

Spatial Planning and Gender Equity: Implications of Customary Land Tenure for Inclusive and Sustainable Urban Development in Abia State, Nigeria

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Abstract: This study examines the implications of customary land tenure for gender equity and inclusive spatial development in Abia State, Nigeria, with particular attention to women's access to land, inheritance, tenure security and livelihoods. Although the empirical investigation was undertaken in rural communities, the findings have direct planning implications for the rural–urban continuum because customary land practices shape the availability, security and transfer of land on which future settlement growth, housing, productive activities and infrastructure development depend. The study adopted a case-study design and a mixed-method approach. A multistage sampling procedure covered the three senatorial zones of Abia State. The study selected 1,035 women registered under the Growth Enhancement Support Scheme; structured questionnaires, key-informant interviews, focus group discussions and observations were used. Descriptive statistics and chi-square analysis were applied to quantitative data, while qualitative information was content analysed. The evidence indicates substantial gendered constraints in land access. Only 25.6% of the women reported land ownership through their mother's lineage, while 52.3% rented farmland and 22.1% held land through lease arrangements. Being female was identified by 57.0% as a reason for landlessness, followed by not being the eldest child (24.0%) and poor income (19.0%). Inheritance remained a dominant mechanism of land access, while community leaders, councils of elders and indigenous institutions played important roles in allocation and conflict resolution. The study concludes that exclusionary customary practices, weak formal land administration and limited spatial planning mechanisms can reproduce gender inequality and undermine inclusive development. It recommends gender-responsive land-use planning, rural and peri-urban layout planning, participatory land governance, tenure regularisation, transparent land records and a gender-sensitive Land Information System. The paper contributes to SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and indirectly SDGs 1 and 8. The healthy-city relevance is principally a planning implication: secure and equitable land access is a foundation for orderly settlement growth, adequate housing, livelihoods and safer communities.

Keywords: *Spatial Planning; Gender Equity; Customary Land Tenure; Women's Livelihoods; Land Governance; Inclusive Development; Sustainable Urban Development; Abia State; SDG 5; SDG 11.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Land is a fixed and strategic resource around which housing, agriculture, economic activity, infrastructure and settlement development are organised. The way land rights are allocated, transferred, controlled and protected therefore has consequences beyond individual property ownership. The source study identifies land tenure as a social organisation that determines who obtains land, how access is provided, the rights to use and control land, and the obligations associated with its use. In Abia State, customary

practices remain important in rural land allocation and inheritance, even where statutory systems provide formal mechanisms for rights of occupancy and land administration.

Gender equity is central to this planning question because unequal access to land can limit women's economic opportunities, livelihood security, housing options and participation in decisions about the use and development of space. The thesis underpinning this article found that customary land tenure in rural Abia is not uniform:

communities differ in the way inheritance and access are organised, with patrilineal, matrilineal and communal elements occurring across locations. The study also found a continuing tension between statutory land administration and customary practice.

The planning significance becomes particularly important in a context of urbanisation. Rural land is progressively connected to expanding settlements, road corridors, housing development, markets and other urban functions. The source document notes that conversion of rural land into planned layouts can attract substantial development and can also create disputes over community land. Where women have weak or insecure rights before such transformations occur, they may have limited capacity to benefit from, negotiate or protect their interests in subsequent development.

This paper therefore reframes the empirical evidence on rural customary land tenure through a spatial-planning lens. The title uses 'urban development' because the concern is not that the surveyed communities are themselves classified as urban, but that the rules governing rural land ownership have implications for the wider settlement system and the rural-urban transition. The paper does not claim that health outcomes were directly measured. Rather, its sustainable healthy-city relevance is located in inclusive land governance, secure tenure, orderly settlement development, housing and livelihood conditions, all of which are planning foundations for healthy and sustainable communities.

➤ *Problem Statement and Research Gap*

Existing literature reviewed in the source study has addressed women's land rights, tenure security, inheritance and gender inequality in different African and Nigerian contexts. However, the study identified a specific empirical gap concerning land ownership and inheritance under customary land tenure in rural areas of Abia State. Much of the available discussion had concentrated on urban settlements or broad questions of gender inequality, with limited empirical attention to how local customary institutions actually determine women's access to land and how those arrangements affect livelihoods.

The source study further identifies a planning and policy gap. Rural development master plans and layout mechanisms were reported as limited in the study area, while land administration processes were described as slow and the relationship between statutory and customary systems as problematic. These gaps are significant because unplanned or weakly planned land development can make it difficult to coordinate infrastructure, settlement expansion, tenure regularisation and equitable access to land.

The central problem addressed in this paper is therefore the persistence of gender-differentiated access to land within customary systems and the implications of that inequality for inclusive spatial development. If women lack secure access to land used for farming, housing or other livelihood activities, spatial inequality can become

reproduced across generations. This has implications not only for rural livelihoods but also for the sustainability and inclusiveness of settlements as rural areas become increasingly connected to urban development processes.

➤ *Aim and Objectives*

The aim of the study was to examine land ownership and women's livelihoods under customary land tenure systems in rural areas of Abia State, and to draw planning implications for gender-equitable and sustainable spatial development.

- Examine the existing land tenure systems in rural areas of Abia State;
- Investigate determinants of access to land among women under customary land tenure;
- Determine the roles of key actors in the customary land delivery process;
- Examine constraints to access to land and security of tenure; and
- Examine the livelihood impacts of customary land tenure on rural women.

➤ *Conceptual and Theoretical Framework*

• *Spatial Planning, Gender Equity and Land Governance*

Spatial planning is concerned with the organisation of land uses, activities, infrastructure and settlements in ways that support social, economic and environmental objectives. In the context of this study, spatial planning is understood broadly to include land allocation, layout planning, land information, development control, tenure regularisation and participatory governance. Gender equity requires these processes to recognise different levels of access, power and vulnerability rather than assuming that formally identical rules produce identical outcomes.

The thesis treats equity as fairness and social justice in the distribution of resources and opportunities. Applied to land, an equity perspective asks whether women have meaningful opportunities to obtain, use, control, inherit and secure land. Land governance is equally important because the rules and institutions that allocate and administer land can either reduce or reinforce exclusion. The source study identifies traditional rulers, councils of elders, Umuada and other customary actors as important participants in land allocation and conflict resolution.

• *Patriarchy, Descent and Citizen Participation*

The study was informed by Descent Theory and Citizen Participation Theory. Descent Theory is relevant because rights, duties and succession can be structured through kinship lines. In the Abia context, patrilineal inheritance can privilege male descendants, while some communities display matrilineal or more inclusive practices. This helps explain why land rights can vary between communities despite their location within the same state.

Citizen Participation Theory is relevant to spatial planning because land governance involves actors at household, community and institutional levels. Participatory

planning can provide mechanisms through which women and other vulnerable groups influence decisions affecting land allocation, development and tenure security. The theory is particularly appropriate to the qualitative component of the study, which involved interviews and focus group discussions with stakeholders and women.

- *Sustainable Development Goal Alignment*

The study has a primary connection with SDG 5 (Gender Equality), because it directly addresses women's unequal access to land and inheritance. It also supports SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) through its focus on structural and spatial inequalities in access to resources. SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) provides the principal spatial-planning connection: inclusive land governance and orderly settlement development are necessary for sustainable communities. The livelihood dimension also relates to SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) is relevant where secure access to agricultural land supports food production, although food-security outcomes were not directly measured in the study.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Customary tenure systems in Africa are diverse and often combine communal, family and individual interests. The source literature describes customary land in Igbo communities as historically associated with community or family ownership, with elders and traditional authorities acting as custodians. Such arrangements can provide social security and access for community members, but their outcomes depend on the norms governing membership, succession and decision-making.

Women's land rights are shaped by the interaction of customary norms, statutory law, household relations and access to institutions. The source review highlights evidence that women may face barriers arising from patriarchy, cultural stereotypes, limited economic resources and weak participation in decision-making. Doss and Meinzen-Dick (2020) are cited in the source as emphasising the importance of secure land tenure for women, while Ezeilo (2020/2021) and Unachukwu (2020) address the relationship between women's inheritance rights and customary legal systems in Nigeria.

Land governance has a direct planning dimension. Transparent land records, participatory decision-making, tenure regularisation and accessible land administration can improve the predictability of land rights. The source study identifies the absence or weakness of rural layout planning and the slow acquisition of formal documentation as important policy concerns. Paradza and Mokwena (2020) are cited for the potential role of mapping initiatives in securing women's customary land rights.

A key gap remains in connecting these gender and tenure debates with spatial planning and sustainable urban development. The contribution of this article is to make that connection explicitly: unequal land rights are not only a

social or legal issue; they can influence the spatial distribution of livelihood opportunities, housing possibilities, settlement expansion and participation in land-development decisions.

III. METHODOLOGY

➤ *Study Area and Research Design*

The study covered rural areas of Abia State across the three senatorial zones: Abia North, Abia Central and Abia South. Rural areas were selected using the National Population Commission's classification as reported in the source thesis. The study adopted a case-study design and a mixed-method approach combining quantitative survey data with qualitative evidence.

➤ *Sampling and Data Collection*

A multistage sampling procedure was used. The study selected 1,035 women registered for the Growth Enhancement Support Scheme, distributed across the three senatorial zones as follows: 355 in Abia North, 311 in Abia Central and 369 in Abia South. Structured questionnaires addressed socio-economic characteristics, land access, challenges in obtaining farmland and the roles of actors in land delivery. Key-informant interviews were conducted with traditional rulers, councils of elders and Umuada. Focus group discussions involved women in each senatorial zone.

The fieldwork was conducted between January and July 2021. The source reports an approximately 90% response rate for the household questionnaire in one description of the field process, while the detailed analysis reports that 882 of 1,035 questionnaires were returned, representing an 85.22% return rate. This article adopts the detailed analytical figure of 882 returned questionnaires because it is directly tied to the reported statistical analysis.

➤ *Instrument Validity and Reliability*

The questionnaire was reviewed by experts in statistics for face and content validity. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Reported coefficients included 0.82 for the heads-of-households component, 0.67 for Umuada and 0.80 for monarchs, indicating acceptable to high reliability for the reported components.

➤ *Data Analysis*

Quantitative data were analysed with SPSS Version 23 using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations, and inferential statistics including chi-square/crosstabulation and related significance tests. The study used a 0.05 significance level. Qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions were coded and analysed thematically/content-wise.

IV. RESULTS

➤ *Socio-Economic Profile and Livelihoods*

The respondents had a mean age of approximately 51.0 ± 10.0 years. Subsistence farming was the principal

livelihood for 75.3% of respondents, while 24.7% engaged in petty trading. A large share of respondents had secondary education (83.7%), while 63.2% earned between ₦16,000 and ₦30,000 monthly. More than half (58.8%) were widows, and 74.5% had family sizes of four to six members.

➤ *Women's Land Access and Ownership*

Only 25.6% of women reported owning land through their mother's lineage. By contrast, 52.3% rented farmland and 22.1% were on lease arrangements. The findings indicate that access to land is therefore often mediated rather than based on direct ownership. This distinction is important for spatial planning because the ability to use land is not necessarily equivalent to secure rights to control, transfer or develop it.

➤ *Drivers of Landlessness and Gender Inequality*

Being female was identified by 57.0% of respondents as a reason for landlessness. Not being the eldest child accounted for 24.0%, while poor income accounted for 19.0%. These findings indicate that gender interacts with birth order and economic capacity to shape land access.

➤ *Land Acquisition and Inheritance Patterns*

The empirical analysis indicates that inheritance is a major pathway through which land is accessed in rural Abia. The source reports inheritance as accounting for 20.8% of land ownership in one analysis, followed by purchase at 19.6% and family-owned land at 16.8%. Community-owned land accounted for 17.5%, while exchange, gifts and government ownership accounted for 5.5%, 6.4% and 5.4%, respectively. Another analysis identified land rental, group titling, customary tenure and other arrangements, demonstrating the diversity of tenure forms.

Qualitative evidence showed that inheritance practices vary among communities. In some cases, any child may inherit, including daughters; in others, inheritance is more strongly associated with sons. The source also reports that women may inherit when property has been specifically willed to them, while widows can experience particularly severe insecurity following the death of a husband.

➤ *Institutional Actors and Land Governance*

Community leaders, councils of elders and indigenous tribunals play important roles in land allocation, conflict resolution and land records. Formal government agencies are also involved in land policy, administration, allocation and registration. The evidence therefore demonstrates a plural land-governance system in which customary and statutory institutions coexist.

➤ *Factors Affecting Tenure Security*

The analysis identified inheritance, property rights, marital and divorce rights, land-use control and widowhood as important socio-legal considerations. In one reported analysis, widowhood accounted for 30.0%, land-use control 26.2%, inheritance 18.7%, divorce and marital property rights 12.8% and property rights 12.3%. These figures suggest that tenure security is closely linked to household status and the ability to make decisions about land use.

➤ *Statistical Relationships*

The study reports significant relationships between socio-economic characteristics and livelihoods, including gender, birth position, income, marital status and educational attainment. For example, the reported chi-square statistic for gender and livelihoods was $\chi^2(16, N=1031)=668.448$, $p<0.001$; birth position was $\chi^2(8, N=1035)=1203.085$, $p<0.001$; income was $\chi^2(8, N=1016)=361.549$, $p<0.001$; marital status was $\chi^2(16, N=1034)=147.680$, $p<0.001$; and educational attainment was $\chi^2(16, N=1034)=687.766$, $p<0.001$.

At the community level, the evidence suggests both similarities and differences in customary practices. The source reports no significant variation in some inheritance practices across the three senatorial zones, while significant differences were found for factors affecting access to land ownership and for who may inherit under customary law. This indicates that planning interventions should recognise both common structural constraints and community-specific institutions.

V. DISCUSSION: PLANNING IMPLICATIONS FOR INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

The findings demonstrate that land tenure is a spatial equity issue. Women who depend on rented or leased farmland have less control over land than those with secure ownership or inheritance rights. When access depends on male relatives, household status, birth position or community decisions, women's capacity to make long-term investments in land can be constrained. The planning implication is that land policies should assess not only the quantity of land available but also who has effective rights over that land.

The results also reveal the importance of the rural–urban continuum. Although the empirical sample is rural, rural land is part of the wider spatial system from which towns and cities expand. Weak tenure documentation and the absence of adequate layout planning can make land conversion more contentious and can increase uncertainty for households. As settlements expand, women with weak customary claims may be less able to secure plots, participate in land transactions or benefit from infrastructure and development.

An inclusive planning approach therefore requires more than statutory equality on paper. The source study identifies a disconnect between formal legal provisions and grassroots customary practice. Where formal rights are poorly understood, difficult to obtain or weakly enforced, customary institutions may continue to determine everyday access. Participatory planning should consequently involve traditional rulers, councils of elders, Umuada, women, planning authorities, land agencies and community representatives.

Land Information Systems can support this transition. A gender-sensitive LIS can document land parcels, tenure

types, household and group claims, land-use changes and development proposals. The source study specifically recommends a digital LIS that can support spatial mapping, land servicing and titling and recognise individual, group and family-based titles. Such a system can improve transparency and provide planning authorities with evidence for development control and infrastructure planning.

The findings also have implications for healthy and sustainable communities. The study did not directly measure health indicators, so no causal health effect is claimed. Nevertheless, secure and equitable land access is closely connected to the ability of households to secure housing, maintain livelihoods, access infrastructure and participate in settlement development. From a planning perspective, these are enabling conditions for healthier and more resilient communities. The conference theme can therefore be addressed through the principle that sustainable communities require inclusive land governance and equitable spatial development.

VI. POLICY AND PLANNING RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop gender-responsive rural and peri-urban spatial plans that identify residential, agricultural, institutional and infrastructure land while explicitly considering women's land rights.
- Undertake participatory rural land audits involving planning authorities, customary institutions, women, community representatives and land administration agencies.
- Establish transparent tenure-regularisation mechanisms that recognise legitimate customary interests while improving documentation and security of tenure.
- Create a gender-sensitive Land Information System capable of spatially mapping parcels, recording tenure arrangements and supporting individual, family and group-based titles.
- Integrate women into land governance and planning committees at community and local-government levels, including traditional land-allocation and dispute-resolution processes.
- Review and address discriminatory customary practices that prevent women from inheriting or controlling land, while engaging traditional institutions through sustained sensitisation rather than relying only on formal legal provisions.
- Accelerate accessible land documentation and registration procedures, particularly for women and other vulnerable groups who face financial or institutional barriers.
- Prepare rural and peri-urban layout plans that anticipate settlement expansion, infrastructure corridors and changing land-use patterns so that development does not proceed through uncoordinated land conversion.
- Strengthen collaboration among traditional rulers, Umuada, councils of elders, planning authorities, land agencies and women's organisations to reconcile customary practices with equitable planning objectives.

- Align land and spatial-planning interventions with SDG 5, SDG 10 and SDG 11, while recognising their livelihood links to SDG 1 and SDG 8.

➤ Contribution to Knowledge

The study contributes to Urban and Regional Planning by repositioning women's customary land rights as a spatial-planning issue rather than solely a socio-cultural or legal issue. It provides empirical evidence from rural Abia State showing that landlessness, insecure tenure, inheritance practices and customary governance influence women's livelihood opportunities. It further identifies the need to connect land tenure reform with layout planning, land information, participatory governance and settlement management.

By extending the discussion from rural land ownership to the rural–urban continuum, the paper argues that gender-equitable land governance is part of the foundation for inclusive and sustainable settlement development. This is particularly relevant to SDG 5 and SDG 11, while also contributing to the broader objective of reducing spatial and socio-economic inequalities.

VII. CONCLUSION

Customary land tenure remains an important determinant of access to land in rural Abia State. The study shows that women's access is frequently mediated through rental, lease, family and customary arrangements, while gender, birth position, income, marital status and education influence livelihood and land outcomes. Inheritance is a major pathway of land access, but its rules differ across communities and can disadvantage women, particularly widows and women without strong customary claims.

For spatial planning, the central lesson is that formal statutory equality is insufficient when everyday land governance remains shaped by customary institutions and unequal power relations. Inclusive and sustainable development requires planning systems that recognise the social realities of land ownership while improving documentation, transparency, participation and tenure security.

The paper therefore supports a gender-responsive planning framework in which customary land governance is connected to formal spatial planning, rural and peri-urban layout development, land information systems and participatory decision-making. These measures can help reduce spatial inequality and provide a stronger foundation for sustainable communities. The paper's connection to healthy cities should be understood primarily as a planning pathway: equitable land access supports secure livelihoods, housing and orderly settlement development, although direct health outcomes were outside the scope of the empirical study.

➤ *SDG Alignment Matrix*

Table 1 SDG Alignment Matrix

SDG	Connection to Study	Planning Relevance
SDG 5 – Gender Equality	Women's unequal access to land, inheritance and tenure security.	Gender-responsive land allocation, participation and titling.
SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities	Gendered and socio-economic inequalities in access to land.	Equitable spatial resource distribution and tenure regularisation.
SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities	Land governance influences settlement growth and the rural–urban continuum.	Inclusive layouts, land information, infrastructure planning and orderly development.
SDG 1 – No Poverty	Land is a livelihood and wealth-generating resource.	Secure land access can strengthen livelihood security.
SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth	Women's farming and petty trading depend partly on land access.	Secure tenure can support productive land use and investment.

VIII. LIMITATIONS

The empirical study was designed around rural land ownership, inheritance and women's livelihoods; it did not directly measure urban health, morbidity, infrastructure quality or urban environmental outcomes. Consequently, the link to sustainable healthy cities in this article is a planning and policy interpretation rather than a directly tested causal relationship. The title and discussion should therefore be understood as extending the rural evidence to its implications for inclusive spatial development and the rural–urban continuum.

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