

Climate Change and Gender Based Violence in Nigeria

Professor Member Euginia George-Genyi

Department of Political Science,
Benue State University,
Makurdi

Abstract

This study examines the complex relationship between climate change and gender-based violence in Nigeria, highlighting the multifaceted challenges and vulnerabilities faced by women and marginalized groups. The study used secondary sources of data and utilized the Ecosystem theory as the frame work of analysis. The research reveals that climate change exacerbates existing gender inequalities, leading to increased risks of gender-based violence. Women as primary stewards of resources, experience heightened vulnerabilities due to shifts in environmental patterns and resource scarcity. Economic stressors arising from climate change contribute to power imbalances, escalating the risk of domestic violence. Cultural and social dynamics further amplify these challenges, with displacement and overcrowded living conditions fostering environments conducive to gender-based violence. Specific groups, including women, indigenous communities, and those with limited access to resources, face intersecting vulnerabilities, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions. Policy and legal frameworks are identified as crucial components for addressing the linkages between climate change and gender-based violence. Thus, a gap in integration persists, necessitating a comprehensive and gender-sensitive approach in climate policies. The eco-feminist perspective underscores the interconnectedness of environmental and gender injustices, advocating for holistic sustainability solutions.

Key Words: Climate Change, Ecosystem, Gender Based Violence, Intersecting Vulnerabilities

Introduction

Climate change and its diverse impacts have become critical issues globally, influencing ecosystems, economies, and social structures. Nigeria, as the most populous country in Africa, is particularly susceptible to the adverse effects of climate change. Concurrently, the intersection of climate change and gender-based violence (GBV) presents a complex web of challenges that demand attention. Nigeria, endowed with a diverse range of ecosystems, faces multifaceted challenges arising from climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has highlighted the country's vulnerability to extreme weather events, such as floods, droughts, and heatwaves (IPCC, 2014).

These climatic shifts have profound implications for agriculture, water resources, and overall socio-economic stability (Nkonya, Mirzabaev & von Braun, 2016). As threats and pressures on the environment and its resources amplify gender inequality and power imbalances in communities and households, coping with resource scarcity and societal stress, gender-based attacks and harassment are employed to bar women from exercising their rights over resources and their uses. Thus, the loss of traditional knowledge, biodiversity and ecosystem services are resulting in new, more damaging forms of violent control and exploitation. The linkages between GBV and environmental issues are complex and multi-layered, but these threats to human rights and healthy ecosystems are not insurmountable.

The statistics on gender-based violence are frightening as more than 5 women or girls are killed every hour by someone in their family. In 2021, nearly 1 in 5 women aged 20-24 were married before turning 18 years of age (in Nigeria, they got married out even at a much younger age). One in three (3) women have been subjected to violence at least once in their lifetime, there is data on intimate partner violence in at least, 161 countries, there is technology facilitated violence against women and girls and boys too. There is on the increase, acts of femicides across the globe.

In Nigeria, the predominance of patriarchy, the underlying socio-political system has impacted gender relations and the preferential treatment to men over women and the consequences have been a disproportionate advantage in favour of men over a disadvantaged female folk.

Urgent action to end GBV, promote gender equality and protect the environment is crucial and is the responsibility of all. Preventing and responding to GBV in environmental contexts facilitates this action, unlocking opportunities for enhanced conservation, sustainable development, human rights and gender equity. This study explored the nuanced relationships between climate change and the prevalence of gender-based violence in the Nigerian context.

Climate Change and Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria: Some Expositions

Climate change refers to long-term alterations in temperature, precipitation, and other atmospheric conditions on Earth, primarily caused by human activities such as the burning of fossil fuels and deforestation (IPCC, 2014). Climate change and its consequences have garnered increased attention globally, and researchers are increasingly exploring the intersections between climate change impacts and social issues particularly, gender related concerns. One critical nexus is the relationship between climate change and gender-based violence (GBV). In the Nigerian context, this intersection presents unique challenges and opportunities that necessitate a comprehensive examination through the lens of existing literature. Nigeria, as a West African nation, faces a myriad of climate change impacts, including rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, and increased frequency of extreme weather events (IPCC, 2014). These changes have profound implications for agriculture, water resources, and overall livelihoods, particularly in rural areas where a significant segment of the population depends on agriculture for sustenance (Nkonya, Mirzabaev & von Braun, 2016). The greater percentage of this population incidentally is the women folk who alongside with the other vulnerable groups are directly affected by the vagaries of climate change.

Gender-based violence on the other hand, involves harmful actions, threats, or coercion directed at an individual based on their gender. This form of violence disproportionately affects women and girls, encompassing physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse (UNICEF, 2017). Duflo (2012) emphasizes the link between economic empowerment and gender-based violence. Women's vulnerability to climate change-induced stressors is heightened when economic disparities persist, making them more susceptible to various forms of violence. Denton (2002) also explores the gendered dimensions of climate change vulnerability, stressing that the impacts are not uniform across genders. Women, especially in Nigeria, face unique challenges due to existing socio-cultural norms, which exacerbate the risks of gender-based violence. Gender inequalities in Nigeria intersect with climate change impacts, creating disproportionate vulnerabilities, particularly for women. Women often bear the brunt of climate-induced challenges as they are primarily responsible for household water supply, fuelwood collection, and small-scale agriculture (Denton, 2002). This places them at the forefront of climate-induced risks and vulnerabilities.

The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2005) underscores the correlation between environmental changes and gender-based violence in the context of humanitarian crises. Displacement

and resource scarcity resulting from climate-related events contribute to an increased risk of violence, particularly affecting women and girls. Caprioli (2005) highlights the role of gender inequality in predicting internal conflict, which can be exacerbated by climate-induced stressors. The study emphasizes how pre-existing gender disparities within Nigeria contribute to the susceptibility of certain populations, especially women, to gender-based violence in the wake of environmental changes. The socio-cultural context in Nigeria plays a significant role in shaping the dynamics of gender-based violence exacerbated by climate change. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, traditional gender roles, and unequal access to resources contribute to the vulnerability of women and marginalized groups (Caprioli, 2005). Understanding these cultural dynamics is crucial for developing effective interventions.

Jewkes (2002), contributes to the literature by examining the causes and prevention of intimate partner violence. The study emphasizes the interconnectedness of socio-economic factors and cultural practices, shedding light on how climate-induced changes in these domains can contribute to an increased prevalence of gender-based violence in Nigeria. Despite the growing body of literature on the topic, there are noticeable gaps in research. Few studies have systematically examined the long-term impacts of climate-induced displacement on the prevalence of gender-based violence. Additionally, there is a need for more research exploring the effectiveness of existing policies in mitigating the dual challenges of climate change and gender-based violence in the Nigerian context. This study sets out to close the existing gap.

Theoretical Framework

The study utilizes the Ecological Systems Theory as developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, a Russian-American developmental psychologist. He first introduced the theory in the late 1970s. The theory posits that human development occurs within a series of nested environmental systems, ranging from the immediate microsystem (individual's immediate surroundings) to the broader macrosystem (cultural and societal contexts). The interactions between the different levels and components of the ecological systems are dynamic and bidirectional. Changes in one system can have ripple effects in the others.

The theory distinguishes between proximal influences (those directly impacting the individual) and distal influences (external factors that indirectly affect the individual through other systems). The theory emphasized that human development is contingent upon the degree of fit between an individual and their environmental systems. Optimal

development occurs when there is a positive interaction between the individual and their ecological environment. The theory includes the concept of the chronosystem, which refers to the temporal dimension of the ecological model. It recognizes that individuals and environments change over time, and historical context plays a role in shaping development. The importance of interactions between different systems (mesosystem) is highlighted. For example, how family experiences may interact with school experiences, influencing overall development.

The theory acknowledges the role of individual agency and the capacity of individuals to actively shape and influence their environments. The macrosystem incorporates the broader cultural context, including societal values, norms, and ideologies, influencing human development. The ecological systems theory emphasizes an ecosystemic perspective, highlighting the interconnectedness of various systems and the need to consider the context in understanding human development.

The Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory has been influential in understanding human development within environmental contexts, though it is not without its criticisms. Some critics argue that the theory oversimplifies the complexities of human development by presenting ecological systems in a linear and hierarchical manner, neglecting the dynamic and bidirectional nature of interactions (Vandenbroeck, 2004). The theory is criticized for its lack of specificity in explaining the mechanisms through which interactions between different systems influence development. Critics argue that the theory needs more concrete guidance on how these interactions occur (Vandenbroeck, 2004).

Others have argued that the Ecological Systems Theory tends to be culturally biased, with a focus on Western societies. It may not adequately consider the cultural variations in how individuals interact with their environments (Sameroff, 2010). Critics argue that the theory places less emphasis on individual agency and tends to portray individuals as passive recipients of environmental influences, potentially neglecting the active role individuals play in shaping their own development (Grossman & Grossman, 1991). In the same manner, the theory has been criticized for presenting systems as relatively stable entities. It is further argued that it does not fully capture the dynamic and ever-changing nature of environments and their impact on development (Vandenbroeck, 2004).

The Ecological Systems Theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner, however, can be highly relevant in explaining the complex interactions between climate change and gender-based violence in Nigeria. The theory's multilevel structure helps analyze how different environmental systems, from the individual (microsystem) to the broader societal and cultural context

(macrosystem), interact and influence vulnerability to climate change impacts and gender-based violence. The theory explains that climate change and gender-based violence are dynamic phenomena with bidirectional interactions. The theory's emphasis on dynamic interactions allows for the exploration of how changes in climate affect social structures and, reciprocally, how societal norms and practices impact vulnerability to gender-based violence in the context of climate change. The theory's distinction between proximal and distal influences aligns with the idea that both direct (proximal) and indirect (distal) factors contribute to the link between climate change and gender-based violence. For instance, immediate environmental changes (proximal) may impact economic conditions, which then influence vulnerability to violence (distal).

The theory is also relevant due to the concept of person-environment fit which is crucial in understanding how individuals, especially women in Nigeria, navigate their environments in the face of climate change. It addresses how the fit between individuals and their changing environments can affect their vulnerability to gender-based violence. The chronosystem recognizes the importance of considering changes over time. This is critical when examining the evolving nature of climate change impacts and how societal responses and policies have changed, influencing the prevalence and nature of gender-based violence in Nigeria over time.

The interactions between various systems (mesosystem) are crucial. For instance, how policies at the community levels (family, schools, workplaces) interact with the experiences of individuals or families, influencing their vulnerability to gender-based violence amid climate change impacts. This is because the macrosystem component of the theory is particularly significant in understanding the cultural and societal norms that shape gender roles and power dynamics in Nigeria. These cultural factors contribute to the complex relationship between climate change and gender-based violence. The ecosystemic perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of various systems. This is pertinent when examining how changes in the natural environment, economic systems, and cultural norms collectively contribute to the vulnerability of certain groups, especially women, to gender-based violence in the context of climate change.

Gender-Based Violence in Nigeria

Gender-based violence, encompassing physical, sexual, and psychological harm, remains a pervasive issue in Nigeria. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports alarming rates of intimate partner violence, with approximately 30% of Nigerian women experiencing such violence during their lifetime (WHO, 2018). This indicates the urgency of

understanding the root causes and contextual factors contributing to gender-based violence within the Nigerian social landscape.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is a pervasive and deeply rooted global issue that affects individuals regardless of age, socio-economic status, or cultural background. GBV encompasses a range of harmful behaviors, actions, or threats that are directed at an individual based on their gender, disproportionately affecting women and girls. It manifests in various forms, including physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse, and is often rooted in unequal power dynamics between genders (UNICEF, 2017).

It often involves physical harm, such as hitting, slapping, or any form of bodily injury. The physical aspect of violence is a visible and alarming manifestation of gender-based power imbalances. On the other hand, sexual violence is a prevalent form of GBV, encompassing rape, sexual assault, forced marriage, and any unwanted sexual contact. It violates an individual's autonomy and can have severe physical and psychological consequences (WHO, 2021). GBV extends beyond physical harm to include psychological and emotional abuse, such as intimidation, verbal threats, and manipulation. This form of violence can have lasting effects on victims' mental health and well-being (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2006). Economic violence involves controlling an individual's financial resources, restricting their access to employment or education, and exploiting economic dependence. This form of violence reinforces gender inequalities and limits opportunities for economic empowerment (Duflo, 2012).

It is a global phenomenon affecting millions of individuals, with women and girls being disproportionately impacted. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), about 1 in 3 women worldwide has experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime (WHO, 2021). However, it's crucial to recognize that GBV also affects men and individuals of non-binary gender identities, albeit to a lesser extent, highlighting the importance of a comprehensive and inclusive approach to addressing the issue.

Understanding the root causes of GBV is essential for effective prevention and intervention strategies. Gender inequalities, social norms that perpetuate violence, and entrenched patriarchal structures contribute significantly to the prevalence of GBV (Heise, 1998). Additionally, factors such as poverty, lack of education, and cultural practices that subordinate women have exacerbated the risk of experiencing GBV (Jewkes, 2002). In Nigeria, this is expressed in many forms including domestic, verbal and physical abuse, rape and sexual assaults, early and forced marriages, incest, female genital mutilation, acid baths and outright killing.

The consequences of GBV extend far beyond the immediate act of

violence. Victims often suffer from physical injuries, emotional trauma, and long-term psychological effects, leading to a diminished quality of life. GBV also contributes to cycles of violence, as children who witness or experience violence are more likely to perpetrate or become victims of violence in the future (UNICEF, 2017).

Linking Climate Change and Gender-Based Violence

The intersection of climate change and gender-based violence is an emerging area of concern. Climate-induced environmental changes, resource scarcity, and altered livelihood patterns can exacerbate existing gender inequalities, making certain populations more vulnerable to violence (Denton, 2002; OCHA, 2015). Studies have pointed to the intricate connections between climate-related stressors and an increased risk of gender-based violence, as seen in post-disaster scenarios and changing community dynamics (Caprioli, 2005; Heslop, 2013).

Climate change and gender-based violence (GBV) represent two intersecting global challenges that, when examined together, reveal a complex web of relationships. The impact of climate change on vulnerable communities has far-reaching consequences, affecting socio-economic structures, resource availability, and community dynamics. Within this context, gender-based violence emerges as a consequence and exacerbator of climate-induced vulnerabilities, creating a cyclical pattern that disproportionately affects women and marginalized groups.

There is no specific international legal instrument to redress SGBV. The general law relating to climate change and environmental protection do not address the gender issues specifically. Some related international legal instruments dealing with women's human rights applicable during peace, conflict and post-conflict situations are implicitly dealing with the issue. It can be hypothesized that the existing international legal mechanism are not adequate to address exacerbation of SGBV against women as a result climate change. There is a need for a specific international legal instrument

Climate change leads to a range of environmental changes, including extreme weather events, shifts in precipitation patterns, and alterations in temperature. These changes can result in resource scarcity, loss of livelihoods, and increased competition for essential resources (IPCC, 2014). In such scenarios, existing gender inequalities can be amplified, as women are often responsible for securing water, food, and fuel for their families (Denton, 2002). This places an additional burden on women and may increase their vulnerability to various forms of gender-based violence. The UN Secretary General on 23rd February, 2021 stated that women bear the greatest burden of climate change emergencies and they do not enjoy equal rights.

SGBV grows considerably during pandemics and epidemics as could be seen during the COVID-19 period as domestic violence or intimate partner's violence rose because of scarcity of resources, security and other necessary services.

The economic ramifications of climate change, such as crop failure and loss of livelihoods, can contribute to heightened tensions within households and communities. As economic resources become scarce, power imbalances may intensify, leading to an increased risk of gender-based violence (OCHA, 2015). For instance, economic stressors may exacerbate existing domestic violence, as frustration and desperation manifest in abusive behavior.

Climate change can also prompt shifts in social and cultural dynamics, further impacting gender relations. Displacement due to environmental degradation or disasters may lead to overcrowded living conditions, disrupting community structures and traditional support systems. In such contexts, the risk of gender-based violence, including sexual violence, can escalate, particularly in displaced populations (Heslop, 2013). Certain groups, such as women and girls, indigenous communities, and those with limited access to resources, are disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and gender-based violence (Caprioli, 2005). The intersectionality of these vulnerabilities compounds the challenges faced by these groups, emphasizing the need for targeted and inclusive interventions. The experiences of displaced people particularly women and girls in internally displaced camps in Nigeria are cases in point arising from general insecurity and the farmers'/herders conflicts.

Case Studies and Examples on Climate Change and Gender-Based Violence:

Bangladesh - Cyclone Sidr (2007): In the aftermath of Cyclone Sidr, studies documented an increase in gender-based violence, particularly against women and girls, in temporary shelters. The displacement, loss of livelihoods, and heightened stressors exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities, leading to incidents of violence (ActionAid Bangladesh, 2008).

Pacific Island Nations - Rising Sea Levels: Small island nations in the Pacific face increased risks due to rising sea levels and extreme weather events. Displacement and resource scarcity heighten tensions, leading to documented cases of gender-based violence. Women may face increased vulnerability during migration and in new, crowded living conditions (IFRC, 2016).

India - Agricultural Changes and Water Scarcity: Changes in rainfall patterns and water scarcity in certain regions of India impacted agricultural practices. Women, often responsible for water collection and agriculture, face increased workloads and economic stress, contributing to heightened tensions and instances of domestic violence (Narain & Nanda, 2012).

Sub-Saharan Africa - Drought and Resource Scarcity: Drought conditions in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa have led to increased competition for resources. Women, responsible for water and fuelwood collection, have faced heightened risks of gender-based violence as resource scarcity intensifies (Oxfam International, 2009).

Nepal - Post-Earthquake Vulnerabilities (2015): Following the earthquake in Nepal, studies indicated an increase in gender-based violence, including human trafficking and early marriages. Displacement, breakdown of community structures, and economic stressors contributed to the heightened risks faced by women and girls (UN Women, 2015).

In Nigeria, climate change and associated consequences have forced huge populations to migrate within state; majority being women and children and these population displacements have increased risks for women and girls, whether in transits, displacement camps or living without resources. Away from their communities, exposure to violence has increased including sexual assault, exploitation, child labour and trafficking. Young girls are forced out of schools, increasing the rate of child marriages and other bizarre activities like sex for food.

These examples illustrate the diverse ways in which climate change interacts with gender dynamics, contributing to increased vulnerabilities and risks of gender-based violence. It's essential to note that addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and gender-sensitive approach that considers the unique contexts of different regions and communities.

Concluding Thoughts

Climate change and gender-based violence in Nigeria are interconnected challenges, creating a complex web of vulnerabilities. The impacts of climate change, such as resource scarcity and displacement, exacerbate existing gender inequalities, leading to increased risks of gender-based violence. Women in Nigeria bear a disproportionate burden in the face of climate change. Traditional gender roles often assign women responsibilities for securing water, food, and fuel, making them more susceptible to the impacts of environmental changes. Economic stressors resulting from climate change contribute to heightened tensions within households and communities. The ensuing power imbalances increase the risk of gender-based violence, with economic hardship acting as a catalyst for abusive behavior.

Also, climate change prompts shift in cultural and social dynamics, disrupting community structures and support systems. Displacement and overcrowded living conditions create environments conducive to gender-based violence, particularly affecting marginalized groups. Certain groups, including women, indigenous communities, and those with limited access to resources, face heightened vulnerabilities at the intersection of climate change and gender-based violence. The compounded impacts necessitate targeted and inclusive interventions. While there is a growing recognition of the linkages between climate change and gender-based violence, policy and legal frameworks often lack integration. Comprehensive approaches that include gender-sensitive climate policies are crucial for addressing the unique vulnerabilities of different genders. An eco-feminist lens highlights the interconnectedness of environmental and gender injustices. Understanding the ways in which environmental degradation contributes to gender-based violence reinforces the need for a holistic approach to sustainability and justice.

The intricate relationship between climate change and gender-based violence in Nigeria underscores the urgent need for holistic and intersectional approaches to address the vulnerabilities faced by women and marginalized groups. The impacts of climate change, ranging from extreme weather events to shifts in resource availability, intersect with existing gender inequalities, exacerbating the risks of gender-based violence. The multifaceted nature of this nexus demands nuanced solutions that consider the socio-economic, cultural, and environmental dimensions (Onah, Jeiyol, Ademanyi & Ukange, 2023).

As evident from the literature and case examples, climate-induced stressors disproportionately affect women, who often bear the brunt of resource scarcity, displacement, and economic strain. These stressors, in turn, contribute to an increased susceptibility to various forms of gender-based violence. The vulnerability is further exacerbated by cultural norms and systemic inequalities prevalent in Nigeria.

Recommendations

- i. **The Nigerian government should** ensure that climate change policies and strategies incorporate gender-sensitive approaches. Recognize and address the differentiated impacts of climate change on men and women, considering their roles, responsibilities, and vulnerabilities.
- ii. Strengthening and restoring GBV service delivery, implementing shock-responses, safety nets projects and women empowerment are veritable strategies and response to climate induced disasters.
- iii. Implement community-based resilience programs that empower women

economically and socially. This includes providing access to education, training, and resources that enhance women's capacities to cope with climate-related stressors.

- iv. Improve early warning systems for extreme weather events, considering the specific needs and vulnerabilities of women. Ensure that information reaches women in a timely and accessible manner, allowing them to make informed decisions and evacuate if necessary.
- v. Strengthen legal frameworks addressing gender-based violence. Ensure that laws are comprehensive, enforceable, and that justice is accessible. Raise awareness about legal rights and avenues for recourse, particularly in the context of climate-induced vulnerabilities.
- vi. Promote community-level awareness and education on the intersection of climate change and gender-based violence. Foster dialogues that challenge harmful cultural norms and empower communities to collectively address these issues.
- Vii. Build the capacity of local organizations, government agencies, and communities to implement gender-responsive strategies. Provide training on gender-sensitive disaster risk reduction and management.

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