

## **Narratives of Climate Change and Herdsmen's Invasion in Nigerian Newspapers: Rethinking the Crisis from an Ecofeminist Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines representations of the interplay between climate change and herdsmen's crisis in Nigerian newspapers, specifically *The Vanguard* and *Daily Post*. The study argues that through newspaper narratives, which foreground political and literary approaches, it is established that climate change is an underlying factor that triggers the reoccurring crises between the Fulani herdsmen and their host communities. These conflicts, as the study reveals, are detrimental to the survival of the women, especially those residing in the rural communities whose main vocation is farming. It highlights the economic and sociological challenges faced by the women in these conflict-prone areas as foregrounded in the storylines of the examined newspapers. The Ecofeminist theory, which underscores the intersection between environment and feminism, is deployed in this study to investigate the relationship between climatic problems and the herdsmen's hostilities towards farmers, particularly womenfolk. The study concludes that creating a complementary policy will enable communities and NGOs find lasting solutions to the herdsmen-farmers conflicts.*

**Keywords:** Fulani herdsmen, Eco-feminism, women, conflict

### **Introduction**

This paper attempts to provide an alternate understanding of climate change and conflict within the context of the present violent activities of Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria. Considering that in a general context, scholars have posited that the effect of climate change appears to manifest in three core arenas in nation-states. First, it leads to the frequency of natural disasters; second, an unprecedented rise in sea-level that significantly threatens coastal towns and/or cities; and, third, natural resource scarcity (Barnett and Adger, 639). Ultimately, these effects will lead to significant changes in societal way of life/livelihood, economic decline and forced migration and climate refugees. It is also suggested that climatic change has effect on various communities depleting natural resources (Barnett and Adger, 655). While this 'grim' prediction from several research studies have manifested to a higher and/or lesser degree across various contexts, there are scholarly evidences to suggest

that such phenomenon, if not significantly mitigated against in the coming decades will be the 'new norm' of societal crisis particularly in emerging societies, and state capacity to adapt to these challenges might not be adequate (Mearns and Norton, 2010).

In the Nigerian context, there have been several violent activities on the Nigerian state since the advent of civilian rule in 1999 (Maier, 2000; Campbell, 2011; Hill, 2012). The present recurrences of violence occasioned by the activities of Fulani herdsmen in various parts of Nigeria appear to constitute another kind of deadly violence by a group(s) on the polity. As a result of these conflicts post-1999, there have been several studies that seem to suggest that the present herdsmen violence in numerous host communities in Nigeria cannot entirely be as a consequence of change in climatic conditions (Odoh and Chilaka, 113). Some studies have attempted to frame this present conflict within the context of 'ethno-politically driven' strategy used by the Hausa/Fulani elites as part of their ethno-political game to significantly influence key political outcomes particularly at the federal level (Eke,2017).

The Fulani are culturally nomadic, it is their practice at certain seasonal periods of any year - dry season to be specific - to significantly move herds of cattle from the less abundant rainfall, arid regions of the northern part of the country to the more tropical southern area of Nigeria due to more rainfalls. This cultural practice of movement by Fulani herdsmen is done to support their large number of herds due to lush vegetations for their animals to feed on. However, these seasonal movements of large herds of cattle by herdsmen have consistently caused significant conflicts between the host communities and the herdsmen. These host communities have consistently accused herdsmen of destroying their farmlands and generally disregarding the cultural customs and norms of their communities. While such conflicts were historically at low intensity, when high intensity conflicts do occur, the host communities are usually met with fierce defiance by herdsmen whose primary forms of defence at former periods were bows and arrows, and local charms (BBC, Tenuche and Ifatimehin, 360; International Crisis Group; Lott and Hart, 186). However, in recent times, the defence and/or violent tactics used by Fulani herdsmen appear to have changed. It is alleged that herdsmen routinely attack their host communities without any form of provocation. It is further alleged that these herdsmen make use of Ak-47 machine guns to indiscriminately kill members of host communities, burn homes and farmlands and rape the women (Eke, 2017).

As a result of their present deadly activities, several states in the federation have banned, and/or considering placing a ban on the movement of Fulani herdsmen into their states. Some states have further enacted anti-grazing laws as a means of limiting the activities of herdsmen within their domains (*Vanguard*, 2017). In summary, the conventional discourse linking the sudden change of violent tactics used by Fulani herdsmen to climate change seems debatable; however, there appears

to be credible evidence to suggest that the intensification of the conflict between herdsmen and host communities has its roots in climate change (Cullen and Glaser, 715; Cullen and Salehyan, 35).

In the past three decades, there has been an explosion in population growth in Nigeria and a similar growth has also occurred overtime in the cattle population of the country in order to meet the dietary needs of the growing population. The current violent crisis in the northeast of Nigeria has resulted to a significant change in the strategies used by the herdsmen to feed their cattle. Prior to the escalation of violence in the northeast, it was the nomadic practice of the Fulani herdsmen to feed their cattle in the foraging grounds of the northeast. The present conflict has, however, caused the herdsmen to abandon that region and move more cattle to the southern part of the country. It is, however, important to note that prior to the intensification of the crisis in the northeast, there were already research concerns about the effects of climate change on the foraging grounds in that region. For example, Lake Chad and environs which used to be lush with vegetations, has overtime lost approximately 95% of its water volume while across the northern part of the country, significant changes in the landscape due to the effects of desertification have taken place (Fabiya and Otunugajun, 2016). However, that is not to presume that similar climatic challenges have not been a concern in the southern part of the country. There are numerous communities in the south dealing with excessive flooding and/or prolong drought. Overall, it is stated that the implications of climate change in Nigeria have contributed to lower crops yields which some experts have suggested may have drastically reduced Nigeria's crop yield by 20% (Fabiya and Otunugajun, 2016). Collectively, challenges of desertification in the north, less vegetation for cattle to feed on both in the north and south of the country, and an intensification of the Boko Haram crisis in the northeast of the country are important variables to consider in the analysis of climate change and conflict between Fulani herdsmen and host communities in Nigeria.

Although there are significant numbers of explanatory gaps in the literature on Fulani herdsmen and climate change, this study analyzes a crucial gap in the literature that should shed more light on this current crisis. In the areas significantly affected by this crisis, women in these communities are greatly involved with nature particularly through farming, fetching water from rivers and/or ground water (wells) for domestic purposes and collecting woods from the forest as fuel for making food. In addition, women in these communities are also critical in rural developmental activities although it is often not culturally acknowledged due to the patriarchal nature of Nigerian traditional societies. Such communities - although not totally limited to these areas - include several communities in Benue, southern Kaduna, Plateau, and the southeast among others. Based on the interactions that exist between women and their environment within these communities, particularly through farming and other agro-related activities, the following macro analysis will analyze the present Fulani herdsmen crisis in Nigeria from an Ecofeminist

perspective with a view to better understand how conflicts affect women - and in particular, those in southern Nigerian communities - and their interactions with the environment.

This is important because numerous studies have suggested that conflicts in virtually all societies usually affect men and women differently due to the patriarchal cultural practices that characterize several societies. The different interactions and perceptions both genders have with nature are also significant in this regard (Dhakai, 13-24). As a result, this study will use Ecofeminism as an analytical tool to better understand the current Fulani herdsmen crisis in Nigeria because:

1. Women and children are usually most vulnerable and prone to suffer the hardest in conflicts.
2. Women are not passive victims in crisis and usually take up multiple roles particularly if the breadwinner - usually a man - dies in a conflict.
3. Women are often more prone to sexual assaults and exploitation during conflicts.
4. Women daily interactions with nature in these communities - mainly through farming activities - are significant and shed invaluable insights into understanding the effects these violent crises impact on the relationship between women and the environment.

### **Ecofeminism and Its Nigerian Variant**

Ecofeminism, as a social research theory, is multifaceted in nature and its theoretical position evolved from the various fields of feminist activism such as, peace movements, labour movements, anti-nuclear and environmental movements and so on. According to Greta Gaard, Ecofeminism's central thesis which focuses on "... the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities and species, is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature..." (23). Therefore, Ecofeminism attempts to highlight these concerns and, "... calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature..." (Gaard, 25). Similarly, Rosemary Reuther (1975) argues that women cannot be entirely liberated from socially constructed oppressions as long as the socio-cultural structure formed out of the power dynamics of the patriarchal system, is constructed to oppress them. She further notes:

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationship continues to be one of domination. They must write the demands of the woman's movement with those of the ecological movement, to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socio-economic relations and the underlying values of this (modern, industrial) society (10).

Although Ecofeminism derives its roots from feminist theory, which as a theory for example, in international relations, attempts to advocate a form of gender equality in global intercourse or, in the case of global environmental concerns appears to suggest that the preservation of the global environment can be achieved through a framework of a pre-existing patriarchal system (Capriccio, 1). Ecofeminism, seeks to highlight alternate theoretical and ideological ideals where man and woman, human and environment/planet are respected and contribute significantly on an even playing field (Capriccio, 2).

While being a theory that is significantly rooted in Western scholarship, Ecofeminism has been used to highlight and explore the links between gender and the environment in the global south. Such scholarly exploration, at the initial stage, was stimulated by compelling narratives of women in traditional/rural societies in Asia saving trees and thwarting commercial loggers from destroying the ecosystem which the women significantly benefitted from (Shiva, 43). Consequently, there have been several proponents of this strand of Ecofeminism that seems to suggest broadly that since women appears to be closer to the environment in several traditional/rural communities, they were in a better position—unconsciously—to be custodians of the environment and that the earth's natural resources had better chances of survival for future generations (Resurreccion,33).

However, such narratives suggesting that women seem to be the 'natural' caretakers of the environment have been criticized by several scholars. Critics like Stacy Alaimo have critiqued Vandana Shiva's apparent essentialism of positioning women as inherently closer to nature than men, and as holders of privileged knowledge about healthy human/environment relations. Shiva argues that "rural, indigenous women are the original givers of life and are therefore the rightful caretakers of nature" (42). It seems framing the narrative of women being closer to nature appears to embrace the very oppressive and dualistic culture and economy that Western feminism has critiqued and attempted to transform. Therefore, opponents to that strand of Ecofeminism seems to suggest that even if women's connection to nature is posed as a social construction in a particular historical time, posing such a relationship in general and global terms, generalizes and homogenizes women's position globally (Goebel, 84).

Also, Feminist theory that is opposed to this general perception believes that different cultural contexts might not be applicable for this generalized connection and/or link between women and nature. Scholars like Melissa Leach (1994) have studied different societies to highlight the contextual cultural differences and suggest that claims of women being the natural caretakers of environments in virtually all societies might be difficult to hypothesize.

In a Nigerian context, due to the ethnic configuration of the country, there are profound ethnic and cultural differences/practices that exist between the various

ethnic identities that comprise modern-day Nigeria (Hill, 2). Therefore, it appears problematic being able to link women and the environment broadly in Nigeria. Most southern Nigeria traditional communities' pre-colonial rule had the human–environment relationship that seems dialectical, evolving out of certain historical sequences within these ethnic traditional societies. The people in these societies were highly spiritual, believing in several deities, and tend to link the spiritual to their physical activities. Reference was always made to their divine pantheon to further explain their affinity to the environment. From this perspective, there seems to be a balance relationship between the gods and goddesses in these communities. This balance, it appears, gave individuals in these traditional communities a contrary understanding of gender relationship when compared to Western traditional social structure that was later introduced into present day Nigeria. As argued by Olademo, "... maintaining [this] balance [of deities] is the very ground on which complementarity gender relations rest [in pre-colonial Nigeria societies]" (43). This is a social cultural structure that appears to be gender neutral. Again, both sexes can emphasize each other qualities without any form(s) or perceived idea of gender domination.

However, with the advent of colonial rule in Nigeria, the traditional social structure, particularly in virtually all southern Nigeria traditional societies, was significantly altered. British colonial rule introduced the Victorian mind-set of creating a social structure where men and women are supposed to be treated differently in social, political and economic relations (Oyewunmi, 23). As a result, from that period till the contemporary times, the traditional social structure in most traditional societies in Nigeria have been a kind of 'hybrid culture', one that is significantly rooted in its pre-colonial cultural heritage yet, also with several Western cultural norms. Rather than being based entirely on complementarity of gender relations as in the pre-colonial period, the Western norm of hierarchy and domination is now prevalent to a certain degree. Women are perceived as inferior and less powerful compared to their male counterpart and most of their roles are relegated to the domestic sphere although they contribute significantly to the communities' development particularly through trade and farming related activities.

Overall, Ecofeminism in Nigeria provides another contextual view of the relationship between human and the environment and in particular, the link between women and the environment which is the main foci of this work. It, however, differs from women being perceived as the natural caretakers of the environment as postulated by Shiva in the analysis of some contexts in Asia (Shiva, 45). Rather, women relationships with the environment manifest more — since pre-colonial times to the present — through their invaluable developmental roles in these communities, particularly through farming related activities. Although in a Nigerian post-colonial setting this is not significantly acknowledged due to the patriarchal social cultural structure in the country.

### **Climate Change and Fulani Herdsmen Conflict: An Ecofeminist Perspective**

The sudden rise in violent tactics by Fulani herdsmen has devastated several host communities in Nigeria, and the natives of such communities are subjected to constant fear and uncertainty. At present, most discussions on this current crisis in the country have, surprisingly neglected the impact the crisis has on women and their interactions with the environment in host communities. Though in a Nigerian context, women contribute significantly in the development of communities and their linkage with the environment - unconsciously - do more in the conservation of nature in these communities (Dankelman and Davidson, 34). It is also important to note, however, that developmental roles and contributions of women to societal development is however, not a new phenomenon. From the pre-colonial times up-till the contemporary times, women have been active in communities. In the numerous Yoruba kingdoms, women were greatly involved in the food processing of certain crops such as palm-kernel and cassava that were eventually sold in the markets as palm oil and garri (Raji *et al*, 44) respectively by women during the market days in the communities.

In the post-colonial era and in particular, with the advent of the oil boom in Nigeria in the early 1970s, there has been a drastic change in the economic structure of the country. Since that period, there has been less emphasis on agro-related products as means of foreign exchange revenue for the country. Also, this period has witnessed a large-scale exodus of able-bodied men from several communities into urban centres seeking wage labour due to fewer opportunities in the villages and/or townships. Therefore, women are increasingly taking up greater portion of food production in the communities and some studies (Oyewunmi, 1997; Olademo, 2009) have suggested that women contribute between 50% and 70% of Nigeria's food requirement. Overall, the impact of women activities in their communities cannot be over-emphasized as they play critical roles in several communities in Nigeria. Therefore, it is important that the present violent conflict that exist between Fulani herdsmen and host communities, which this work suggests is partially caused by climate change, is examined from an Ecofeminist perspective.

The present conflict appears to have significant ramifications on migrations (relocation) as individuals are significantly moving from the various conflict-prone communities due to the violent intensity of the crisis. In the literature on climate change, migrations and conflicts in emerging societies, there are several arguments made by scholars that suggest that climate change is the causality for such migrations which ultimately has a link to conflicts in the settler communities that migrants move to (Nordas *et al*, 638). It is argued that such migrations can promote various intensities of conflicts to areas receiving the migrants though such intensities vary across contexts. Rafael Reuveny notes that such climate-induced conflicts develop in phases and usually begin when there is competition for resources between the climate-induced migrants and host communities particularly if there are an unprecedented high number of migrants into a particular community.

Consequently, ethnic tensions might develop especially when there are different ethnic identities as migrants whose socio-religious and/or socio-cultural norms and way of life are significantly different from the host community's ethnic/cultural way of life. Such ethnic tensions are suggested as leading to distrust among the various ethnic identities especially if the host community feels that such migrants might displace them as the original inhabitants of that area based on the number of migrants that might have moved into that community. Eventually such distrust, it is argued, will create a kind of socio-economic fault line, and depending on the context, migrants and host communities might compete over pastoral land and/or jobs and so on (656-73).

In recent times, there have been numerous media reports of individuals - mostly farmers - fleeing their communities over attacks from Fulani herdsmen and they take refuge in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. In one of such reports, it was stated that in May 2017, an estimated 15,000 persons from numerous farming communities in Taraba state had fled attacks from Fulani herdsmen and have sought refuge in IDP camps (Vanguard Newspaper, 2017). While climate-induced conflicts affect both genders in terms of migrations to safer communities, women are particularly more affected based on our earlier analysis on the significant role women play in communities across the country.

In the communities significantly affected by the violent attacks by herdsmen, women have had to abandon their farming activities and relocate to safer communities. Just as other farming contexts across most part of sub-Saharan Africa, access to land for farming activities is a significant determinant of income power and in particular, among women. Leaving such a status, especially in a patriarchal society such as in Nigerian communities which historically granted men easier opportunities to acquire land compared to women - who had it more challenging acquiring land - particularly for farming, meant that such a loss of farming land significantly disempowered them and whatever social status having such lands granted them in the community. Overall, the inability to access farmlands for cultivation due to the present violent activities of Fulani herdsmen has significant psychological effect on women who have to deal with the loss of their means of livelihood and/or regular source of income, and often, the demise of family members in the communities. For example, it was reported in the media on 25 April 2016 that in Uzo-Uwani local government area of Enugu state, three women had gone mad due to the loss of their husbands during an attack by Fulani herdsmen in their community (Daily Post, 2016).

Another area where women are significantly impacted by the on-going Fulani herdsmen crises in various communities in Nigeria is in the loss of regular income and livelihood. Since the change of tactics used by Fulani herdsmen in these host communities, there have been numerous media reports of women in several communities of Nigeria protesting against the activities of these herdsmen and the

impact these crises pose on their livelihood. In one of such media reports in July 2017, Nkechinyere Nwosu, wife of the paramount ruler of Ekwu 1 of Umuekwunehoro of Igbo-Etche Kingdom, Rivers State, speaking on behalf of the protesting women, Nkechinyere stated that she was appealing to both the federal and state governments to stop herdsmen from entering into their farmlands because such activities were destroying their crops which can lead to starvation in several homes within the community. She noted that “if herdsmen destroy our crops what do they expect us to feed on? ...” (Vanguard Newspaper, 2017). This is given the fact that in those communities ravaged by the herders, virtually all the people are engaged in farming and/or farming related activities as means of livelihood.

Such media reports on violent activities of Fulani herdsmen in various communities in Nigeria have had significant effects on the degree of poverty present in these communities, considering that poverty is highly prevalent in the country and especially in rural communities where herdsmen are wrecking havoc. In Nigeria, as at 2016, it was estimated that no fewer than 112 million people live below the poverty line. This represents approximately 67.1% of the total population estimated at 167million (Vanguard Newspaper, 2016). There are numerous reasons attributed to causing poverty in Nigeria. These include income inequality, political instability and ethnic conflict, among others. It is crucial to understand that those who are usually worse off in terms of the degree of poverty are those that reside in rural communities.

Consequently, the loss of regular source of income and/or livelihood for women affected by the violent activities of Fulani herdsmen in mostly rural communities - due to their inability to make monetary proceeds from farming and/or farming related activities - has multi-faceted ramifications. First, it limits access to health care opportunities for both the women and their family members. This is as a result of not having adequate financial resources to cover the cost of health care bills when there is need to access such health care centres. Second, most often families that do not have adequate financial resources particularly in rural communities in Nigeria have the challenge of providing quality education - both primary and secondary -for their children. The immediate primary concern often focuses on having sufficient money to buy food for their family on a daily basis for survival rather than on sending the children to quality schools in the communities. And, lastly, it is more prevalent in poverty stricken areas, especially in rural communities, to have higher degrees of child abuse. As families do not have adequate financial resources to care for their children, they often expose the children to numerous societal dangers such as, hawking of goods on the streets and in the market, or give them up as domestic helpers in urban centres, so as to make ends meet.

Finally, women in these conflict areas are more prone to sexual exploitation and/or abuse. It is important to note that such sexual exploitations in conflict prone areas are not unique to Nigeria, as this is highly prevalent in virtually all conflict prone regions of the world (Gray and Adeakin, 185-211). The literature on women

experiences in conflict prone regions of the world show that sexual exploitation/abuse is frequently used as an instrument of war and such sexual violence experienced by women in most conflicts have ethnic, gender dominance and racial superiority overtones that justifies such violence (Dhakal, 24). In recent times, several of such violence are intentionally inflicted by men to destroy any form of ethnic identity or group solidarity, and importantly, the dignity of the women. As a result, most recent studies on sexual violence perpetrated against women are characterized as a form of genocide. Overall, sexual assaults or violence against women in conflicts often results in stigma, victimization, isolation, alienation, prolonged emotional trauma and unwanted pregnancies (Dhakal, 13).

Media reports on this crisis have been dominated by several cases of rape and sexual assault allegedly perpetuated by the herdsmen. These reported cases cut across numerous communities and ethnic groups in the southern part of the country. As at 2017, such notable reports that had several media coverage includes in August 2017, a 72-year-old grandmother, Victoria Akinseye, who was allegedly raped by herdsmen on her farm in Ore, Odigbo council area of Ondo State (Daily Post, 2017). Earlier in that same year in June, suspected Fulani herdsmen were alleged to have raped and beheaded a pregnant woman identified as Margaret on her way to her farm in Ekpoma, Esan West local government area of Edo State (Punch Newspaper, 2017). A similar case was also reported in August 2017 of a 19-year-old married woman who was raped on her way to her farm around Idiya village, in Ile-Ido, Ibadan in Oyo State (Vanguard Newspaper, 2017). Overall and as earlier stated, these cases of sexual assaults and rapes against women in these communities have not only led to prolonged emotional trauma for these women, they have also made them to be alienated within their communities. It has been reported that a community leader in Enugu State, Anthony Enu, stated that men in various communities in Enugu State are divorcing their wives that were raped by Fulani herdsmen. Enu noted that the primary reason given by these men for divorcing their raped wives was that they were afraid of being infected with sexually transmitted diseases as there is a general perception that the herdsmen are major transmitters of sexual diseases (Vanguard, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

This work has attempted to provide an alternate understanding to climate change and conflict within the context of the present violent activities of Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria. It examined a largely unexplored area in the literature of Fulani herdsmen and climate change by analyzing the present herdsmen conflict in Nigeria from an Ecofeminist perspective. Thus far, most studies on this subject have tended to analyze this present conflict from an ethno-political and/or ethno-religious perspective. While other studies postulate that it might be another form of Islamist Jihadists phenomenon on the polity. There seems to be two important possibilities that may occur if the current violence by Fulani herdsmen persists and/or degenerates within these communities from an Ecofeminist perspective. The first is

that it is plausible to assume that a 'modified' form of complementarity of gender relations might be harnessed by several NGOs and government agencies to attempt to limit these herdsmen conflicts in various rural communities in southern Nigeria. The second is that the invaluable developmental roles performed by women in various rural communities can further enhance gender solidarity or cohesion among women which might lead to significant economic empowerment of women within these communities. This ultimately, might assist in limiting the level of havoc perpetuated by the herdsmen.

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