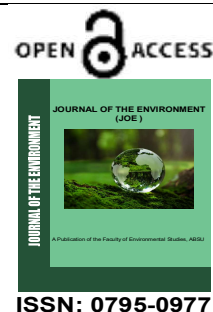


JOURNAL OF THE ENVIRONMENT (JOE)

Available online at <https://journaloftheenvironment.com>



Original Research Article

TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS AS KEY ACTORS IN LAND OWNERSHIP AND INHERITANCE IN RURAL AREAS OF ABIA STATE

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Abstract

Traditional institutions play a pivotal role in the administration of land ownership and inheritance in rural areas of Abia State, Nigeria. These institutions, including village councils, elders, and family heads, serve as custodians of customary land laws and arbiters in land-related disputes. This study examines the role of traditional institutions in shaping land ownership and inheritance patterns in rural Abia State, with particular attention to their implications for gender relations. Using qualitative methods such as interviews with traditional leaders and community members, the study finds that traditional institutions reinforce patriarchal norms that favor male inheritance and ownership of land. While these institutions contribute to social cohesion and dispute resolution, their practices often exclude women from land rights. The study recommends engaging traditional institutions in gender-sensitive land governance reforms to promote equitable access to land.

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

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INTRODUCTION

In many rural communities in Nigeria, traditional institutions remain influential in governing land ownership and inheritance. In Abia State, land is not only an economic asset but also a cultural heritage managed through customary norms upheld by traditional authorities. These institutions regulate land allocation, inheritance, and conflict resolution, thereby shaping access to land at the community level (Chigbu, Gaynor, Walter, 2019).

Despite their importance, traditional institutions often operate within patriarchal frameworks that prioritize male lineage and inheritance. Women's

access to land is frequently limited to use rights rather than ownership, leaving them vulnerable to dispossession and economic insecurity. This has far-reaching implications for women's livelihoods, social status, and participation in rural development (Dabara, Lawal, Chiwuzie, Omotehinshe, Soladoye, 2019).

This study examines the role of traditional institutions as key actors in land ownership and inheritance in rural areas of Abia State. It analyzes how customary practices enforced by these institutions influence land distribution and gender relations. Understanding the role of traditional institutions is crucial for designing inclusive land

governance policies that balance cultural values with principles of equity and social justice.

Statement of research problem

Traditional institutions such as family heads, councils of elders, and village chiefs play a central role in land ownership, allocation, and inheritance in rural areas of Abia State. As custodians of customary land laws, these institutions regulate access to land, resolve disputes, and enforce inheritance practices based on long-standing cultural norms. While they contribute to social order and conflict resolution, their practices are often embedded in patriarchal structures that favor male inheritance and ownership of land

In many rural communities, women's access to land is limited to use rights granted through male lineage, marriage, or temporary allocation by traditional authorities. These arrangements frequently exclude women from inheritance and decision-making processes related to land, despite their substantial contributions to agricultural production and household welfare. The absence of uniform customary practices across communities further exacerbates land-related conflicts, sometimes leading to disputes, dispossession, and loss of property (Doss & Meinzen-Dick, 2020).

Although statutory laws recognize equal rights to land ownership, traditional institutions continue

to dominate land governance in rural Abia State, creating a disconnect between legal frameworks and customary practices. Existing literature has given limited attention to the specific role of traditional institutions in shaping land ownership and inheritance patterns, particularly in rural settings. Consequently, there is insufficient understanding of how these institutions influence gender relations and land access. This study therefore seeks to examine the role of traditional institutions as key actors in land ownership and inheritance in rural areas of Abia State, with a view to identifying pathways for more inclusive land governance.

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 South
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 South
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: Determinants of Women's access to land and women livelihood in rural areas of Abia South

Variable	Option	Abia South
	By Marriage	8 (33.33%)
	Through good deeds	3 (12.50%)
	Inherit land as the only child and not married	6 (25.00%)
	Through written will	7 (29.17%)
	Total	24 (100%)
Cultural/religious factors that determine gender differential access to land	Traditional rights of use	47 (16.10%)
	Inheritance	123 (42.12%)
	Extended family	60 (20.55%)
	Purchase	19 (6.51%)
	Extended family believe that women are not allowed to inherit land	23 (7.88%)
	Based on Igbo tradition, its only men that has exclusive right to inherit land	20 (6.85%)
	Total	292 (100%)
Land Legal Title Documents Availability	C of O	47 (15.26%)
	Consent to Sublease	13 (4.22%)
	Mortgage	24 (7.79%)
	Power of Attorney	46 (14.94%)
	Deed of Conveyance	77 (25.00%)
	None	101 (32.79%)
	Total	308 (100%)

Women's access to land in rural areas is mainly influenced by social and customary arrangements rather than direct ownership rights. Access through marriage (33.33%) is the most common, showing women's dependence on marital relationships for land use. Access through written wills (29.17%) and inheritance as the only unmarried child (25.00%) indicates limited recognition of women's inheritance rights, often granted only under special conditions. Access through good deeds (12.50%) is minimal and informal. Overall the distribution reveals that women's land access is largely conditional and insecure, which negatively affects their livelihoods and economic independence.

The distribution shows that cultural and religious factors strongly influence gender differences in access to land in rural areas. Inheritance is the dominant means of access (42.12%), but it is largely shaped by traditions that favor men. Access through extended family arrangements (20.55%) and traditional rights of use (16.10%) indicates that women's access is often indirect and insecure. Cultural beliefs that women are not allowed to inherit land (7.88%) and Igbo traditions that grant inheritance rights exclusively to men (6.85%) further restrict women's ownership. Land purchase remains minimal (6.51%), reflecting both cultural barriers and limited economic capacity. Overall, these factors limit women's secure access to land and negatively affect their livelihoods.

The highest proportion of respondents without any legal title document (32.79%) indicates that many women access land informally, making their land rights insecure and vulnerable to disputes or dispossession. It also reveals the low level of formal land tenure security for women in rural areas. The deed of conveyance (25.00%) is the most common, suggesting that a significant number of women acquire land through purchase or formal transfer. However, ownership supported by a Certificate of Occupancy (C of O) accounts for only (15.26%), reflecting limited access to fully recognized statutory land titles. Other legal instruments such as power of attorney (14.94%), mortgage (7.79%) and consent of sublease (4.22%) are relatively low, indicating restricted engagement of women in formal land transactions and credit systems. Overall, the distribution shows that women's access to land in rural areas is largely informal and weakly

documented, which undermines tenure security and negatively affects their livelihood sustainability, agricultural productivity and economic empowerment.

Conclusion

This study concludes that traditional institutions are key actors in land ownership and inheritance in rural areas of Abia State, exercising significant influence over land allocation, succession, and dispute resolution. While these institutions contribute to social order and communal stability, their practices often reinforce patriarchal inheritance systems that exclude women from land ownership and decision-making processes. The lack of uniformity in customary practices across communities further exacerbates land-related conflicts and gender inequality. To promote equitable land governance, it is essential to engage traditional institutions in reform processes that recognize women's land rights while respecting cultural values. Integrating traditional authorities into gender-sensitive land administration frameworks will enhance tenure security, reduce conflicts, and support sustainable rural development in Abia State.

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