

GENDER, CONFLICT AND LIVELIHOODS IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

This article is based on research carried out in Kebbi State on behalf of the World Bank and JEWEL (Jigawa Enhancement of Wetlands Project) in March 2003.

Pictures of pastoralism

There is one picture we can paint of the pastoralist culture of the FulBe people. This is the free, romantic life beneath the stars of the long-range pastoralists, the tall spare men with their turbans and long staffs, following the traditional stock routes across new political boundaries as they herd their cattle and trade trinkets, a life set apart from the influences of modernisation. But as agriculture is encouraged by federal government, farmers begin to encroach onto the fadama (wetlands) build fences, grow crops – and thus prevent the use of traditionally agreed grazing lands and watering holes. The cattle suffer and conflict ensues. Although federal law protects their rights on paper, the pastoralists find these are not upheld locally – farmers have the vote and are more likely to be supported by local officials. Conflict escalates. Both farmers and herders take up entrenched positions, exacerbated by the fact that cultural separation makes communication difficult – another area where pastoralists are at a disadvantage. In some cases resolution seems impossible.

However, if we focus on pastoralist women and children, there is another picture. They in fact bear the brunt of male conflict as farmers attack their hamlets, beat them, set fire to their homes (and farming families suffer similarly from herder attacks). They want to avoid conflict, telling their husbands to ‘take it easy’, ‘find a way round’ and look for alternative sources. Herding is not just a male occupation. Women do the milking in the morning before sending the children out with the younger cattle into the fadama for grazing and watering; the women then process at least half of the milk yield for yoghurt and carry it into town to the market, along with processed millet balls (hura). Because of the lack of good grazing land in the dry season, the women use their profits to buy wheatbran as a supplement to fatten the cattle (one sack costs 950 naira and a woman makes 60-80 naira a day).

The Fulani women (of all ages) gather together in one area of the market and this is an important point of informal association and exchange of ideas. They have good relationships with other women and permanent customers they sell milk to. Their diet has changed as they buy fresh vegetables at the market and have also begun to grow a wider range of crops (sorghum, cowpea, maize). They have expanded into other income-generating areas such as guinea fowl, chickens and small ruminants. Some attend workshops on production techniques organised by the Women in Agriculture Unit. FulBe women say “we have to move with the times”, they would like to settle down (“but we leave those decisions to our husbands”) and have their children properly educated - so that they can become lawyers to provide legal support for their families.



Fulani women selling yoghurt in Sabiyel, Northern Kebbi

We heard a similar story from the farming women. In two particular villages we found Hausa women also moving with the times, though with full encouragement from their husbands. Each village had a women's association, with its own bank account, the women were planting new crops and using new farming methods such as double cropping. They were making a profit, able to employ men as labourers, make loans to their husbands – and to pastoralist women who lived nearby. As women took on a wider range of productive activities, the men in one village took over fish processing – a traditional women's task. Thus a greater level of equality and cooperation between women and men appeared to exist in communities which have recognised the need for diversification of income generation. Such communities also seemed more likely to extend cooperation outside to other groups – and to share skills - for example, the farming youth were trained by local pastoralists to herd cattle.

Women and Innovation

In some ways, these findings are not surprising. It is generally accepted now that it was women whose desire to settle brought an end to the nomadic way of life at the dawn of civilisation, that women invented agriculture and the cultural artefacts and processes that go with a settled existence (cooking, pottery, weaving, storage etc) In other parts of Nigeria and other parts of Africa, pastoralist women are voicing the same desire, according to research carried out by the Pastoral Development Initiative.

Similarly, women's capacity for diversification and innovation, when traditional livelihoods are threatened, is a commonplace which is largely disregarded in development planning and analysis. In recent work with women in Jigawa, another Northern Nigerian state, Catherine Allen of CIDT observed: *"As women have lost their access to land and traditional labour market, they have turned to collecting and weaving doum palm, other wild products, producing local foodstuffs (fura, bean cakes, pasta, local Maggi) and processing smoked fish..."*

For examples closer to home we can include the Bed and Breakfast trade in rural parts of Wales and Eire which has been set up by farming women to make ends meet, while their husbands, affected by withdrawal of subsidies and encroaching forestry development, sit by and mourn the loss of their traditional livelihood. There are relatively few projects which place this capacity of women at the centre of their design. Exceptions include the development of small-scale agri-business in Brazil where husband and wife teams share tasks and rôles in a process of diversification which builds on women's traditional contribution (eg food processing). Similarly in Nicaragua the Pro Patio initiative for refugees has supported the development of the traditional 'kitchen garden' to sustain livelihoods (although Nicaraguan men are not keen on doing 'women's work').

Conflict and Change

The intention in this discussion is not to deny the real discrimination that exists against pastoralists in Nigeria and the real need for their rights to be recognised and upheld, both formally and informally. Rather, the intention is to go beyond a view of problems as rooted in simple divisions, binary opposites and cultural absolutes which in fact do not exist. In reality, conflict is often created by changes in external circumstances and these impact on all parties as they struggle with transition. In addition, there are the invisible gender conflicts *within* communities which tend to surface as the more visible conflict *between* communities escalates.

If we focus on **change** as the issue, we can see the situation in a more positive light. As people recognise the need for diversification of livelihoods, they have to develop new skills, knowledge and behaviour. This usually means taking on new rôles and hence new perceptions of themselves and others. In turn, these changes impact on interaction and association - which can be a cause of new conflict but which can also create the opportunity for new dialogue and different ways of communicating - a process which can help to reduce prejudice, remove barriers and help all parties to recognise and respect the rights and needs of others. Women seem to be better equipped for this process and to find it easier, while men tend to demonstrate a sentimental but rigid attachment to the old ways: in other words, conflict also arises from a resistance to change.

In summary, it is only by using a gendered analysis and a holistic approach to livelihoods that we can understand the complexity of a resource-based conflict and come up with creative solutions to avoid or transcend it.

Acknowledgements

The research in Kebbi would not have been possible without the collaboration of the following:

Hadiza Giwa, JEWEL Consultant, WIA, Jigawa

Esther Jatau, Head of WIA, Kebbi

Aisha Gambo, WIA Officer, Yaouri

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Readers interested in learning more about pastoralists in Nigeria could also contact the Pastoralist Development Initiative at pdi@pdi.kabissa.org