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TOWARDS A GENDERED ANALYSIS OF COMMUNAL CONFLICTS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
Communal conflicts in Nigeria have proliferated, creating profound socio-economic, political, and humanitarian consequences. These conflicts are often rooted in multifaceted causes, such as resource control, governance structures, and identity politics, with significant impacts on men and women. This paper presents a gendered analysis of communal conflicts in Nigeria, highlighting the differentiated experiences of men and women and the fluidity of traditional gender roles in conflict settings. It underscores the latent and manifest consequences of violence on women, including displacement, sexual violence, and economic vulnerabilities, while also examining the targeting of men through forced recruitment and extermination. The study employs content and narrative analysis of academic literature, grey literature, and media reports to illustrate these dynamics and emphasises women's active roles in peacebuilding and conflict mitigation. The findings reveal that ignoring the intersectionality of gender with other identity markers perpetuates systemic inequalities and hinders sustainable peace. These findings inform the paper's concluding emphasis on the need for inclusive conflict resolution strategies and policy frameworks that address these gendered realities.

Keywords: Communal conflicts, Gender analysis, Peacebuilding, Intersectionality, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Communal conflicts have proliferated in Nigeria, resulting in massive social costs stretching from economic to political. Increasingly, such costs have occurred within the context where large-scale violence has become the norm rather than the exception (Neji & Edet, 2024). Exact statistical data on the number of casualties resulting from communal violence in Nigeria remains impossible because of the complexities of these conflicts and the limited media reportage on the number of incidents across the various theatres of violence nationally. Such complexities often extend from the multi-factorial dimension of communal conflicts, which usually manifests in their rooting on multiple issues, from land to power and identity. However, the high intensity of these conflicts has frequently been demonstrated by the high volume of casualties left in the wake of communal clashes. In May 2023, for instance, at least 100 deaths were recorded in Plateau State, Nigeria, adding to a long pattern of endless bloodletting that had disrupted social cohesion in the state and the broader region (Al Jazeera, 2023). The social dimensions of these conflicts are often further illustrated by their broad intersections with broad issues of "gender roles" and "gender norms" that usually typify conflict settings. Such roles generally entail men and women being constructed into divergent stereotypical models. Such models often attribute violence primarily to men and assign a victimhood status to women (Chaban 2016; Exposito and Dominguez, 2009). However, a growing body of literature has demonstrated the impracticality of such dichotomous descriptions of the lived experiences of armed conflict. A decade of research across national contexts has pointed towards the idea that women are also active actors, such that they can engage in violence as combatants and perpetrators, drawing cases from Rwanda (Pfanner, 2010), Sierra Leone (Cohen, 2013), Colombia and Guatemala (Weber,

2021). Thus, excessive focus on this tendency contributes to a discourse wherein male victimisation has often been overshadowed and stigmatised (Hagen 2019; Gorris 2015). Again, this tendency has often been credited with other negative contexts, such as failing to capture the fluidity and diversity of gender roles in conflict settings (Alison, 2007).

This paper is a response to the need to bridge the theoretical blind spots of conflict research within the context of communal conflicts. To that end, the paper is centred around two lines of inquiry: exploring the diverse ways communal conflicts impact women and men in Nigeria, discussing the roles women and men occupy as "conflict escalators" or "conflict mitigators" through the examination of the fluid roles men and women occupy within the context of communal conflicts. The paper examines these issues in a discourse spanning seven parts. To begin its discourse, the article discusses the context of communal conflicts in Nigeria. It characterises communal conflicts in Nigeria as pervasive, prevalent, and socially costly. The following section examines the intersectionality of gender and communal conflicts in Nigeria, emphasising the nuanced and evolving scholarly focus on how gender shapes experiences and dynamics within these conflicts. This sets the stage for the article's attempt to bridge the gap in gendered scholarship on communal conflicts in Nigeria. The paper also articulates its methodology thereafter. In the following two sections, the paper explores the issues at the heart of its discourse. In the final part, the paper concludes and summarises its discussion.

2 Communal conflicts in Nigeria: An overview

Communal conflicts in Nigeria represent a deeply rooted social reality. They may thus be described as pervasive to the extent that the country has become a vast geography of violent communal conflict. Such conflicts, by nature, develop from a multiverse of factors that originates from both socio-cultural and political bases. Typically, communal conflicts are a violent extension of contests over controlling natural resources, including hydro, mineral, and agricultural resources (Okwaraji, Aguwa, Shywobi-Eze, Nwokpoku, & Nduanya, 2016). Also, contests over control of traditional governance structures (such as chieftaincy), property and marital matters often present another causative factor (Lamidi & Oluseyi, 2023). Nevertheless, it may be discussed that the contributions of other variables, especially political institutions, have often been decisive in sustaining the perpetual cycle of communal conflicts. Communal conflicts have been discussed as extending from the misapplication of constitutional and legal instruments and biased enforcement by state institutions (Fatai et al., 2023). Adeleke et al. (2023) have argued that political institutions and actors are often complicit in communal conflicts due to inequitable and biased resource distribution structures, which often fuel tensions between communities. The identified institutions have often crisscrossed the various tiers and levels of government, and have, by extension, arguably intersected with structural issues associated with Nigeria's struggling state-building project (Edet, Odey, Edet, & Ojukwu, 2025).

Nigeria's federal structure is often featured in the literature as an "intensifier" of community tensions and grievances, given its suppression of specific clusters of interests and the institution of the hegemony of large-member identity groups (Nolte, 2002). This has often been coupled with frail and inefficient governance structures, particularly the local government, which has intensified poverty and polarisation of communities (Uzuegbunam, 2014). The inefficiencies of governance structures, to an extent, may arguably be more of a deliberate design, which is captured succinctly by the following remarks in respect of intra-communal conflicts: "Not always taken seriously, intra-ethnic conflicts are often dismissed as minor squabbles between brothers. Since 'blood is thicker than water', conflicts among members of the same group are misconceived as easily resolvable." (Onwuzuruigbo, 2010, p. 1808). This context often informs

community moves to instrumentalise democratic processes for securing qualitative and resource advantages over their counterparts competing for claims to public goods (Iwu, 2015).

Communal conflicts in Nigeria are characterised by variations in character, which often reflect geographical differences. In the eastern part of the country, such conflicts, at some point, have been described as more of intra-group conflicts occurring among members of the same ethnic stock, which have suffered from historical problems of insufficient analysis and research (Ibeanu, 2003). In the northern part of Nigeria, communal conflicts have often overlapped with religious identities (Alimba, 2014). This has also been the case in the central part of Nigeria, albeit with elite politicking and the influence of political actors complicating the landscape of violence (Uduma 2013; Okoli and Uhembe 2014). Conflicts in the south, meanwhile, have often displayed the character of vicious inter-group conflict, also extending to entangle with anti-state violence in the Niger Delta (Ebiede, 2017). Nevertheless, the costs of these conflicts have been severe, particularly in Cross River State, where vicious, high-casualty communal conflicts have displaced entire communities across at least five local governments of the state (The Fund for Peace, 2014). Inarguably, the recurring nature of communal conflicts contributes to Nigeria's heavy internal displacement burden, which has been noted to be the third highest on the continent, with more than two (2) million persons displaced internally as of 2020 (Sasu, 2022).

3 A review of the literature on the intersectionality of gender and communal conflicts in Nigeria

Over the past decades, scholars have increasingly acknowledged the existence of an intersectionality between gender and communal conflicts in Nigeria. This increasing focus reflects a consciousness of the existence of a broader connection between armed violence and gender. Such consciousness increasingly centres on the different recruitment methods of male and female participants of armed groups (Viterna, 2013), the diverse impacts of violence on gender relations, which often implies either "de-empowerment" or "empowerment" for women (Wood, 2008), and the diverse forms of women's assumption of "conflict mitigator" roles through peace activism (Berry, 2018). Direct connections between gender and armed conflict have also been buttressed in the literature, giving rise to comments such as: "… If gendered violence can be undermined at its taproot—domestic violence within the home—the effects, as we have shown with violent patriarchy, should cascade outward to affect many social phenomena, including state security and behaviour." (Hudson, Caprioli, Ballif-Spanvill, McDermott, & Emmett, 2009, p. 26). Nevertheless, the existing literature on communal conflicts in Nigeria has been insufficient in its gendered perspective. As such, it can be stated that research on the intersectionality of gender and violence within communal contexts is in its early stages. One such work, Krause (2019), explicitly addresses the intersectionality of gender and communal conflict in Nigeria. Krause's article examines how everyday gender relations and societal perceptions of masculinity influence the mobilisation of violence in communal conflicts. The paper analyses how narratives surrounding conflict and victimisation are gendered, affecting both men's and women's roles in violence and peacebuilding.

Krause argues that civilian agency in conflict situations is gendered, with distinct notions of masculinity influencing individuals' willingness to engage in violence or nonviolence (Krause, 2019, p. 1466). Men who participated in violence often held views that reinforced violent masculinities, while those in nonviolent communities embraced nonviolent masculinities supported by community norms, particularly from women and elders (Krause, 2019, p. 1473). Again, Krause spotlights how men from nonviolent communities faced social stigma and mockery for not participating in violence and being labelled as "women" (Krause, 2019, p. 1467). This feminisation served as a form of social control that pressured men to conform to

violent norms. Nevertheless, some former fighters encouraged these men to resist such mockery and maintain their commitment to peace (Krause, 2019, p. 1469).

Another study by Koneyikan and Vincent-Osaghae (2018) discussed gender perspectives in coping and resolution strategies related to violent communal conflicts (VCCs) experienced in communities of Edo and Ondo States, Nigeria. Regarding coping strategies, females were found to adopt more diverse approaches, including resignation to fate, prayer, avoidance of costs, and reduction of food rations, while males primarily coped by selling assets and abrogating responsibilities (Koyenikan & Vincent-Osaghae, 2018, p. 10). Females were more vulnerable due to their reliance on a broader range of coping strategies, highlighting the need for targeted government relief and policy measures to ensure compensation for losses and support community peace-building initiatives (Koyenikan & Vincent-Osaghae, 2018).

While few and far between, the existing literature effectively supports the notion that men and women experience communal conflict differently and that gender roles within these contexts are fluid. These notions can be effectively appraised using the intersectionality theory. Intersectionality theory highlights that gender intersects with other identity markers, such as ethnicity, class, and religion, shaping how men and women experience social reality and the fluidity of gender roles.

Women are victims and active agents in peacebuilding and conflict management. In South-Eastern Nigeria, women's civil society organisations have engaged in traditional conflict resolution practices, demonstrating the adaptive nature of gender roles in such contexts (Onwuzuruigbo I. , 2013; Onwuzuruigbo I. , 2013). Similarly, in Jos, women have adopted practices like "checkmating" to manage ethnoreligious tensions, illustrating how violent conflict reshapes traditional gender norms (Rigual, Udasmoro, & Onyesoh, 2022).

The intersectionality framework shows that ignoring women's voices, particularly those from marginalised ethnic or religious backgrounds, perpetuates cycles of conflict by failing to address systemic inequalities (Wallace, 2023). Conversely, acknowledging how gender intersects with ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status can foster inclusive and sustainable peace (Smith & Stavrevska, 2022).

4 Methodology

This article constructs its presentation using qualitative data gathered from academic literature, grey literature, and newspaper publications. The study draws on academic literature to establish the conceptual and theoretical foundation for the paper's presentation. The academic literature is central to justifying the study and also helpful in constructing the lens through which to view communal conflicts in Nigeria. The grey literature, on the other hand, is primarily sourced from the publications of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), Nigerian government agencies, and ministries that are at the forefront of responding to communal violence and its associated humanitarian consequences. Newspaper reports are consulted to source data on incidents and gain insights into the lived experiences of victims of communal conflict. Data from the respective data sources were analysed using narrative and content analysis techniques, which included thematic reading and coding, to extract insights and trends relevant and specific to the article's discourse.

5 Male and female experiences of communal conflict in Nigeria

Males and females experience communal conflicts in common and diverse ways. For women, experiences are sometimes somewhat latent and indirect. Such latent consequences may be in the form of "… economic pressures through displacement, livelihood and property destruction, or the loss of household breadwinners as a result of the violence" (Taft, Blyth, & Murphy,

2018). These consequences often heighten the vulnerabilities of women. For instance, in the aftermath of various communal conflicts in Jos, Nigeria, women have often faced acute hunger and homelessness (Umeha, 2010) in addition to poor maternal care conditions, which have often compromised safe child delivery (Lolo, 2010). However, women's experiences of communal conflict in Nigeria have also included direct and manifest experiences in the form of fatalities, which arise from armed attacks by hostile communal actors. In May 2023, women formed the bulk of the estimated 20 fatalities recorded during a violent attack on a community in Plateau State in the north-central part of Nigeria (Reuters, 2023). Fighting in Benue state between two communities months earlier also had a high count of women as fatalities (Kola, 2022)

Where the outcomes are not fatalities, as is the case in the northwest, it is often the norm that women are often objectified as sexual artefacts either through rape or "forced marriages" by criminal actors who abduct them for that purpose (International Crisis Group, 2020). This practice reflects patriarchal norms that commodify women as reproductive assets and "spoils of war" in conflict situations (Lacey, 2013) and seek to emphasise power and dominance (Catic & von Hlatky, 2014). Furthermore, building on knowledge from other conflict contexts, these situations constitute acts of 'strategic terrorism' pivot towards the infliction of psychological trauma (Zawati, 2015). Such actions tend to accumulate into secondary consequences that affect health and welfare post-conflict, as illustrated by the story below:

> "...there was the case of about twenty women and girls captured by the Boghom people and taken to a village called Kangyal in Kanam Local Government Area. The women and their daughters suffered the worst form of sexual abuse as their captors took turns on them every evening for three months. When they were eventually rescued, five of them were pregnant and tested positive to HIV/AIDS test." (Alawemo & Muterera, 2011, p. 83).

For men, experiences are often two-way: between extermination and forced recruitment. Extermination, which comes in the form of executions or mass disappearance, is not just perpetuated by non-state actors but also by state actors. Reports have abounded of members of the state security structure indiscriminately targeting men while responding to communal violence (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Such targeting inarguably connects to the established stereotypes which posit men as combatants or potential threats, leading to their disproportionate targeting for executions or forced recruitment during conflicts (Carpenter, 2006). Beyond that, this targeting is designed to diminish their role as leaders or defenders, conveying messages to destabilise societal hierarchies (Boomen, 2019).

6 The fluidity of gender roles in communal conflicts in Nigeria

In contexts affected by communal conflict, substantial evidence shows that women have often seen their roles change, deviating from traditionally prescribed roles. In the northwest of Nigeria, ethno-communal conflicts have meant that women have increasingly been made to occupy breadwinning roles and responsibilities (International Crisis Group, 2020). Such role transmutations reflect trends which have also been applied in other situations of violent conflicts across Nigeria. For instance, in eastern Nigeria, the transmutation of roles often has breached the male-female social dichotomy, given that women have seen their domestic responsibilities expand to "incorporate hitherto male-dominated duties of providing for basic needs and covering the costs of educating their children" (Terhile, Edet, Undiandeye, & Edet, 2024, p. 24). The fluidity of gender roles also extends to the "actor" dimensions of conflict. At various times, women's actions have been perceived as deviating from the conventional framing of "pacifist." In the context of the 2001 communal conflict in Jos, women actively served as "foils" for gangs

of armed men, offering support to enhance the operations of the men (Dinshak, 2008), and were also noted to have been involved as "perpetrators" (Ettang & Okem, 2016).

Anecdotal evidence for the active participation of women in violence during the communal clashes in Jos could be seen in the following testimony published by Human Rights Watch:

> "Christian women—from Kuru Karama and other communities—allegedly carried containers of petrol that were used to set fire to houses and Muslim victims caught by the mob. Witnesses described to Human Rights Watch at least two instances where they saw women participating in the killing, including beating to death a small boy and setting fire to an old man after he had been beaten by the mob." (Human Rights Watch, 2013, p. 53)

This active participation connects to psycho-economic logic. In the economic sense, it could be noted that "some women support the fighting because they benefit from it. They may get some goods or clothing from looting, or their sons come back with money" (Krause, 2019, p. 1480). Psychologically, active support for violence also drew from affinity with community identity and the urge to protect it (Krause, 2019). Such dynamics are unsurprising when contextualised within the compass of extant configurative literature. Over the past decades, the evolving and dynamic nature of gender roles in armed conflict situations has been well noted in the literature. For instance, it has been argued that during and after conflicts, women often assume roles beyond caregiving, participating as combatants, activists, and community leaders (Cockburn, 2001).

Also, recent literature has discussed the idea that armed conflict disrupts traditional gender roles, leading to changes in women's societal positions and challenging assumptions about men as protectors and women as passive victims (Sjoberg, 2020). As active actors, as seen in the Jos communal conflicts, certain members of the womenfolk have appropriated "conflict escalator" roles for themselves. This assumption of a role in support of violent actors or active participation in violence has modern equivalents, specifically in the strategic usage of women in violent roles in the context of the Boko Haram insurgency. Women and girls have been co-opted as suicide bombers, human shields, and fighters, showcasing how insurgent groups weaponise gender to further their objectives, thus exacerbating communal violence (Adeyanju, 2020) and demonstrating the use of gender-based violence as a deliberate instrument of warfare (El-Affendi & Gumel, 2015).

It is worth noting that, in assuming the role of actors, women have also attempted to instrumentalise their visibility to mitigate communal conflicts. A prominent illustration of this instance is the HD Jos Forum (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2014). Through this forum, the women of Jos, Plateau State, articulated their concerns and perspectives regarding the violence, including killings, terrorism, sexual violence, and the loss of homes and property due to the persistent communal crises in Jos (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2014). In articulating these concerns, these women have equally emphasised the incorporation of conflict prevention and transformation modules into the formal educational curriculum in recognition of the imperative of equipping future generations with the tools to foster peace. (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2014). Concurrently, it has been suggested that there is a need to enhance women's economic independence and access to resources, which are vital for their empowerment (CHD, 2014). From the perspectives of women, it has been established that there is also a need for trust-building initiatives among different ethnic and religious groups, including promoting intermarriage and encouraging dialogue to foster understanding and cooperation (CHD, 2014). These steps must be combined with policies and strategies that tackle the

structural causes of poverty, which is essential, mainly as these issues disproportionately affect women and children in the context of violent conflict (CHD, 2014).

7 Conclusion

Questions about the differentiated experiences of men and women in communal conflicts remain incipient and in demand of a vast corpus of literature. This paper has presented a gendered analysis of communal conflicts in Nigeria by contrasting men's and women's experiences while highlighting the fluidity of traditional gender roles during and after such conflicts. Women often endure both latent and direct consequences of communal violence. Latent effects include economic pressures stemming from displacement, the destruction of livelihoods, and the loss of breadwinners, all of which heighten their vulnerabilities. In addition to these latent consequences, women also suffer direct impacts, such as fatalities from armed attacks. Beyond fatalities, women are frequently subjected to sexual violence, including rape and forced marriages, particularly in the northwest, where abductors commodify them as reproductive assets and "spoils of war." These acts reflect entrenched patriarchal norms and serve as forms of psychological and strategic terrorism, leaving lasting health and welfare consequences. Men, on the other hand, are often targeted through extermination or forced recruitment, driven by societal stereotypes that label them as combatants or threats. The fluidity of gender roles in communal conflicts is another significant theme discussed within this paper. Women in conflict-affected regions often assume roles traditionally occupied by men, becoming breadwinners and taking on responsibilities such as providing basic needs and funding education. These shifting roles align with broader trends in conflict literature, which highlight the disruption of traditional gender norms during armed conflicts. Women are increasingly assuming leadership roles and participating as combatants. Despite these violent dynamics, women have actively sought to centre themselves in the peacebuilding efforts and contribute to community survival and reconstruction. Advocacy, as demonstrated by the HD Jos Forum, shows that women can leverage their lived experiences to drive solutions that address both immediate and systemic issues. Moving forward, therefore, development actors and parties engaged in conflict interventions must necessarily prioritise, for effective interventions that truly address the root causes, the disaggregated collection of conflict data, which emphasises the collection of data based on experiences by gender. This should be paralleled by the mainstreaming of gendered experiences of communal conflicts as a key theme in local research agendas on communal conflicts across Nigeria.

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