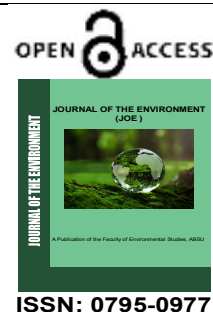


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Original Research Article

Women's Access to Land and Women's Livelihood in Rural Areas of Abia South, Nigeria

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Abstract

Access to land is a critical factor influencing rural livelihoods, particularly for women whose economic activities are largely land-dependent. In rural areas of Abia South, women play significant roles in agriculture and household sustenance, yet their access to land remains limited due to socio-cultural and institutional constraints. This study examines the nature and extent of women's access to land and how it affects their livelihoods in rural communities of Abia South. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines household surveys, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions, the study analyzes patterns of land acquisition, use, and control among rural women. Findings reveal that women's access to land is largely mediated through male relatives, resulting in insecure tenure and limited decision-making power. These constraints negatively affect agricultural productivity, income generation, and overall livelihood sustainability. The study recommends policy reforms and community-based interventions aimed at strengthening women's land rights to enhance rural development and poverty reduction.

Keywords: women's livekihood, sustainable development, focus group discussion

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INTRODUCTION

Land is a fundamental resource for rural livelihoods, especially in agrarian societies where agriculture constitutes the primary source of income and food security. In Nigeria, rural women contribute substantially to agricultural production, food processing, and household welfare. Despite this contribution, women often face systemic barriers in accessing and controlling land, which undermines their economic empowerment and livelihood outcomes (Deininger and Ali, 2008).

In Abia South, land access is shaped by customary norms and practices that prioritize male ownership and inheritance. Women's rights to land are often secondary, temporary, or dependent on marital status, thereby limiting their capacity to invest in long-term agricultural activities. This unequal access has significant implications for women's productivity, income levels, and resilience to economic shocks (Babalola, 2022). This study focuses on examining women's access to land in rural areas of Abia South and assessing how such access or lack thereof affects their

livelihoods. By highlighting the relationship between land access and women's economic well-being, the study contributes to ongoing debates on gender equity, land reform, and sustainable rural development.

Statement of research problem

Despite land being a fundamental resource for agricultural production and rural livelihoods, women in rural areas of Abia South continue to face significant challenges in accessing and controlling land. Agriculture remains the primary occupation in these communities, with women contributing substantially to subsistence farming, food processing, and household sustenance. However, their access to land is largely mediated through male relatives' husbands, fathers, or lineage heads resulting in insecure tenure and limited decision-making power (Dadusc & Mudu, 2020).

Customary land tenure practices prevalent in Abia South prioritize male ownership and inheritance, often relegating women to secondary use rights that can be withdrawn at any time. Although statutory laws in Nigeria are largely non-discriminatory, there remains a wide gap between legal provisions and actual practices at the community level. Cultural norms, patriarchy,

and traditional beliefs continue to restrict women's independent access to land, thereby limiting their ability to invest in land-based livelihood activities, access credit, or adopt improved agricultural practices (Abdulhameed, 2019).

These constraints have direct implications for women's livelihoods, including reduced agricultural productivity, income insecurity, and heightened vulnerability to poverty. While existing studies on land tenure and gender have largely focused on urban areas or generalized national contexts, there is limited empirical evidence specifically addressing how women's access to land affects livelihood outcomes in rural Abia South. This gap necessitates a focused investigation into the nature of women's land access and its implications for their livelihoods in the study area (Alonge, 2004).

Study Area

Abia South is one of the three senatorial districts in Abia State. Abia South lies at approximately latitude 5°06'N and 7°21'E and longitude in Abia State, southeastern Nigeria and has a projected population of about 1.90 million people. Figure 2 shows the selected Abia South for the study.

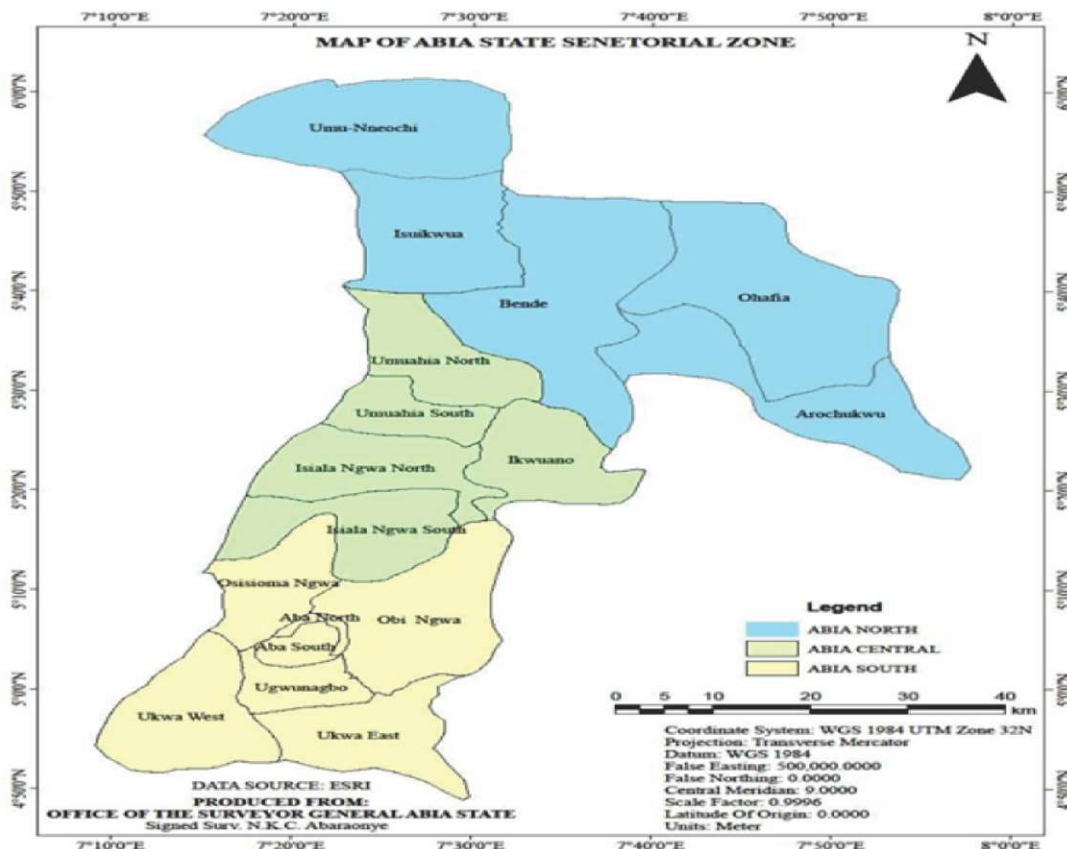


Figure 1: Map of Abia State Showing the three senatorial zones in Abia State

Source: Office of the Surveyor General, Abia State, 2024

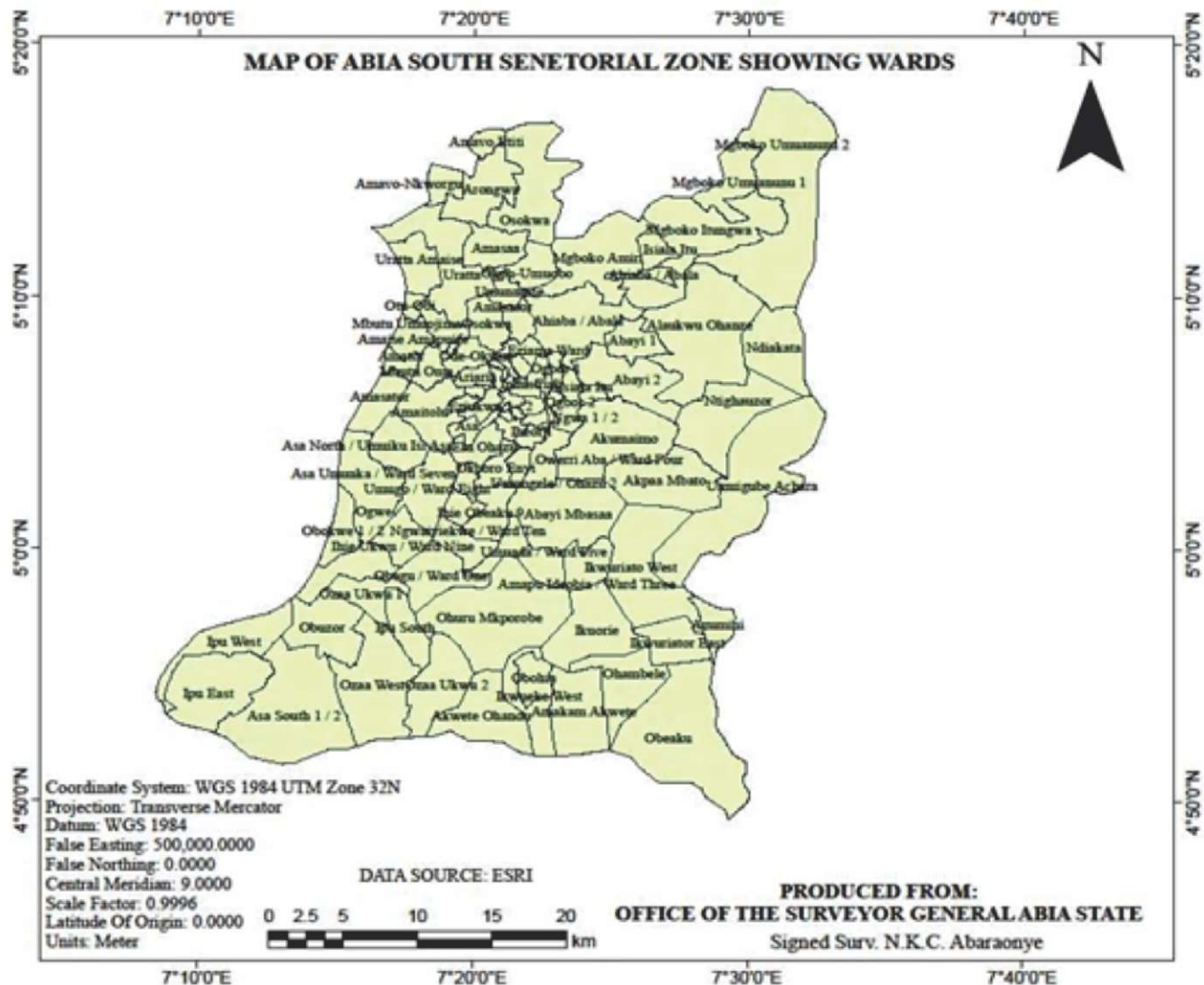


Figure 2: Map of Abia South Senatorial Zone showing its Administrative wards

Source: Office of the Surveyor General, Abia State, 2024.

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: Pattern of land ownership in Abia South

Variable	Option	Abia South
Pattern of Land Ownership	Inheritance (Patrilineal or matrilineal)	9 (26.47%)
	Purchase	9 (26.47%)
	Lease	3 (8.82%)
	Pledge	3 (8.82%)
	Land grabbing	3 (8.82%)
	Freehold	3 (8.82%)
	Gift	3 (8.82%)
	Exchange	1 (2.94%)
	Total	34 (100%)

In Abia State, inheritance, either through patrilineal or matrilineal systems and purchase, stands out as a prevalent form of land ownership, constituting nearly a quarter of all instances (26.47%) (Table 4.3). This underscores the enduring significance of traditional practices that facilitate the transfer of land within families and it also reflects a preference for and accessibility of buying land, possibly indicating a rising importance of financial transactions in property acquisition. Leasing represents 8.82% of ownership types. While less frequent than inheritance or purchasing, leasing serves as a crucial alternative, likely appealing to individuals who need temporary land use or lack the means for outright purchases. Pledging land constitutes 8.82% of transactions, suggesting that a

notable segment of land dealings involves land used as collateral for financial or social commitments. This practice appears relatively common, demonstrating its significance in local land management and financial systems. Land grabbing, though less frequent, still accounts for 8.82% of the total. This method of acquisition, often linked to illegal or forceful seizure, points to deeper issues associated with land disputes and inadequate enforcement of property rights. Freehold land ownership, also at 8.8%, is a frequency that mirrors land grabbing. Gifting land accounts for 8.8% of ownership patterns, suggesting that informal land transfers, often within families or between close relations, are still a significant mode of land ownership.

Table 4: Determinants of Women's access to land and women livelihood in rural areas of Abia South

Variable	Option	Abia South
Determinants of women's access to land inheritance	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 informality, 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.

Table 5: Factors responsible for Women's loss of access to land in rural areas of Abia South

Variable	Option	Abia South
Factors responsible for women's loss of access to land	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 lose 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.

Conclusion

This study concludes that women's access to land in rural areas of Abia South remains largely constrained by customary practices, patriarchal norms, and insecure tenure arrangements. Although women play a central role in agricultural production and household livelihood sustenance, their limited and indirect access to land significantly undermines their economic productivity and livelihood security. The reliance on male-mediated land access restricts women's ability to make long-term investments in farming

and other land-based enterprises, thereby reinforcing poverty and economic vulnerability. Bridging the gap between statutory land laws and customary practices is essential for improving women's livelihood outcomes. Strengthening women's land rights through policy enforcement, community sensitization, and gender-inclusive land governance mechanisms will contribute to sustainable rural development and poverty reduction in Abia South.

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