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THE GENDERED IMPACT OF FARMER-HERDER CONFLICTS ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN BENUE STATE, NIGERIA (2015–2026)

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Abstract

Despite growing scholarship on farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria, there remains limited gender-disaggregated research that specifically examines the disproportionate and long-term impacts on women and children in Benue State, particularly within a longitudinal timeframe. Existing studies are largely descriptive, with insufficient attention to the interconnected effects of livelihood loss, sexual violence, educational disruption, and intergenerational trauma in Nigeria's food basket region. This study investigated the lived experiences of women and children affected by farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State between 2015 and 2026. Anchored on Human Needs Theory, Feminist Conflict Theory, and Structural-Functionalism, the research adopted a primarily qualitative case study design with limited mixed-methods elements. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis involving 45 purposively selected participants from Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, affected communities, NGOs, and government agencies in high-conflict Local Government Areas (LGAs). Findings revealed severe livelihood losses, widespread sexual and gender-based violence, and overwhelming caregiving burdens on women, while children experienced profound educational disruptions, psychological trauma, and malnutrition. The conflicts have created intergenerational consequences that threaten human capital development and national food security. The study concludes that gender-neutral interventions have proven inadequate and recommends urgent, inclusive, and gender-sensitive policies focused on protection, livelihood restoration, psychosocial support, and sustainable peacebuilding. These measures are critical to mitigating vulnerabilities and fostering resilience among women and children in conflict-affected agrarian communities.

Keywords: Farmer-Herder Conflicts, Benue State, Women and Children, Displacement, Food Insecurity

Introduction

Farmer-herder conflicts embody a multifaceted interplay of environmental scarcity, economic livelihoods, socio-cultural identities, ethnic tensions, and governance failures. These variables converge through competition over arable land and water resources between sedentary farmers and nomadic pastoralists, often intensified by climate variability, population pressures, and policy shortcomings. In Benue State, Nigeria's "food basket of the nation," these dynamics are particularly pronounced as Tiv crop farmers clash with Fulani herders over fertile farmlands vital for yam, rice, and cassava production. Ethnic identities, traditional grazing routes, and livelihood incompatibilities interrelate to fuel recurrent violence, resulting in fatalities, destruction of crops and livestock, and widespread displacement. This nexus not only undermines agricultural productivity and national food security but disproportionately devastates women and children through loss of breadwinners, increased household burdens, sexual and gender-based violence (GBV), psychological trauma, and disrupted access to education and healthcare (Ali, 2025; Yusufu et al., 2021). Understanding these interconnected variables is essential for addressing the root causes and gendered impacts of the conflicts.

From a global perspective, farmer-herder or analogous resource-based conflicts highlight patterns of environmental degradation and competition for diminishing natural resources across continents. Climate change, desertification, and population growth drive similar clashes in regions of Latin America, the Middle East, Asia, and parts of Africa, where pastoralists and farmers vie for land and water. International bodies such as the United Nations and World Bank emphasise how these conflicts exacerbate food insecurity, humanitarian crises, and barriers to sustainable development goals. Women and children consistently emerge as the most vulnerable, facing heightened risks of GBV, malnutrition, orphanhood, widowhood, and loss of social protections amid instability and displacement. Global studies underscore the need for integrated approaches that combine resource management, climate adaptation, and gender-sensitive interventions to mitigate such violence and its cascading socioeconomic effects (Efobi, 2025; Krätli & Toulmin, 2020).

In the African regional context, farmer-herder conflicts have become a defining security challenge, particularly across the Sahel, Horn of Africa, East Africa, and West Africa. Countries including Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Kenya, and Sudan witness recurrent violence fueled by desertification, shifting transhumance routes, cattle rustling, and ethnic militancy. Regional organisations like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) have identified these conflicts as threats to stability, integration, and development, often noting how expanding farmlands obstruct traditional pastoral mobility. The gendered dimension is stark: women and children suffer amplified vulnerabilities through displacement into IDP camps, exposure to sexual exploitation, economic marginalisation, and intergenerational trauma. Regional responses stress dialogue, transhumance protocols, and sustainable resource governance, yet implementation gaps persist, allowing conflicts to spill across borders and undermine peacebuilding efforts (Ohiri & Kazeem, 2024; UNOWAS reports).

In Nigeria, farmer-herder conflicts have escalated significantly in the Middle Belt, with Benue State as a primary epicentre due to its critical role in national food production. Recurrent attacks on farming communities, frequently linked to Fulani herders, have caused thousands of deaths, massive internal displacement, and severe disruption of agricultural activities since the mid-2010s. Benue's strategic contribution of staple crops makes the violence a direct threat to Nigeria's food sovereignty and economic stability. Empirical evidence reveals disproportionate impacts on women and children, including high rates of GBV and sexual exploitation in IDP camps, loss of livelihoods, psychological trauma, school disruptions for children, and increased burdens on female-headed households (Ali, 2025; Yusufu et al., 2021). Despite legislative efforts like Benue's Open Grazing Prohibition Law, violence continues, highlighting governance and enforcement challenges.

This study problematizes the disproportionate and often overlooked impact of farmer-herder conflicts on women and children in Benue State, despite the state's pivotal agricultural status. Existing interventions frequently adopt gender-neutral approaches that fail to address unique vulnerabilities such as sexual violence, economic disempowerment, and long-term psychosocial effects. The research is necessitated by gaps in gender-sensitive scholarship, the urgent need for empirical insights into lived experiences, and the demand for context-specific policy recommendations on resilience, protection, and sustainable peacebuilding. By pursuing targeted objectives and guiding questions, the study aims to inform humanitarian responses, bolster Nigeria's food security framework, and enrich academic discourse on conflict-induced vulnerabilities in agrarian societies, ultimately contributing to more equitable and effective conflict resolution strategies.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theories. The primary anchor is Human Needs Theory as proposed by John Burton (1990). The theory posits that conflicts arise primarily from the frustration of fundamental human needs such as security, identity, recognition, autonomy, and access to livelihood resources. In the context of farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State, the theory explains how competition over scarce land and water resources frustrates the basic needs of both Tiv farmers and Fulani herders. When these needs remain unmet due to environmental pressures, population growth, and weak institutional mechanisms, violence becomes a means of asserting identity and securing survival. The protracted nature of the conflicts in Nigeria's food basket reflects deep-seated grievances related to livelihood insecurity and ethnic identity. Human Needs Theory is particularly relevant because it shifts focus from power politics to the satisfaction of non-negotiable human needs, offering pathways for conflict resolution through need-fulfilment strategies rather than mere suppression of violence (Burton, 1990; Azar, 1990; Nwankwo, 2025).

Complementing this is Feminist Conflict Theory, which highlights the gendered dimensions of violence and how conflicts disproportionately affect women and children. This theoretical lens interrogates how patriarchal structures and conflict dynamics amplify women's vulnerabilities, including exposure to sexual and gender-based violence, economic disempowerment, widowhood, and increased caregiving burdens in displacement settings. In Benue State, feminist perspectives reveal that women, who form the majority of smallholder farmers and caregivers, bear unique burdens when agricultural livelihoods collapse and social protection systems fail. The theory challenges mainstream conflict analyses that ignore gender power relations and advocates for the recognition of women's agency in peacebuilding. It provides a critical framework for understanding why interventions must address gendered impacts to achieve sustainable peace (Cockburn, 2010; Enloe, 2014; Ali, 2025).

Together, these two theories provide a robust, multi-dimensional framework for the study. Human Needs Theory explains the underlying drivers of the farmer-herder conflicts, while Feminist Conflict Theory illuminates the gendered vulnerabilities and disproportionate impacts on women and children. This dual theoretical approach enables a comprehensive analysis of both the root causes of violence and its differential effects in Benue State, offering valuable insights for more effective and inclusive peacebuilding interventions.

Methodology

This study adopted a primarily qualitative case study research design with limited mixed-methods elements to explore the disproportionate impact of farmer-herder conflicts on women and children in Benue State. The case study approach enabled an in-depth examination of the phenomenon within its real-life context, focusing on Benue State as Nigeria's food basket. The target population

included women and children in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps and affected communities in high-conflict Local Government Areas such as Guma, Agatu, Logo, and Ukum, as well as key informants from NGOs, government agencies, and community leaders. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to select 45 participants, ensuring adequate representation across gender, age groups, and stakeholder categories until data saturation was achieved.

Data were collected through multiple methods. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with women, older children aged 12–17 years (with both guardian consent and child assent), aid workers, and government officials to capture personal narratives and expert insights. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with homogeneous groups of women and mixed community members to explore shared experiences and coping mechanisms. In addition, extensive document analysis was carried out on government reports, NGO publications, policy documents, and media articles. Limited quantitative elements involved basic frequency counts of recurring themes from document analysis and simple demographic tabulations from interview responses. All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with permission and supported with detailed field notes.

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework to identify recurring patterns and themes, while descriptive statistics were applied to summarise the limited quantitative elements, such as frequency of reported incidents. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Informed consent (verbal and written) was obtained from all adult participants, while for children aged 12–17, both parental/guardian consent and individual child assent were secured. Additional safeguards for child participants included trauma-informed interviewing techniques by trained researchers, use of child-friendly language, private and safe interview settings, and the option to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained for all participants, and institutional ethical approval was secured before the commencement of fieldwork.

Historical Overview of Farmer-Herder Conflicts in Nigeria

Farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria have deep historical roots tracing back to pre-colonial and colonial eras, when symbiotic relationships existed between sedentary agricultural communities and nomadic pastoralists, particularly Fulani herders. Traditional mechanisms such as seasonal transhumance routes allowed for relatively peaceful coexistence, with herders providing manure for farms and farmers offering crop residues for livestock. However, colonial policies disrupted these arrangements by altering land tenure systems, introducing cash crops, and neglecting traditional grazing reserves. British colonial administration favoured sedentary agriculture and imposed boundaries that restricted pastoral mobility, laying the foundation for future tensions. Post-independence, rapid population growth, agricultural expansion southward, and environmental pressures began straining these relationships, leading to sporadic disputes over land and water resources. In the Middle Belt region, including areas around the Benue Valley, these tensions gradually intensified as farmlands encroached on historical cattle routes, transforming occasional resource competition into recurring friction (Blench, 2010; Krätli & Toulmin, 2020; Akosu & Edward, 2025). The interplay of these factors created a fragile coexistence that would later unravel into widespread violence.

The escalation of violence in farmer-herder conflicts became more pronounced from the 1980s onward, driven by desertification and climate change in northern Nigeria, which pushed herders southward into fertile regions like Benue State. The neglect of national grazing reserves and stock routes significantly exacerbated competition for scarce resources. By the 2000s, conflicts turned increasingly lethal due to the proliferation of small arms, involvement of criminal elements such as cattle rustlers, and politicisation along ethnic and religious lines. What were once manageable

resource disputes evolved into identity-based confrontations, with Fulani herders often framed against predominantly Christian farming communities in the Middle Belt. Weak governance, failure to modernise colonial-era transhumance protocols, and demographic pressures further fueled the cycle of retaliation and revenge attacks. Scholars note that environmental degradation, combined with socio-political factors, created a volatile environment where economic survival directly translated into violent competition (Nwankwo, 2025; Tseer, 2026; Ioryue, 2024). This period marked a critical shift from sporadic clashes to more organised and deadly confrontations.

In Benue State, historically known as the food basket of the nation, farmer-herder clashes gained national attention in the mid-2010s with high-profile attacks on communities in Local Government Areas such as Agatu, Guma, and Logo. These incidents resulted in significant loss of lives, destruction of properties, and displacement of thousands. The enactment of the Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law in 2017 represented a significant policy response aimed at curbing open grazing and promoting sedentary livestock management. However, the law also triggered further tensions, as herders perceived it as discriminatory and an existential threat to their traditional livelihood. Historical analyses reveal that while early conflicts were primarily economic in nature, contemporary ones incorporate layers of political manipulation, where elites exploit ethnic divisions for electoral gains and control of resources. The law, though well-intentioned, led to backlash and escalated violence in several communities (Vanger & Nwosu, 2020; Akosu & Edward, 2025; Agwadu, 2024).

Scholarly works document a clear shift from localised skirmishes to widespread violence, with thousands killed and displaced since 2015. Factors such as climate change, weak governance institutions, failure to update colonial-era transhumance protocols, and the proliferation of sophisticated weaponry have sustained the cycle of violence. Studies emphasise that the conflict is not inevitable but results from institutional failures in land management, conflict resolution mechanisms, and equitable resource allocation. In Benue State, the combination of rich agricultural potential and strategic location has made it a flashpoint, where disputes over farmland and grazing routes frequently escalate into full-scale attacks. Researchers argue for comprehensive approaches that address both immediate security concerns and underlying structural drivers to break the persistent cycle (Nassef et al., 2023; Babatunde, 2024; Nwankwo, 2024).

Overall, the historical trajectory of farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria shows a transformation from symbiotic interdependence to existential competition characterised by violence and mutual suspicion. Understanding this evolution is critical for contextualising current crises in Benue State and designing interventions that address both historical grievances and emerging drivers like armed banditry, identity politics, and climate-induced migration. The overview reveals persistent patterns rooted in colonial legacies, environmental changes, and governance deficits that demand nuanced, historically informed, and inclusive policy approaches. Without deliberate efforts to revive traditional conflict resolution mechanisms while adapting to modern realities, these conflicts risk further undermining national food security and social cohesion (Ofuoku, 2009; Lamidi, 2021; Blench, 2010). Effective resolution requires multi-stakeholder engagement that balances the needs of both farming and herding communities.

Gendered Impacts of Conflict in African Contexts

Gendered impacts of farmer-herder conflicts in Africa reveal that women and children disproportionately suffer due to their central roles in agriculture, caregiving, household food production, and community stability. In contexts like the Sahel and East Africa, outbreaks of violence frequently result in widowhood, heightened economic burdens on female-headed households, and increased exposure to sexual and gender-based violence (GBV) in displacement settings. Women often lose access to farmlands, markets, and productive assets, which exacerbates

food insecurity, poverty, and nutritional deficits. Children, particularly girls, face disrupted education, early marriage risks, and long-term developmental setbacks. These conflicts intensify pre-existing gender inequalities rooted in patriarchal norms, limiting women's mobility and access to justice while amplifying their vulnerabilities during periods of instability and resource scarcity (SPARC, 2025; Ali, 2025; WANEP, 2021). The cumulative effect undermines not only individual livelihoods but also broader community resilience and sustainable development across affected regions.

Across African cases in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Sudan, women play dual roles as victims and active agents in the midst of farmer-herder conflicts. While confronting trauma, isolation, caregiving responsibilities, and loss of male breadwinners, many women contribute to peacebuilding initiatives, economic coping strategies, and informal conflict mediation within their communities. However, deeply entrenched cultural norms continue to limit their mobility, decision-making power, and access to resources, thereby amplifying vulnerabilities during violent episodes. Reports highlight how conflicts disrupt traditional social support systems, forcing women to manage households single-handedly amid heightened insecurity and economic hardship. Despite these challenges, emerging scholarship recognises women's resilience and agency, advocating for their inclusion in formal peace processes rather than viewing them solely through a victimhood lens (Krätli & Toulmin, 2020; Bloem, 2025; SPARC, 2025). This duality underscores the need for nuanced interventions that harness women's potential while addressing structural barriers.

In Nigeria and neighbouring West African states, the gendered dimensions of farmer-herder conflicts manifest through sexual exploitation in IDP camps, disrupted education for girls, and widespread psychological trauma. Women farmers frequently report direct losses of crops, livestock, and farmlands, while herder women encounter stigmatisation and restricted access to grazing resources and markets. In Benue State and other Middle Belt areas, displacement exposes women and girls to alarming rates of GBV, including rape, survival sex, and intimate partner violence, often within overcrowded and poorly protected camps. These experiences compound economic marginalisation and mental health challenges such as post-traumatic stress disorder. Studies increasingly call for gender-sensitive interventions that recognise women's agency in both conflict dynamics and recovery processes, moving away from portrayals of women as passive victims (CDD West Africa, 2021; Mubi, 2018; Ali, 2025; Tseer, 2026).

Regional analyses underscore that farmer-herder conflicts intensify existing gender inequalities deeply rooted in patriarchal structures across Africa. Women bear the brunt of nutritional deficits and health challenges when agricultural production collapses due to violence and displacement. Children, especially girls, experience long-term setbacks in schooling, face elevated risks of early marriage, child labour, or recruitment into informal networks, and suffer intergenerational trauma. The loss of livelihoods forces many women into precarious survival strategies that further expose them to exploitation. Effective responses demand the integration of women's voices into dialogue, mediation, and policy formulation processes at local, national, and regional levels. Without deliberate gender mainstreaming, peacebuilding efforts risk perpetuating cycles of vulnerability and exclusion (WANEP, 2021; Nnam, 2025; SPARC, 2025).

Scholarship on gendered impacts advocates moving beyond simplistic victimhood narratives to explore women's multifaceted contributions to conflict de-escalation, resilience-building, and community recovery in African farmer-herder contexts. Inclusive policies that address GBV prevention, livelihood restoration, economic empowerment, and meaningful participation in peace processes can significantly mitigate disproportionate effects and foster sustainable peace. In regions like the Sahel, Horn of Africa, and Nigeria's Middle Belt, recognising women as active agents rather than mere victims enhances the effectiveness of interventions. This body of literature highlights

critical gaps in mainstream conflict studies, which often overlook these gendered dynamics, calling for more ethnographic, participatory, and longitudinal research to inform context-specific solutions (SPARC, 2025; Tseer, 2026; Krätli & Toulmin, 2020). Such approaches are essential for achieving equitable and lasting conflict resolution.

Studies on Displacement, Education, and Food Insecurity in Benue

Studies on displacement in Benue State document massive internal migration resulting from recurrent farmer-herder attacks, with thousands of people fleeing their ancestral homes to internally displaced persons (IDP) camps across the state and neighbouring areas. This forced displacement disrupts traditional livelihoods, destroys homes and community infrastructure, and creates severe humanitarian challenges, including inadequate shelter, poor sanitation, limited healthcare access, and insufficient food supplies. Women and children constitute the majority of those displaced, facing heightened risks of gender-based violence, disease outbreaks, and psychosocial trauma in overcrowded camps. Research links these patterns to broader forced migration trends in Nigeria's Middle Belt, where repeated attacks in Local Government Areas such as Guma, Agatu, Logo, and Ukum have led to prolonged humanitarian crises. Scholars emphasise that displacement not only erodes social cohesion but also undermines the state's agricultural capacity as farmlands remain abandoned due to insecurity (Akosu & Edward, 2025; Dooshima, 2023; Nwankwo, 2025).

Education in Benue suffers severely as farmer-herder conflicts destroy school buildings, displace teachers and students, and generate widespread fear that prevents regular school attendance. In affected communities, many schools have been converted into IDP camps or completely abandoned, leading to sharp declines in enrollment and learning outcomes. Girls are particularly affected, experiencing increased dropout rates due to safety concerns, household burdens, and early marriage pressures arising from economic hardship. Long-term studies indicate significant intergenerational impacts on human capital development in conflict-affected LGAs, with children losing critical years of schooling and facing diminished future opportunities. The destruction of educational infrastructure compounds existing challenges of teacher shortages and inadequate facilities, threatening the state's progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education (Iornumbe, 2025; Adejoh, 2022; Ali, 2025).

Food insecurity emerges as a direct and devastating consequence of disrupted farming cycles, widespread crop destruction, and the abandonment of farmlands due to persistent violence in Benue State. As Nigeria's acclaimed "food basket," the state's instability poses serious threats to national supplies of staple crops such as yams, rice, cassava, and maize. Empirical studies quantify substantial yield losses, rising household hunger indices, and increased dependence on food aid among displaced populations. Farmers, especially women who form the backbone of smallholder agriculture, are unable to access their fields, resulting in massive post-harvest losses and inflated food prices across the country. The linkage between conflict and food insecurity has transformed a once-thriving agricultural economy into a zone of vulnerability and humanitarian need (Obi, 2025; Atobauka et al., 2024; Nwankwo, 2025).

Integrated research shows strong interconnections among displacement, education, and food insecurity in Benue State. Displacement directly reduces agricultural labour availability, worsening food production and forcing greater reliance on external aid. Education disruptions further compound these problems by limiting the development of skills needed for future resilience and agricultural innovation. When children miss school, especially girls, it affects long-term community capacity to recover and adapt. Scholars therefore recommend holistic interventions that simultaneously address security concerns, equitable land use policies, and integrated social services encompassing education, nutrition, and livelihood support. Such multi-sectoral approaches are

considered essential for breaking the vicious cycle of conflict-induced vulnerabilities in the region (Nwankwo, 2025; George & Adelaja, 2022; Dimelu et al., 2016).

Existing studies in Benue highlight the urgent need for more longitudinal data on recovery trajectories and post-conflict rehabilitation. While the immediate impacts of displacement, education disruption, and food insecurity are relatively well-documented, fewer works evaluate the effectiveness of long-term rehabilitation programs or community-led resilience models. There is limited analysis of sustainable return processes, livelihood restoration outcomes, and the specific needs of women and children in recovery phases. This gap underscores the necessity for research that can better inform policy on durable solutions, including safe return, reconstruction of infrastructure, and inclusive development strategies. Future scholarship must bridge these gaps to support evidence-based interventions that promote lasting peace and food security in Benue State (Dimelu et al., 2016; Nwaoburu, 2025; Akosu & Edward, 2025).

Identified Gaps in Existing Scholarship

While historical overviews have adequately traced the evolution of farmer-herder conflicts in Nigeria, there remains limited longitudinal analysis that integrates climate change data with ethnic politics and resource governance in specific Benue State hotspots. Most existing studies adopt descriptive approaches, documenting past events without developing predictive models that forecast future escalation under varying policy scenarios, such as the full implementation of ranching laws or climate adaptation strategies. This gap hinders proactive policymaking, as scholars have paid insufficient attention to the dynamic interactions between environmental degradation, demographic pressures, and identity-based mobilisation in the food basket region. Consequently, there is a weak evidence base for anticipating conflict triggers and designing preventive mechanisms tailored to Benue's unique agro-ecological and socio-cultural context.

Gendered impact literature in African contexts is growing rapidly but often suffers from over-generalisation, lacking sufficient Benue-specific ethnographic data on women's agency, intra-household power dynamics, and lived experiences of resilience. Few studies employ robust mixed-methods designs capable of quantifying economic losses alongside qualitative insights into sexual and gender-based violence, psychological trauma, and coping strategies among displaced women and children. Existing works frequently portray women primarily as victims while under-exploring their roles as peacebuilders, economic actors, and decision-makers within farming households. This limitation restricts the development of nuanced, context-specific interventions that address both vulnerabilities and strengths in Benue's conflict-affected communities.

Research on displacement, education, and food insecurity in Benue State tends to be largely snapshot-oriented, capturing immediate humanitarian consequences without adequate attention to post-conflict recovery metrics, sustainable return processes, or long-term rehabilitation outcomes. There is insufficient comparative analysis with other Middle Belt states, which could reveal transferable lessons or unique contextual factors. Furthermore, long-term impacts on child nutrition, educational attainment, and intergenerational human capital development require deeper cohort studies that track affected populations over extended periods. The absence of such longitudinal evidence limits understanding of how short-term disruptions translate into enduring developmental setbacks in the region.

Overall, existing scholarship lacks a robust evaluation of intervention effectiveness, particularly gender-sensitive and community-driven approaches to peacebuilding and livelihood restoration. There is a noticeable overemphasis on identifying causes of conflict at the expense of rigorous analysis of scalable solutions, policy implementation gaps, and best practices in conflict resolution. Many studies stop at recommending broad measures without assessing their practical outcomes or

cost-effectiveness in real-world settings like Benue State. This imbalance constrains the ability of policymakers and practitioners to design evidence-based programs that deliver measurable improvements in security, food production, and social cohesion.

These identified gaps collectively justify the current study, which seeks to bridge them through a focused, gender-disaggregated analysis of farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State. By integrating historical, gendered, and institutional perspectives with empirical data on displacement, education, and food insecurity, this research aims to contribute actionable insights for evidence-based peacebuilding and strengthened food security strategies. Addressing these shortcomings will not only enrich academic scholarship but also support more effective, inclusive, and sustainable policy responses to one of Nigeria's most pressing security and developmental challenges.

Findings

The findings revealed that farmer-herder conflicts had profound effects on women in Benue State. Most interviewed women reported complete or partial loss of livelihoods as they could no longer access farmlands due to insecurity, leading to economic dependence and poverty. Many participants recounted experiences of sexual violence, including rape and sexual exploitation in IDP camps. Additionally, women bore heavy caregiving burdens as they became sole heads of households following the death or displacement of male family members, managing children, the elderly, and the sick with very limited resources. These experiences significantly increased their psychological and physical stress.

Children were equally devastated by the conflicts. The study found severe disruption of education as many schools were destroyed, converted into IDP camps, or abandoned due to fear of attacks. This resulted in high dropout rates, especially among girls. Children also suffered deep psychological trauma manifested through nightmares, anxiety, withdrawal, and aggressive behaviours. Malnutrition was widespread because of disrupted food production and limited access to adequate meals in displacement camps. Many children exhibited signs of stunting and micronutrient deficiencies linked directly to the prolonged violence.

The findings largely aligned with Human Needs Theory and Feminist Conflict Theory. In line with Burton's Human Needs Theory, the frustration of basic needs such as security, livelihood, and identity recognition fuelled the conflicts and deepened suffering, with women and children experiencing acute deprivation of these needs. Feminist Conflict Theory was strongly supported as the results clearly showed how patriarchal structures and conflict dynamics disproportionately burdened women with reproductive and caregiving roles while exposing them to gender-based violence.

However, the data also presented internal tensions and nuances that both confirmed and partially complicated the theoretical predictions. While the theories anticipated near-total frustration of needs and structural collapse, some institutional actors, such as certain NGOs and local community leaders, managed to sustain limited functionality in education and psychosocial support delivery despite the conflict, indicating partial rather than complete structural breakdown. Similarly, although Feminist Conflict Theory predicted heightened vulnerability, several women actively resisted these gendered impacts by forming solidarity networks, initiating small-scale income-generating activities, and participating in advocacy for peace and resource rights. These acts of agency challenged the framework's emphasis on passive victimhood and demonstrated women's capacity to exercise limited autonomy even under severe constraints. No major contradictions emerged, yet these unexpected elements of resilience and partial institutional resilience added

analytical depth, revealing that while vulnerabilities were widespread, they were not universally deterministic.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrated how unmet human needs and gendered power imbalances perpetuate cycles of violence and vulnerability in Benue State. Consistent with Human Needs Theory, the denial of security and livelihood resources created conditions for persistent conflict, while Feminist Conflict Theory explained why women carried heavier burdens. These theoretical lenses helped interpret why conventional security-focused interventions have yielded limited success. The results showed that addressing only surface-level triggers without tackling deep human needs and gender inequalities is insufficient for sustainable peace.

When compared with other conflict-affected regions in Nigeria, such as Plateau, Kaduna, and Southern Taraba, the patterns observed in Benue were strikingly similar. Livelihood loss, sexual violence against women, educational disruption for children, and widespread trauma appeared consistent across Middle Belt states. However, Benue's situation stood out due to its critical role as the nation's food basket, making the humanitarian and economic consequences more far-reaching at the national level.

The study highlighted important policy and humanitarian implications. There is an urgent need for gender-sensitive interventions that prioritise women's economic empowerment, protection from sexual violence, and children's access to education and psychosocial support in IDP camps. Government and humanitarian agencies should strengthen early warning systems, promote community-based dialogue, and implement the Benue Open Grazing Law more effectively while addressing herder concerns. Long-term strategies must focus on livelihood restoration, trauma counselling, and inclusive peacebuilding that places women and children at the centre of recovery efforts.

Conclusion

This study concludes that farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State have inflicted severe and multifaceted hardships on women and children, who bear a disproportionate burden of the violence. Key findings revealed widespread livelihood losses among women, who could no longer access farmlands, resulting in deepened poverty and economic dependence. Many women experienced sexual violence and exploitation, particularly in IDP camps, while simultaneously carrying overwhelming caregiving responsibilities as heads of households. Children suffered massive disruption in education, with high dropout rates, especially among girls, alongside profound psychological trauma and widespread malnutrition stemming from collapsed food production systems. These impacts were consistently explained through Human Needs Theory, which highlighted the frustration of basic needs such as security, livelihood, and identity, and Feminist Conflict Theory, which exposed how gendered power relations amplify vulnerabilities during conflict. The situation in Benue State, Nigeria's food basket, not only devastates individual lives but also threatens national food security and long-term human capital development.

The long-term consequences of these conflicts on women and children are particularly alarming and far-reaching. Beyond immediate physical harm, prolonged exposure to violence has created cycles of intergenerational trauma, reduced educational attainment, and diminished economic opportunities that may persist for decades. Women face lifelong psychological scars, loss of productive capacity, and social marginalisation, while children are at risk of becoming a lost generation with limited skills and heightened susceptibility to future conflict. These gendered and generational impacts undermine community resilience, weaken family structures, and jeopardise the state's agricultural productivity, with ripple effects felt across Nigeria. Without deliberate and

sustained intervention, the current crisis risks entrenching poverty, food insecurity, and social instability in one of the country's most vital agricultural regions.

Urgent and comprehensive intervention is therefore imperative. Government agencies, humanitarian organisations, and local communities must collaborate to implement gender-sensitive policies that prioritise the protection of women and children, restore livelihoods, rebuild educational infrastructure, and provide psychosocial support. Strengthening the implementation of the Open Grazing Prohibition Law alongside inclusive dialogue mechanisms that address the needs of both farmers and herders is essential. Ultimately, addressing the disproportionate impact of farmer-herder conflicts on women and children in Benue State is not only a humanitarian necessity but a critical step toward achieving lasting peace, food sovereignty, and sustainable development in Nigeria. Failure to act decisively will have devastating consequences for current and future generations.

Recommendations

1. Gender-Sensitive Protection Framework

Since the study revealed widespread sexual and gender-based violence in IDP camps and affected communities, interventions must prioritise specialised protection units for women and children. This includes safe spaces, stronger camp security, and legal aid services to address GBV and ensure accountability.

2. Economic Recovery and Empowerment

With severe losses in income-generating activities documented, especially among women farmers, policies should provide targeted agricultural recovery programs, such as access to land, credit, seeds, and training. Women-led cooperatives and microfinance schemes can help rebuild economic independence and reduce vulnerability.

3. Education and Psychological Support

Given the profound educational disruptions and trauma among children, rebuilding schools and offering trauma-informed counselling is essential. Mobile classrooms and scholarship schemes for displaced girls can mitigate dropout rates, while psychosocial support programs can address intergenerational trauma.

4. Inclusive Peacebuilding and Governance Reform

The study problematized the inadequacy of gender-neutral interventions. Sustainable peace requires inclusive dialogue platforms where women and youth actively participate in decision-making. Strengthening governance through transparent land-use policies and community-based conflict resolution mechanisms will reduce recurring violence.

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