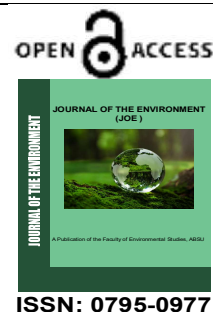


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Original Research Article

CUSTOMARY LAND TENURE SYSTEMS AND WOMEN'S LIVELIHOOD IN RURAL ABIA STATE, NIGERIA.

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Abstract

Customary land tenure systems remain the dominant framework governing land ownership and use in rural Abia State, Nigeria. While these systems regulate access to land and maintain social order, they often marginalize women in matters of land ownership and control. This study examines the impact of customary land tenure systems on women's livelihoods in rural Abia State. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data collected from selected rural communities, the study explores how customary rules influence women's access to land, tenure security, and livelihood opportunities. The findings show that customary land tenure systems largely exclude women from ownership and inheritance, thereby restricting their agricultural productivity and income-generating activities. The study concludes that reforming customary land practices to accommodate gender-inclusive approaches is essential for improving women's livelihoods and achieving sustainable rural development.

Keywords: Land, Customary Law, Land Tenure System, Women Livelihood, Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

Customary land tenure systems play a central role in land administration across rural Nigeria, particularly in southeastern states such as Abia. These systems are rooted in tradition and communal values, regulating land ownership, inheritance, and usage based on established norms and lineage structures. While customary tenure provides social stability, it also perpetuates gender inequalities, especially in relation to women's access to land (Ezeilo, 2021).

Women in rural Abia State rely heavily on land for farming, trading, and household sustenance. However, under customary tenure systems,

women rarely own land outright and often gain access only through husbands, fathers, or male relatives. Such arrangements result in insecure tenure and limited autonomy, which negatively affect women's ability to invest in land-based livelihood activities (Ugochukwu, 2021).

This study investigates the relationship between customary land tenure systems and women's livelihoods in rural Abia State. It seeks to understand how customary rules shape women's land access and the implications for their economic and social well-being. By doing so, the study aims to inform policy discussions on land tenure reform and gender-inclusive development

strategies.

Statement of research problem

Customary land tenure systems dominate land ownership, access, and control in rural Abia State and are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural and economic life of the people. While these systems regulate land use and promote communal cohesion, they often perpetuate gender-based inequalities, particularly in relation to women's rights to land. Under customary tenure, women rarely own land outright and are often excluded from inheritance, resulting in insecure tenure and dependence on male relatives (Bae, 2021).

Although statutory land laws in Nigeria provide for equal rights to land ownership, customary practices remain influential in rural areas, creating contradictions between what is legally permissible and what is socially acceptable. These inconsistencies have contributed to disputes, exclusion, and limited livelihood opportunities for women whose economic activities depend heavily on land. Women's restricted access to land affects their agricultural productivity, limits income generation, and undermines broader goals of rural development and poverty reduction.

Furthermore, most existing studies on land tenure and gender in Nigeria focus on urban settlements or examine land administration without adequate attention to women's livelihood implications in rural contexts. In rural Abia State, where communities adopt varying customary rules regarding land access and inheritance, there is a lack of comprehensive studies assessing how these customary land tenure systems shape women's livelihoods. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by examining the impact of customary land tenure systems on women's livelihood outcomes in rural Abia State.

Study Area

Abia State was carved out in 1991 and is one of the thirty-six (36) states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It has a population estimate of around 4 million people, where youth aged between 15 and 24 years account for about 18% of the population. Abia state is politico-geographically structured into three Senatorial districts, they are Abia North and Abia South, and Abia Central. The State Government head is democratically elected in the person of an executive Governor who operates closely with elected State House of Assembly.



Figure 1: Map of Abia State Senatorial District

Materials and Methods

The study employed the cross-sectional survey to facilitate the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data from primary and secondary sources (National Population Commission, 2006). Using Enumeration Area maps and the 2006 Housing and Population Census provided by the National Population Commission (NPC), a

two stage multi sampling method was adopted. Five enumeration areas were randomly selected from each of the three Local Governments in each Senatorial Zone. Master sample frames were constructed from where the parameters (household, stakeholders, bureaucrats and vulnerable women) were randomly selected.

RESULTS

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by Sex

Variable	Option	Abia State
Sex	Male	175 (59.52%)
	Female	119 (40.48%)
	Total	294 (100%)

The highest percentage of respondents is the male (59.52%) and the lowest percentage of male respondents (40.48%) (Table 4.1). This variance draws attention to the disparities in prospective viewpoints and representation among the respondents. This helps find patterns and trends in the data by offering insightful information on the demographic makeup of the respondents.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents by Marital Status

Variable	Option	Abia State
Marital Status	Single	71 (24.15%)
	Married	120 (40.82%)
	Divorced	64 (21.77%)
	Widow	18 (6.12%)
	Widower	21 (7.14%)
	Total	294 (100%)

Married women represents 40.82%, while widow women account for only 6.12% divorced women make up 21.77%, and single women (not married, divorce, or widowed) constitute 100%. This distribution highlights the challenges women face in securing land ownership and access, particularly in rural areas, where legal and cultural barriers of ten hinder their rights. Understanding this distribution is crucial for addressing women's livelihoods and ensuring their empowerment in rural communities.

Table 3: Factors responsible for Women's loss of access to land under customary land tenure systems in rural areas of Abia State

Variable	Option	Abia State
Factors responsible for women's loss of access to land under customary land tenure sytem.	Customary laws	17 (65.38%)
	Insufficient land	6 (23.08%)
	Insufficient fund	3 (11.54%)
	Total	26 (100%)

The distribution indicates that customary laws are the major factor responsible for women's loss of access to land in rural areas, accounting for 65.38% of responses. This highlights the dominant role of traditional norms and practices that favor male ownership and inheritance, often leading to women's exclusion from land rights following events such as widowhood, divorce, or family disputes. Insufficient land (23.08%) is the second most significant factor, reflecting increasing land scarcity due to population pressure and land fragmentation. In such contexts, women are often the first to loss access as families prioritize male members when allocating limited land resources. Insufficient funds (11.54%) represents the least cited factor, suggesting that economic constraints, while relevant are less influential than cultural and structural barriers. Overall, the distribution shows that women's loss of access to land is driven primarily by entrenched customary laws rather than financial limitations, with serious implications for women's livelihoods, agricultural productivity and economic security in rural areas.

Table 4: Who can Inherit lands under customary Law of inheritance and succession of land

Variable	Option	Abia State
Under customary law of inheritance and succession who can inherit land	Only the deceased's children (both male and female)	4 (16.00%)
	Only the deceased's sons	8 (32.00%)
	Both legitimate male and female children	3 (12.00%)
	Eldest male child	10 (40.00%)
	Total	25 (100%)

The distribution shows that customary laws of inheritance and succession in rural Abia State largely favor male heir, with significant implications for women livelihoods. The highest proportion indicates that the eldest male child is the primary inheritor of land (40.00%), reflecting the practice of primogeniture that concentrates land ownership in the hands of men. This is followed by inheritance by only the deceased sons (32.00%), further emphasizing the exclusion of women from customary land inheritance. In contrast, inheritance by only the deceased children regardless of gender accounts for

16.00%, while inheritance by both legitimate male and female children is the least practiced (12.00%), indicating limited recognition of gender-inclusive inheritance under customary systems. Overall, the distribution highlights a strong patriarchy structure within customary land tenure systems, where women's secure access to land, undermines their agricultural productivity and negatively affects their livelihood and economic empowerment in rural Abia State.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that customary land tenure systems in rural Abia State, while vital for maintaining social cohesion and regulating land use, continue to marginalize women's access to land and constrain their livelihood opportunities. The exclusion of women from land ownership and inheritance under customary tenure results in tenure insecurity, reduced agricultural productivity, and limited income-generating capacity. The coexistence of statutory and customary land systems has created contradictions that disadvantage women, particularly in rural communities where customary practices

dominate land administration. The study concludes that reforming customary land tenure systems through gender-sensitive policies, legal awareness, and collaboration with traditional authorities is critical to enhancing women's livelihoods and achieving inclusive rural development in Abia State.

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