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Gender-Sensitive Conflict Analysis: Middle Belt of Nigeria

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GENDER-SENSITIVE CONFLICT ANALYSIS: MIDDLE BELT OF NIGERIA

Reine Radwan
April 2025

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Executive Summary

This gender-sensitive conflict analysis forms a critical foundation for the Building Bridges project, which seeks to respond to the increasingly complex and evolving interreligious violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt. This region, encompassing states such as Adamawa, Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau, and others, is a critical geopolitical zone, home to over 45 million people, reflecting a highly diverse mosaic of ethnic, religious, and socio-economic identities, with a disproportionate impact on women and youth. It is a geopolitical flashpoint where overlapping tensions – rooted in disputes over land, shifting political dynamics, historical grievances, and deep-seated inequalities – intersect in ways that defy simplistic explanations. Recognizing the need to understand the nuanced gender dimensions of these conflicts, the project commissioned this analysis to inform and refine its methodologies for effective intervention and the promotion of sustainable social cohesion.

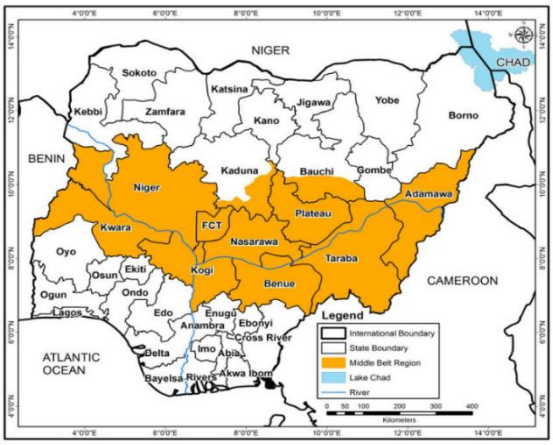
At the heart of the conflict are intensifying clashes between predominantly nomadic Muslim Fulani herders and settled Christian farmers, a dynamic greatly exacerbated by fierce competition over increasingly scarce land and water resources. However, these disputes have gone beyond simple resource competition, evolving into highly charged religious and ethnic confrontations that threaten the very fabric of communities. The humanitarian consequences are devastating, as evidenced by the over 536,632 internally displaced persons (IDPs) as of November 2024 in the three states of intervention covered by our project, namely Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau. Alarmingly, women and girls make up 56% of this displaced population, and 56% of the total displaced population are minors under the age of 18, highlighting their disproportionate vulnerability and the urgent need for a gender-sensitive lens in all intervention efforts. The Middle Belt conflict has intensified since 2018, marked by a surge in displacement driven by resource competition and elite manipulation, underscoring the urgent need for attention to the growing crisis. Women and girls face disproportionate violence and exclusion from peace efforts, despite their role in the community, with a critical lack of specific data. Social media fuels these tensions through misinformation and hate speech, as confirmed by focus group discussions, exacerbating divisions and inciting violence.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of these multifaceted dynamics, a rigorous mixed-methods approach was employed. This included extensive desk research, which synthesized existing reports,

academic studies, and policy documents, and twelve focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted in Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau states between January and February 2025, and36 key informant interviews were conducted as part of the baseline study.

The analysis underscores the importance of a holistic, multidimensional approach that acknowledges the complex interplay of resource competition, religious and ethnic tensions, gender inequalities, and the pervasive influence of social media. Ultimately, this analysis calls for a multidimensional response—one that not only addresses the immediate drivers of conflict but also lays the groundwork for long-term social cohesion. By integrating these findings into its strategy, the Building Bridges project aims to contribute to more effective, equitable, and sustainable peacebuilding efforts in Nigeria's Middle Belt.

1. Introduction



Map of Nigeria showing the Middle Belt States.

Conflicts in the Middle Belt of Nigeria, a region of more than 45 million that includes the states of Adamawa, Bauchi, Benue, Kaduna, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, Taraba, and the Federal Capital Territory, are rooted in the phenomenon of transhumance and the competition for resources, leading to clashes between farmers and herders. However, these conflicts have taken on an increasingly dangerous religious and ethnic dimension, as most herders are traditionally nomadic Fulani who are mostly Muslim, they constitute about 90% of Nigeria's herders, while most farmers are Christians of various ethnic backgrounds[1]. The impact of this conflict on both Christian and Muslim communities has been devastating. Lives have been lost, families displaced, and the social fabric of entire communities torn apart with estimates of over 536,632 displaced persons (across Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau) in November 2024.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM)[2] reports that 56% of IDPs are women and girls and 56% of IDPs total are minors under the age of 18. Clashes between farmers and herders, exacerbated by religious and tribal conflicts, have caused significant displacement in Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau states, with 45%, 53%, and 45% of IDPs respectively citing these factors as the main cause. Official statistics do not fully reflect the impact on women and girls, but their increased vulnerability to violence and exploitation during displacement remains a critical issue in Nigeria's humanitarian crisis, affecting nearly 8 million people. With 1.8 million women of reproductive age in need of assistance,

[1] A.A Modu, "The Impacts of Farmers-Herders Conflicts in North Central Nigeria," *Yamtara-Wala Journal of Arts, Management and Social Sciences (YaJAMSS)* 3, no. 1 (2023).

[2] IOM, "IDP-Atlas Mobility Tracking North-Central and North-West Nigeria Round 16," February 2025, https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/idp-atlas-mobility-tracking-north-central-and-north-west-nigeria-february-2025.

and large numbers of girls out of school, they are disproportionately vulnerable to gender-based violence, exploitation, and a lack of basic services, particularly in conflict-affected areas[1]. Economically, the conflict has disrupted livelihoods, particularly in agriculture and pastoralism, leading to food insecurity and deepening poverty. Socially, the conflict has bred mistrust and hatred, undermining the traditional bonds of coexistence that once characterized these communities. The psychological toll, including trauma and fear, has left lasting scars on individuals and society as a whole.

Over the past 30 years, religious violence between Muslims and Christians has intensified, particularly in Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, and Kaduna, where herder-farmer conflicts have escalated[2]. Since 2018, these clashes have claimed more lives than the Boko Haram insurgency[3]. Recent incidents include the December 22, 2024, attack in Riyom, in which an armed group killed 15 people, and the December 25, 2024 Christmas massacre in Kwande, in which 20 people were killed, homes were burned, and food stores destroyed. Residents attributed both attacks to herders[4]. In January 2024, violence in Mangu resulted in 30 deaths and over 100 injuries[5]. Similarly, Benue's 2017 anti-grazing law, intended to reduce trespassing and violence, drove thousands of Fulani Muslim herders into Nasarawa, exacerbating tensions with Tiv Christian farmers. Between January and June 2018, more than 260 people were killed in southern Nasarawa. (Doma, Awe, Obi, Keana LGAs), prompting military intervention[6]. By mid-2018, the conflict had evolved into coordinated attacks, resulting in over 1,300 deaths[7].

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[1] UNFPA, "Nigeria Situation Report #5 - December 2024 - Nigeria," January 23, 2025, https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/nigeria-situation-report-5-december-2024.

[2] ACLED, "ACLED Data Nigeria," *ACLED* (blog), accessed March 4, 2025, https://acleddata.com/data/.

[3] ICG, "CrisisWatch Database Nigeria," 2025, https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/database?location[]=28&created=.

[4] ICG.

[5] Asmau Kontagora, "Nigeria's Farmer-Herder Conflict: A Ray of Hope?," *The Organization for World Peace* (blog), July 16, 2024, https://theowp.org/nigerias-farmer-herder-conflict-a-ray-of-hope/.

[6] ICG, "The Climate Factor in Nigeria's Farmer-Herder Violence," accessed March 4, 2025, https://nigeriaclimate.crisisgroup.org/.

[7] Crisis Group, "Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence," July 26, 2018, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/262-stopping-nigerias-spiralling-farmer-herder-violence.

Multiple factors are fuelling this crisis, including climate change, environmental degradation, militia violence, impunity, and a weak government response. Desertification has driven herders south in search of pasture and water, encroaching on farmland, while the expansion of Boko Haram in the north has exacerbated migration[1].

In 2024, violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt has worsened, with brutal inter-religious killings continuing unabated, driven by a combination of religious, ethnic, and resource-based tensions[2]. Attacks on Christian communities have intensified, with extremist groups often targeting civilians. At the same time, long-standing conflicts between nomadic herders and settled farmers over land and water resources remain a major concern[3], with these disputes often taking on religious and ethnic dimensions. Despite government efforts, these conflicts continue to displace thousands of people, and the humanitarian situation has deteriorated. The region remains highly unstable, with little progress towards reconciliation or sustainable solutions to the intertwined problems of religious extremism and resource-based conflict[4].

This gender-sensitive conflict analysis aims to refine the project's methodology and ensure that it is tailored to the specific needs and realities of the communities. In the context of inter-religious violence in Nigeria, deeply entrenched gender inequalities exacerbate vulnerability, particularly for women and girls. Nigeria ranks 157th out of 189 countries on the Gender Inequality Index, highlighting the systemic nature of these inequalities.

The normalization of violence against both boys and girls reflects the patriarchal structures that shape societal norms, with girls, adolescents, and women disproportionately affected. However, boys and men also experience the pressures and stigmas imposed by this hierarchical system. Patriarchal beliefs and practices that reinforce male dominance and female subordination are deeply embedded in religious and cultural traditions,

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1 Crisis Group. Op. Cit.

2 Filipe d'Avillez, "Brutal Killing of Christians in Nigeria's Middle Belt Continue," *Aid to Church in Need*, April 19, 2024, https://acninternational.org/brutal-killing-of-christians-in-nigerias-middle-belt-continue/.

3 Ibrahim Abdul' Aziz, "Violent Conflicts between Nomadic Herders and Farmers in North-Central Nigeria Escalate," *Africa News*, January 14, 2018, https://www.africanews.com/2018/01/14/violent-conflicts-between-nomadic-herders-and-farmers-in-north-central-nigeria/.

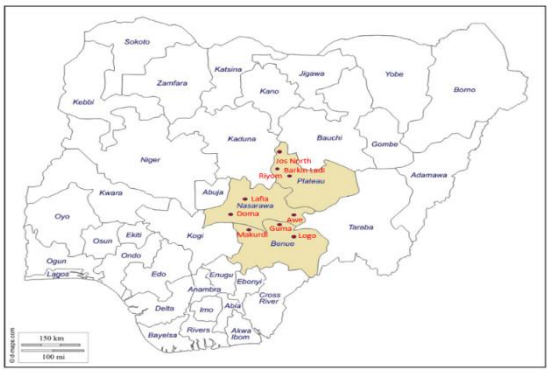
4 Promise Eze, "Religious Oil on Ethnic Fire in Northern Nigeria," *New Internationalist*, April 18, 2024, https://newint.org/violence/2024/religious-oil-ethnic-fire-northern-nigeria.

shaping not only gender roles but also the broader dynamics of interfaith conflict.

These gendered structures influence how violence is manifested and how peacebuilding efforts are approached. Women are often excluded from leadership and decision-making positions, despite their active role in defusing tensions and promoting dialogue. Meanwhile, societal expectations of masculinity can drive young men to participate in violence as a means of asserting power. Understanding these gender dimensions is crucial for developing effective strategies to address inter-religious tensions and promote sustainable, inclusive social cohesion.

2. Methodology

This gender-sensitive conflict analysis aims to deepen the understanding of inter-religious tensions, the role of gender in these dynamics, and how the project can respond effectively. The aim is to identify actionable insights that will guide the project's approach to addressing inter-religious tensions and promoting sustainable and inclusive social cohesion.



Map of Nigeria showing project locations.

The methodology combines both desk research with insights from key informant interviews and focus group discussions conducted by local field teams from DIWA and CPI in Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau states which were undertaken in January and February 2025 for the project baseline. The specific questions, which focus on gender-sensitive conflict analysis, are designed to encourage reflection, open dialogue, and critical thinking. They encourage participants to examine both the practical and social aspects of conflict, with a strong focus on gender sensitivity.

The focus group discussions (FGDs) involved community members, youth, women, religious leaders, traditional rulers, and local peacebuilders to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities for peacebuilding in the region. Twelve (12) FGDs and 36 KIIs were

conducted in Plateau, Benue and Nasarawa between 21 and 28 February 2025.

3. Historical Context and Colonial Legacy

Nigeria's current divisions are rooted in its colonial past. In 1914, the British merged the economically weaker, predominantly Muslim north with the wealthier, Christian-dominated south, creating an administrative structure that laid the foundations for persistent ethnic, religious, and regional fault lines[1].

Before colonial rule, the Sokoto Caliphate dominated the north, while the south remained ethnically diverse with Christian and Western influences. Indirect British rule reinforced these divisions, which worsened as Nigeria moved towards independence. From 1947 to 1959, nationalist leaders struggled to agree on governance, with northern and southern elites doubting the viability of a unified Nigeria[2]. The colonial administration also had a significant impact on gender dynamics, often reinforcing patriarchal structures and introducing new forms of gender inequality through policies and legal frameworks that privileged certain roles and excluded women from political and economic spheres[3].

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has faced constant instability. Ethnic and religious tensions fuelled the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), in which the Igbo-led Biafran secession was violently suppressed. In 1963, Ahmadu Bello's conversion campaign sought to Islamise the Christian and animist populations of the North and Middle Belt, further deepened divisions[4].

4. Modern Religious Tensions and Insurgencies

Religious conflict persists, with northern Muslims fearing Westernization and southern Christians suspecting Islamization. The introduction of

[1] Moses Ochonu, "The Roots of Nigeria's Religious and Ethnic Conflict," *The World from PRX* (blog), July 30, 2016, https://theworld.org/stories/2016/07/30/roots-nigerias-religious-and-ethnic-conflict, https://theworld.org/stories/2016/07/30/roots-nigerias-religious-and-ethnic-conflict.

[2] Ochonu.. Op. Cit.

[3] Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, NED-New edition (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttt0vh.

[4] Jibrin Ibrahim, "The Politics of Religion in Nigeria: The Parameters of the 1987 Crisis in Kaduna State," *Review of African Political Economy* 45/46 (1989): 89.

Sharia law in northern states (2000–2002) led to violent clashes, particularly in Jos and Southern Kaduna, resulting in mass deaths and displacements[1]. However, it is important to recognize that these tensions are not universally experienced or interpreted in the same way by all Nigerians. Many communities across the country continue to foster peaceful coexistence despite the broader national narratives. However, political elites and inflammatory media rhetoric have amplified grievances, particularly among minority groups[2].

The rise of Boko Haram reflects the broader failures of governance, economic inequality, and religious extremism. Although the group targets both Muslims and Christians, its existence underscores Nigeria's deep-seated instability. Nevertheless, it is important to avoid framing inter-religious relations in binary terms, as research across the Middle Belt shows most people have experienced discrimination, exclusion and trauma. This complex reality often manifests itself in fear, suspicion, and cycles of retaliation. Successive governments have struggled to manage these divisions, with corruption and poor governance exacerbating inequality. Politicians often exploit religious identity for political gain, fuelling national divisions[3]. For example, much research on the Middle Belt of Nigeria indicates that both Christians and Muslims "experience a tense and violent relationship that arises from a dysfunctional relationship embedded in a superiority/inferiority complex, discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization"[4]. This is due to the long-term generational trauma leaving the groups living in fear and suspicion of each other. Additionally, members of the Plateau community stated during the FGDs that misinformation and propaganda are used as tools to fuel religious and ethnic divisions while the indoctrination of youth including girls into extremist ideologies was identified as a growing cause for concern. Finally, 40.61% of respondents to the project's baseline survey said that places of worship were not protected during violent conflicts in their state.

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1 Samaila Suleiman, "'Exhuming Passions:' Religion and the Emergence of the Middle Belt Struggle in Nigeria," *Annual Review of Islam in Africa* 11 (2012).

2 Ochonu, "The Roots of Nigeria's Religious and Ethnic Conflict."

3 Ochonu. Op. Cit.

4 Oholioabs D. Tuduks, "Empirical Interrogation of the Christian/Muslim Inter-Religious Challenges in Northern Nigeria," *STJ | Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 6, no. 4 (January 22, 2021): 385, https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2020.v6n4.a16.

5. Middle Belt Conflict and Ethnic Fragmentation

In the Middle Belt, clashes between Fulani Muslim herders and Christian/traditionalist communities over land, grazing, and political representation continue. There have also been retaliatory attacks on northern Muslims in southern towns. The Middle Belt is one of West Africa's most culturally and linguistically diverse regions, home to the Jukun, Tiv, Idoma, Nupe, Angas, Birom, and others. Social cohesion remains elusive while the exclusive and discriminatory attitudes practiced by some fuel and trigger tensions[1]. However, this framework risks oversimplifying a web of socio-economic, political, and environmental factors. These tensions are also influenced by changing migration patterns, contested land rights, and unequal political representation.

In the context of inter-religious coexistence, a dysfunctional relationship fosters an insular mindset, in which one religious group perceives the world through a rigid "us" versus "them" divide[2]. This perspective creates a clear division between the two major religious groups. Within an exclusive community, people's sense of belonging reinforces the distinction between "we/us" and "they/them." During the fieldwork, for example, participants in Benue identified a lack of respect for religious beliefs and inflammatory preaching as the main causes of tension. One participant stated: "lack of respect for one's belief and inciteful preaching are the main sources of tensions between Christian and Muslim communities in our areas".

Despite information on the ground leading to the contrary such as the inability to work with certain schools in Benue State because of their closure due to security concerns and tensions between the two communities, 70.17% of participants in our baseline surveys said that relations between Muslims and Christians in their state were 'cordial and friendly' and only 25.14% of participants said that relations were 'suspicious'. However, in another survey question, 45.3% of participants said that religious differences were the main cause of conflict in their community. In addition, a male participant in the FGD in Barikin Ladi in Plateau said: "It is unfortunate that our children don't know that we lived together in peace before, we attended same schools comprising both

[1] Suleiman, "'Exhuming Passions:' Religion and the Emergence of the Middle Belt Struggle in Nigeria," 21.

[2] David W. Ausburger, *Pastoral Counselling Across Cultures* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 22.

religions. Our children are now affected by the events because they don't have any place to meet and interact. Any child born from 2000 to date don't know anything like peace".

Historical grievances, such as unresolved conflicts over land and resources, have also been cited as contributing factors. In a research piece conducted for the *Journal of Social Encounters*, the researcher shows that Muslims are increasingly selling in markets created exclusively for Christians. This can be helpful, as she witnessed acts of tolerance and sociality amongst members of different religious groups. However, tensions and lingering perceptions of the other remain strong. A trader in the Furaka market shared that "we are extremely cautious about visiting the main vegetable market on Fridays to avoid becoming trapped in a Muslim-dominated area if a crisis occurs"[1]. During the FGDs in Plateau, some community members mentioned that "This Christmas, there are women that complained to us that there is an Islamic scholar they heard over the microphone saying that no Muslim should eat Christmas food, so for that reason, majority of them did not share Christmas food to Muslims in the community which was the ideal situation." On the other hand, a key informant interview presented another scenario that leads to misconceptions sharing that "at times you see that they may kill a Christian somewhere, then they will bring the corpse to the Fulani side to keep so that they will say Fulani have killed their brother and vice versa."

6. Political and Economic Drivers

Competition for resources, including land, jobs and government positions, has significantly exacerbated religious divisions in the Middle Belt. The centralization of Nigeria's resources following the shift from an agricultural to an oil-based economy has intensified this competition[2]. Some observers argue that religion has been manipulated to create and exacerbate conflict as part of a wider strategy by elites to gain political influence and economic control over the country's resources. In the baseline survey, we found that 35.64% of participants in Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau states saw 'political competition' (the most selected option) as

[1] Gloria Na'antoe Longba'am-Alli, "Everyday Peace: Historicising Local Agency in Managing Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria's Middle Belt," *The Journal of Social Encounters* 6, no. 1 (March 10, 2022): 11, https://doi.org/10.69755/2995-2212.1111.

[2] Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada, "Religion and Conflict," Refworld, January 3, 1993, https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/irbc/1993/en/94096.

the main cause of conflict and land disputes were cited by 25.41% of respondents. Furthermore, religious differences are said to be fuelled by politicians exploiting popular dissatisfaction with current socio-economic conditions as a result of IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programs[1]. In addition, conditions of resource scarcity, particularly over land, are exacerbating ethnic and religious tensions in the Middle Belt region[2].

In 2019, the National Livestock Transformation Plan was implemented to improve security and reduce farmer-herder conflicts by allocating ranches to herders and favouring local indigenous populations such as farmers who want to raise cattle[3]. This can also, in fact, exacerbate inter-communal tensions. For example, Benue State's Open Grazing Prohibition and Ranches Establishment Law imposed a multi-stage approval process for non-indigenes, many of whom are herders. This process includes obtaining authorization from landowners, which makes it unlikely to facilitate livelihood transitions or reduce the need for pastoral mobility. Instead, the law is more likely to deepen inter-communal resentment.

In a survey conducted by the International Partnership on Religion and Development (PaRD) in 2022, participants from the Middle Belt reported that although they had not experienced a direct crisis in the past two years, they did not feel their communities are secure. They attribute this to a lack of food, clean water, and access to livelihoods[4]. For example, in Benue during the FDGs, participants cited positive examples of interfaith cooperation that were ultimately undermined by political and economic factors: "We have successful community collaboration, like the Wadata/Nyongun crisis of 2013, where both Christian and Muslim leaders came together to stop the crisis."

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1 Ibrahim Gambari, *Religion and National Integration in Africa: Islam, Christianity, and Politics in the Sudan and Nigeria* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1992), 96–97.

2 Samuel Egwu, "Ethno-Religious Conflicts and National Security in Nigeria: Illustrations from the 'Middle Belt,'" in *State, Economy, and Society in Post-Military Nigeria*, ed. Said Adejumobi (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011), 51, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230117594_3.

3 Leif Brottem, "The Growing Complexity of Farmer-Herder Conflict in West and Central Africa," *Africa Center* (blog), accessed March 4, 2025, https://africacenter.org/publication/growing-complexity-farmer-herder-conflict-west-central-africa/.

4 Mubarak Yusuf and Jared Miller, "Effectiveness of Local Faith Actors in Peacebuilding, Development, and Humanitarian Response" (Maiduguri, Borno State: International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), 2023), 11.

Another source of misunderstanding and conflict came up several times during our fieldwork in Benue State. The construction of mosques and churches, and thus the symbolic and physical presence of one religious group for all to see, has been a source of increased tension in the community and has led to misconceptions about one religious groups' desire to dominate over another, especially with the construction of very large places of worship.

7. Religion, Culture and Gender Dynamics in the Middle Belt of Nigeria

A study conducted by Voices4Change[1], entitled *Being a Man in Nigeria: Perceptions and Realities*, provides insight into the social construction of masculinity in Nigeria and its impact on gender inequalities, social injustices, conflict dynamics, and the role of religion in this social structure. The ways in which masculinity is perceived by both men and women, and the stereotypes associated with it, provide key insights for promoting gender justice and equality. For example, one focus group discussion revealed that: "Another stereotype is the belief that a Christian man who marries only one wife is not man enough unlike Muslim men who are permitted to marry up to four wives under Islam" illustrating the harmful misconceptions about men and their masculinity associated with interfaith marriages.

Religious beliefs significantly shape gender roles, with many respondents to this analysis believing that men are divinely ordained to lead, protect, and provide for their families. Women, in turn, are expected to support men by managing the household and contributing financially in their absence. However, while religious texts were often cited to justify gender roles, most participants acknowledged that these roles are largely cultural rather than religious. A community member from Plateau said during the FGDs: "The truth is we believe that Islamically, we don't allow women and men to mix together in the same place. Any woman that attends such meetings, she will definitely be marginalized. But with proper education and enlightenment, things will be improved."

While religion was often used to justify male dominance, respondents often stated that culture—not faith—perpetuates gender inequality. This inconsistency suggests that misinterpretation of scripture, cultural

[1] Voices4Change, "Being A Man in Nigeria: Perceptions and Realities," n.d., http://www.v4c-nigeria.com/being-a-man-in-nigeria-perceptions-and-realities/.

influence, or reluctance to admit religious justification for discrimination may contribute to gender inequalities. Participants from all religious backgrounds agreed that no faith supports violence against women (VAWG), although misinterpretation of religious texts can reinforce harmful ideologies. Some Christian women felt that religious teachings sometimes encourage women to endure domestic violence.

In this specific gender analysis, FGDs in Nasarawa and Benue reported lower levels of gender-based discrimination, but cited cultural norms as a limiting factor and called for greater inclusion of women and women with disabilities. In Doma, some people mentioned that women and youth are discouraged from participating in peacebuilding activities because they are 'considered to be less educated' and communities 'believe that women are not meant to be heard'. In Plateau, however, it was mentioned that "we have cases of gender-based violence. In most cases when women are employed to work on farmlands, they are not paid the agreed sum because they are weaker sex, they cannot do anything."

Despite the prevailing patriarchal norms, there is a growing acceptance of a more equal relationship between men and women. However, religious justifications for male dominance remain particularly influential. Women were less accepting of these inequalities but were still expected to remain humble and respectful of men. Encouragingly, there was widespread support for religious leaders to promote respect for women, shared responsibilities, and increased educational opportunities for women and girls.

8. Gendered Impact of Conflict in Middle Belt

8.1. Displacement and Humanitarian Crisis

Between January 2018 and June 2018, farmer-herder violence left over 1,300 people dead, over 300,000 displaced, with 176,000 displaced in Benue, 100,000 in Nasarawa, and 100,000 in Plateau[1]. Furthermore, The *Guardian* noted in 2021 that farmers-herders related violence had claimed over 15,000 lives between 2018 and 2021[2] and was still rising, prompting

[1] Crisis Group, "Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence."

[2] Emmanuel Akinwotu, "Trail's End: The Days of Roaming Free Are Numbered for Nigeria's Herders," *The Guardian*, October 27, 2021, sec. Global development, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/oct/27/days-of-roaming-free-are-over-for-nigeria-herders.

the Commissioner for Peace and Security of the African Union to declare that this violence "take(s) more lives than terrorism"[1]. In total, 536'632 civilians have been internally displaced from their homes in the three states as of November 2024. However, due to the lack of official monitoring systems and the focus on Boko Haram, there are no recent statistics on the Middle Belt region.

Women have been particularly hard hit, making up the largest proportion of those displaced, food insecure and out of school[2]. Many have taken refuge in IDP camps or are living in churches and schools. The ICG reported 'appalling' conditions in two camps in Benue, where if found that most were women and children with 'severely inadequate shelter and food, and were at risk of communicable disease'. Furthermore, the camps are overcrowded and lack safe drinking water and hygiene protocols. In early April 2018, seven children died in a measles outbreak in Makurdi in a camp that houses 35,000 people.

8.2. Sexual Violence and Exploitation

Some have been raped in the camps, many girls and women are sexually harassed and assaulted in the camps, as there is no perimeter fencing around the camps, no gender-segregated sleeping areas. They are also highly vulnerable to sexual exploitation as a last resort for survival in the camps. Similarly, as men have increasingly lost their ability to farm the land or herd depending on the state, women have taken on other roles, such as hawking or working as housekeepers, where they are increasingly vulnerable to gender-based violence[3].

In a field interview with a participant in Benue, it was stated that "women and men are affected differently; women become widows, and their children become orphans, while men are killed." Another community member from Plateau declared that "Women and children are the ones that are greatly affected. The problems that we have are started from men.

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[1] African Union, "'Conflicts between Pastoralists and Farmers on the Continent Take More Lives than Terrorism,'" September 18, 2018, https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20180918/conflicts-between-pastoralists-and-farmers-continent-take-more-lives.

[2] Centre for Democracy & Development, "Farmer-Herder Conflict in Northern Nigeria: Trends, Dynamics and Gender Perspectives," January 4, 2021, https://www.cddwestafrica.org/uploads/reports/file/Farmer-Herder-Conflict-in-Northern-Nigeria_-Trends,-Dynamics-and-Gender-Perspectives2.pdf.

[3] Longba'am-Alli, "Everyday Peace," 4.

When anything happens, they run away and the women and children get harmed. The biggest casualties are women and children."

8.3. Interfaith Marriages

Another participant added that women face a double discrimination on the basis of both gender and religion, which limits their ability to participate in social cohesion efforts, especially if they have been part of an inter-religious marriage. When asked about inter-religious marriages, most key informants saw them as possible, even positive, but only when Christian women married Muslim men and not vice versa. Ultimately, inter-religious marriages are seen by some as unconditionally positive, by others as tolerable in certain scenarios, and by some other interviewees as a source of negativity and conflict.

In addition, according to UN Women Nigeria, "women are underrepresented at all political and economic levels, and in military and police institutions, which are important institutions of access and control" and traditional institutions known for promoting peace are male-dominated[1]. There has also been a significant increase in early marriages of young girls as a means of survival as agriculture has become less accessible and more dangerous as a career[2]. In addition, in the PaRD study in the Middle Belt region, most participants both men and women, identified women and children as the most vulnerable to violent conflict crime, as respondents felt that women were less able to defend themselves less against attacks and abductions. Respondents also cited concerns about gender-based violence perpetrated by husbands and security concerns[3].

8.4. Exclusion from Peacebuilding and Decision-Making

Despite the disproportionate impact on women, they are often not included in the peace-building processes due to cultural and social norms. For example, during the FGDs, a woman in Plateau said: "In our community, we meet monthly to discuss security of our community. But the women were never given the chance to contribute. So, we are

[1] UN Women Nigeria, "Assessment of the Utilization of Dialogue and Mediation in the Response to the Farmer-Herder Conflict in Plateau and Kaduna States and the Role of Women in the Process," 2021, 6.

[2] Centre for Democracy & Development, "Farmer-Herder Conflict in Northern Nigeria: Trends, Dynamics and Gender Perspectives."

[3] Yusuf and Miller, "Effectiveness of Local Faith Actors in Peacebuilding, Development, and Humanitarian Response," 12.

contributing nothing in that respect. If you insist on going to such meetings, they will say you are stubborn". Nevertheless, their involvement in informal mediation processes often increases during times of conflict and in the post-conflict phases. Informal community-based institutions that implement dialogue processes are often catalysed or led by women in an attempt to resolve conflicts within the community[1]. Research on women's involvement in mediation shows that agreements are 64% more likely to succeed and 35% more likely to last for at least 15 years[2]. A number of Nasarawa respondents to our focus group discussions and key informant interviews noted that they believe a woman's influence in peacebuilding begins in the home with the education of children so that they grow up to believe in and practice peace.

9. Role of Social Media in the Conflict

More also needs to be done to address perceptions of violence, which are too often attributed to one religious group or another, and the growing tensions fuelled by hateful speech, misinformation, and incitement to violence seen on social media. The media is increasingly divided along geographical lines with powerful interests behind them. Major outlets in Lagos tend to support the 'southern narrative', while media outlets in Abuja and Kaduna are seen as supporting the 'northern position'. This polarises society, fuels conflict, and increases the risk of violence. The framing of 'Fulanisation' and 'Jihadisation' is an example of inflammatory discourse circulating on radio, traditional media, and social media[3].

In our baseline survey data, 45.03% of respondents said that they came across religious content on social media 'very frequently (multiple times a day)' illustrating the crucial role of social media is at this time. 27.35% of respondents noted that 'misinformation about a particular religion' is the most frequently seen content online. For example, in an interview with a key informant, the respondent cited an incident of misinformation: "There was a story about a structure built next to a mosque at the General

[1] UN Women Nigeria, "Assessment of the Utilization of Dialogue and Mediation in the Response to the Farmer-Herder Conflict in Plateau and Kaduna States and the Role of Women in the Process," 11.

[2] Council on Foreign Relations, "Women's Participation in Peace Processes," February 2020, https://www.cfr.org/womens-participation-in-peace-processes/.

[3] Thomas Jr. Bimba, Seth Kaplan, and Marina Adan Marcos, "Ending Violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt: Strategic Report on Nasarawa State" (Institute for Integrated Transitions, June 2022), 29.

Hospital in Awe. People spread false information that a giant church was being constructed beside the mosque. This misinformation led some youths to destroy the structure. Later, the community came together to contribute money and rebuild the structure, which eventually became a church. This incident shows how misinformation can cause unnecessary tension and conflict."

During an FGD, participants in Benue, Nasarawa, and Plateau all agreed that men are more likely to spread misinformation, while women face specific risks such as threats to their safety and reputation. They also all noted that social media is used both positively and negatively. The common themes on the negative side are linked to intolerance, political elections, and religion. Community members from Benue called for media literacy programmes, those from Nasarawa recommended counter-narratives to promote peace, and those from Plateau emphasized the need for regulation of social media to curb hate speech and incitement to violence.

In addition, the conflation of members of extremist groups and criminal gangs with armed herders or farmers or simply civilian members of Christian or Muslim communities exacerbates the violence. For example, an attack by a suspected Fulani group on 23 December 2023, led to a series of revenge killings that escalated into a 'blood-for-blood duel' over Christmas, spreading fear and hatred across Plateau State. Human Angle Media examined hundreds of posts on X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook and was able to determine how institutions, groups, and individuals pushed particular narratives about the killings to suit their own ideologies and motivations. Local and international religious organisations, religious conspiracy theorists, social media influencers, journalists and individuals who did not verify the information before sharing it were the main actors behind the disinformation surrounding the Christmas massacres.

In particular, a video was shared by an influencer with a wide reach, showing the lifeless bodies of women and children, covered in blood, who had been gruesomely killed. This video received over 40,000 views and was re-shared over 800 times on X alone. The influencer claimed that Christians were systematically killed in this way every year . Human Angle later discovered that this video existed on the internet before 23 December 2023, and that it is was actually posted on 16 December 2023, a week before the massacre. The original post came from someone who reported

that these were scenes from a killing by Wagner soldiers in Burkina Faso[1]. This story was picked up by Fox News, confirming the narrative that foreign-linked jihadists were responsible for the Plateau massacres.

Furthermore, thousands of X and Facebook users read a clickbait article about the story claiming that a Christian is killed every two hours in Nigeria. This in turn feeds into International Christian Concern's report that Nigeria is the deadliest country in the world to be a Christian. This cycle of misinformation and disinformation is therefore crucial in explaining the stoking of tensions between Christians and Muslims, particularly in the aftermath of an attack.

10. Engaging Religious and Community Leaders in Peacebuilding

In the face of these inter-religious challenges, a pragmatic response is essential, with healing and reconciliation playing a crucial role in addressing the trauma experienced by both Christians and Muslims. Healing and reconciliation are distinct but related concepts that need to be understood together to be fully meaningful. Healing is essential for genuine reconciliation, as the latter cannot be fully realized without the former. Genevieve Parent warns that neglecting or marginalizing healing can hinder and undermine reconciliation[2]. Healing involves restoring what has been lost, reclaiming identity, and promoting integration. It also involves developing new coping mechanisms, recovering old ones, or reframing existing perspectives[3]. Furthermore, both religions promote principles of social cohesion, living with people of other faiths, reconciliation, and mutual respect. Accordingly, 97.79% of respondents to our baseline survey said they believed that dialogue and cooperation would bring about lasting peace to their State.

As the Africa Center recommends and as the Building Bridges project does, the role of local male and female leaders is crucial. With trust and accountability all but eroded, effective conflict transformation and

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1 Ibrahim Adeyemi, "Terror From The Trolls (I): The Keyboard Warriors Fueling Plateau's Ethno-Religious Crisis," HumAngle, August 27, 2024, https://humanglemedia.com/terror-from-the-trolls-i-the-keyboard-warriors-fueling-plateaus-ethno-religious-crisis-2/.

2 Geneviève Parent, "Peacebuilding, Healing, Reconciliation: An Analysis of Unseen Connections for Peace," *International Peacekeeping* 18, no. 4 (August 2011): 382, https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2011.588385.

3 David W. Lartey, *In Living Colour: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counselling* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003), 60.

resolution depends on the rebuilding of trust. Training leaders in dialogue processes, both intra- and inter-faith, enables society to have mediators who can then intervene in local communities to spread the messages of peace and understanding between Christians and Muslims, farmers and herders[1]. Mercy Corps interviews and focus group discussions show that all respondents believe that religious leaders have a crucial role to play in peacebuilding, and that they view their own religious leaders' attempts at peacebuilding as positive because they apply lessons from religious teachings[2]. Attempts at such work have been positive in the past such as the Kabara Committees, which were set up as a grassroots mediation forum in Adamawa State.

In our own research in Plateau, Benue, and Nasarawa, we found that 81.49% of the respondents (both Christian and Muslim) had participated in one or more discussions within their religious community about peace, tolerance, or preventing internal disputes. However, 55% identified leadership struggles as the main source of division within their religious community and 50% identified doctrinal differences as the main problem. Furthermore, Nigeria is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and this should be fully respected in order for the areas of peacebuilding and conflict resolution to be gender sensitive. Women should therefore be involved in all dialogue activities[3]. However, participants in the FGDs in Benue cited lack of funding, cultural norms, and limited access to decision-making as obstacles to their full potential in peacebuilding activities.

There have also been efforts by religious leaders to promote unity between Christians and Muslims. In September 1999, the Constitution of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) was formed between Christian and Muslim leaders to "forge inter-religious harmony and concord" as guided by "divine regulations and the dictates of our CREATOR"[4]. The aim is to promote and encourage local government chapters to promote understanding of the true teachings of each religion through dialogues, discussions, conferences, etc. in order to strengthen intra- and inter-faith relations in Nigeria. Although we observe a latent

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1 Brottem, "The Growing Complexity of Farmer-Herder Conflict in West and Central Africa."

2 Mercy Corps, "Role of Religion and Religious Leaders in Farmer-Pastoralist Conflict in Plateau State," IPNN Report, October 2016, 19.

3 Nkechi G. Onah, Benjamin C. Diara, and Favour C. Uroko, "Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria: Implications on Women," *Mediterranean Journal Fo Social Sciences* 8, no. 5 (September 2017).

4 NIREC, "Constitution of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council" (2020).

inter-faith tension that is rooted in the history of Nigeria, since April 2022, there has been an awakened debate among Muslim scholars on "interfaith relations". While some find it appealing and see it as an opportunity to promote peace in a pluralized society, others have strong reservations and are publicly speaking against it. They go so far as to publicly condemn those who support it, even considering them to be apostates (*Murtadeen*). Ultimately, these findings from many reports are often contradictory and do not fully reflect the situation on the ground, and must therefore be taken as perceptions that vary depending on how different people define certain terms such as 'trust' and 'safety'. For example, Mercy Corps reports note that some of their findings are contradictory: "While most community members did not fully trust the members of the other community and perceived them as a threat to their own group, they were not opposed to engaging in a range of activities with them."[1]

In the past, the government has organized several high-level roundtable discussions between leaders and representatives of both faiths with the aim of improving peaceful coexistence. The 2014 CONFAB is an example of such a meeting, which was attended by representatives of both faiths[2]. Establishing a platform for healthy dialogue and creating opportunities for joint activities is key to promoting interfaith coexistence. However, there have been challenges where harm has been inadvertently caused because they have not been managed in a conflict-sensitive manner. For example, in some humanitarian interventions, relief items for IDPs were provided only to Christians as Muslims were throwing away Bibles included in the package. Although the interventions were well-intentioned, they inadvertently created divisions within communities[3].

The role of women-led NGOs in peacebuilding activities was positively acknowledged. In Nasarawa, organizations such as the Federation of Muslim Women Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN) and the Woman Wing of Christian Association of Nigeria (WOWICAN) play an active role in peacebuilding, particularly through community outreach and support for orphans. Another positive aspect highlighted by the community in the

[1] Mercy Corps, "Role of Religion and Religious Leaders in Farmer-Pastoralist Conflict in Plateau State," 24.

[2] Nan, "'I Convened 2014 National Confab to Address Seeds of Discord' – Jonathan," The Guardian Nigeria News - Nigeria and World News, November 17, 2021, https://guardian.ng/news/i-convened-2014-national-confab-to-address-seeds-of-discord-jonathan/.

[3] Yusuf and Miller, "Effectiveness of Local Faith Actors in Peacebuilding, Development, and Humanitarian Response," 15.

FGDs was inter-religious marriages, which are seen as fostering trust and cooperation between communities. This is corroborated by a number of news outlets that have reported on inter- religious and inter-tribal marriages as important forces for unity and understanding[1]. In addition, respondents in Plateau noted that women are more trusted and committed to peacebuilding than men, often serving as mediators and role models in their communities. However, they also have to overcome the cultural and religious barriers mentioned above. Participants therefore emphasized the need for capacity-building programs to empower women to take on leadership roles in peacebuilding.

11. Recommendations

To effectively address inter-religious violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt, a holistic and gender-sensitive approach is essential. The following recommendations focus on conflict prevention, peacebuilding, community engagement, and socio-economic empowerment to promote long-term stability and cohesion.

1) Strengthen Grassroots Communication and Community-Led Peace Messaging

Ensuring that peace narratives reach all levels of society requires localized and culturally relevant communication strategies:

- Utilize local languages, community radio, and storytelling to promote positive interfaith relations and gender equality. Incorporate interactive community-led discussions (e.g., participatory theatre, storytelling, and local influencers) rather than only top-down messaging.
- Engage religious leaders, traditional rulers, and community influencers in the design and delivery of peace messages.

2) Promote Women's Leadership and Inclusion in Peacebuilding

Women play a crucial role in mediation and conflict resolution, yet they remain underrepresented in formal peace processes:

- Ensure women's active participation in local and national peace committees by addressing structural barriers (e.g., legal constraints,

[1] Mohammed Ibrahim, "Peacebuilding: The Unifying Power of Inter-Tribal Marriages in Nigeria," *Peace News Network* (blog), November 18, 2024, https://peacenews.com/peacebuilding-the-unifying-power-of-inter-tribal-marriages-in-nigeria/.

cultural resistance) through advocacy for policy change at local and national levels.

- Create mentoring networks that link experienced women peacebuilders with younger women to ensure the transfer of skills.
- Include women from diverse backgrounds (rural, religious minorities, displaced women, and women with disabilities) to ensure intersectional representation.
- Support women-led mediation and community reconciliation efforts and ensure that they receive adequate resources and recognition.

3) Engage Religious and Traditional Leaders as Peacebuilders

Given the influence of religious and traditional leaders, their engagement in conflict prevention and resolution is crucial:

- Strengthen interfaith cooperation through joint community projects, interfaith dialogues, and capacity-building workshops for religious leaders.
- Involve youth religious leaders to challenge radical narratives and promote tolerance.
- Establish local inclusive interfaith councils to mediate disputes before tensions escalate into violence.
- Maintain stakeholder engagement through structured WhatsApp groups, periodic review meetings, and ongoing collaboration.

4) Combat Misinformation and Hate Speech in Traditional and Digital Media

Misinformation, particularly on social media, fuels interfaith tensions and gender-based discrimination:

- Train journalists, religious leaders, and local influencers to counter misinformation and hate speech, and engaging digital influencers to promote peace narratives on social media.
- Establish community-based fact-checking networks to monitor and debunk false narratives.
- Develop early warning systems to identify and respond to online incitement to violence.

5) Enhance Early Warning and Rapid Response Mechanisms

Early detection of tensions and swift intervention are crucial to preventing escalation:

- Strengthen early warning systems, to ensure that information reaches local communities, security forces, and peace actors in real time.
- Train women, youth, and community leaders as first responders to mediate conflicts before they turn violent.
- Improve coordination between local peace actors, security agencies, and humanitarian organizations to ensure a timely and effective crisis response.

6) Address Youth Involvement in Violence Through Education and Economic Opportunities

Young people are both perpetrators and victims of violence, often due to economic vulnerability and social marginalization:

- Expand beyond interfaith sports programs to include vocational training, economic empowerment initiatives, and peace education in schools.
- Provide psychosocial support to youth exposed to violence to prevent recruitment into extremist or criminal groups.
- Establish interfaith youth networks to promote peer-led peacebuilding efforts.

7) Promote Economic Empowerment as a Peacebuilding Strategy

Interfaith tensions in the Middle Belt are also driven by competition for resource, particularly land and livelihoods:

- Develop livelihood programs for women and youth, including farming cooperatives, small business support, skills training and alternative income-generating activities.
- Ensure equal access to economic opportunities, especially for displaced populations and marginalized groups.
- Encourage joint economic initiatives between Christian and Muslim communities to foster interdependence and reduce sources of conflict.

8) Strengthen Legal and Policy Frameworks for Gender and Conflict Sensitivity

To ensure sustainable peacebuilding, government and civil society must institutionalize gender and conflict sensitive policies:

- Advocate for the full implementation of Nigeria's commitments to gender equality and women's inclusion in peace processes.
- Develop state-level policies to ensure that women are included in conflict resolution mechanisms and security sector reforms.
- Enhance collaboration between government, NGOs, and community-based organizations to support long-term peacebuilding initiatives.

12. Conclusion

Addressing interfaith violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt requires a multi-dimensional approach that integrates conflict prevention, gender inclusion, and economic empowerment. By strengthening community engagement, early warning mechanisms, women's leadership, and youth opportunities, this framework provides a sustainable path to reconciliation and social cohesion.

Finally, strengthening the capacity of religious leaders to engage in interfaith dialogue is crucial for fostering understanding, empathy, and peaceful coexistence. By equipping these leaders with the necessary skills to mediate between Christian and Muslim communities, we enable them to create safe spaces where both groups can come together, challenge stereotypes, and address common concerns together. Such dialogue not only allows for the deconstruction of harmful stereotypes but also fosters mutual respect, cooperation, and peacebuilding initiatives that can transcend religious boundaries.

However, the sustainability of this process is inherently linked to the meaningful participation of women and youth. These groups must be actively involved in dialogue and decision-making processes to ensure that their perspectives are taken into account and their voices heard. Women and youth are often key drivers of change in their communities, and their participation is essential to build a more inclusive and sustainable peace. By empowering these groups alongside religious leaders, we create a more balanced and representative approach to conflict resolution and peacebuilding, strengthening the long-term success and impact of these efforts.

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