeria. People are grossly misinformed and made to believe that other ethnic groups hate them. Thus, there is a need for robust community education and sensitisation on the existence of fake news circulating in the social media space and the need to seek clarification before acting. This underscores the need to engage social workers in community education and enlightenment (Hernandez and Carling, 2012; Odo et al. 2021; Okafor, Agwu, Okoye et al., 2018; Okoye, 2019; Wakefield et al. 2010). Social workers will organise routine community-wide enlightenment programmes using such medium to educate community members on ethnic tolerance and peaceful coexistence as well as probing the authenticity of any news in circulation before taking any action.

One of the notable limitations of this study is the inability to recruit participants from other ethnic groups in Nigeria. This was partly due to short time allocated to this study. This issue to a large extent projected the researchers and the study as being biased and

taking sides with one ethnic group. More so, the restrictions occasioned by Covid-19 pandemic accounted for the limited sample size for the study (n=12) thus, the findings may not be ideal for generalisation of the population.

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