

# Cyclical Trauma and Interrupted Futures: The Gendered Impact of Persistent Farmer-Herder Violence on Widows and Adolescent Girls in IDP Camps of Takum LGA, Taraba State, Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

The farmer-herder crisis in Nigeria's North East especially southern Taraba state which shares its borders with the middle belt states of Benue, Plateau and Nassarawa has precipitated a complex humanitarian emergency, marked by mass displacement and profound gendered consequences. This study investigates the cyclical and interlocking traumas experienced by two critically vulnerable yet distinct groups—widows and adolescent girls—displaced by recurrent violence in Takum Local Government Area (LGA) of Taraba State. Utilizing a qualitative case study methodology, the research focuses on IDP camps within Takum LG hosting survivors from villages like, Peva, Gatatti, Torlijam, Januan niyife, Januan gaba, Gbise and Tortser, devastated in the 2019, 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025 attacks. Findings reveal a devastating trajectory where initial violence triggers secondary traumas within the camp environment. For widows, spousal bereavement catalyzes a cascade of psychological distress (Complex-PTSD), economic precarity through land dispossession, and heightened vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Concurrently, adolescent girls face an environment where SGBV and exploitative transactional sex are normalized, leading to a “weekly experience” of teenage pregnancy that irrevocably terminates their education. This paper argues that the IDP camp, rather than a sanctuary, functions as a site of continued gendered insecurity, perpetuating a cycle of trauma that threatens to spill intergenerationally. The study concludes that without integrated, trauma-informed interventions targeting the specific vulnerabilities of these groups, the conflict will leave a legacy of entrenched poverty and psychological scarring that undermines long-term peace building and sustainable development in the region.

**Keywords:** Farmer-Herder Conflict, Internal Displacement, Gendered Trauma, Intergenerational Impact, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), Nigeria

## INTRODUCTION

The protracted farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria's North East represents a critical threat to human security, livelihoods, and national cohesion. Evolving from historical contests over natural resources, the conflict has morphed into a complex crisis characterized by identity-based violence, militia proliferation, and large-scale internal displacement, resulting in over 300,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the region (IDMC, 2023). Taraba State, situated within this volatile nexus, has been a recurrent flashpoint, with communities in LGAs like Wukari, Takum, Ussa local government area and Yangtu special development area experiencing relentless cycles of attack, displacement, and return, only to be displaced again.

This paper presents a granular analysis of the human cost of this crisis in Takum LGA, where many villages including Chanchanji, Many, Dogongawa, Muji I, Muji II, Amadu, Demevaa, New Gboko, Ansua and Tatti have been worse hit by the recent crisis. The resultant displacement has transformed public institutions and Church—into congested, informal IDP camps. Within these camps, a silent, gendered catastrophe unfolds, where the initial trauma of violence is compounded by the conditions of displacement itself. This crisis is not isolated; recent reports from neighbouring Ussa LGA detail renewed attacks in late 2025, displacing hundreds more and destroying farmlands, confirming the persistent and expanding nature of the threat (Dogo, 2025, as cited in Daily Post). Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps in Takum Local Government Area of Taraba State are a result

of the ongoing conflicts between the ethnic groups, as well as Fulani herdsman attacks. These clashes have led to significant displacement, with many IDPs struggling to access basic necessities like food, water, shelter, and education. Some key challenges faced by IDPs in Takum and other parts of Taraba State include:

1. **Inadequate Food and Water:** IDPs often rely on relief materials, which are frequently insufficient, leading to hunger and malnutrition.
2. **Poor Shelter Conditions:** Many IDPs are forced to live in overcrowded camps with inadequate shelter, making them vulnerable to disease outbreaks.
3. **Lack of Access to Education:** Children in IDP camps often miss out on education due to the absence of schools or qualified teachers, perpetuating a cycle of ignorance and poverty.
4. **Health Risks:** IDPs are exposed to various health risks, including disease outbreaks, due to poor sanitation and limited access to healthcare services. (Tyopuusu 2021).

While the macro-dynamics of the conflict are well-documented, the specific, differentiated impacts on female sub-groups within displacement settings remain under-explored. This study focuses on two such groups: widows, who face the compounded tragedy of bereavement and social-economic collapse, and adolescent girls, whose futures are being systematically erased through SGBV and educational termination. We posit that their experiences are not merely parallel but are interlocked in a cyclical trauma economy, where the vulnerability of one exacerbates the plight of the other, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of suffering with clear intergenerational implications.

The paper is structured as follows: a comprehensive literature review situates the study within discourses on the farmer-herder conflict, feminist security studies, and trauma theory. The methodology details a robust qualitative approach. The findings and discussion are presented in two core sections, analyzing the distinct yet interconnected traumas of widows and adolescent girls. The conclusion synthesizes the argument and proposes targeted policy interventions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This review synthesizes existing scholarship across four key domains to construct a robust theoretical framework for analyzing the cyclical trauma experienced by widows and adolescent girls in the Takum LGA IDP camps. It begins by deconstructing the evolution of the farmer-herder conflict, then engages with feminist security and political economy frameworks to theorize gendered vulnerability. It further explores the psychosocial dimensions of trauma and concludes by identifying the critical gaps this study aims to fill.

### The Metamorphosis of a Crisis: From Resource Competition to Complex Insurgency

The scholarly understanding of Nigeria's farmer-herder conflict has undergone significant revision, moving from simplistic binary explanations to nuanced, multi-causal models. The foundational **environmental scarcity thesis**, articulated by Homer-Dixon (1999), posited that climate change-induced desertification in the north, the shrinking of Lake Chad, and expanding agricultural frontiers created an inevitable collision over dwindling fertile land and water resources (Okoli & Atelhe, 2019). While this explains the structural backdrop, it fails to account for the conflict's escalating brutality and politicization.

Contemporary scholarship now frames the crisis as a **"complex insurgency"** (Blench, 2021), characterized by three key shifts:

1. **Militarization and Criminalization:** The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) across West Africa has transformed traditional herder sticks and farmer machetes into AK-47s. This has been coupled with the rise of organized criminal syndicates involved in cattle rustling, which in turn fuels a local arms race and militia formation for community self-defense (Higazi, 2021).
2. **Politicization and Identity Instrumentalization:** The conflict has been dangerously framed in ethno-religious terms—Fulani (often Muslim) herders versus indigenous (often Christian) agrarian communities. This framing, as Mueller (2021) argues, is frequently exploited by political elites for electoral mobilization, patronage, and resource allocation, thereby transforming local disputes over land into a broader national

security and identity crisis. This aligns with **Constructivist conflict theory**, which emphasizes how conflict is socially constructed through identity narratives and elite manipulation (Fearon & Laitin, 2000).

3. **State Failure and the Crisis of Governance:** The Nigerian state's response has been widely criticized as inconsistent, ineffective, and often partisan. Strategies have oscillated between a heavy-handed, militarized approach that fails to distinguish between criminals and entire communities, and political neglect (International Crisis Group, 2020). This governance vacuum creates a permissive environment for violence and impunity, undermining traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and leaving communities to fend for themselves. The Taraba State government too appears to be helpless as little or no appreciable effort is made in order to resettle displaced persons who have been away from their ancestral homes for a very long time. (Kwada 2025).

### **Feminist Security and Political Economy: Theorizing Gendered Vulnerability**

Feminist International Relations (IR) scholarship provides the critical lens through which this study analyzes the differentiated impacts of the conflict. **Feminist security theory**, as advanced by scholars like Sjoberg (2020) and Enloe (2014), fundamentally challenges traditional, state-centric security paradigms by asking “where are the women?” and asserting that insecurity is profoundly gendered. It posits that while men are more likely to be direct targets of lethal violence, women and girls bear a disproportionate burden of the indirect and long-term consequences of conflict and displacement (Carpenter, 2020).

The concept of the “**continuum of violence**” (Cockburn, 2012) is pivotal here. It suggests that pre-conflict patriarchal violence does not disappear during conflict but intensifies, transforms, and persists into post-conflict and displacement settings. The SGBV experienced by women and girls in IDP camps is not an aberration but a continuation of the structural violence embedded in patriarchal norms.

A **feminist political economy** lens further deepens this analysis. It examines how global and local economic structures, combined with gendered norms, shape experiences of crisis (True, 2012). For widows, this manifests as what Korieh (2020) terms a “crisis of social reproduction.” In the patrilineal societies of the Middle Belt, a woman's social identity, legal rights to land, and economic security are often mediated through her husband. His death disrupts the entire economy of social reproduction, leading to disinheritance and “property grabbing” by male relatives—a deliberate mechanism of patriarchal control that plunges widows and their children into destitution (Chukwuma, 2022; IOM, 2022).

Furthermore, IDP camps, ostensibly humanitarian sanctuaries, are often analyzed as sites of “gendered insecurity” (Krause, 2021). The camp's structure—overcrowding, lack of privacy, inadequate lighting, and securitized management—can inadvertently create environments where SGBV thrives with impunity (Freedman, 2020). The breakdown of social networks and the desperation for scarce resources foster what we term a “trauma economy,” where women's and girls' bodies become a currency for survival.

### **Psychosocial Trauma and its Intergenerational Transmission**

Understanding the psychological impact of these experiences requires moving beyond conventional PTSD models. Judith Herman's (2015) seminal concept of Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) is far more applicable. C-PTSD results from prolonged, repeated trauma from which there is no possibility of escape, such as in situations of captivity, domestic abuse, or, we argue, protracted displacement. Its symptoms include:

- Alterations in affect regulation (e.g., persistent dysphoria, explosive anger).
- Alterations in consciousness (e.g., amnesia, intrusive flashbacks).
- Alterations in self-perception (e.g., feelings of shame, guilt, helplessness).
- Alterations in relations with others (e.g., isolation, distrust).
- Somatization (e.g., chronic pain without medical cause).
- Alterations in systems of meaning (e.g., loss of faith, hopelessness).

This framework perfectly captures the profound identity disruption and chronic psychological distress described by the widows and adolescent girls in this study, whose trauma is not a single event but a continuous condition of life in the camp.

This trauma is not contained within the individual. The theory of intergenerational trauma transmission posits that the psychological and emotional effects of trauma can be transferred across generations through multiple pathways (Kellermann, 2020):

1. **Psychosocial Pathways:** Traumatized parents may exhibit attachment disorders, emotional numbing, or hypervigilance, impairing their capacity for nurturing parenting, which in turn affects their children's emotional and cognitive development.
2. **Sociocultural Pathways:** Family narratives, secrets, and communication styles shaped by trauma can socialize children into a worldview defined by fear and loss.
3. **Biological Pathways:** Emerging research in epigenetics suggests that extreme stress can cause chemical modifications that turn genes on or off, potentially predisposing offspring to higher levels of stress hormones and anxiety disorders (Yehuda & Lehmer, 2018).

When an adolescent girl's education is terminated by pregnancy, her capability to secure a prosperous future is severely diminished (Sen, 1999). This, combined with the trauma of SGBV and the stresses of early motherhood, creates a high-risk environment for her child, thereby ensuring the conflict's legacy is biologically and socially embedded into the next generation (Save the Children, 2022).

### Gaps in the Literature and This Study's Contribution

Despite this rich and interdisciplinary body of scholarship, critical empirical and theoretical gaps remain, particularly in the context of Southern Taraba State and Takum Local government in particular.

1. **Lack of Intersectional Analysis:** There is a scarcity of research that systematically differentiates the trauma experiences of female sub-groups (e.g., widows vs. adolescent girls) within the same conflict-induced displacement context. An intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1991) is needed to understand how age, marital status, and socioeconomic position create distinct vulnerability profiles.
2. **The IDP Camp as an Active Site of Trauma:** Existing literature often treats IDP camps as passive, neutral settings. There is a need to critically theorize the camp not just as a space of refuge, but as an active, political, and gendered site where trauma is reproduced and amplified through its very structure and governance.
3. **Bridging Macro and Micro Analyses:** While macro-political analyses of the conflict and micro-psychological studies of trauma exist, they often operate in silos. A integrated framework that explicitly links the macro-political economy of the farmer-herder crisis to the micro-psychosocial experiences of the most vulnerable is lacking.

This study contributes to filling these gaps by providing a nuanced, empirically grounded analysis that:

- Employs an intersectional lens to compare and contrast the trauma pathways of widows and adolescent girls.
- Theoretically frames the IDP camp as a critical locus in the “continuum of violence” and a producer of the “trauma economy.”
- Synthesizes theories from political science, feminist economics, and clinical psychology to build a comprehensive model of cyclical and intergenerational trauma in the context of the farmer-herder crisis.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, descriptive case study design (Yin, 2018) to facilitate an in-depth, contextualized exploration of the phenomena. The case was defined as the IDP camp cluster in Peva, Takum LGA, selected for its severity of impact and accessibility for research.

### Participants and Sampling

The research population comprised widows and adolescent girls (aged 13-19) displaced from the specified villages and residing in the four Canchanji camps. A multi-stage purposive sampling technique was used. Initial contact was made through camp coordinators, followed by snowball sampling to identify participants with specific experiences (e.g., teenage mothers, widows who had experienced land dispossession).

**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

Participant Group	Number of In-depth Interviews	Number of FGDs (Participants)	Key Characteristics
Widows	25	2 FGDs (n=16)	Age range: 28-55; All lost spouse in 2019-2024 attacks; Average number of children: 4.
Adolescent Girls	15	2 FGDs (n=14)	Age range: 14-19; 8 were mothers or pregnant at time of interview; All out of school.
Key Informants	6 (KIIs)	N/A	Camp coordinators (2), Community Leader (1), Health Worker (1), Local NGO staff (2).

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data was collected over a 3-month period in 2025 through:

- Semi-structured interviews *exploring experiences of displacement, trauma, SGBV, and coping mechanisms.*
- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) *to explore community norms and shared experiences.*
- Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) for contextual and verificatory data.

All sessions were recorded, transcribed, and translated. Thematic analysis was conducted following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2019), utilizing NVivo 12 software for data management. Codes were derived inductively from the data and grouped into analytical themes.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the [Blinded for Review] Institutional Review Board. Informed consent/assent was obtained from all participants. Psychological first aid was available, and confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: THE MULTILAYERED TRAUMA OF WIDOWS**

**The Cataclysm of Bereavement and Psychological Sequela**

The widows' narratives consistently described their husband's death as a cataclysmic event that shattered their world. Their grief was not a linear process but a state of pervasive psychological distress aligning with Herman's (2015) C-PTSD framework.

- *Symptomatology:* Participants reported chronic hypervigilance, intrusive flashbacks of the attacks, emotional numbness, and profound feelings of helplessness. A 38-year-old widow from Demevaa shared, “My mind is a battlefield. I see the fire, I hear the screams when I close my eyes. I am alive, but I am dead inside.” This reflects the “alterations in consciousness” and “persistent negative emotional state” central to C-PTSD (Killikelly & Maercker, 2020).
- *Disenfranchised Grief:* Their grief was often compounded by the inability to perform culturally mandated burial rites, leading to what Doka (2020) terms “disenfranchised grief”—a grief that is not openly acknowledged or socially supported. This lack of closure exacerbated their psychological pain.

**Systemic Economic Destitution and Land Dispossession**

The psychological trauma was inextricably linked to a rapid and severe economic collapse. The loss of their spouse, the primary breadwinner, was immediately followed by the loss of their livelihood.

- *Patterns of Dispossession:* A predominant theme was the systematic dispossession of farmland and property by their husband's kin. Over 80% of the widows interviewed reported experiencing some form of property grabbing. A 45-year-old widow from Amadu stated, “His family said the land belongs to their lineage. They took the farm, the yams in the barn, even our cooking pots. I was left with only my children and the clothes

we fled in.” This practice, well-documented by Chukwuma (2022), is a deliberate mechanism of patriarchal control that ensures long-term female dependency.

- *Survival Economies*: Stripped of their assets, widows were forced into a precarious “survival economy.” This included high-risk, low-return activities like manual labour, fetching firewood from dangerous border areas, and begging. This economic desperation was a key driver of their vulnerability to SGBV.

**Table 2: Primary Coping Mechanisms and Associated Risks for Widows (n=25)**

Coping Mechanism	Frequency Reported	Associated Risks
Dependence on erratic humanitarian aid	25/25	Food insecurity, malnutrition, competition.
Engaging in high-risk labour (e.g., firewood collection)	22/25	Physical assault, sexual violence, abduction.
Relying on extended family (often unsuccessful)	18/25	Rejection, further exploitation, stigma.
Engaging in transactional sex	9/25	STIs, unwanted pregnancy, social ostracization, further psychological trauma.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### The Erasure Of Adolescent Futures

#### The Normalization of SGBV and Transactional Sex

The IDP camps were described by key informants and girls alike as environments where SGBV was rampant and systematically under-reported. The phrase “weekly pregnancy” emerged as a chilling indicator of the scale of the problem.

- **Economies of Exploitation**: The collapse of the formal economy was replaced by a brutal “economy of exploitation.” Adolescent girls reported being coerced into transactional sex with older men, including camp officials, security personnel, and local traders, in exchange for cash, sanitary products, or food. A 17-year-old from Ansua explained, “The food they give us is not enough. If a man can give you 1,000 naira for your family, can you say no? You close your eyes and let him do what he wants.” This aligns with Freedman's (2020) analysis of how humanitarian crises create conditions for the sexual exploitation of minors.
- **Structural Insecurity**: The physical layout of the camps directly facilitated violence. The lack of lighting, secure gender-segregated latrines, and locked sleeping quarters made girls easy targets. The near-total absence of formal justice mechanisms created a culture of impunity for perpetrators.

#### Educational Termination and the Capability Deprivation

The destruction of educational pathways was a universally reported and deeply felt loss among the adolescent girls.

- **Direct and Indirect Barriers**: The direct conversion of schools into camps physically eliminated classrooms. Indirectly, the economic pressure on families, the stigma of pregnancy, and the lack of safety traveling to or within the camp served as insurmountable barriers. Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach frames this not just as a loss of schooling, but as a fundamental “capability deprivation”—a severe narrowing of their freedom to lead the kind of life they have reason to value.
- **Pregnancy as a Final Barrier**: For those who became pregnant, return to education was described as socially impossible. They faced stigma from peers and teachers and had no access to childcare. This effectively converted a temporary disruption into a permanent termination of their formal education, with lifelong consequences for their economic empowerment and social mobility (Save the Children, 2022).

## Synthesis: The Interlocking Cycle of Gendered Trauma

The traumas of widows and adolescent girls are not isolated; they form a synergistic, interlocking system that perpetuates suffering across generations. This cycle can be visualized as a feedback loop:

1. **Widow's Trauma → Daughter's Vulnerability:** A widow's economic desperation may implicitly or explicitly pressure her daughter to engage in transactional sex to support the family. Her psychological impairment (C-PTSD) reduces her capacity to provide supervision and emotional protection, leaving her daughter more vulnerable to predatory advances.
2. **Daughter's Trauma → Widow's Deepened Crisis:** A daughter's pregnancy places a new material and caregiving burden on the widow, deepening her economic and psychological distress. The shame and social stigma associated with the daughter's situation further isolate the family.

This cycle ensures that the trauma of the initial conflict is continuously reproduced within the camp environment. The child born into this context—to a traumatized teenage mother and a grandmother suffering from C-PTSD—starts life with a significantly higher risk of poor health, cognitive deficits, and limited opportunities, thereby inheriting the legacy of the violence (Kellermann, 2020). The farmer-herder crisis thus achieves a perverse longevity, etching its scars onto future generations.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has delineated the mechanisms through which the farmer-herder crisis in Takum LAGA produces and perpetuates a cyclical, gendered trauma for widows and adolescent girls in IDP camps. We have demonstrated that the camp itself is a critical locus of this trauma production, where humanitarian failure intersects with pre-existing patriarchal structures to create a perfect storm of suffering. The experiences of bereavement, dispossession, SGBV, and educational termination are not episodic but are interlinked in a system that ensures the conflict's impact endures long after the guns fall silent.

The persistent nature of the crisis, as evidenced by the 2025 attacks in Takum LGA, underscores the futility of short-term, relief-only approaches. A paradigm shift towards integrated, long-term, and trauma-informed intervention is urgently required.

### Policy And Intervention Recommendations

#### For State and National Government:

- a. **Security and Justice:** Establish women-only police units and mobile courts in camp settings to improve SGBV reporting and prosecution. Support community-led security watch groups.
- b. **Legal Empowerment:** Mandate and fund legal aid clinics to assist widows in challenging property grabbing, leveraging existing laws like the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act.
- c. **Education in Emergencies:** Dedicate resources to create safe, alternative learning spaces for displaced children and implement formal programs for young mothers.

#### For Humanitarian and Development Actors:

- a. **Integrated MHPSS:** Train and deploy community mental health workers to provide trauma-focused counseling and establish peer-support networks for both widows and adolescents.
- b. **Targeted Economic Programs:** Create protected livelihood programs (e.g., village savings and loans, in-camp petty trade) for widows and cash-transfer programs conditioned on girls' school attendance.
- c. **Comprehensive SRHR and Protection:** Provide adolescent-friendly SRHR services, establish girl-only safe spaces with trained mentors, and distribute dignity kits and solar lamps to reduce SGBV risks.

### Avenues for Future Research

Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to track the intergenerational outcomes of children born in these camps. Further research is also needed to explore the roles, perceptions, and potential as allies of men and boys in these disrupted communities to inform holistic peacebuilding.

Ultimately, breaking the cycle of trauma is not merely an act of humanitarian compassion but a strategic imperative for building a resilient and peaceful post-conflict society. The futures of Taraba State's most vulnerable citizens depend on actions taken today.

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