

Displacement and Women's Resilience in Africa: Toward a Decolonial Feminist Framework

©Adebimpe D.esire Fashina, Fatima Badurdeen & Madiha Khamis

Department of Social Sciences, Technical University of Mombasa, Kenya



Abstract

Climate change drives unprecedented displacement globally, with Africa South of the Sahara severely affected. Women and girls constitute more than half of the 32.6 million people newly displaced by disasters worldwide, underscoring displacement's gendered nature. In Nigeria, environmental degradation and flooding converge with conflict to displace millions, with women in camps like Madinatu in Borno State facing livelihood loss, insecurity, and marginalization. Yet, scholarship on climate displacement relies on Western-centric resilience paradigms emphasizing individual traits while neglecting relational, cultural and ecological dimensions of women's experiences. This paper probes the following major research question: How do displaced women in Madinatu's Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp experience and construct resilience? Using qualitative design with semi-structured interviews and focus groups involving 25 women, data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns across vulnerabilities, adaptive practices, and coping mechanisms. Findings reveal that resilience is a collective process embedded in community networks, agency, and cultural-spiritual resources rather than individual traits. Women resisted exclusion by establishing informal businesses and advocacy groups, processed trauma through storytelling and prayer, and developed adaptive strategies including small-scale gardening and skills-sharing. This study establishes that resilience among displaced African women is relational, transformative, and ecologically situated. Centering women's voices, it challenges Western-centric models and contributes to decolonial displacement understandings. Findings also demonstrate that effective interventions must support women's agency, livelihoods, and cultural knowledge to foster sustainable climate resilience, all of which entail practical significance for policymakers and humanitarian actors.

Keywords: Climate Displacement, Socioecological Adaptation, Decolonial Knowledge, Feminist Theory, Resilience, Vulnerabilities

Introduction

Climate change is a major driver of human displacement, with the Global South bearing

disproportionate impacts. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that by 2050, up to 86 million people in Africa South of the Sahara could be displaced by environmental pressures (Wolde et al., 2023). Women constitute a particularly vulnerable group: the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC) reported that women and girls account for more than half of the 32.6 million people newly displaced by disasters globally in 2023 (Guadagno et al., 2024). In Nigeria, climate variability, desertification, and violent conflict have generated significant internal displacement, with women in camps such as Madinatu in Borno State facing repeated cycles of uprooting and loss, demonstrating that displacement is deeply gendered.

Existing scholarship has relied on Western-centric paradigms that conceptualize resilience primarily as individual psychological traits or technocratic adjustments to environmental shocks. These approaches fail to capture the relational, cultural and sociopolitical dimensions of resilience in African contexts, thereby overlooking how women construct survival strategies through communal practices, spiritual traditions, and collective agency. Privileging quantitative metrics and abstract models, these paradigms risk silencing displaced women's voices, thereby reducing them to data points rather than knowledge producers.

This study addresses the preceding limitations by asking the following: How do displaced women in the Madinatu Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp experience and construct resilience in the face of climate-induced displacement? This question shifts attention from generalized adaptation models to lived realities in one of Africa's most climate-vulnerable regions. Complementary sub-questions examine gendered vulnerabilities, adaptive practices within the camp, and how feminist and socioecological resilience theories illuminate these processes.

The paper has three objectives: (1) documenting displaced women's lived experiences in Madinatu camp; (2) analyzing how resilience is socially constructed through gendered, cultural and ecological dynamics, and (3) contributing to theoretical debates by integrating feminist and socioecological resilience perspectives into a decolonial framework. These objectives respond to both the practical urgency of climate displacement and the scholarly need for conceptual approaches reflecting African realities.

This study's significance lies in reframing resilience as a collective, relational and transformative process. Centering African women's voices, the study challenges dominant assumptions, highlights Western-centric paradigms' inadequacy, and provides insights for more just and context-sensitive policy responses, thereby contributing to academic debates while offering practical lessons for humanitarian and development actors.

Literature Review

Climate change is increasingly recognized as a powerful force shaping human mobility patterns in the 21st Century. Across Africa, climate-related hazards such as drought, flooding, and desertification intersect with fragile governance, protracted conflict, and socioeconomic inequalities to produce new forms of forced displacement. These disruptions are never gender-neutral. Women in the Global South, particularly in Africa, disproportionately bear climate disruption costs due to inequalities in land ownership, resource access, and exclusion from decision-making. As Augsten et al. (2022) and Edo et al. (2024) argue, displacement should be seen as a social phenomenon whose impacts are mediated through structural inequalities that stratify vulnerability.

Africa is among the most vulnerable regions to climate-induced migration. Rising

temperatures, erratic rainfall, and recurrent flooding have undermined ecosystems and livelihoods, particularly in agrarian and pastoralist communities dependent on rain-fed agriculture. The collapse of such systems has compelled thousands of people to abandon ancestral lands, an ecological dispossession that constitutes cultural rupture by eroding intergenerational ties to land and heritage (Roy et al., 2022). Floods add acute dimensions, displacing entire communities into precarious camps or overcrowded urban peripheries with limited access to sanitation, health, and education, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty (Desai and Mandal, 2021). Displacement is rarely voluntary or temporary; many families spend decades in liminal conditions, unable to return to degraded lands or integrate into host communities (Capasso et al., 2022; Michalek, 2022).

The climate-conflict-displacement nexus further illustrates these dynamics' complexity. In northeastern Nigeria, desertification and water scarcity have intensified farmer–herder competition, fueling violent conflicts that displace thousands. Climate pressures cannot be disentangled from governance failures and insecurity (Augsten et al., 2022). Urbanization compounds the crisis as displaced households migrate into cities whose infrastructure cannot absorb rapid influxes, producing informal settlements characterized by overcrowding and heightened exposure to urban flooding (Carmen et al., 2022).

Displacement is not experienced uniformly across gender lines. For African women, patriarchal property regimes, exclusion from decision-making, economic dependency, and care work burdens intersect with climate shocks to generate disproportionate vulnerabilities. Customary land tenure systems limit women's land access, and displacement collapses these fragile entitlements entirely. Humanitarian aid often privileges male "heads of households," further marginalizing women (Roy et al., 2022). With few formal employment options, women enter precarious informal economies while their unpaid care responsibilities intensify under extreme scarcity, labor that sustains community survival but remains unacknowledged (Desai and Mandal, 2021).

Women face heightened exposure to sexual and gender-based violence. Overcrowding, poverty and weakened social protections expose women and girls to assault and exploitation within camps and from external actors (Capasso et al., 2022). Coping mechanisms such as child marriage or transactional sex emerge as desperate survival strategies. Women's exclusion from camp leadership structures renders them passive recipients rather than active participants, even when they self-organize for advocacy (Bisht, 2024). Displacement produces health challenges that include limited reproductive care access, heightened maternal mortality risks, and psychological burdens compounded by mental health stigmas (Michalek, 2022). Vulnerability varies intersectionally, with widows, unmarried women, adolescent girls and women with disabilities facing compounded disadvantages (Baird, et al., 2021).

Despite constraints, displaced women demonstrate remarkable resilience and agency. Many sustain households through informal economies, tailoring, food vending, and small-scale trade, and often forming cooperative ventures like rotating savings groups that pool risk and strengthen solidarity (Borges, 2025). Where kinship ties fracture, women rebuild social networks functioning as caregiving alliances and material exchange systems (Carmen et al., 2022). Cultural practices such as storytelling, rituals, and songs preserve identity and resist cultural erasure (Roy et al., 2022). Women form advocacy groups contesting aid inequities and demanding safety, shifting from passive victims to change agents (Borges, 2025). Others pursue education and vocational training, establishing community schools as long-term resilience investments (Hawkes et al., 2020). Spirituality provides hope and moral grounding, reframing

suffering within cosmological frameworks (Jerome et al., 2023). These practices underscore resilience as dynamic processes rooted in creativity, solidarity, and meaning-making, although celebrating resilience should not obscure systemic inequalities making such coping necessary (Chikwe et al., 2024).

Several gaps remain in this scholarship. Gendered perspectives are underrepresented, with studies treating displaced communities as gender-neutral, thereby obscuring women's specific vulnerabilities (Desai and Mandal, 2021). Resilience frameworks reproduce Western-centric assumptions privileging individual coping over collective strategies central to African contexts (Hawkes et al., 2020). Policy discourses prioritize statistical data over women's lived experiences, thereby producing top-down interventions failing to capture local realities (Borges, 2025). Displacement is frequently reduced to humanitarian crisis, with insufficient attention to socioecological and cultural dimensions (Roy et al., 2022).

This study therefore addresses these limitations by reframing climate-induced displacement as a gendered socioecological process. It situates adaptation within African sociocultural realities, foregrounds how displacement intensifies patriarchal inequalities while establishing spaces for women's agency, and offers nuanced accounts of resilience avoiding victim/survivor binaries. By synthesizing structural drivers, gendered vulnerabilities, adaptive practices, and cultural dimensions, this study provides a holistic, context-sensitive framework to advance both scholarship and policy relevance in addressing the issue under investigation.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates Feminist Theory with Socioecological Resilience Theory to examine how African women construct resilience within climate-induced displacement. The framework addresses Western paradigms' limitations that conceptualize resilience individualistically while overlooking gendered and ecological dimensions, and positioning resilience as a gendered socioecological process shaped by systemic inequalities and women's agency.

Feminist Theory interrogates how patriarchy and social inequality structure women's realities. Applied to climate displacement, it reveals how environmental disruptions intersect with gender hierarchies to generate disproportionate vulnerabilities. Displacement severs women's access to land and livelihoods while exacerbating care burdens and exposing them to violence, compounded by exclusion from leadership. The theory highlights women's agency in constrained environments, building informal economies, establishing advocacy groups, and establishing support networks. It reframes resilience as socially embedded resistance and empowerment rather than individual traits.

Socioecological Resilience Theory conceptualizes resilience as systems' capacity to absorb shocks and reorganize (Laskey et al., 2023). It emphasizes resilience as dynamic processes unfolding across scales, recognizing that women's adaptive capacity depends on social capital, institutional support, and ecological resources (Hawkes et al., 2020). This suits African contexts where survival hinges on collective adaptation through kinship networks and cultural meaning-making.

Integrating the two theories generates holistic framework. Feminist Theory ensures that power and inequality remain central, while Socioecological Resilience Theory situates displacement within ecological transformations. Together, they conceptualize resilience as transformative processes whereby women exercise agency within disrupted systems while negotiating structural constraints. This framework positions displaced African women as central

adaptation actors, thereby understanding resilience as relational and collective. It provides a foundation for reframing climate displacement as gendered socioecological processes whereby vulnerability and agency coexist, thereby enabling a context-sensitive understanding with implications for climate adaptation and gender justice policy.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design with a phenomenological orientation to explore lived experiences of women at the Madinatu IDP camp in northeastern Nigeria. A qualitative approach captured the depth and cultural meanings embedded in women's displacement narratives, insights quantitative surveys cannot meaningfully convey (Roy, 2022). Madinatu camp was selected as it exemplifies the intersection of climate stressors, insecurity, and humanitarian response in West Africa hosting families displaced by drought, flooding, and environmental degradation.

Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure theoretical relevance and accessibility. A total of 25 women participated: 15 through semi-structured interviews and ten across two focus group discussions, sufficient for thematic saturation while capturing individual and collective perspectives.

Data collection combined semi-structured interviews for personal accounts and focus groups for collective narratives. Sessions were conducted in participants' preferred languages with translator assistance when necessary. Framework analysis organized the complex qualitative material through familiarization, systematic coding guided by feminist and socioecological theories, thematic categorization, and examination of connections between categories.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Technical University of Mombasa Institutional Review Board and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) clearance secured. Informed consent was obtained verbally and in writing. Confidentiality was strictly observed, and interviews conducted in safe settings with psychosocial support referrals available through local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) when necessary.

Results

The findings from interviews and focus groups with 25 women at Madinatu IDP camp reveal resilience as a collective, relational process rather than individual coping. Four interconnected themes emerged: (1) communal support systems, (2) gender-specific challenges, (3) psychological and cultural coping, and (4) ecological-practical adaptation. These themes demonstrate how women construct resilience through social networks, agency, and transformation within disrupted socioecological systems.

Communal Support and Social Networks

Women consistently framed resilience as a communal process. Displacement ruptured kinship ties, but new solidarity networks quickly emerged. Participants described the camp as a "new family" where trust and interdependence navigated daily struggles. Collective food sharing ensured no household went without meals, while informal childcare allowed women to pursue livelihoods or attend distributions.

Savings cooperatives, modeled on traditional rotating credit systems, were particularly significant. Small pooled contributions generated financial buffers against emergencies. "We survive because we put our hands together," one woman explained, illustrating how financial solidarity translated into collective resilience. Social cohesion carried emotional dimensions. Prayer meetings, storytelling, and evening gatherings countered isolation and grief, establishing normalcy amidst disruption. These practices sustained resilience through both tangible strategies and cultural rituals rebuilding community bonds in exile.

Gender-specific Challenges

Despite communal support, women faced persistent gender-specific challenges. Exclusion from camp leadership was recurrent, with most roles held by men and women's voices disregarded in decision-making about aid distribution and security. This reinforced pre-displacement inequalities. Access to aid presented gendered barriers. Humanitarian agencies prioritized male "heads of households," overlooking widows, unmarried women, or women with disabilities. "When the list comes, our names are not there," one widow reported, showing how bureaucratic systems reproduced patriarchal assumptions.

Economic displacement disrupted women's livelihoods as subsistence farmers and traders. Women carved out new opportunities through tailoring, food vending, and trade while forming advocacy groups to press for equitable aid and protection. "Taking back our power," as one described it, illustrated resilience as deliberate resistance to marginalization. Heightened exposure to gender-based violence included harassment, transactional sex tied to scarcity, and assault fears. Coping strategies ranged from group travel to lobbying for better security, highlighting resilience as navigating insecurity while contesting vulnerabilities.

Psychological and Emotional Coping

Displacement's psychological impact surfaced in every discussion. Women described anxiety, grief, and intrusive memories. "The memories follow us everywhere, but we have learned to carry them together," one explained, revealing collective orientation to trauma rather than individual burden.

Prayer, fasting, and communal singing offered hope and reconnected women to familiar life rhythms. Elders provided guidance through storytelling contextualizing suffering within endurance narratives. Group mourning rituals validated grief while restoring dignity to invisible experiences. Mental health challenges were gendered and linked to caregiving pressures in resource-scarce conditions. Women described feelings of failure when unable to provide for children, yet highlighted how sharing responsibilities within solidarity networks lightened psychological loads.

Ecological and Practical Adaptation

Women developed new skills for unfamiliar environments, learning to grow crops in different soils and making gardens despite poor conditions. Older women mentored younger women in survival strategies, reflecting innovation born of necessity. Adaptation was framed as transformation rather than restoration. "We are not the same women who left our villages. We are stronger now because we had to become stronger," one emphasized. This statement

highlights resilience as capacity-building within disrupted systems.

New economic ventures like tailoring groups generated income and socially empowering spaces where women asserted economic visibility and collective identity. The strategy reinforces resilience as reconstituting dignity alongside meeting material needs.

An Integrated Model of Resilience

The narratives reveal resilience as a convergence of four dynamics: (1) communal support systems, (2) gendered resistance and agency, (3) cultural and spiritual coping, and (4) ecological-practical adaptation. These attributes collectively redefine resilience as socially constructed, culturally embedded, and an ecologically responsive process rather than individual features.

Women at Madinatu demonstrated that climate displacement, while disruptive, can be a site of innovation, empowerment, and resistance. Their strategies highlight vulnerability and agency interplay, showing how women negotiate systemic inequalities while forging new adaptation pathways. This integrated model combines feminist insights into power and exclusion with socioecological perspectives on multi-scalar adaptation.

Discussion

This discussion examines the findings through the lens of feminist and socioecological resilience theories to demonstrate how displaced women at Madinatu camp construct resilience as a collective, relational, and transformative process. The analysis reveals four interconnected dimensions that challenge Western-centric paradigms and contribute to a decolonial understanding of resilience in displacement contexts. These are discussed sequentially in the ensuing subsections for the sake of clarity.

Communal Support: Rethinking Collective Resilience

The findings on this aspect underscore communal support as the central axis of women's resilience, not merely a coping strategy. This resonates with feminist scholarship emphasizing relationality over individual autonomy (Allen, 2023). While mainstream resilience theories valorize personal traits such as grit or adaptability, women's narratives at Madinatu highlight survival through shared practices, food pooling, cooperative savings, and childcare exchanges. Similar to Carmen et al. (2022), who emphasize the role of social capital in building community resilience, the displaced women demonstrated that disrupted kinship networks can be reconstituted in exile, effectively re-weaving community amidst forced displacement. The emotional and spiritual dimensions, prayer meetings, storytelling, and collective mourning, preserved cultural identity and provided continuity, echoing Jerome et al. (2023) who highlight spirituality as a core resilience strategy for women navigating trauma. These findings affirm that resilience includes preserving system identity through adaptation (Artmann, 2023).

Gender-specific Challenges: Resilience as Resistance

Gendered challenges in Madinatu speak directly to feminist critiques of resilience discourse. While resilience is often romanticized as stoic endurance, women's stories reveal how structural inequalities, exclusion from leadership, biased aid distribution and gender-based violence shape

who gets to be “resilient” and at what cost. This reflects broader findings by Capasso et al. (2022) and Desai and Mandal (2021) who document how gender-based violence intensifies during displacement. Aid systems privileging male heads of households reproduce institutionalized patriarchy within humanitarian governance, consistent with critiques by Zadhly and Erman (2023). Women confronted these inequities by forming advocacy groups and establishing livelihood alternatives, thereby enacting resilience as resistance (Borges, 2025; Chikwe et al., 2024). This reframes resilience as contesting the terms of marginalization, positioning women as agents shaping their own realities rather than passive aid recipients. Gender-based violence illustrates resilience’s paradox: i.e. while women developed strategies such as group mobility and security lobbying to navigate persistent threats, these practices also highlight resilience discourse limitations when structural violence remains unaddressed (Thakore, 2025).

Psychological Coping: Collective Healing

Women articulated emotional coping as a collective process rooted in cultural rituals, spirituality, and storytelling, rather than Western individualist models of “trauma recovery.” This aligns with African feminist epistemologies privileging shared knowledge and communal healing (Theisen-Womersley, 2021). Group mourning, prayer circles, and storytelling generated cultural containers for grief, validating experiences often silenced in humanitarian discourse. Such practices resonate with Atari-Khan et al. (2021), who document community-centered healing among Syrian refugees, and Michalek (2022), who emphasizes culturally sensitive approaches to trauma. Women’s psychological struggles were inseparable from caregiving responsibilities, yet resilience emerged through redistributing care within communal networks, showing how emotional burdens were collectively managed as a process consistent with the systematic review of resilience among refugee women by Hawkes et al. (2020).

Ecological Adaptation: Innovation in Displacement

Women’s practical adaptations demonstrate resilience as innovation rather than restoration. Efforts to cultivate unfamiliar soils, develop micro-gardens, and form cooperatives illustrate how displacement generates new socioecological practices. These align with Aziz and Anjum (2024), who argue that women’s resilience strategies often transform inequitable systems rather than simply adapt to them. Similarly, Amadi (2021) documents resilience among African female refugees as tied to both survival and the reclamation of agency. Tailoring groups at Madinatu provided not only income but also visible spaces of female solidarity, echoing Roy et al. (2022) on the integration of adaptation and cultural sustainability. Resilience thus functioned as dignity reclamation that restores social worth alongside ensuring survival.

An Integrated Model: Beyond Individual Coping

The findings contribute to an integrated resilience model bridging feminist and socioecological perspectives. Resilience among displaced women in Madinatu camp is communal and relational sustained by solidarity networks (Carmen et al., 2022); gendered and resistant shaped by patriarchal constraints and women’s contestation strategies (Borges, 2025; Chikwe et al., 2024); cultural and spiritual and embedded in shared healing and meaning-making rituals (Jerome et al.,

2023; Theisen-Womersley, 2021); and ecological and transformative, producing innovation within disrupted environments (Aziz and Anjum, 2024; Artmann, 2023).

This model challenges the universalist notions of resilience as an individual psychological trait, foregrounding it instead as relational, political, and ecological. It demonstrates women's resilience as an ongoing negotiation of power, culture, and ecology, rather than passive endurance, consistent with the call by Thakore (2025) to avoid depoliticizing suffering by questioning underlying inequalities.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

This study has examined how women in the Madinatu IDP camp experience climate-induced displacement and construct resilience in the face of multiple vulnerabilities. The findings revealed that resilience is not an individual attribute, but a socially and ecologically embedded process that is sustained through communal support networks, collective agency against exclusion, culturally-rooted healing practices, and adaptive livelihood strategies. By centering women's voices, the study demonstrated that displaced African women are not passive recipients of aid but active agents who generate new forms of survival and transformation within conditions of crisis.

The research contributes to scholarship by addressing persistent gaps in the literature, including the underrepresentation of gendered perspectives, the dominance of Western-centric models of resilience, and the neglect of cultural and ecological dimensions of displacement. By integrating Feminist Theory with Socioecological Resilience Theory, the study advances a holistic and decolonial framework for understanding how women navigate climate displacement. It shows that resilience in this context is not about restoring pre-displacement normality, but about generating new capacities and reconfiguring social and ecological relations, thereby enabling women to move forward despite systemic constraints.

At the same time, it is important to recognize the study's limitations. The research primarily explored women's experiences of resilience within the structured environment of the Madinatu camp, where survival strategies are shaped by both community networks and the regulations of humanitarian agencies. What remains less clear and warrants further study is how resilience evolves when women leave such controlled settings, whether through return, relocation, or reintegration. Understanding post-camp trajectories would deepen insights into the long-term sustainability of resilience and the structural supports required beyond temporary settlements.

Also, reflecting on the research process, one of the most profound lessons that emerged is an appreciation of the collective and transformative character of resilience. Prior to this study, resilience was often conceived in abstract theoretical terms. Nonetheless, engaging with the lived realities of displaced women revealed resilience as a relational, cultural and political practice; something actively built in community rather than merely endured. What this research demonstrates, and what was not fully understood beforehand, is that resilience among displaced women is not only about coping with loss but also about asserting dignity, resisting marginalization, and generating new possibilities for life in the midst of displacement. This recognition challenges dominant narratives and provides both scholars and policymakers with deeper insights into how resilience is lived and sustained in African displacement contexts.

Given the preceding conclusions, a number of policy recommendations are tendered here. First, displacement policy must integrate gender-sensitive approaches beyond token

representation. Women's exclusion from camp leadership reflects patriarchal dynamics undermining their access to aid and recovery processes. Policies should mandate women's participation at all levels, from camp management to regional planning, ensuring their perspectives inform resource allocation, protection strategies, and livelihood initiatives through structural reform and safe participation spaces.

Second, humanitarian interventions must prioritize restoring and expanding women's livelihoods. Support for alternative income-generating activities, small-scale enterprises, skills training, microcredit access would restore dignity and reduce aid dependence. Such initiatives should be designed collaboratively with women, drawing on their knowledge of feasible and culturally acceptable livelihood forms.

Third, policy frameworks must incorporate culturally appropriate psychosocial programs recognizing storytelling, spiritual practices, and collective rituals in healing. Partnering with local women's groups, faith leaders, and traditional healers ensures interventions respect and reinforce cultural identity.

Fourth, displacement policies must be situated within broader climate and development planning. Women's adaptive practices, experimenting with crops and mentoring others demonstrate that displaced populations are active ecological resilience contributors. Governments and NGOs should integrate displaced women's ecological knowledge into climate adaptation programs that include reforestation, soil restoration, and water management, thereby validating their expertise while ensuring that policies reflect environmental change realities.

Fifth, stronger coordination between humanitarian actors, government agencies, and community-based organizations is essential. Bureaucratic inefficiencies and fragmented interventions leave displaced women navigating overlapping systems without clear support pathways. Establishing integrated frameworks that link emergency relief to long-term development will prevent women from being trapped in dependency and marginalization cycles.

Sixth and finally, effective interventions must center women's voices, support their livelihoods, recognize their cultural coping mechanisms, and integrate their ecological knowledge into climate resilience strategies. Only by aligning policy with lived realities can displacement responses move beyond short-term relief toward transformative adaptation that empowers women and strengthens communities facing climate change.

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