
AALIYAH OVAYOZA IBRAHIM

NEITHER FARMERS NOR HERDERS

Centering Women in Strategies for Agro-Pastoral
Conflict Resolution

aoi7@georgetown.edu

Farmer-herder conflicts in the Sahel are intensifying due to land pressures, which ongoing demographic and climate changes will no doubt exacerbate. Women, vital to agricultural and pastoral livelihoods, often face greater crop losses, displacement, and barriers to recovery while being excluded from formal peacebuilding processes. Only 28% of farmer-herder conflict studies recognize women's roles, often portraying them as victims. It is crucial for national and regional policies, such as Nigeria's NLTP and the ECOWAS Transhumance Protocol, to include women's voices in land governance and conflict resolution. The paper recommends developing gender-sensitive recovery policies, enhancing regional mobility governance to acknowledge women's roles, and ensuring their participation in livelihood support programs to foster sustainable peace.

Conflict Context

The Sahel is a region located south of the Sahara Desert, spanning several countries in West Africa and extending slightly into Central Africa. Ecologically classified as a semi arid zone, this environment significantly shapes the livelihoods of its primary inhabitants, who typically engage in crop production as farmers (agriculturalists) or livestock rearing as herders (pastoralists). As early as 2006, several dynamics emerged that continue to influence the region's agro-pastoral conflict landscape (Moritz, 2006).

The most prominent shift has been the increasing competition between farmers and herders for access to land (Figure 1). While the root causes of this competition are debated, changing land use patterns have been widely recognized as key contributing factors (Benjaminsen et al., 2012). As land use boundaries become less distinct, localized tensions between farming and herding communities escalate into chronic violence, further intensified by demographic and climate pressures and weakened community governance structures. Adding to the complexity is a sociocultural divide between these groups. In many parts of the Sahel, herders and farmers belong to different ethnic communities, which can exacerbate conflicts along ethnic lines (Shettima & Tar, 2008).

Sahel on the move: Migratory pastoralist routes

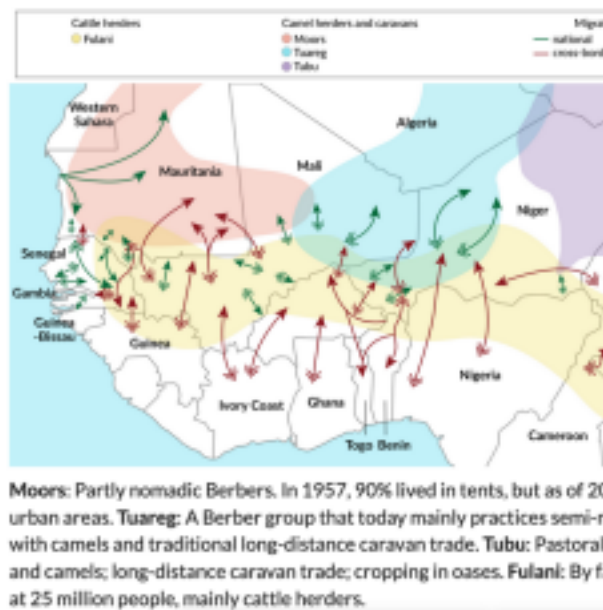


Figure 1: Sahel on the Move

(Sourced from Nogueira Pinto, 2025)

women as passive victims rather than active participants.

Women remain largely invisible, both

structurally and symbolically, in

dominant narratives

surrounding these farmer herder conflicts.

This exclusion of women in the

farmer-herder narratives of conflicts in the

Sahel results not only from traditional

gender norms that associate violence and

negotiation with men but also from formal

policies and media representations that

portray

A systematic scoping review of farmer-herder conflicts in Africa illustrates this exclusion, revealing that only 28% of related studies mention women primarily as victims (Nassef et al., 2023). National agricultural censuses also overlook women's contributions, failing to account for how women underwrite 40% of agricultural production, 80% of agricultural processing, and 70% of agricultural distribution labor. (McOmber, 2020). Moreover, during conflicts, women face significantly higher crop destruction rates than men (*Gender Analysis of Pastoral Systems in Three Sub Saharan African Countries*, 2024).

Thus, the women's exclusion positions them in a 'neither farmer nor herder' category, obscuring their vital contributions to local economies and resource management while also reinforcing gender biases in both conflict analysis and policy responses.

Problem Analysis

Two key dimensions emerge when centering women to address farmer-herder conflicts:

1) the understanding of gender roles, particularly those of women, within farming and

herding communities, and 2) the differential impacts of farmer-herder conflicts based on gender. These two dimensions challenge the normative assumptions in conflict analyses that overlook existing gender dynamics (Aoláin et al., 2017). Applying a comprehensive and strategic environmental security lens to understanding the recurring cycles of violence between farming and herding communities in the Sahel also means integrating a gender analysis to resolve these conflicts. As the analysis below demonstrates, centering women in agro-pastoral conflict resolution offers a pathway to cultivating positive peace and building resilience in affected communities.

Gender Roles within Farmer and Herder Communities

One critical area of addressing farmer-herder conflicts is understanding gender within both herding and farming communities, particularly focusing on the roles of women. Considering and integrating these internal gender dimensions across conflict resolution strategies is vital for managing escalating crises across the region.

For example, there are different configurations of gender roles in pastoral communities. In some pastoral communities, such as the Fulani in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria, men are responsible for seasonal or annual migrations, while women remain in strategically settled locations to manage other aspects of pastoral life. In others, such as the Tuareg of Mali, entire communities migrate together, including women and children. Scholars have highlighted several factors that shape the cultural roles assigned to women across these different models of pastoralism (Onyima, 2021; Yurco, 2024). However, a consistent finding is that women in these societies have a significant socio-economic impact (Balogun & Dudu, 2024). Whether engaged in direct livestock activities, such as herding, or indirect activities, like milking and processing cattle products, women's labor is vital to the welfare and sustainability of pastoral households.

In contrast, women's roles in many farming communities are shaped by factors such as the type of crops grown, the location of the community, and their access to land. Because conflicts between farmers and herders are primarily rooted in land competition, the issue of gender roles is pronounced in agricultural communities where land access to women is likely to be already limited (Babatunde, 2025). In such settings,

farmer-herder conflicts can significantly undermine women's contributions to household well-being, particularly through subsistence farming.

The underlying challenge of women in both farmer and herder communities is ownership. Women's capacity to own and control livestock and land, and their legal or social constraints to ownership, becomes even more fragile during periods of conflict. As tensions between farmers and herders escalate, these pre-existing imbalances are often amplified, leaving women even more vulnerable.

Differential Impacts of Farmer-Herder Conflict

Another critical aspect of centering women in farmer-herder conflicts is assessing who is affected and how impacts vary across gender lines. This means examining how violence, displacement, livelihood loss, and insecurity uniquely shape women's experiences, often compounding existing vulnerabilities and limiting their capacity to recover and adapt.

To illustrate, in many Sahelian countries, there has been a noticeable rise in the number of displaced populations, many of whom have explicitly fled due to farmer-herder violence (*Where Climate Change Is Reality*, 2020). While farmer-herder conflicts primarily affect herding and farming communities, their repercussions often spill over into neighboring areas, disrupting broader ecological and social systems. Compounded by the proliferation of weapons and other aggravating factors, farmer-herder conflicts heighten the risk of long-term instability and permanent displacement of women. The relationship between displacement and gender has been extensively studied, revealing that women displaced from farmer-herder conflicts are particularly vulnerable, facing greater barriers to recovery and reintegration (Iorbo et al., 2024).

Furthermore, many affected farming and herding communities are rural and underserved, often lacking the infrastructure available in urban areas. This underscores the framing of farmer-herder conflict as a 'rural crisis,' exacerbating existing urban rural inequalities in access to services. Consequently, rural women from both herding and are increasingly compelled to migrate to urban areas, where they may struggle to adapt, find employment, or rebuild their lives, further compounding their vulnerability.

This leads to widespread livelihood insecurity, which can have intergenerational effects, trapping women and their families in cycles of poverty and marginalization.

5

Recommendations

- 1. Establish Gender-Sensitive Recovery Policies:** Policymakers should explicitly include women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution processes of farmer-herder crises. This can be done by promoting women's role as mediators in farming and herding communities. National initiatives, like Nigeria's National Livestock Transformation Plan (NLTP), should incorporate gender-sensitive frameworks that recognize and empower women as central figures in land governance and building community resilience.
- 2. Enhance Cross-Border Coordination with a Gender Lens:** In developing regional policies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Transhumance Protocol, policymakers should ensure that the standardization of movement corridors does not marginalize women's roles in pastoral and agricultural systems. The protocol should be refined to account for the cultural norms and flexible practices of both herders and farmers, integrating women's needs for mobility and resource access. Gender inclusion in transhumance policy can ensure that women have the tools and spaces to thrive within these systems as they change.
- 3. Design Gender-Inclusive Livelihood Support Programs:** International actors, such as the World Bank through the Regional Sahel Pastoralism Support Project (PRAPS), must design programs that explicitly include women in pastoral knowledge systems. These programs should prioritize women's participation in training, decision-making, and resource allocation to improve food security and agricultural resilience.

Conclusions

As localized farmer-herder conflicts intensify into broader regional insecurity issues,

including the rise of violent extremism and terrorism, women are well-positioned to contribute to resilient communities. In areas experiencing violent land competition, gendering farmer-herder conflicts is essential in finding sustainable solutions. By

6

considering women's roles within their communities and understanding the differential impacts of these conflicts on them, policymakers can design strategies that work toward meaningful, long-lasting peace, one that endures precisely because it is inclusive.

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7

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8

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