

## **SOWING IN THE SHADOW OF THE GUN: INSURGENCY AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF WOMEN FARMERS' LIVELIHOODS IN NORTHERN BORNO, NIGERIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the socioeconomic and gendered dimensions of insurgency on women farmers' livelihoods in northern Borno State, Nigeria. Drawing on a synthesis of empirical studies, humanitarian assessments, and policy reports published between 2024 and 2026, the analysis demonstrates that the Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) insurgencies have systematically dismantled the agricultural foundations of women's livelihoods through four interconnected mechanisms: forced displacement and loss of farmland, abduction and bodily insecurity, the emergence of women as primary agricultural labourers under conditions of extreme precarity, and the proliferation of survival-oriented coping strategies that entrench rather than alleviate poverty. The findings reveal that over 70% of women farmers in Borno State have lost their primary income sources, 62.2% have lost access to farmland, and 49.8% have lost livestock, with widowed and female-headed households bearing the most acute burdens. The paper argues that women farmers in northern Borno occupy a paradoxical position: they are increasingly responsible for feeding their communities while simultaneously being systematically excluded from the resources, security, and institutional support necessary to perform that role. Durable recovery requires not only gender-sensitive agricultural interventions but a fundamental restructuring of land access, security provision, and economic opportunity that recognises women's centrality to rural food systems.

***Keywords: Women farmers, insurgency, northern Borno, livelihood fragmentation, gendered vulnerability, agrarian crisis***

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the rural communities of northern Borno State, Nigeria, women have long been the invisible architects of agricultural life. They have planted, weeded, harvested, processed, and marketed the crops that sustain their households and communities. Yet the Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgencies, which erupted in 2009 and have since evolved into one of the world's most protracted and devastating conflicts, have targeted not only the physical infrastructure of agriculture but the gendered social relations upon which it depends. Women farmers in northern Borno now sow in the shadow of the gun, cultivating crops under armed guard, travelling in convoys for safety, and living with the constant knowledge that the simple act of tending a field may result in abduction, ransom demands, or death.

The scholarly and humanitarian literature on the Borno insurgency has rightly documented its devastating humanitarian consequences, its impact on agricultural production, and its economic toll. However, the specific experiences of women farmers, their vulnerabilities, their adaptations,

and their extraordinary resilience, remain comparatively under-theorised. This is a significant gap. Women in Borno State are not merely passive victims of the insurgency; they are active agricultural producers whose labour is essential to food security in a region where nearly six million people are projected to face acute food insecurity during the 2026 lean season. Understanding how the insurgency has fragmented their livelihoods is therefore both an intellectual and a policy imperative.

This paper addresses the following research questions: How has the insurgency disrupted women farmers' access to land, labour, and markets in northern Borno? Through what mechanisms does gendered insecurity undermine women's agricultural livelihoods? And what coping strategies have women farmers adopted in response? The analysis draws on recent empirical studies, humanitarian assessments, and policy documents to provide a comprehensive account of the insurgency's impact on women farmers in northern Borno State.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on women, agriculture, and conflict in Borno State. Section 3 outlines the methodology. Section 4 presents the findings organised around four thematic dimensions of livelihood fragmentation. Section 5 discusses the implications for policy and recovery. Section 6 concludes.

## **Literature Review**

### **Women in Borno's Agricultural Economy**

Women have historically played a central role in Borno State's agricultural economy. In Kanuri society, women have been responsible for a range of agricultural activities, including planting, weeding, harvesting, processing, and marketing, often working on both household plots and their own farms. A study of women farmers in South Borno documented that women typically work on their husbands' farms from Monday to Thursday and on their own farms on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, a pattern that illustrates both their integration into household agricultural production and their independent economic agency. Women's agricultural labour is not merely supplementary to men's; it is foundational to household food security and rural economic life.

### **The Gendered Impact of the Insurgency**

The Boko Haram insurgency has had profoundly gendered impacts. The conflict has been characterised by the targeted killing and conscription of men and boys, the abduction and sexual enslavement of women and girls, and the systematic destruction of the rural communities in which women's agricultural livelihoods were embedded. A study conducted in Gwoza Local Government Area of Borno State found that the extent of women's participation in food production was "very low" as measured against the pre-insurgency period, concluding that threats to lives and property had "crippled the motivation of women to engage in activities that can enhance the economic development of the society and their well-being".

Research on women's livelihoods in Borno State has documented the scale of economic devastation. More than 70% of female respondents in a mixed-methods study faced loss of primary income sources, 62.2% experienced loss of farmland, and 49.8% lost livestock. Access to vocational training, credit, land, and institutional assistance remains notably restricted, and many women have turned to precarious survival strategies, including survival sex and petty trading under exploitative circumstances.

### **Widowhood and Female-Headed Households**

The insurgency has produced a dramatic increase in widowhood and female-headed households in Borno State. Widowhood in this context is not merely a demographic status; it is a “catastrophic event” for women farmers, with serious implications for their well-being. Widows face compounded vulnerabilities: they have lost not only their husbands but often their access to land, their social status within the community, and their primary source of agricultural labour. A study of widowed cowpea farmers across Adamawa, Borno, Gombe, and Yobe states found that widows living in internally displaced persons (IDP) settlements recorded worse poverty levels because years of conflict had stripped many of them of their means of livelihood.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Despite the growing body of research on women and conflict in Borno State, significant gaps remain. Few studies have systematically examined how the gendered division of agricultural labour has been transformed by the insurgency, how women have adapted to the loss of male labour, and how their coping strategies differ from those of men. This paper seeks to address these gaps by developing a comprehensive account of the fragmentation of women farmers’ livelihoods in northern Borno.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This paper employs a qualitative synthesis approach, drawing on empirical studies, humanitarian assessment reports, and policy documents published between 2024 and 2026. The sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, reports from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), as well as news reports from the BBC and local Nigerian outlets. The analysis is organised around four thematic dimensions of livelihood fragmentation: (1) displacement and loss of farmland; (2) abduction, extortion, and bodily insecurity; (3) the emergence of women as primary agricultural labourers; and (4) survival-oriented coping strategies. These dimensions are treated as interconnected mechanisms through which the insurgency has restructured women’s agricultural livelihoods.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Displacement and the Loss of Farmland**

The most immediate mechanism through which the insurgency has fragmented women farmers’ livelihoods is displacement. The conflict has displaced over two million people in northeastern Nigeria, with women and children constituting the majority of those forced from their homes. When women flee their communities, they leave behind not only their land but also the social networks, customary land rights, and agricultural knowledge that are essential for farming. Yakaru Bukar, a 50-year-old widow living in Bama Local Government Area, describes the compounded losses she has endured. A mother of nine children, only five of whom are still alive, Yakaru lost her husband to the conflict and returned home four years ago to find that “everything had deteriorated”. The 2024 floods further devastated her crops, affecting over 60,380 hectares of cropland in Borno State alone. For widows like Yakaru, the struggles are especially profound. “It’s the widows who suffer the most,” she explains. “Even when we want to farm, the lack of resources like seeds makes it nearly impossible. Most of us can only cultivate small plots, if at all. To survive, we work as labourers on other people’s farms, spending everything we earn on food”.

Yakaru's account illustrates a critical dimension of livelihood fragmentation: the loss of farmland is not merely a loss of physical space but a loss of economic autonomy. When women cannot cultivate their own land, they become dependent on wage labour, which is precarious, poorly paid, and often exploitative. The transition from independent farmer to agricultural labourer represents a profound downward mobility that is difficult to reverse.

### **Abduction, Extortion, and Bodily Insecurity**

The second mechanism through which the insurgency fragments women farmers' livelihoods is the pervasive threat of abduction, extortion, and bodily harm. In November 2025, thirteen female farmers were abducted in Askira-Uba Local Government Area by suspected Boko Haram/ISWAP militants while travelling to harvest crops in a neighbouring district. The victims were originally from Huyim District and had travelled to Mussa District to harvest their farm produce when they were seized. The abduction of female farmers is not an isolated incident but part of a broader pattern of targeting women who venture into fields and markets.

The threat of abduction has transformed the spatial and temporal organisation of women's farming. Women farmers in northern Borno now frequently travel to their fields in convoys, often with armed escorts provided by the Agro Rangers, a special security unit established by the Borno State government to protect farmers from insurgent attacks. Aisha Isa, a 50-year-old farmer, describes the psychological toll of farming under these conditions. "There is fear...we fear for our souls," she tells the BBC as she tends her crops. Because it is no longer safe for her family to live in their home village, she and many others are bussed into Dalwa village from Maiduguri early in the morning and returned in the evening. She now lives in temporary housing, and growing beans and maize remains the only way for her to feed her family. "We will take the risk and come even if the rangers are not coming," she says.

The extortion of farmers by insurgent groups further compounds women's economic vulnerability. Militant groups operating in areas they control demand payments as a condition for allowing cultivation, functioning as a de facto tax on agricultural production. For women farmers, who already operate with minimal surpluses and face restricted access to credit and land, extortion can mean the difference between survival and destitution.

### **The Gendered Division of Agricultural Labour under Conflict**

A third mechanism through which the insurgency fragments women farmers' livelihoods is the transformation of the gendered division of agricultural labour. As men have been killed, conscripted, or forced into displacement, agricultural labour has increasingly shifted to women and girls, who are perceived as not facing the same existential threats in the fields and now shoulder much of the duties of farming and firewood gathering. This shift represents both an expansion of women's agricultural responsibilities and a contraction of their access to resources.

The paradox is striking: women are being asked to produce more food with less access to land, fewer inputs, and diminished social support. Research by UNIDIR documents that women face particular difficulties in securing land or loans, leaving them further excluded from the resources necessary for agricultural production. In many displaced and conflict-affected communities, customary land tenure systems have broken down, and women's traditional rights to cultivate household plots have been undermined by displacement, the loss of male relatives who mediated land access, and the disruption of community governance structures.

The burden on women is further exacerbated by the collapse of rural infrastructure. Markets have been destroyed, roads rendered unsafe, and storage facilities looted. Women who manage to produce a crop often find themselves unable to transport it to market or unable to obtain a fair price. Quick sales of harvests to meet immediate needs are common, with 32% of respondents in one assessment noting women's involvement in distress sales that trap them in cycles of poverty rather than enabling recovery.

### **Survival-Oriented Coping Strategies**

In response to these pressures, women farmers in northern Borno have adopted a range of survival-oriented coping strategies. These strategies are largely reversible and focused on immediate survival rather than long-term recovery, indicating that women are attempting to endure the crisis rather than transform their livelihoods in a sustainable way.

**Agricultural labouring.** The most common coping strategy documented in the literature is wage labour on other people's farms. Widows in Bama, like Yakaru Bukar, work as labourers on other farms, spending everything they earn on food. While this strategy provides immediate income, it is precarious, poorly paid, and does not build assets or skills that could support long-term livelihood recovery. A study of widowed cowpea farmers found that increased commercialisation among widows was associated with poorer welfare outcomes rather than improved livelihoods, suggesting that market participation under conditions of extreme vulnerability may deepen rather than alleviate poverty.

**Petty trading and small business.** Some women have turned to petty trading and small business ventures as alternatives to farming. In Dikwa and Mongonu Local Government Areas, women supported by Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) have opened small shops, started chin-chin production, and established tailoring businesses. Bawagana, a mother of five, received training and a start-up kit to open a small shop at home. "The shop items I received allowed me to start a small business. Now I can take care of my children. They can go to school, with the proper equipment," she says. While these ventures provide important income, they are often small-scale, informal, and vulnerable to the same insecurity that affects farming.

**Distress sales of livestock and assets.** The loss of livestock has been devastating for women farmers, with 49.8% of female respondents in one study reporting livestock losses. In response, some women have engaged in distress sales of remaining assets, including livestock, to meet immediate food needs. The ICRC has launched a cash-based livestock restocking programme in Borno State, prioritising assistance to women, widows, and other vulnerable groups, but the scale of need far exceeds the programme's reach.

**Migration and displacement.** For some women, the only coping strategy available is migration. Outmigration of family members, particularly young men and women, has been documented as a key strategy for managing food insecurity in insurgency-affected households. However, migration exposes women to new risks, including gender-based violence during transit and exploitation in urban informal economies.

**Survival sex.** Perhaps the most disturbing coping strategy documented in the literature is survival sex. The Zenodo study on women's livelihoods in Borno State found that many women have turned to "precarious survival strategies, such as engaging in survival sex and petty trading under exploitative circumstances". This finding underscores the extreme vulnerability of women farmers in northern Borno, who may be forced to trade their bodily autonomy for the resources

necessary to feed their children. The UNFPA has warned that rising insecurity has compounded a deepening hunger crisis, increasing risks of gender-based violence (GBV) and exacerbating the vulnerability of women and girls.

### **The Paradox of Invisibility and Indispensability**

The findings of this study reveal a profound paradox in the situation of women farmers in northern Borno. On the one hand, women are increasingly indispensable to agricultural production and food security. As men have been killed, displaced, or conscripted, women have assumed responsibilities for cultivation, harvesting, processing, and marketing that were previously shared with or performed by men. A study of rural livelihoods in southern Borno documented women's dual roles, working on their husbands' farms during the week and on their own farms on weekends. In displacement camps and resettled communities, women have become the primary producers of food for their families and communities.

On the other hand, women farmers remain largely invisible in policy responses to the insurgency. A 2025 analysis by Businessday found that in north-eastern states like Adamawa and Borno, women farmers are often the first to return to the land to rebuild livelihoods amidst conflict, yet state budgets allocate no specific funding for women farmers. While Borno State has collaborations with NGOs and benefits from federal initiatives, the state's own budget does not reflect the centrality of women to agricultural recovery. This invisibility is not merely a matter of policy neglect; it is a structural feature of gendered governance that systematically excludes women from the resources and decision-making processes that shape their livelihoods.

### **Discussion: Implications for Policy and Recovery**

The findings of this study have significant implications for policy and recovery efforts in northern Borno State.

First, gender-sensitive land access must be a central component of recovery programming. The loss of farmland is the most direct mechanism through which the insurgency has fragmented women's livelihoods, and any recovery strategy must address the structural barriers that prevent women from accessing and controlling land. This includes reforming customary tenure systems that exclude women, providing legal aid to women seeking to reclaim lost land, and prioritising female-headed households in land allocation for resettlement programmes.

Second, security provision must be designed with women's needs in mind. Women farmers face distinct security threats, including abduction, sexual violence, and extortion. Current security arrangements, such as the Agro Rangers, provide important protection but are insufficient in scale and scope. Recovery efforts must include gender-sensitive security provision that enables women to access their fields without fear of violence, including women-only farming spaces, escorted transport, and community-based early warning systems.

Third, economic empowerment programmes must recognise women's agricultural roles. While vocational training and small business support are valuable, they should not replace investment in women's agricultural livelihoods. Women farmers need access to improved seeds, fertilizer, credit, and markets on equitable terms. The FAO's Farmer Field Schools, which have reached over 800 women farmers in the northeast, provide a model for integrating agricultural training with gender-sensitive programming.

Fourth, psychosocial support is essential. The psychological toll of farming under conditions of extreme insecurity—the fear, the trauma of abduction and violence, the grief of loss—cannot be addressed through agricultural inputs alone. Women farmers need access to mental health and psychosocial support services that help them cope with the trauma of conflict while rebuilding their livelihoods.

Fifth, women's voices must be centred in recovery planning. The invisibility of women farmers in state budgets and policy frameworks is symptomatic of a broader exclusion of women from decision-making processes. Recovery programmes that do not engage women as partners, planners, and leaders will fail to address their needs and will perpetuate the gendered inequalities that the insurgency has exacerbated.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has examined how the insurgency in northern Borno State has fragmented the livelihoods of women farmers through displacement, loss of farmland, abduction and extortion, the transformation of gendered agricultural labour, and the proliferation of survival-oriented coping strategies. The findings demonstrate that women farmers in northern Borno occupy a paradoxical position: they are increasingly indispensable to agricultural production and food security while simultaneously being systematically excluded from the resources, security, and institutional support necessary to perform that role.

The policy implications are clear. Durable recovery in northern Borno requires not merely agricultural inputs or security provision but a fundamental restructuring of gendered access to land, security, and economic opportunity. Women farmers must be recognised not as passive victims of the insurgency but as essential actors in the reconstruction of rural food systems. Their knowledge, labour, and resilience are assets upon which any sustainable recovery must be built.

Future research should examine the long-term trajectories of women farmers in northern Borno, including the persistence or reversal of gendered labour shifts, the effectiveness of gender-sensitive recovery interventions, and the conditions under which women can reclaim their agricultural livelihoods. Such research is essential for understanding how rural societies recover from protracted conflict and for designing policies that support equitable and sustainable rural futures.

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