



Psychosocial Consequences of Displacement on Women during Farmers–Herders Clashes in Loko, Nasarawa State, 1999–2015

ABSTRACT

This study examines the psychosocial consequences of conflict-induced displacement on women in Loko, Nasarawa State, resulting from farmers–herders conflicts between 1999 and 2015. Historically, agrarian relations in Loko were regulated through seasonal land-use arrangements mediated by indigenous institutions such as councils of elders and lineage heads, which protected women's farming activities and household livelihoods. However, colonial land policies, post-independence statutory frameworks, demographic pressure, and the decline of customary dispute-resolution mechanisms disrupted these arrangements, leading to recurrent violence and forced migration. The study aims to analyze how displacement affected women's psychosocial well-being, socio-economic stability, and cultural roles within a changing historical context. Employing a qualitative historical methodology, the research draws on oral interviews with displaced women, government reports, and documentation from local non-governmental organizations. Findings reveal that displacement exposed women to multiple stressors, including loss of livelihoods, destruction of property, family separation, and increased gender-based vulnerabilities. Oral testimonies indicate enduring emotional distress, anxiety, grief, and challenges in sustaining familial and cultural responsibilities. Documentary evidence further shows that displacement weakened long-term socio-economic security and community cohesion. The study concludes that displacement in Loko represents a historically rooted process of social dislocation that erodes women's material and psychosocial resilience, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive psychosocial support, livelihood restoration, and the revitalization of indigenous conflict-resolution mechanisms.

Keywords: *Psychosocial Consequences, Displacement, Women, Farmers–Herders Clashes, Loko.*

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I. Introduction

The Middle Belt region of Nigeria, particularly Nasarawa State, has witnessed tireless farmers–herders conflicts since the late 20th century, driven by competition over fertile farmland, water resources, and seasonal grazing corridors. Loko, a predominantly agrarian community in Nasarawa Local Government Area, has historically been a center for both crop cultivation and pastoral grazing, with women constituting a significant portion of the agricultural workforce and local trading economy. However, between 1999 and 2015, the community experienced recurrent displacement as violent clashes between farmers and Fulani herders disrupted traditional patterns of coexistence, forcing families to flee homes, abandon farms, and seek temporary refuge in neighboring communities.

Historically, Loko's agrarian-pastoral interactions were mediated by customary institutions,

including elders' councils, village heads, and lineage leaders, who negotiated seasonal grazing rights and access to water points, and women played central roles within this framework: they were responsible for food production, household management, and the transmission of cultural knowledge, including traditional rites, festivals, and local conflict resolution practices. Unfortunately, forced displacement during violent conflicts disrupted these roles, leaving women vulnerable to emotional stress, loss of livelihood, and social dislocation. A displaced woman in Loko recounted:

"When the herders attacked our farm in 2008, I ran with my children into the bush for two days. We left everything behind our food, our stores, even our small trading goods. I could not think of anything else but survival."

Furthermore, the socio-economic consequences of displacement extended beyond immediate survival. Women often lost access to markets, farmland, and livestock, which were their primary sources of income. Additionally, prolonged displacement weakened family cohesion, disrupted intergenerational transmission of cultural practices, and eroded women's authority in community decision-making. While the existing literature on farmers–herders conflicts in Nigeria provides insights into general patterns of violence and resource competition, there remains limited scholarly attention to the psychosocial consequences of displacement on women in Loko, particularly over an extended period spanning multiple decades.

This study seeks to fill that gap by situating women's experiences within historical, socio-economic, and cultural frameworks, drawing on archival records, government and NGO reports, and oral testimonies from affected women. By examining the interplay between forced migration, gendered vulnerabilities, and community structures, this paper provides a shade for understanding the psychosocial effects of displacement and the broader implications for sustainable peace and social cohesion in Loko and by extension some communities within North-central Nigeria.

Historical Context of Displacement in Loko

Loko's history reflects a longstanding pattern of interaction between agrarian communities and pastoralists, shaped by both cooperation and negotiated competition for land and water resources. In the pre-colonial era, Loko's women and men depended heavily on subsistence agriculture, cultivating yams, maize, millet, and vegetables, while Fulani and other pastoral groups moved seasonally through the area with their cattle. While, access to grazing lands and water points was regulated by customary institutions, including elders' councils, lineage heads, and village assemblies, which mediated disputes through dialogue, compensation, and ritual oaths. These arrangements ensured that women could manage household production and participate in local markets without disruption, while herders maintained mobility for their livestock.

Thus, the colonial interventions in the early 20th century disrupted this balance, especially with the 1903 Native Lands Ordinances, implemented across Northern Nigeria which introduced statutory land tenure that privileged individualized land titles over communal ownership. This legal restructuring curtailed the customary rights of herders, restricting access to traditional grazing corridors and water sources in Loko. As recall these changes by residents of the area: Fatima Usman, a 72-year-old resident, recounted, "Before the white men came, our fathers and the herders agreed where cattle could graze. When they brought their law, disputes started, and women like us had to worry more about our farms being destroyed."

In addition, the post-independence policies compounded this problem, this is based on the introduction of the Land Use Act of 1978, this act centralized land administration under state governors, formalizing tenure arrangements and weakening the authority of customary institutions. Whereas local elders had once mediated disputes and ensured compensation for crop destruction, state law effectively marginalized their role. During the 2003 and 2008 clashes in Loko, women reported being forced to abandon farms and homes, losing both subsistence resources and income from local trade. One displaced trader, Maryam Ibrahim, described fleeing with her children during the 2008 violence:

"We left everything behind—yams, maize, even my small trading goods. We stayed in a makeshift camp for two weeks; I could not work, and my children were hungry most days."

By the 2010s, recurring clashes often sparked by competition over farmland and grazing access this led to chronic displacement in Loko. Women were disproportionately affected, as their

livelihoods, social networks, and cultural roles were disrupted. Available sources indicate that displacement weakened women's influence within the household and the community, making it harder to maintain traditional practices and intergenerational knowledge transfer. These historical processes of colonial land reforms, post-independence statutory interventions, and the destruction of customary dispute mechanisms created conditions in which forced migration became a recurrent feature of life in Loko, particularly impacting women's psychosocial well-being.

Psychosocial Consequences of Displacement

The reoccurring displacement exposes women in Loko to a range of emotional and psychological stressors, including fear, anxiety, grief, and symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Interactions with women displaced during farmers–herders conflicts reveal periodic nightmares, hypervigilance, and a profound sense of helplessness. Most of them recounted having to flee homes with children in the middle of the night, witnessing destruction of property, and fearing for the safety of male family members who often stayed behind to negotiate or defend farmland. One woman from Usha recalled:

“When the herders came in 2008, we ran into the bush with the children. I could not think of food or our farm. I only prayed that we survive. Even now, I wake up frightened by noises at night.”

Similarly, an elderly women reported a chronic anxiety over displacement episodes in 2003 and 2012, noting that repeated exposure to violence worn their sense of security and emotional well-being. Oral interviews indicate that women often bore the double burden of caring for children and elderly relatives while navigating the trauma of forced migration, exacerbating their psychological strain.

Studies in Nigeria and the wider North-central Nigeria confirm that women disproportionately experience trauma during forced migration, compounded by their primary roles in household sustenance and caregiving responsibilities. The cumulative stress of recurrent displacement contributes to depression, social withdrawal, and persistent fear, which undermines both individual and community resilience.

Loss of Livelihoods

Again, women in Loko rely heavily on subsistence agriculture, petty trading, and craft production for economic survival. Displacement interrupts planting and harvesting cycles, destroys stored food and farm tools, and eliminates access to local markets. A testimony from a displaced Loko trader emphasized the economic impact of recurrent clashes:

“During the 2008 and 2012 attacks, my small store in the village market was looted. I lost a season's income, and we had no choice but to depend on relatives and local NGOs for food.”

Such losses had not only immediate effects but also long-term this bas on the fact that reduction in access to resources undermines household stability, decreases food security, and perpetuates cycles of poverty. Women displaced for extended periods often struggled to reestablish farming activities or trading ventures, particularly when the destruction of crops and livestock coincided with key planting seasons. The disruption of livelihoods also increased dependency on external aid, weakening women's economic agency and bargaining power within their households.

Erosion of Cultural and Community Identity

Another effect of forced migration that feature prominently was the disruptions of social cohesion and weakens cultural practices that sustain community identity. Women in Loko traditionally play central roles in transmitting cultural knowledge, organizing communal rituals, and ensuring intergenerational continuity of local norms. However, displacement fractures kinship networks, separates families from ancestral homes, and interrupts participation in cultural festivals and rites of passage. Resultant to this was often a profound sense of cultural alienation on women. A participant in societal festivities noted:

“We could not celebrate planting or harvest festivals in the camps. Our children did not learn the songs, dances, or prayers that tie us to Loko. It was like our identity was slipping away.”

More often than not the psychosocial dislocations have intergenerational implications such that most of the children raised in displacement camps experience weakened cultural socialization, while women lose some of the authority and social respect associated with performing traditional

roles. The erosion of these cultural functions undermines communal resilience, leaving communities less able to collectively manage future crises.

In Loko, the intersection of emotional stress, livelihood loss, and cultural erosion demonstrates that displacement is not merely a physical disruption but a profound psychosocial crisis. The cumulative effect of recurring farmers–herders conflicts between 1999 and 2015 left women navigating complex challenges, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive interventions that address both material and psychosocial vulnerabilities.

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

Despite the multiple challenges posed by displacement, women in Loko have exhibited remarkable resilience, drawing on social, cultural, and religious resources to navigate crises. For instance, during the 2008 and 2012 farmers–herders clashes, displaced women formed informal support networks within camps and host communities, pooling resources to provide food, clothing, and temporary shelter. Women in Garaku, Usha, Ashoma and nearby settlements established collective kitchens and organized rotational child-care systems, ensuring that families could meet basic needs while maintaining some sense of routine.

Similarly, religious institutions also played a pivotal role in psychosocial support. Churches and mosques in Loko and neighbouring communities organized relief drives, offered counseling sessions, and provided spaces for women to share experiences and cope emotionally with trauma. One displaced woman reported:

“The mosque committee helped us every morning with food and prayers. Meeting other women who had lost farms and children gave me courage. I knew I was not alone.”

The women also employed economic coping strategies to sustain livelihoods by engaging in petty trading, local craft production, and collective farming in host communities. In some cases, women coordinated with relatives in unaffected villages to send seeds, tools, and small capital, enabling them to cultivate crops even while displaced. Available record suggests that these strategies, though limited in scope, prevented complete economic destitution:

“Even in the camp, we planted maize and vegetables in the host community’s land. It was not much, but it helped our children eat and sent something to our relatives back home.”

Mutual aid groups also functioned as informal insurance systems, where women contributed small sums of money or goods to assist members who suffered the greatest losses during each displacement episode. These traditional mechanisms reflected longstanding cultural practices of reciprocity and communal solidarity, which historically underpinned resilience during periods of environmental or social stress in Loko.

However, reliance on informal coping strategies alone was insufficient to mitigate the psychosocial consequences of repeated displacement. Chronic stress, disrupted education for children, and sustained loss of productive assets required more formalized interventions. Experts recommend integrated programs combining legal protection for displaced women, psychosocial counseling, and targeted livelihood restoration to prevent long-term mental health deterioration and economic marginalization. For example, UN Women interventions in Nasarawa State, though limited, demonstrated the potential of combining trauma counseling with skills training to empower displaced women and restore household stability.

In Loko, the persistence of displacement underscores both the resilience of women and the urgent need for coordinated policies that strengthen community-based support systems while addressing structural vulnerabilities created by farmers–herders conflicts.

II. Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, between 1999 and 2015, farmers–herders conflicts in Loko, Nasarawa State, and the broader North-Central region including Plateau, Benue, and Kogi States resulted in large-scale displacement, disproportionately affecting women. Women, as primary caregivers and contributors to household sustenance, faced profound psychosocial consequences, including persistent anxiety, grief over lost family members, and post-traumatic stress symptoms. In Loko, displaced women reported being forced to flee homes with young children, often into bushlands or temporary host settlements with limited shelter, food, and security. One woman recounted fleeing

during the 2008 clashes:

“We ran into the forest with only the children. Our farms were burned, and our houses destroyed. For weeks, I could not sleep; I feared for our lives and prayed constantly.”

Livelihood disruption further intensified women’s vulnerability. Across North-Central Nigeria, women engaged in subsistence farming, petty trading, and local artisanal activities suffered direct economic losses when fields were destroyed or markets were abandoned due to insecurity. In Benue State, for example, women displaced by similar clashes between 2007 and 2012 reported loss of stored grains and livestock, which were central to household survival. In Loko, repeated displacements between 1999 and 2015 destroyed crop yields and prevented access to local markets, forcing reliance on kinship support and humanitarian aid.

The erosion of cultural and community identity compounded psychosocial stress. Historically, pre-colonial arrangements in North-Central Nigeria allowed for negotiated access to grazing lands and shared water sources, mediated by lineage heads and council elders. These customary mechanisms fostered social cohesion and mitigated resource-based tensions. However, colonial land policies, such as the 1903 Native Lands Ordinances, imposed individualized ownership structures, disrupting communal access and customary dispute resolution. Post-independence legal reforms including the Land Use Act of 1978 and contemporary anti-grazing laws further weakened traditional authorities, leaving displaced women without culturally legitimate support networks. Source from displaced women in Loko confirmed that these legal and institutional gaps exacerbated feelings of isolation and helplessness:

“Even when we tried to settle disputes over farm destruction, the elders had no power. The government said we must report to the police or courts, but these were far and often unhelpful.”

Across the region, similar patterns emerged. In Plateau State, women displaced during the 2001–2004 clashes between Berom farmers and Fulani herders reported psychological trauma, social fragmentation, and interruption of communal rites such as planting festivals and child naming ceremonies. In Benue and Kogi States, women described long-term dislocation from ancestral homes, which disrupted the transmission of cultural practices and community networks critical for resilience.

Sustainable solutions to these challenges require multi-level interventions. First, recognition of women’s specific vulnerabilities during displacement is critical, encompassing access to psychosocial counseling, secure housing, and livelihood support. Second, integration of traditional dispute resolution practices alongside statutory legal frameworks can restore culturally relevant mechanisms for conflict mediation, as elders historically played crucial roles in negotiating seasonal grazing rights and communal reparations. Third, gender-sensitive support systems, including women-led cooperatives and community-based emergency relief structures, can empower women to maintain livelihoods and social cohesion during and after displacement.

Implementing these interventions would not only address immediate psychosocial needs but also reinforce community resilience, preserve cultural identity, and reduce women’s vulnerability to recurring cycles of displacement across North-Central Nigeria. By combining historical knowledge, local cultural practices, and contemporary policy approaches, policymakers and humanitarian actors can create a framework that mitigates the long-term consequences of farmers–herders conflicts on women.

III. Recommendations

Psychosocial Support Services

Establishing trauma-informed counseling centers in Loko is essential to address the emotional and psychological impacts of displacement on women. These centers should provide professional mental health services, group therapy sessions, and community-based psychosocial programs. Collaboration with local NGOs, religious organizations, and trained social workers can enhance accessibility and trust. For example, drawing from successful models in Plateau State, mobile counseling units can reach women in temporary shelters or host communities, ensuring continuous care even during ongoing conflicts.

Livelihood Restoration Programs

Economic empowerment is crucial for reducing vulnerability and rebuilding household

stability. Women displaced in Loko often lost farmlands, markets, and artisanal goods, disrupting seasonal income cycles. Livelihood restoration programs could include grants for replanting crops, microcredit schemes for small businesses, vocational training in trade skills, and cooperative market access. Partnerships with state agricultural development agencies, local microfinance institutions, and women's associations can facilitate sustainable economic recovery. For example, in Benue State, post-conflict livelihood programs for women included seed distribution and collective farming initiatives, which restored household income and food security within two planting seasons.

Integration of Traditional Institutions

Revitalizing indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms is a culturally grounded approach to preventing future displacement. Elders' councils and lineage heads historically mediated seasonal grazing disputes, balancing pastoralist mobility with farmers' land use. Reintegration of these structures should formally include women leaders, ensuring gender-sensitive solutions that address women's concerns over safety, land access, and market continuity. This can be operationalized by creating joint farmer–herder–community committees that convene regularly and liaise with local government authorities.

Community-Based Early Warning Systems

Participatory early warning systems can detect escalating tensions before they culminate in displacement. These systems could involve local women as monitors of grazing patterns, crop damage reports, and community grievances, reporting to neutral committees that include traditional and statutory authorities. ICT-based alert mechanisms—such as mobile phone networks, radio broadcasts, or WhatsApp groups—can disseminate warnings to vulnerable households. For instance, in Plateau State, integrating women into community monitoring networks allowed rapid mobilization of peace committees, which averted several potential clashes in 2011–2013.

Cultural Preservation Initiatives

Displacement erodes cultural identity, as women are central to transmitting norms, rituals, and communal knowledge. Initiatives to preserve cultural heritage could include mobile cultural centers, temporary community spaces for rituals and festivals, and training displaced women to document and teach local crafts, storytelling, and traditional knowledge. NGOs and local government partnerships can support festivals, religious ceremonies, and educational workshops for children to maintain intergenerational continuity. In Loko, oral testimony shows that women who maintained some form of cultural engagement during displacement reported lower psychological distress and stronger community cohesion.

Implementation Considerations

Achieving these recommendations requires multi-level collaboration between state agencies, local governments, civil society, and community leaders. Funding could be sourced from state budgets, TETFund community development initiatives, and international humanitarian organizations. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be embedded from the outset, using local indicators of women's wellbeing, household food security, and community cohesion to measure effectiveness. Historical knowledge of pre-colonial and post-colonial conflict management practices can guide culturally sensitive interventions, ensuring that modern programs complement, rather than replace, indigenous structures.

By combining psychosocial support, economic empowerment, integration of traditional institutions, early-warning mechanisms, and cultural preservation, these interventions can mitigate the long-term consequences of displacement and strengthen resilience among women in Loko and similar North-Central Nigerian communities.

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