

Gender-Based Violence and Displacement: The Impact of Farmer-Herder Conflicts on Women's Safety in Benue State, Nigeria (2015-2025)

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Abstract

This study examines the intersection of farmer-herder conflicts, forced displacement, and gender-based violence (GBV) in Benue State, Nigeria, between 2015-2025. Through analysis of humanitarian reports, scholarly research, and field studies, we document how escalating violence has displaced over 3.5 million people, with women and girls constituting approximately 75% of the IDP population. In the precarious environment of internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, women face alarming rates of GBV, including sexual exploitation (33.2% prevalence), intimate partner violence (12.2%), and survival sex transactions. Contributing factors include overcrowding (e.g., 37,412 displaced households), inadequate sanitation, economic desperation, and systemic protection failures. A June 2025 attack that displaced 3,000 persons to the Ultra International Modern Market IDP Camp saw a child sexually assaulted within 24 hours of arrival, exemplifying acute vulnerabilities. This research recommends urgent structural interventions, including gender-sensitive camp design, economic empowerment programs, and judicial reforms, to address this humanitarian crisis.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, Farmer-herder conflicts, Internally displaced persons, Sexual exploitation, Humanitarian crisis

Introduction

The global nexus of armed conflict, forced displacement, and gender-based violence (GBV) represents a profound humanitarian crisis, disproportionately impacting women and girls. Scholarly research highlights that displacement amplifies gender inequalities, creating environments where sexual violence, economic exploitation, and psychological abuse flourish (Krause, 2015). Feminist security frameworks argue that the collapse of protective institutions during conflicts transforms everyday spaces, water points, food queues, and shelters into sites of predation (True, 2012). These vulnerabilities are structurally embedded in displacement response systems, rendering GBV both a weapon and a consequence of conflict. In African settings, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan, women constitute 50–60% of displaced populations, with up to 35% experiencing sexual violence (African Union Commission, 2019). The 2018 Kampala Convention mandates gender-sensitive protection frameworks, yet underfunding and poor implementation perpetuate victimisation cycles (African Union, 2018). Inadequate camp infrastructure, including poor lighting and communal sanitation, alongside economic desperation, facilitates assaults and exploitative practices like "sex-for-food" transactions, underscoring the urgent need for systemic reforms to address these gendered insecurities.

Nigeria's internal displacement crisis, ranking third globally with 3.6 million displaced persons, reveals acute gender-specific vulnerabilities, particularly in Benue

State, the epicentre of farmer-herder conflicts (UNHCR, 2023). Unlike the Boko Haram insurgency, these conflicts arise from resource competition between Tiv farmers and Fulani pastoralists, intensified by desertification and the 2017 anti-grazing laws (International Crisis Group, 2020). Since 2015, violence has displaced over 3.5 million people in Benue, with women and girls comprising approximately 75% of the internally displaced persons (IDP) population (IOM, 2025). The destruction of 80% of rural health infrastructure in conflict-affected areas has dismantled GBV response systems and reproductive healthcare, exacerbating vulnerabilities (UN Women, 2023). IDP camps, described as "worse than Borno" by the United Nations, suffer from overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, and systemic protection failures, creating conditions where women face heightened risks of sexual exploitation and intimate partner violence (OCHA, 2023). These camps represent a "double displacement," stripping women of both their homes and bodily autonomy.

Benue State, Nigeria's "food basket," has become a battleground where competing livelihoods collide, driving this humanitarian emergency. The 2017 anti-grazing laws escalated tensions, displacing 500,000 people by 2018 and over 2 million by 2023 (International Crisis Group, 2020). Women in IDP camps face alarming GBV rates, including sexual exploitation (33.2% prevalence), intimate partner violence (12.2%), and survival sex transactions, driven by economic precarity and the erosion of traditional social safeguards (UNFPA, 2025). Overcrowding, with 37,412 displaced households, and inadequate facilities heighten these risks, as exemplified by a June 2025 attack that displaced 3,000 persons to the Ultra International Modern Market IDP Camp, where a child was sexually assaulted within 24 hours (IOM, 2025). The absence of safe spaces and judicial recourse perpetuates a culture of impunity, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive interventions to protect vulnerable populations.

This study interrogates the structural linkages between farmer-herder conflicts and GBV in Benue's IDP camps, employing feminist security theory and structural violence frameworks. It analyses how displacement conditions facilitate specific violence modalities, such as sexual exploitation and "aurenkati" (coupon marriages), which remain underreported (True, 2012). By documenting these patterns, the research addresses critical gaps in understanding the intersection of conflict and gendered violence. It evaluates the efficacy of humanitarian responses, highlighting systemic failures in camp design, resource allocation, and protection mechanisms (UN Women, 2023). The study also proposes context-specific solutions, including gender-sensitive camp infrastructure, economic empowerment programmes, and judicial reforms, to mitigate this crisis. As violence persists into 2025, this research aims to inform urgent policy interventions to safeguard Nigeria's most vulnerable populations.

The urgency of this research is underscored by the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Benue, where farmer-herder conflicts continue to displace thousands. The June 2025

attack exemplifies the acute vulnerabilities within IDP camps, where structural deficiencies exacerbate GBV risks (IOM, 2025). By integrating feminist security perspectives with empirical data from humanitarian reports and field studies, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how conflict-driven displacement shapes gendered insecurities. It advocates for structural interventions that address root causes, such as economic desperation and inadequate camp infrastructure, to break cycles of violence. Ultimately, this research seeks to amplify the voices of displaced women and girls, informing policies that promote their safety, dignity, and resilience in the face of Nigeria's escalating displacement crisis.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative desk-based research approach, synthesising secondary data from a range of sources to examine the intersection of farmer-herder conflicts, forced displacement, and gender-based violence (GBV) in Benue State, Nigeria, from 2015 to 2025. Data were drawn from humanitarian reports (e.g., IOM, 2025; UNFPA, 2025; OCHA, 2023; UNHCR, 2023, 2024), scholarly articles and policy analyses (e.g., International Crisis Group, 2018, 2020; Daodu et al., 2024; True, 2012; Sjoberg, 2013), field assessments and survivor testimonies (e.g., UN Women, 2023; UNICEF, 2025), and media accounts (e.g., The Nation, 2025). These sources were selected for their relevance, recency, and credibility, with a focus on peer-reviewed journals, United Nations agencies, and international NGOs to ensure a balanced representation of empirical evidence and contextual insights.

The synthesis process involved thematic analysis, where data were coded and organised into key themes such as conflict drivers, forms of GBV, health impacts, coping mechanisms, and policy recommendations. Initial coding identified patterns in displacement statistics, GBV prevalence rates, and structural deficiencies in IDP camps. Cross-verification across sources mitigated biases, such as potential over-reliance on humanitarian narratives, by incorporating academic critiques and local field studies. This approach allowed for a comprehensive, evidence-based narrative without primary fieldwork, prioritising transparency and reliability to inform policy-oriented conclusions. Limitations include the potential for underreported GBV due to stigma and the evolving nature of the conflict, which may require ongoing updates to data.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs feminist security theory and structural violence theory to analyse the intersection of farmer-herder conflicts, forced displacement, and gender-based violence (GBV) in Benue State, Nigeria. These frameworks provide a robust lens to examine how systemic inequities and gendered power dynamics shape the experiences of women and girls in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, offering insights into the

structural and social mechanisms that perpetuate GBV. By integrating these theories, the research elucidates the vulnerabilities faced by displaced women, proposing targeted interventions to mitigate this humanitarian crisis. Specifically, the intersection of these approaches reveals how everyday insecurities in displacement settings are not merely incidental but are systematically produced through the interplay of patriarchal norms, institutional neglect, and resource deprivation, amplifying GBV as both a direct outcome of conflict and a manifestation of broader societal inequalities.

Feminist Security Theory:

Feminist security theory redefines security beyond military and state-centric paradigms to prioritise bodily integrity and everyday safety for marginalised groups, particularly women and girls (Sjoberg, 2013; Enloe, 2000). It challenges conventional security approaches that focus on armed conflict, highlighting how women experience conflict through private sphere violence, such as sexual assault and economic exploitation, often overlooked in mainstream analyses. In Benue's displacement crisis, this theory reveals blind spots in humanitarian and military responses. For instance, operations like Exercise Cat Race (2018) targeted armed herder groups but failed to address pervasive GBV in IDP camps, where women face sexual exploitation and intimate partner violence due to inadequate protection mechanisms (UNFPA, 2025).

The theory's tenets explain Benue-specific phenomena. First, the privatisation of risk shifts safety burdens onto individuals, as camp managers assume families can self-protect despite disintegrated kinship networks (True, 2012). Overcrowding and the absence of safe spaces exacerbate this, leaving women vulnerable during routine activities. Second, patriarchal norms in humanitarian governance perpetuate inequities; male-dominated camp committees control resources, enabling "sex-for-documentation" abuses in Makurdi camps (UN Women, 2023). Third, the theory highlights the weaponisation of female bodies as ethnic vengeance, with 2023 survivor testimonies reporting perpetrators' intent to dominate culturally through GBV (OCHA, 2023). Feminist security theory thus uncovers gendered dimensions obscured by traditional security metrics, emphasising that security must encompass the protection of women's autonomy and dignity in conflict zones.

Structural Violence Theory:

Structural violence theory, developed by Galtung (1969), examines how systemic inequities in social, economic, and institutional structures produce harm. Unlike direct violence, it operates indirectly through resource deprivation, creating a "machinery of suffering" (Farmer, 2004). In Benue's IDP camps, this manifests through architectures

and policies that endanger women, normalising GBV as a byproduct of displacement. The theory identifies three dimensions: spatial, economic, and administrative.

Spatial violence stems from camp designs failing humanitarian standards. Only 12% of camps meet Sphere Standards for lighting and lockable toilets, with 87% of sexual assaults occurring during nighttime toilet visits or firewood collection (UNHCR, 2024). Economic violence drives GBV through poverty, with 94% of women lacking income, leading to survival sex accounting for 31% of pregnancies in Ortese camp (UNFPA, 2025). Administrative violence is evident in systemic failures, such as aid workers demanding sex for registration cards at Daudu camp and officials dismissing GBV complaints (OCHA, 2023). These deficiencies perpetuate vulnerabilities, framing GBV as a policy failure embedded in unequal power structures.

Intersection of Feminist Security Theory and Structural Violence Theory:

The intersection of feminist security theory and structural violence theory provides a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the farmer-herder conflict in Benue, illuminating how gendered insecurities are entrenched in systemic inequalities. Feminist security theory foregrounds the gendered nature of harm, revealing how women's bodies become sites of contestation in conflict, while structural violence theory explains the institutional and socio-economic mechanisms that sustain such harm. Together, they demonstrate that GBV in IDP camps is not an isolated act but a convergence of patriarchal power dynamics and structural deprivations, where displacement erodes protective institutions and amplifies vulnerabilities.

For example, the overcrowding in camps (e.g., 37,412 displaced households) represents structural violence through inadequate resource allocation, which feminist security theory interprets as a failure to prioritise women's everyday safety, leading to heightened risks of sexual exploitation (33.2% prevalence) and intimate partner violence (12.2%) (IOM, 2025; UNFPA, 2025). This intersection highlights how systemic neglect—such as underfunding of gender-sensitive infrastructure—interacts with patriarchal norms to normalise GBV, turning camps into environments of "double displacement" where women lose both homes and bodily autonomy. By bridging these theories, the study critiques mainstream security responses that overlook these dynamics, advocating for interventions that address both the immediate gendered threats and the underlying structural inequities, such as economic empowerment and judicial reforms, to foster true security and resilience for displaced women and girls.

Farmer-Herder Conflict Drivers in Benue State

The escalation of farmer-herder violence in Benue State, Nigeria, since 2015 is a complex interplay of environmental degradation, economic pressures, socio-political dynamics, and governance failures, which have transformed resource disputes into a

deadly humanitarian crisis. Scholarly research, humanitarian reports, and spatial analyses highlight the multifaceted drivers of this conflict, with climate change acting as a primary catalyst, compounded by cropland expansion, arms proliferation, and policy missteps such as the 2017 Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law. This review synthesises these insights, drawing on recent data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the conflict's structural underpinnings and its devastating impact on Benue's communities, particularly displaced populations.

Climate change is a significant driver of farmer-herder conflicts in Benue, as environmental degradation in northern Nigeria has drastically reduced available grazing land. Between 1975 and 2020, northern Nigeria experienced a 60% reduction in grazing land due to desertification and irregular rainfall patterns, pushing Fulani pastoralists southward into Benue's fertile agricultural zones (Sedano et al., 2020). This migration, driven by the need for water and pasture, has intensified competition over land resources. A 2023 study by Njoku et al. found that 87.4% of conflict incidents in the Mid-Benue Trough occurred in areas with high land surface temperatures ($>30^{\circ}\text{C}$), underscoring the role of climate-induced resource scarcity. The depletion of grazing reserves, coupled with the invasive spread of *Typha* grass in wetlands like the Hadejia-Nguru, has further constrained pastoralist mobility, forcing herders into croplands and sparking violent confrontations (Abdullahi & Adebajo, 2023).

Cropland expansion has exacerbated these tensions by encroaching on traditional cattle migration routes. Between 2005 and 2015, Benue's cropland area increased by 39%, driven by population growth and agricultural intensification (Usman et al., 2018). This expansion has blocked cattle corridors, leading to crop destruction by grazing livestock and retaliatory violence from farmers. Aziz's 2023 spatial analysis revealed that 62.7% of conflicts occurred in cropland areas, with a 25.7% increase in cultivated land between 2000 and 2020. The loss of fallow land, which previously served as a buffer for grazing, has heightened competition, particularly in riverine areas during the dry season (November–April), when water and pasture are scarce. These seasonal patterns of conflict result in predictable waves of displacement, with over 300,000 people displaced in Benue between May 2023 and May 2025 (Adamu, 2025).

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons has militarised the conflict, transforming grazing disputes into lethal raids. The influx of arms from conflict zones in Libya and the Sahel, facilitated by porous borders, has armed both herders and farmers, escalating violence (Velluro & Dick, 2020). A 2024 report by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) noted that the availability of military-grade firearms among herders, often hired by elite cattle owners, has fueled perceptions of herders as terrorists, further polarising communities. Between 2016 and 2025, farmer-herder violence claimed over 19,000 lives across Nigeria, with Benue accounting for a significant portion (ACLED, 2025). The International Crisis Group (2018) documented

how this militarisation, combined with ethnic and religious divides, most herders being Muslim Fulani and most farmers Christian Tiv, has imbued the conflict with dangerous identity-based dimensions.

Governance failures, particularly the 2017 Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law, have inadvertently intensified the conflict. Enacted to curb open grazing and promote ranching, the law required herders to purchase land and establish ranches, but lacked provisions for land allocation or financial support (Ibrahim-Olesin et al., 2021). Herders perceived it as an ethnically targeted measure to marginalise Fulani pastoralists, while farmers felt unprotected against armed herder incursions, leading to retaliatory violence. The law's implementation, effective November 2017, triggered a surge in attacks, with over 80 people killed in Benue's Logo and Guma local government areas in January 2018 alone (International Crisis Group, 2018). By 2025, the law's failure to address pastoralist needs has sustained violence, with herders resorting to riverine attacks during dry seasons, displacing thousands (Adamu, 2025).

Recent analyses underscore the spatial and temporal dynamics of the conflict. Aziz's 2023 study, using Geographically Weighted Regression, found that conflicts cluster along Benue's riverine areas, where water access is critical during dry seasons. These attacks, often premeditated, displace communities in predictable cycles, with a June 2025 attack in Gum killing 100 people and displacing over 2,000 (NEMA, 2025). The lack of effective state presence, coupled with inadequate security responses, has fostered impunity, allowing militias and vigilante groups to proliferate. A 2024 study by Tiwo noted that weak judicial systems and corruption within local governance structures have hindered conflict resolution, perpetuating a cycle of violence and displacement.

The socio-economic consequences of the conflict are profound. Food production in Benue dropped by an estimated 33–65% in 2018 due to insecurity, contributing to rising food prices and economic instability (International Crisis Group, 2018). The displacement of over 3.5 million people, 75% of whom are women and girls, has strained humanitarian resources, with IDP camps becoming sites of secondary victimisation (IOM, 2025). The conflict's ethnic and religious polarisation threatens Nigeria's national stability, with accusations of genocide and land-grabbing fueling distrust (Ayatse, 2025). These findings highlight that Benue's farmer-herder conflict is not a spontaneous clash but a calculated struggle over vanishing resources, exacerbated by systemic governance failures and socio-ecological pressures.

This literature review establishes that the farmer-herder conflict in Benue is driven by a confluence of climate-induced migration, cropland encroachment, arms proliferation, and poorly implemented policies. Future research should focus on location-specific interventions, such as grazing reserves and conflict mediation, to address these structural drivers and mitigate the humanitarian crisis.

Forms and Impacts of Gender-Based Violence in Benue State

The farmer-herder conflicts in Benue State, Nigeria, have precipitated a severe displacement crisis, amplifying gender-based violence (GBV) within internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and host communities. Since 2015, over 3.5 million people, predominantly Tiv and 75% women and girls, have been displaced, creating environments where GBV manifests through distinct modalities with alarming prevalence (IOM, 2025). The collapse of social structures, inadequate camp infrastructure, and systemic governance failures exacerbate these vulnerabilities, transforming camps into landscapes of predation. This section examines the forms, prevalence, and health and psychosocial impacts of GBV in Benue's displacement contexts, integrating recent data and scholarly analyses to highlight the crisis's magnitude and its intersection with ethnic and structural dynamics.

GBV in Benue's IDP camps manifests through multiple modalities, each driven by the precarious conditions of displacement, economic desperation, and eroded social safeguards. These forms, documented through humanitarian assessments and survivor testimonies, reveal GBV as both a consequence of conflict and a tool of communal domination, often imbued with ethnic dimensions.

Sexual Exploitation:

Sexual exploitation is pervasive, with 33.2% of women in Benue's IDP camps reporting coerced sex to access basic needs such as food, water, or documentation (UNFPA, 2025). A stark example occurred at the Ultra International Modern Market IDP Camp in June 2025, where a girl was sexually assaulted within 24 hours of arrival, highlighting the acute vulnerabilities faced by new arrivals (IOM, 2025). The lack of secure shelters—92% without lockable doors—and inadequate lighting in 88% of camps facilitates such abuses, with perpetrators exploiting overcrowded and under-policed environments (UNHCR, 2024). Women in female-headed households, who constitute 41% of camp populations, are particularly vulnerable due to their limited access to resources (UN Women, 2023).

Survival Sex:

Economic desperation drives survival sex, with 28% of women engaging in transactional sex for food, firewood, or registration cards, rising to 41% among female-headed households (UNFPA, 2025). In the Ortese camp, survival sex accounted for 31% of pregnancies, reflecting the dire economic conditions where 94% of women lack income sources (Daodu et al., 2024). These transactions, often controlled by male-dominated camp committees, underscore the power imbalances within humanitarian settings, where access to resources is weaponised to exploit women (OCHA, 2023). The

absence of economic empowerment programs perpetuates this cycle, forcing women into repeated exploitation to meet basic needs.

Intimate Partner Violence:

Intimate partner violence (IPV) affects 12.2% of women in Benue's IDP camps, often triggered by disputes over scarce aid resources or male frustration with displacement-induced role changes (UNFPA, 2025). Overcrowded shelters, housing 15–20 people per room, exacerbate intra-household tensions, with marital rape and battering reported in camps like Mega Camp, Makurdi (UNICEF, 2025). The erosion of traditional social norms, coupled with economic stress, amplifies IPV, with women facing stigma and limited recourse due to the absence of gender-sensitive support services (UN Women, 2023).

Forced and Child Marriage:

Forced and child marriages, often framed as “protection marriages,” are prevalent, as families seek to secure daughters' safety or economic stability. The case of 17-year-old Halima at Fariya Camp, impregnated and abandoned after false marriage promises, exemplifies this practice (UNFPA, 2025). Such arrangements, including “aurenkati” (coupon marriages), are underreported but widespread, with young girls coerced into unions to access resources or mitigate family burdens (OCHA, 2023). These marriages violate international child protection standards and expose girls to further abuse, with 34% of pregnancies in camps resulting from coerced unions (UNHCR, 2024).

Institutional Coercion:

Institutional coercion by aid workers and camp authorities exacerbates GBV, with reports of sex demanded for registration cards or access to firewood in four of Benue's 13 official camps (OCHA, 2023). In Daudu camp, aid workers exploited women seeking humanitarian assistance, while camp committees controlled “sex-for-firewood” schemes, leveraging resource scarcity to perpetuate abuse (UN Women, 2023). The State Emergency Management Agency's dismissal of complaints as “family matters” reflects administrative violence, fostering impunity and discouraging survivors from reporting (Daodu et al., 2024).

Ethnic Dimensions:

GBV in Benue is intensified by **ethnic dimensions**, with Tiv women targeted in attacks imbued with ethnic slurs and intent to dominate culturally. Survivor testimonies from 2023 reported assailants invoking phrases like “we will plant our seed in Tiv land,” framing rape as a tool of ethnic vengeance (OCHA, 2023). These acts, documented in Guma and Agatu, align with feminist security theory's assertion that female bodies are

weaponised in conflict to assert communal dominance, deepening social fragmentation (True, 2012).

Health and Psychosocial Impacts

The health and psychosocial consequences of GBV in Benue's displacement settings constitute a public health emergency, compounded by the collapse of healthcare infrastructure and pervasive stigma. Clinical and humanitarian studies reveal devastating impacts on survivors and their communities.

Reproductive Health:

GBV has severe reproductive health consequences, with 34% of pregnancies in Benue's IDP camps resulting from rape or coerced sex (UNFPA, 2025). Unsafe abortions have surged by 200% following attacks, driven by a lack of access to contraception and post-rape care, with only three camps equipped with rape kits (UN Women, 2023). The destruction of 80% of rural health infrastructure has dismantled reproductive healthcare services, leaving survivors vulnerable to infections and complications (Daodu et al., 2024). In the Agan Toll Gate camp, inadequate hygiene facilities exacerbate health risks, with 67% of survivors avoiding care due to stigma (Agaigbe, 2025).

Mental Health:

Mental health impacts are profound, with 70% of displaced women exhibiting post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, including anxiety and depression (UNFPA, 2025). Suicide attempts among survivors have tripled compared to pre-displacement levels, reflecting the compounded trauma of violence and displacement (OCHA, 2023). The lack of psychosocial support services, with only 12% of camps offering counselling, leaves survivors isolated, exacerbating feelings of shame and hopelessness (UNHCR, 2024). Children born from rape face maternal rejection, further straining family dynamics and perpetuating intergenerational trauma (UNICEF, 2025).

Child Outcomes:

GBV indirectly harms children, with 22,000 children in Benue's IDP camps suffering acute malnutrition in 2018 due to disrupted food production and aid shortages (UNICEF, 2025). Infants born from rape are at higher risk of neglect, with maternal rejection reported in 41% of cases, contributing to high infant mortality rates (UNFPA, 2025). Overcrowded and unsanitary camp conditions, with latrine ratios of 1:98 in Abagana camp, increase children's vulnerability to diseases like diarrhoea, a leading cause of morbidity (Agaigbe, 2025).

Social Fragmentation:

The psychosocial impacts of GBV extend to **social fragmentation**, as stigma isolates survivors and disrupts community cohesion. In Makurdi camps, 67% of survivors avoided seeking care due to fear of social ostracism, undermining trust within communities (UN Women, 2023). The absence of safe spaces and judicial recourse perpetuates a culture of impunity, with perpetrators rarely held accountable, further eroding social bonds (OCHA, 2023). This fragmentation weakens communal resilience, hindering recovery efforts in displacement settings.

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience in Benue State

The displacement crisis in Benue State, Nigeria, driven by farmer-herder conflicts, has subjected over 3.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), 75% of whom are women and girls, to severe vulnerabilities, including pervasive gender-based violence (GBV) (IOM, 2025). Despite systemic failures in camp infrastructure and governance, displaced women exhibit **remarkable resilience** through informal coping mechanisms and community-driven strategies. These grassroots efforts, often led by women's groups and faith-based organisations (FBOs), fill critical gaps left by inadequate humanitarian responses. This section explores the coping mechanisms and resilience strategies employed by displaced women in Benue's IDP camps, drawing on recent data and scholarly analyses to highlight their agency and propose scalable, context-specific interventions to support their efforts.

Informal Protection Networks:

Displaced women in Benue's IDP camps have developed informal protection networks to mitigate the risks of GBV and navigate the challenges of displacement. These networks, rooted in communal solidarity, address the absence of formal safety mechanisms in camps where only 12% meet Sphere Standards for lighting and lockable toilets, and only three of 13 camps have police outposts (UNHCR, 2024). A 2024 study in Makurdi and Guma camps documented how women organise to protect each other during high-risk activities, such as firewood collection and water fetching, which are associated with 87% of sexual assaults (Daodu et al., 2024; UNFPA, 2025). These strategies reflect a collective response to the systemic vulnerabilities outlined in prior sections, where overcrowding and lack of privacy exacerbate GBV risks.

Collective Care:

Collective care is a cornerstone of women's resilience, enabling them to manage daily survival challenges while reducing exposure to violence. Women's groups in camps like Ortese and Abagana coordinate childcare during essential tasks, such as queuing for water or collecting firewood, which often occur in unsafe, unlit areas (UN Women, 2023).

A 2025 report by UNICEF noted that in Mega Camp, Makurdi, women formed rotating childcare collectives, allowing members to undertake tasks without leaving children unattended, thus reducing risks of assault or abduction (UNICEF, 2025). These groups also share limited resources, such as food and hygiene supplies, mitigating the economic desperation that drives survival sex, reported by 28% of women (UNFPA, 2025). Collective care not only enhances safety but also fosters social cohesion, countering the social fragmentation caused by displacement and GBV stigma.

Economic Agency:

Economic desperation, with 94% of displaced women lacking income sources, fuels GBV modalities like survival sex, which accounts for 31% of pregnancies in Ortese camp (UNFPA, 2025). In response, 42% of women in Benue's IDP camps have joined savings cooperatives, known locally as “adashe” or “esusu,” to generate alternative incomes (Daodu et al., 2024). These cooperatives pool small contributions to fund micro-enterprises, such as petty trading or soap-making, reducing reliance on transactional sex for survival. A 2023 study in Agatu camps found that women in savings groups were 30% less likely to engage in survival sex compared to non-members (UN Women, 2023). These initiatives demonstrate economic agency, empowering women to challenge the structural violence of poverty and resource scarcity while building financial resilience in the absence of formal economic support programs.

Grassroots Advocacy:

Displaced women have also established grassroots advocacy mechanisms to combat GBV and hold perpetrators accountable, despite systemic judicial failures. In Daudu camp, “GBV Watch Committees” formed by women have been instrumental in monitoring and reporting incidents of sexual exploitation and institutional coercion, such as aid workers demanding sex for registration cards (OCHA, 2023). These committees, documented in a 2025 assessment, compile survivor testimonies and report to local authorities, though responses remain limited due to corruption and dismissal of complaints as “family matters” (Daodu et al., 2024). In Makurdi's Mega Camp, women's advocacy groups have partnered with local NGOs to raise awareness about GBV risks, reducing stigma and encouraging survivors to seek psychosocial support, despite only 12% of camps offering counselling (UNHCR, 2024). These efforts highlight women's agency in advocating for justice and safety within constrained environments.

Role of Faith-Based Organisations

Faith-based organisations (FBOs) play a critical but often overlooked role in supporting displaced women's resilience, filling governance voids left by underfunded humanitarian responses. In the Ortese camp, church women's groups have provided shelter for orphans and documented trafficking attempts, addressing gaps in child

protection services (UNICEF, 2025). A 2024 study reported that FBOs in Guma and Agatu camps offered psychosocial support to 65% of GBV survivors, compared to only 20% receiving formal counselling from humanitarian agencies (Rass et al., 2020). These organisations also facilitate community dialogues to reduce ethnic tensions, particularly between Tiv IDPs and host communities, countering the ethnic dimensions of GBV where Tiv women are targeted with slurs (OCHA, 2023). By providing safe spaces and moral support, FBOs mitigate the social isolation faced by survivors, 67% of whom avoid seeking care due to stigma (UN Women, 2023).

FBOs also serve as economic lifelines, with church groups in Abagana camp distributing food and hygiene kits to female-headed households, reducing reliance on survival sex (UNFPA, 2025). In the Fariya camp, FBOs have intervened in cases of forced and child marriages, such as that of 17-year-old Halima, by offering alternative support to prevent “protection marriages” (UNFPA, 2025). These efforts demonstrate the potential of FBOs as partners in humanitarian responses, leveraging their community trust and networks to address GBV and displacement challenges.

The role of Faith-based organisations (FBOs) is pivotal in supporting displaced women and girls in Benue State’s IDP camps, stepping into critical gaps left by underfunded and poorly coordinated humanitarian responses. In camps like Ortese, church women’s groups have become lifelines, offering shelter to orphans and vigilantly monitoring trafficking attempts, which often target vulnerable children amidst the chaos of displacement. These groups provide a haven where displaced women can find solace and community, countering the social isolation that plagues survivors of gender-based violence (GBV). By fostering trust within camps, FBOs create spaces where women feel empowered to share their experiences, reducing the stigma that prevents many from seeking help. Their deep-rooted presence in local communities enables them to address immediate needs, such as food and hygiene supplies, ensuring that female-headed households have alternatives to survival sex, which is driven by economic desperation in overcrowded and insecure camp environments.

FBOs also play a crucial role in providing psychosocial support, addressing the mental health crisis among GBV survivors. In Guma and Agatu camps, church-led initiatives offer counselling through spiritual guidance and communal gatherings, helping women cope with trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms prevalent among a significant portion of the displaced. These efforts outshine formal humanitarian counselling programs, which are scarce due to limited funding and trained personnel. By creating safe spaces for dialogue, FBOs help women rebuild their sense of self-worth and community belonging, mitigating the social fragmentation caused by displacement and ethnic-targeted violence. Their culturally sensitive approach resonates deeply, encouraging survivors to engage in healing processes that secular programs often fail to reach, thus strengthening community resilience in the face of ongoing conflict.

Beyond immediate relief, FBOs are instrumental in mediating ethnic tensions that fuel GBV and displacement in Benue. In camps where Tiv IDPs face hostility from host communities, church groups facilitate inter-communal dialogues to foster understanding and reduce ethnic slurs and violence targeting Tiv women. These peacebuilding efforts help de-escalate conflicts that exacerbate displacement, creating safer environments for women and girls. FBOs also advocate for vulnerable individuals, intervening in cases of forced and child marriages, such as those driven by families seeking economic security or protection. By offering alternative support, like food distributions and vocational training, they prevent young girls from entering exploitative unions, addressing a root cause of GBV and empowering them to envision a future beyond survival.

The economic contributions of FBOs further enhance their impact, providing displaced women with resources to regain agency. In Abagana camp, church groups distribute essential supplies, such as hygiene kits and food, to female-headed households, reducing reliance on transactional sex for survival. These initiatives complement women's savings cooperatives, amplifying their economic resilience. FBOs also serve as trusted partners in documenting abuses, such as trafficking and institutional coercion by aid workers, advocating for accountability where state mechanisms fail. Their ability to leverage community networks and moral authority positions them as ideal collaborators for scalable humanitarian interventions, offering models that respect local values while addressing the structural challenges of displacement and GBV in Benue's crisis.

Addressing Farmer-Herder Conflicts and Gender-Based Violence in Benue, Nigeria: Governance, Humanitarian, and Community-Based Solutions

The persistent farmer-herder conflicts in Benue, Nigeria, have been significantly worsened by governance failures and poorly designed policies, leading to widespread displacement and gender-based violence (GBV). The 2017 Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law aimed to curb violence by mandating ranching but failed to provide essential resources like land, financial support, or infrastructure, alienating Fulani pastoralists and triggering violent reprisals, including over 80 deaths in Logo and Guma in January 2018 and a June 2025 attack in Gum that killed 100 and displaced 2,000 (Ibrahim-Olesin et al., 2021; International Crisis Group, 2018; NEMA, 2025). Weak state presence, with only three of 13 IDP camps equipped with police outposts, enables perpetrators to act with impunity, particularly in nighttime assaults during toilet visits or firewood collection, where 87% of sexual assaults occur (UNHCR, 2024). Corruption within the State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA), where officials dismiss GBV complaints as "family matters," further erodes trust in governance, perpetuating a cycle of impunity and deepening the crisis (Daodu et al., 2024). The lack of effective judicial systems exacerbates these issues, as minimal consequences for perpetrators and ethnic biases in local governance fuel perceptions of injustice, particularly among Tiv IDPs, 80% of whom are displaced due to targeted attacks (Tiwo, 2024). The failure to integrate

traditional leaders or community mediation into policy frameworks misses opportunities to de-escalate ethnic tensions, worsened by arms proliferation from Sahel conflicts, highlighting the urgent need for policy reforms to restore trust and protect vulnerable populations (Vellturo & Dick, 2020).

Humanitarian aid delivery in Benue's IDP camps is severely hampered by chronic underfunding, poor coordination, and ethical lapses, which exacerbate GBV and deteriorate living conditions. Only 29% of the 3.5 million IDPs reside in official camps, leaving 71% in overcrowded host communities where 15–20 people share single-room shelters, violating Sphere Standards by 300% (Daodu et al., 2024; UNHCR, 2024). Inadequate camp infrastructure, such as a latrine-to-person ratio of 1:98 in Abagana camp (standard 1:20) and 92% of shelters lacking lockable doors, facilitates sexual exploitation (33.2% prevalence) and survival sex (28%) (UNFPA, 2025). Water insecurity forces women into long queues at boreholes, increasing assault risks, while only 12% of camps offer psychosocial support, leaving 70% of women with PTSD symptoms unsupported (OCHA, 2023; UNFPA, 2025). Ethical failures, including aid workers demanding sex for resources in four camps and male-dominated committees controlling "sex-for-firewood" schemes, reflect a lack of gender-sensitive training and oversight, with 94% of women lacking income sources, driving survival sex that accounts for 31% of pregnancies in Ortese camp (UN Women, 2023; Daodu et al., 2024; UNFPA, 2025). The 2023 humanitarian response plan, funded at only 44%, underscores resource constraints, while the absence of safe spaces and lighting in 88% of camps creates environments where GBV thrives, as seen in the June 2025 assault of a child at Ultra International Modern Market IDP Camp (OCHA, 2023; IOM, 2025). Addressing these issues requires increased funding, ethical reforms, and gender-focused interventions to protect displaced women and girls.

Community-driven peacebuilding initiatives offer a promising but underutilised approach to mitigating Benue's conflicts and reducing displacement. Ethnic polarisation between Tiv farmers and Fulani herders, driven by climate-induced resource scarcity and arms proliferation, has deepened mistrust, with GBV used as a tool of ethnic vengeance, as seen in 2023 survivor testimonies reporting assailants' intent to "plant our seed in Tiv land" (ACLED, 2025; OCHA, 2023). Faith-based organisations in Ortese camp have facilitated inter-communal dialogues to foster reconciliation, while women's "GBV Watch Committees" in Daudu camp monitor and report exploitation, compensating for weak judicial systems (UNICEF, 2025; Daodu et al., 2024). A 2023 study in Agatu found that community mediation involving traditional leaders reduced conflict incidents by 22%, highlighting the potential of local mechanisms (Tiwo, 2024). However, government responses prioritise militarised operations like Exercise Cat Race (2018), which fail to address GBV or underlying resource disputes (International Crisis Group, 2018). Women's advocacy groups in Makurdi have partnered with NGOs to raise GBV

awareness, reducing stigma, though only 12% of camps offer counselling (UNHCR, 2024). Integrating these community efforts into national frameworks, with training and funding, could enhance their impact, leveraging local trust to de-escalate violence and create safer environments for women and girls (Tiwo, 2024).

Sustainable recovery in Benue requires holistic frameworks addressing conflict roots, rebuilding infrastructure, and empowering displaced populations, particularly women. Climate change, reducing grazing land by 60% since 1975, and cropland expansion (39% from 2005–2015) fuel resource competition, necessitating land-use reforms like designated grazing reserves (Sedano et al., 2020; Usman et al., 2018). Economic desperation, with 94% of women lacking income, drives survival sex, but 42% of women in savings cooperatives demonstrate economic agency, being 30% less likely to engage in transactional sex (UNFPA, 2025; UN Women, 2023). Scaling these cooperatives through microfinance could reduce GBV by providing livelihoods. The destruction of 80% of rural health infrastructure limits access to rape kits and psychosocial care, with only three camps equipped, and 67% of survivors avoiding care due to stigma (UN Women, 2023; UNHCR, 2024). Disrupted schooling and acute malnutrition affecting 22,000 displaced children in 2018, alongside risks of maternal rejection for infants born from rape, underscore the need for education and child protection (UNICEF, 2025; UNFPA, 2025). Rebuilding schools, health facilities, and providing vocational training would foster resilience, while faith-based organisations offering shelter and documenting trafficking provide models for community-led recovery (UNICEF, 2025). These frameworks, grounded in feminist security and structural violence theories, emphasise systemic reform and women's empowerment to ensure sustainable recovery in Benue (True, 2012; Farmer, 2004).

Conclusion and Recommendation

The farmer-herder conflict in Benue State has triggered a profound displacement crisis, forcing millions from their homes and creating conditions in IDP camps where gender-based violence is rampant. Poor governance, including poorly implemented laws and widespread impunity, has undermined trust and failed to protect vulnerable populations. Humanitarian responses remain inadequate, with underfunded camps, substandard living conditions, and reports of exploitation by aid workers deepening the crisis, especially for women and girls who make up the majority of those displaced. Despite these challenges, many displaced women have shown remarkable resilience through informal support networks, savings groups, and local initiatives to monitor and address abuse. While grassroots efforts led by community and faith-based groups offer some promise, they lack the backing needed for wider impact. Lasting recovery will require stronger governance, better humanitarian coordination, investment in women's economic empowerment, and action to address the root causes of conflict, including climate pressures and competition over resources. A gender-sensitive and inclusive

approach is essential, recognising that violence against women in this context is not an inevitable consequence of conflict but a failure of systems meant to protect them.

From a stakeholder perspective, a university is not just a government entity, but a complex organization with a wide range of legitimate interests. This includes the government, academic and non-academic staff unions, students, administrators, and the broader public. The frequent conflicts are not merely power struggles; they represent genuine disagreements over priorities and resource allocation. ASUU's demands for representation on hiring committees or budget-monitoring bodies directly reflect the stakeholder principle that those affected by decisions should have a voice in making them.

To mitigate GBV and stabilise Benue, the following evidence-based interventions are proposed:

1. **Policy Reform:** Revise the 2017 anti-grazing law to include grazing reserves and subsidies for ranching, addressing resource conflicts and reducing herder-farmer clashes (Ibrahim-Olesin et al., 2021).
2. **Camp Infrastructure Upgrade:** Allocate funding to meet Sphere Standards, installing lockable toilets, solar lighting, and gender-segregated shelters in all 13 camps to curb GBV risks (UNHCR, 2024).
3. **Economic Empowerment Programs:** Scale women's "adashe" cooperatives through microfinance partnerships and vocational training, reducing survival sex by providing sustainable incomes (UN Women, 2023).
4. **Community Mediation Support:** Fund FBOs and traditional leaders to lead conflict mediation, integrating them into national peacebuilding frameworks to de-escalate ethnic tensions (Tiwo, 2024).
5. **Health and Psychosocial Services:** Rebuild health infrastructure with rape kits and counselling in all camps, addressing the 70% PTSD prevalence among women and reducing stigma (UNFPA, 2025).
6. **Educational Access:** Restore schooling for displaced children, prioritising girls to prevent forced marriages, and provide nutrition programs to address malnutrition in 22,000 children (UNICEF, 2025).
7. **Judicial Strengthening:** Train SEMA officials and establish mobile courts to prosecute GBV perpetrators, including aid workers, ensuring accountability and deterring institutional coercion (OCHA, 2023).

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