Gendered Vulnerabilities in Crisis: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Women and Girls in Nigerian Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camps in Benue State Amidst Insecurity.

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Abstract

The escalation of armed conflicts, communal violence, and displacement in Nigeria's Middle Belt region has engendered profound gendered vulnerabilities, particularly among internally displaced women and girls residing in camps. This study examines the lived experiences of displaced females in Benue State IDP camps, highlighting the intersections of gender, insecurity, and structural inequalities that shape daily survival. Drawing on empirical case studies from camps in Agan, Daudu, and Gbajimba, the paper interrogates patterns of violence, socio-economic precarity, health challenges, gender-based violence (GBV), and coping mechanisms adopted by displaced women and girls. Findings reveal that insecurity not only precipitates displacement but continues to reproduce gendered forms of deprivation within the camps. The study concludes with policy recommendations aimed at strengthening gender-responsive humanitarian interventions in Benue State.

Keywords: Gendered vulnerabilities, Internally Displaced Persons, Benue State, Women and girls, Insecurity, Lived experiences, Gender-based violence.

Introduction

Conflict-induced displacement has become one of the most pressing humanitarian concerns in Nigeria over the last decade, with Benue State emerging as a significant hotspot due to persistent insecurity, environmental pressures, and governance challenges. The Middle Belt region -historically characterized by agrarian livelihoods, ethnic plurality, and struggles over land- has witnessed intensifying confrontations between farming communities and armed herders.

These conflicts have escalated into widespread violence, loss of life, destruction of property, and the mass displacement of rural populations.[1] Benue State in particular has recorded some of the highest displacement figures nationally, with entire communities uprooted and forced into makeshift settlements or government-recognized Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. Within these camps, women and girls constitute a numerical majority, largely due to gendered patterns of mortality during attacks, the migration of men in search of livelihood opportunities, and sociocultural norms that position women as primary caretakers of children.[2]

Yet, despite their numerical significance, the experiences of displaced women and girls in Benue State remain insufficiently analyzed within scholarly literature on conflict, humanitarian crises, and internal displacement in Nigeria. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on the broader drivers of displacement, general humanitarian conditions, or security-sector failures[3]. What is often missing is a systematic understanding of how insecurity produces *gendered vulnerabilities*-that is, specific forms of harm, deprivation, and marginalization that disproportionately affect women and girls. As feminist scholars have long argued, crises do not impact all individuals equally; rather, pre-existing social hierarchies shape exposure to violence, access to resources, mobility, livelihood opportunities, and bodily autonomy.[4] In the context of displacement, these inequalities are frequently intensified, as women navigate not only the fallout of violence but also the structural limitations embedded in camp governance systems, humanitarian aid frameworks, and local cultural norms.

Benue State's IDP camps provide an important empirical site for interrogating these dynamics. Women who arrive in camps often do so after witnessing traumatic events such as the killing of spouses, the razing of homes, or the abduction of children.[5] Their displacement marks the beginning of protracted insecurity: while camps are designed as safe havens, they frequently lack adequate security, gender-sensitive structures, sanitation facilities, and livelihood opportunities. Girls face heightened risks of sexual exploitation, early marriage, domestic labor burdens, and school dropout-challenges compounded by poverty and the absence of protective institutional mechanisms[6]. For pregnant women,

limited access to reproductive healthcare further exacerbates vulnerabilities, often resulting in preventable maternal and neonatal complications.

Furthermore, the humanitarian architecture in Benue State, though crucial, has struggled to adopt deeply gender-responsive approaches. Assistance programs often assume households as homogenous units, thereby obscuring power relations within families and failing to account for the specific needs of widows, adolescent girls, survivors of gender-based violence, single mothers, and women with disabilities[7]. These gaps are significant because they shape the distribution of resources, the fairness of camp management systems, and the overall well-being of displaced females. As insecurity persists, humanitarian actors face increasing pressure to deliver aid under difficult conditions, often without comprehensive gender assessments. Consequently, interventions may inadvertently reproduce gendered inequalities rather than alleviate them.

This paper therefore aims to foreground the lived experiences of women and girls in Benue State's IDP camps, emphasizing how gender interacts with insecurity to shape displacement realities. By drawing on empirical case studies from camps in Agan, Daudu, and Gbajimba, this study seeks to deepen understanding of economic, social, psychological, and health-related vulnerabilities faced by displaced females. It argues that gendered harms in IDP settings are not incidental but are structurally produced through the intersection of insecurity, poverty, patriarchal norms, and institutional shortcomings. Ultimately, the paper contributes to broader debates on gender, conflict, and humanitarian governance by highlighting the urgent need for gender-responsive policies and interventions that center the agency, dignity, and protection of displaced women and girls in Nigeria.

Conceptual Framework: Gender, Insecurity, and Displacement

Understanding the lived experiences of women and girls in IDP camps in Benue State requires a conceptual framework that situates gender at the center of insecurity and displacement dynamics. Gender is not merely a biological category but a social construct that organizes relations of power, access to resources, mobility, and exposure to violence[8]. In conflict and humanitarian contexts, gender roles often become more rigid, with women and girls disproportionately affected

due to their structural location within society. The framework for this study draws on feminist political economy, intersectionality and critical security studies to explain how gender shapes vulnerability, resilience, and agency among displaced populations.

Feminist political economy posits that crises tend to intensify pre-existing gender inequalities, especially in contexts where women are economically dependent or socially marginalized [9]. In rural Nigerian communities-including those in Benue State-women are central to food production, caregiving, and household maintenance, yet they often lack secure land rights, economic autonomy, and decision-making power. When violence erupts, these structural disadvantages heighten their vulnerability: they are more likely to be trapped during attacks, lose livelihoods, and face barriers to rebuilding their lives after displacement. Feminist theorists argue that gendered labor divisions shape not only women's economic outcomes but also their risk exposure during conflict and displacement [10].

Intersectionality further deepens this conceptualization by highlighting that gendered experiences are mediated by other axes of identity, including age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability, and marital status [11]. For example, widowed women who have lost spouses during attacks often face heightened vulnerability due to limited protection and reduced social status. Adolescent girls may suffer differently, confronting risks of sexual exploitation, forced marriage, or school dropout. Pregnant women and women with disabilities face additional barriers in accessing healthcare, mobility, and humanitarian aid. Intersectionality thus reveals that "women" do not constitute a homogenous category but experience layered and differentiated forms of vulnerability within IDP settings.

Critical security studies offer another lens through which to understand the gendered nature of displacement. Traditional security frameworks often prioritize state-oriented threats-territorial integrity, national defense, or elite political stability-while overlooking the everyday insecurities experienced by women [12]. Feminist scholars challenge this narrow conceptualization, arguing that insecurity must be understood holistically: encompassing not only physical violence but also economic deprivation, lack of healthcare, restricted mobility, food scarcity, and psychological trauma[13]. From this perspective, insecurity persists even after

women enter IDP camps, where inadequate infrastructure, internal violence, and unstable humanitarian aid systems continue to expose them to harm.

The framework also incorporates concepts from gender-based violence (GBV) scholarship, which identifies conflict and displacement as environments that heighten the risk of sexual and domestic violence[14]. In IDP camps, women may be subjected to coercion by intimate partners, camp officials, or other displaced persons, particularly in contexts where accountability systems are weak. The erosion of social protection mechanisms during displacement creates opportunities for exploitation, reinforcing patriarchal structures and limiting women's autonomy.

Moreover, this conceptual framework recognizes the role of structural violence in shaping displacement experiences. Structural violence refers to the invisible systems-economic inequalities, discriminatory laws, social norms-that disadvantage individuals and groups over time [15]. In Benue State, displacement is not only caused by direct attacks but also perpetuated by structural conditions such as inadequate governance, weak social services, and entrenched gender norms. These structures make it difficult for women to access justice, healthcare, economic opportunities, and leadership positions both before and after displacement.

Finally, the framework acknowledges that despite these vulnerabilities, women and girls exercise agency in meaningful ways. They develop coping strategies, establish support networks, challenge oppressive norms, and actively participate in sustaining camp communities. Feminist scholars emphasize that recognizing agency is crucial for avoiding victimizing narratives that overlook the resilience and resourcefulness of displaced women [16]. Taken together, this conceptual framework provides a multidimensional lens for analyzing the lived experiences of women and girls in Benue IDP camps. It highlights the interplay of gender, structural inequality, and insecurity, demonstrating that gendered vulnerabilities are not incidental but are deeply embedded within socio-political and economic structures exacerbated by conflict and displacement.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the gendered experiences of women and girls residing in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in Benue State. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for capturing the complexity of lived experiences, social dynamics, and individual perceptions that quantitative methods may overlook [17]. Fieldwork was conducted between 2021 and 2024 across three major IDP locations-Agan (Makurdi LGA), Daudu (Guma LGA), and Gbajimba (Guma LGA)-selected due to their large population sizes, accessibility, and documented histories of insecurity[18].

Primary data collection relied on semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), participant observation, and documentary review. A total of 75 interviews were conducted with displaced women, adolescent girls, camp officials, healthcare workers, and representatives of the Benue State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA). Additionally, six FGDs were held, each comprising eight to ten participants grouped by age and marital status to encourage open discussion on sensitive topics such as gender-based violence, livelihood challenges, and health concerns [19]. Participant observation provided further insight into everyday camp routines, gendered divisions of labor, and informal coping mechanisms.

Secondary data-including policy documents, NGO reports, and academic literature on displacement and gender-supplemented empirical findings and provided contextual grounding [20]. Ethical considerations were central to the research design. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained verbally due to literacy constraints among some respondents. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of participants, particularly survivors of violence [21]. The methodology thus combines rigorous qualitative techniques with ethical sensitivity to produce a nuanced understanding of gendered vulnerabilities in Benue State's IDP camps.

Context of Insecurity and Displacement in Benue State

Benue State, located in Nigeria's Middle Belt, has witnessed persistent and escalating insecurity over the past decade, resulting in one of the highest concentrations of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country. Known as the

"Food Basket of the Nation" due to its agrarian economy, Benue's fertile lands have increasingly become contested spaces in violent clashes between farming communities and armed pastoralist groups [22]. The farmer–herder conflict-driven by environmental degradation, desertification-induced migration, demographic pressures, and weak land-governance systems-lies at the heart of widespread displacement in the state. These tensions have been exacerbated by the proliferation of small arms, the emergence of armed militias, and insufficient state capacity to protect rural settlements [23].

Communities in Guma, Gwer West, Logo, Agatu, and Makurdi LGAs have been especially affected, with repeated raids leading to the destruction of homes, farmland, and livelihood assets. Many attacks occur at night or early morning, catching residents unprepared and forcing mass flight. Women often flee with children while male family members attempt to defend the community or flee separately, resulting in the separation of households and heightened vulnerability for women and girls [24]. In some cases, displaced families traverse dangerous terrains and spend days hiding in forests before reaching temporary settlements or official IDP camps. This traumatic journey marks the beginning of a protracted displacement experience.

Beyond farmer–herder conflicts, other forms of insecurity contribute to the displacement landscape in Benue State. These include rural banditry, kidnapping for ransom, communal clashes, and the activities of armed criminal networks that exploit weak policing and porous borders [25]. Seasonal patterns of violence-often linked to migration cycles and agricultural seasons-create recurrent waves of displacement, preventing many communities from achieving long-term stability. For largely agrarian households, this cyclical displacement significantly undermines food security, disrupts agricultural production, and entrenches poverty.

The humanitarian implications are substantial. As of 2024, Benue hosts tens of thousands of IDPs living in a mix of formal camps and informal settlements. Formal camps such as Agan, Daudu, and Gbajimba were established to accommodate those who could not return home due to ongoing insecurity; however, many more IDPs live in host communities with limited support [26]. The

strain on local infrastructure-schools, health centers, water supply-has intensified, and humanitarian agencies have struggled to meet the growing needs of displaced populations amidst funding constraints.

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by this insecurity. The mass killings and targeted attacks on men in some communities have created a significant population of female-headed households, many of whom lack economic resources and social protection [27]. Displacement disrupts established community support systems, leaving women more exposed to gender-based violence, exploitation, and limited access to healthcare. Additionally, girls face heightened risks of early marriage, school dropout, and trafficking during periods of instability.

The state government, through the Benue State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA), collaborates with national and international partners to provide relief; however, the scale and persistence of insecurity have overstretched available resources. Humanitarian response efforts are further challenged by poor road networks, limited security escorts for aid convoys, and fluctuating funding levels [28]. As a result, displacement in Benue State has evolved from an emergency condition into a protracted crisis requiring long-term, gender-responsive interventions.

Empirical Case Studies and Lived Experiences

Economic Deprivation and Livelihood Insecurity

Economic deprivation remains one of the most significant challenges confronting displaced women and girls in Benue State's IDP camps. The loss of farmland, livestock, household assets, and tools during violent attacks has led to an abrupt disruption of livelihood systems on which rural households traditionally depend [29]. Women who previously engaged in farming, petty trading, and food processing activities find themselves unable to resume income-generating work due to insecurity, displacement, and the absence of productive resources. This sudden decline in economic independence is particularly devastating for widows and female-headed households, who often bear the full responsibility of providing for children in camp settings [30].

Empirical evidence from Agan and Daudu camps illustrates the severity of livelihood insecurity. A 32-year-old widow from Logo LGA reported that she had not earned a steady income since fleeing her village in 2022. Before displacement, she cultivated yam and cassava; however, camp conditions offer limited opportunities beyond occasional labor or small-scale trading within overcrowded markets [31]. Similarly, a focus group with adolescent girls in Gbajimba revealed that many resorted to informal labor such as water fetching, domestic work, or gathering firewood-activities that expose them to risks of harassment and exploitation-in order to support their families [32].

Humanitarian assistance, though vital, is often irregular and insufficient. Food distributions are sporadic, and the decline in funding for protracted crises forces IDPs to rely on unstable coping mechanisms. These include skipping meals, borrowing food, or engaging in transactional relationships to meet basic needs [33]. Such conditions reinforce gendered vulnerabilities and entrench poverty, making economic recovery extraordinarily difficult for displaced women and girls.

Gender-Based Violence and Insecurity Within Camps

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains one of the most pervasive and deeply entrenched threats confronting women and girls in IDP camps in Benue State. The convergence of displacement, weakened community protection systems, and the erosion of traditional social structures creates an enabling environment where women's vulnerability to multiple forms of violence is sharply heightened [34]. Within these camps, GBV manifests in physical, sexual, psychological, and structural forms, often shaped by unequal gender relations and exacerbated by the persistent presence of armed conflict [35].

A significant driver of GBV in the camps is **the collapse of pre-existing social networks and protective mechanisms** that traditionally regulated community behaviour. In their absence, displaced women face heightened exposure to predatory behaviours from male camp residents, local vigilantes, and, in some cases, security personnel entrusted with protecting them[36]. Reports from camp-based interviews indicate that teenage girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, often coerced into transactional sex in exchange for food, menstrual products, or small amounts of money [37]. Such exploitative arrangements are

sustained by unequal power dynamics and a humanitarian system where relief distribution is intermittent, insufficient, or mediated by male authority structures [38].

Insecurity within the camps is further compounded by **poor lighting, inadequate policing, and the absence of gender-sensitive camp layouts**. Many camps report that women avoid using communal toilets at night due to fear of sexual assault, highlighting how design and infrastructure deficiencies translate into chronic insecurity for displaced women [39].The overcrowded nature of makeshift shelters also contributes to intimate partner violence (IPV), as displacement-induced frustration, economic hardship, and altered family roles exacerbate domestic tensions [40].

Cultural norms around stigma and silence present an additional barrier. Survivors face strong disincentives to report abuse, including fear of community ostracism, retaliation from perpetrators, or disbelief by authorities [41]. In many cases, women who report GBV are pressured by community elders or relatives to "settle" the matter privately, reinforcing a cycle of impunity. The absence of functional reporting channels, coupled with the scarcity of trained female security or social welfare personnel, further discourages survivors from seeking help [42]. Moreover, psychological violence-including verbal humiliation, threats, social exclusion, and emotional manipulation-remains widespread but under-recognized. Interviews reveal that displaced women internalize these experiences as part of the "normal" hardships of camp life, demonstrating how displacement reshapes gender norms and normalizes violence [43]. Overall, GBV within Benue State IDP camps is both a symptom and a driver of broader insecurity. It reflects structural gender inequalities, militarized environments, and humanitarian gaps that collectively undermine women's dignity, bodily autonomy, and sense of safety [44].

Health Challenges and Inadequate Reproductive Care

Health challenges constitute a major dimension of vulnerability for displaced women and girls in IDP camps across Benue State. The collapse of formal healthcare systems in areas affected by violence, combined with the limited and inconsistent availability of health services within camps, places displaced women at heightened risk of preventable illnesses, reproductive health complications, and

maternal mortalit[45]. Most camps depend on temporary clinics operated by overstretched humanitarian agencies or local volunteers, which often lack essential drugs, diagnostic equipment, and trained personnel. As a result, women frequently report challenges such as untreated infections, malaria, gastrointestinal diseases, and chronic conditions exacerbated by poor living conditions [46].

Reproductive health services are particularly inadequate. Pregnant women often receive little or no antenatal care, and emergency obstetric services are virtually nonexistent in many camps [47]. Women recounted walking long distances or relying on commercial motorcycles to reach distant health facilities during labor, a journey that exposes them to physical danger and increases the likelihood of complications. Cases of miscarriages, obstructed labor, and postpartum infections are alarmingly common, reflecting a systemic failure to prioritize women's reproductive health in humanitarian planning [48].

Adolescent girls face additional vulnerabilities, including limited access to menstrual hygiene products and the absence of privacy-friendly WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) facilities. Many girls rely on improvised materials, which increases the risk of infection and social stigma [49]. Furthermore, early pregnancy-often linked to sexual exploitation, transactional sex, or forced relationships-poses serious health risks for teenage mothers whose bodies are not fully developed for childbirth [50]. Access to sexual and reproductive health information is also limited. Interviews revealed that many women lacked knowledge of family planning methods, while others described inconsistent availability of contraceptives or the refusal of some providers to offer them without spousal permission [51]. This absence of autonomy over reproductive choices contributes to unwanted pregnancies and worsens the economic pressures already faced by displaced families.

Psychological distress is another dimension of health insecurity. Many women experience trauma related to displacement, loss of family members, or exposure to violence. Despite the high prevalence of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic symptoms, mental health support services are rarely available in camps [52]. Overall, the intersection of poor infrastructure, resource shortages, and gender-specific

health needs produces a fragile health environment that undermines the wellbeing, dignity, and survival of displaced women and girls in Benue State [53].

Education Disruptions and Risks for Adolescent Girls

Education is one of the most profoundly disrupted domains for adolescent girls in IDP camps in Benue State. Displacement uproots students from established schools, deprives them of educational materials, and interrupts consistent attendance, effectively truncating their academic progression [54]. Many adolescent girls report missing months or even years of schooling due to insecurity, the destruction of local schools, or the relocation of teachers to safer areas. Such disruptions not only compromise academic achievement but also limit future employment prospects, exacerbating socio-economic vulnerabilities [55]. The gendered impact of educational disruption is further intensified by societal norms and household responsibilities. Adolescent girls are often tasked with domestic chores, caregiving for younger siblings, and supporting household subsistence activities within camps, which limits their time and capacity to attend formal or informal schooling programs [56].This contrasts with displaced boys, who are more likely to access alternative educational opportunities or vocational training, reflecting entrenched gendered disparities in learning access.

IDP camps also expose adolescent girls to additional safety risks that hinder educational participation. Poorly constructed or overcrowded learning spaces, lack of separate sanitation facilities, and long distances to temporary schools make girls vulnerable to harassment, sexual assault, and abduction [57]. In response, families often restrict girls' mobility, preventing them from attending school altogether. Early marriage and transactional sexual relationships emerge as coping mechanisms for some families, further removing girls from educational pathways [58]. Humanitarian agencies and NGOs have introduced accelerated learning programs, non-formal education centers, and protective measures in some camps; however, these efforts remain insufficient in addressing the scale of need. The combination of interrupted schooling, insecurity, and socio-cultural constraints results in the long-term marginalization of displaced adolescent girls, limiting their ability to achieve literacy, numeracy, and life skills necessary for resilience, empowerment, and social reintegration [59]

Psychological Trauma and Mental Health Stressors

The experience of displacement in Benue State's IDP camps exposes women and girls to profound psychological trauma and mental health stressors. The cumulative impact of witnessing violence, losing family members, and being uprooted from familiar social and cultural environments significantly affects emotional well-being and cognitive functioning [60]. Many displaced women report persistent anxiety, depression, nightmares, and post-traumatic stress symptoms, often compounded by the daily stressors of life in camps such as overcrowding, inadequate shelter, and scarcity of basic resources [61].

Gendered vulnerabilities intensify these mental health challenges. Women and girls, especially survivors of gender-based violence, face heightened psychological distress due to social stigma, fear of retaliation, and the silencing of their experiences within community and institutional settings [62]. The trauma of sexual exploitation, coercion, or intimate partner violence within camps leaves lasting emotional scars, often unaddressed due to the limited availability of mental health professionals or psychosocial support services [63]. Adolescent girls, in particular, are susceptible to anxiety and depression resulting from interrupted schooling, social isolation, and uncertainty about their future prospects [64].

Cultural perceptions of mental health further complicate the situation. Many displaced women are reluctant to seek psychological support due to fear of social judgment or beliefs that emotional suffering should be endured privately. Consequently, psychological trauma is often internalized, manifesting in somatic complaints, withdrawal, and impaired daily functioning [65]. Humanitarian agencies and NGOs have introduced psychosocial support programs, including counseling sessions, peer support groups, and recreational activities aimed at stress relief; however, these interventions are frequently limited in scale and unable to reach all affected individuals [66].

The enduring effects of psychological trauma not only hinder individual recovery but also undermine family cohesion, coping capacity, and broader community resilience. Recognizing the centrality of mental health in displacement contexts is therefore essential for comprehensive humanitarian interventions that address

both immediate survival and long-term psychosocial well-being of displaced women and girls in Benue State [67].

Coping Strategies and Community Agency

Despite the profound vulnerabilities faced by displaced women and girls in Benue State's IDP camps, they demonstrate considerable agency through adaptive coping strategies and collective action. Coping mechanisms range from individual survival strategies to organized community initiatives, reflecting both resilience and resourcefulness in the face of prolonged insecurity and deprivation [68]. Women frequently engage in informal economic activities such as petty trading, food processing, and small-scale farming within camp perimeters to generate income and sustain their households. These strategies, while constrained by resource scarcity and insecurity, illustrate active attempts to regain control over livelihoods and household well-being [69].

Community networks also play a critical role in supporting coping and resilience. Displaced women often form savings and credit associations, women's cooperatives, and peer support groups to share resources, knowledge, and psychosocial support. These networks provide protection against economic shocks, reduce social isolation, and foster solidarity in addressing gender-specific challenges, including GBV and child care responsibilities [70]. Adolescent girls participate in mentorship and informal educational programs, demonstrating agency in maintaining learning continuity despite interruptions caused by displacement [71].

Religious and cultural practices constitute another form of coping. Prayer groups, faith-based gatherings, and traditional rituals offer psychological comfort, reinforce social bonds, and help individuals process trauma. Women also employ storytelling and collective memory-sharing as psychosocial strategies, contributing to emotional resilience and community cohesion [72].

Humanitarian agencies have sought to harness these local capacities by providing skills training, psycho-social support, and participatory program design. Nonetheless, structural limitations-such as overcrowding, insufficient funding, and intermittent access to resources-restrict the effectiveness and scalability of

these initiatives. Despite these challenges, displaced women and girls remain proactive agents of their own welfare, navigating adversity through creative problem-solving, mutual support, and community mobilization [73]. Recognizing and strengthening such agency is essential for designing gender-sensitive interventions that enhance resilience and promote long-term recovery in Benue IDP camps.

State, Humanitarian Actors, and Gaps in Protection

The protection of women and girls in Benue State IDP camps is a shared responsibility between the state, humanitarian actors, and local communities; however, systemic gaps and operational challenges limit the effectiveness of these interventions. The Benue State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) serves as the primary governmental body tasked with coordinating disaster response, managing camps, and facilitating the delivery of relief services [74]. Despite its mandate, the agency faces logistical constraints, insufficient funding, and a shortage of trained personnel, all of which undermine the timely provision of protection, food, shelter, and healthcare. In many cases, state security forces tasked with maintaining camp safety are overstretched or inadequately trained to address gender-specific vulnerabilities, resulting in limited preventive measures against crime and gender-based violence [75].

Humanitarian organizations, including national NGOs, international agencies, and faith-based groups, provide essential services ranging from food distribution and medical care to psychosocial support and educational programs [76]. While these actors have made significant contributions, their interventions are often fragmented, short-term, and dependent on donor funding cycles, which may fluctuate or be insufficient to meet the scale of need. Coordination between state agencies and humanitarian actors is sometimes weak, leading to duplication of efforts in some areas while other urgent needs remain unmet.

Significant protection gaps persist in several domains. Inadequate camp infrastructure, including insufficient lighting, poor WASH facilities, and overcrowded shelters, exposes women and girls to sexual exploitation, harassment, and physical violence [77]. Limited access to legal aid, weak reporting mechanisms, and societal stigma further discourage survivors of abuse from

seeking justice or protection. Additionally, displaced persons living outside formal camps in host communities often fall outside the reach of both state services and humanitarian interventions, leaving them particularly vulnerable [78].

These systemic shortcomings underscore the need for comprehensive, gender-responsive, and context-specific approaches to protection. Enhancing coordination among government agencies, humanitarian actors, and community networks, coupled with capacity building, sustained funding, and participatory program design, is essential for reducing vulnerabilities and promoting the safety, dignity, and well-being of women and girls in Benue State IDP camps [79].

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex and intersecting vulnerabilities experienced by women and girls in Benue State IDP camps, reflecting broader patterns of gendered marginalization in humanitarian crises. Economic deprivation, insecurity, disrupted education, health challenges, and psychological trauma intersect to produce a multidimensional vulnerability landscape that disproportionately affects female IDPs [80]. The loss of livelihoods, as evidenced through disrupted farming, petty trading, and household resource depletion, undermines women's agency and increases dependency on humanitarian aid, reinforcing pre-existing socio-economic inequities [81].

Gender-based violence emerges as both a direct and indirect consequence of displacement and insecurity. The erosion of traditional protective structures, overcrowded shelters, inadequate camp infrastructure, and limited policing create environments where women and girls are exposed to sexual exploitation, harassment, and intimate partner violence. These dynamics not only compromise physical safety but also have profound psychosocial consequences, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress, highlighting the necessity of integrating mental health services into humanitarian interventions [82].

Education disruptions further exacerbate vulnerabilities, particularly for adolescent girls. Interrupted schooling and unsafe learning environments increase the risk of early marriage, child labor, and social marginalization. These findings align with previous research indicating that protracted displacement

disproportionately affects girls' access to education, curtailing future economic opportunities and reinforcing cycles of poverty [83].

Despite these challenges, women and girls demonstrate notable resilience. Coping strategies-including informal economic activities, peer support networks, community-led savings groups, and psychosocial support-underscore the capacity for agency within constrained circumstances. These adaptive responses highlight the importance of recognizing displaced women as active participants in their survival and recovery, rather than passive recipients of aid [84]. However, gaps in protection persist. Limitations in state capacity, coordination challenges among humanitarian actors, and insufficient funding restrict the effectiveness of interventions. Vulnerable populations living outside formal camps are particularly underserved, indicating the need for context-specific strategies that extend protection, education, and healthcare beyond established camp boundaries [85].

Overall, this discussion underscores the necessity of gender-responsive, multi-sectoral approaches that address both immediate humanitarian needs and long-term structural inequalities. Interventions must integrate protection, livelihood support, psychosocial care, and education, while promoting women's agency and participation in decision-making. Only through such comprehensive strategies can the intersecting vulnerabilities of displaced women and girls in Benue State be effectively mitigated [86].

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study underscores the multifaceted vulnerabilities experienced by women and girls in Benue State IDP camps, shaped by the intersection of gender, displacement, and insecurity. Empirical evidence demonstrates that displacement results in economic deprivation, disrupted education, limited access to healthcare, psychosocial trauma, and heightened exposure to gender-based violence. These intersecting challenges reveal how crises amplify pre-existing social inequalities, leaving displaced women and girls disproportionately disadvantaged compared to other populations.

The findings further highlight the resilience and agency demonstrated by displaced women despite severe structural constraints. Coping mechanisms-including informal economic activities, community networks, peer support, and culturally embedded psychosocial strategies-illustrate adaptive responses that mitigate, though do not eliminate, vulnerability. Such agency underscores the necessity of recognizing displaced women as active participants in their survival, protection, and recovery processes rather than passive recipients of humanitarian assistance.

However, persistent gaps in protection, healthcare, education, and livelihood support demonstrate systemic deficiencies in both state capacity and humanitarian response. Overcrowded shelters, inadequate WASH facilities, irregular food distributions, and limited access to reproductive and mental health services perpetuate vulnerabilities, particularly for women and adolescent girls. Coordination challenges among state actors, NGOs, and international agencies further constrain the effectiveness of interventions, while displaced populations outside formal camps remain largely underserved.

Based on these findings, several policy recommendations are proposed. First, the Benue State government should strengthen protection mechanisms, enhance the capacity of SEMA, and ensure the provision of gender-sensitive infrastructure within camps. Second, humanitarian actors must adopt integrated, multi-sectoral approaches that address livelihoods, psychosocial support, health, and education simultaneously. Third, participatory program design should be prioritized, ensuring that displaced women and girls have meaningful input in decision-making and resource allocation. Fourth, long-term interventions should extend beyond formal camps to reach displaced populations living in host communities, thereby reducing protection and service gaps. Finally, sustained funding, monitoring, and coordination between state and humanitarian actors are critical to ensure that interventions are both effective and resilient to protracted crises.

In conclusion, addressing the intersecting vulnerabilities of displaced women and girls in Benue State requires comprehensive, gender-responsive strategies that combine immediate humanitarian relief with long-term structural solutions. By prioritizing protection, education, health, livelihoods, and psychosocial well-

being, and by leveraging women's agency, policymakers and humanitarian actors can foster resilience, dignity, and sustainable recovery in protracted displacement contexts.

Footnotes

1. Reports by humanitarian and security-monitoring agencies highlight recurrent patterns of violent farmer–herder clashes in Benue State.
2. Field observations and demographic reports from Benue IDP camps (2021–2024).
3. Existing literature tends to prioritize conflict drivers and security breakdowns over gender-specific displacement experiences.
4. Feminist political economy and intersectional theorists emphasize that crises intensify structural gender inequalities.
5. Interview accounts from displaced women in Agan and Daudu camps (2022–2023).
6. Focus group discussions with adolescent girls in Guma LGA camps (2023–2024).
7. Assessment reports by NGOs and SEMA indicate limited gender mainstreaming in humanitarian programming.
8. Gender as a social construct shaping power relations is well established in feminist theory.
9. Feminist political economy analyses argue that crises exacerbate existing structural inequalities.
10. Scholars note that gendered divisions of labor influence women's exposure to risk during conflict.
11. Intersectionality theory emphasizes overlapping identities in shaping experiences of marginalization.
12. Traditional security paradigms often neglect everyday insecurities faced by marginalized populations.
13. Feminist security studies expand the definition of security beyond physical threats to include structural and social vulnerabilities.
14. Global evidence shows a rise in gender-based violence during displacement and humanitarian crises.
15. Structural violence literature explains how systemic inequalities produce long-term harm.

16. Feminist scholars emphasize recognising women's agency to avoid reducing them to passive victims.
17. Qualitative methods allow researchers to capture subjective and context-specific experiences in humanitarian settings.
18. Agan, Daudu, and Gbajimba camps were chosen due to population size, accessibility, and documented conflict histories.
19. FGDs facilitated collective reflection and deeper insight into shared gendered challenges.
20. Documentary sources helped contextualize field data within broader policy and academic frameworks.
21. Ethical procedures such as informed consent and confidentiality were strictly followed.
22. Environmental pressures and land-use conflicts are widely documented as drivers of farmer–herder clashes in Benue State.
23. Reports highlight the rise of armed militias, weak border controls, and limited policing capacity in rural communities.
24. Interviews with displaced households in Guma and Logo LGAs describe patterns of nocturnal attacks and family separation.
25. Rural banditry and kidnapping have increased insecurity across the Middle Belt region.
26. Benue State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) records indicate large populations living both in formal and informal displacement sites.
27. Field observations and NGO assessments note high numbers of female-headed households as a result of conflict-related deaths.
28. Humanitarian actors report logistical and security challenges in delivering aid to remote or volatile areas.
29. Displacement-related destruction of farmland and livelihood assets is widely reported across Benue's conflict-affected LGAs.
30. Field interviews indicate high numbers of widows and female-headed households experiencing acute economic hardship.
31. Interview with a displaced farmer in Agan camp (2023).
32. Focus group discussion with adolescent girls in Gbajimba camp (2024).
33. Humanitarian reports highlight inconsistent food distributions and declining donor support in protracted displacement settings.

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