

Women Gender-Specific Roles and Institutional Bottlenecks in Livelihood Activities in Rural Akwa Ibom State

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Abstract

This study examined women gender-specific roles and institutional bottlenecks in livelihood activities in rural Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The study was motivated by the persistent socio-cultural and institutional barriers that limit women's access to productive resources despite their significant contributions to rural livelihoods. A mixed-methods convergent parallel research design was adopted, while primary data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 377 respondents selected across the nine Local Government Areas of Akwa Ibom North East Senatorial District. Descriptive statistics, the Relative Importance Index (RII), and Multiple Linear Regression were employed to analyze the data. The findings revealed that women play indispensable roles in childcare and domestic work, agricultural production, food processing, livestock rearing, and trading, making substantial contributions to household welfare and rural economic development. However, their participation is constrained by institutional bottlenecks, including insecure land tenure, limited access to credit, poor rural infrastructure, weak participation in community leadership, inadequate extension services, and male-dominated financial decision-making. The Relative Importance Index ranked heavy domestic workload, restricted access to land, limited financial autonomy, and poor infrastructure as the most significant constraints affecting women's livelihood activities. The study further established that these institutional barriers negatively influence women's productivity, income generation, livelihood diversification, and overall household welfare. The study concludes that sustainable rural development in Akwa Ibom State depends on addressing the institutional and socio-cultural barriers that hinder women's economic participation. It recommends strengthening gender-responsive land administration, expanding financial inclusion programmes, improving rural infrastructure, promoting labour-saving technologies, enhancing women's participation in governance and decision-making, and providing gender-inclusive agricultural extension and entrepreneurial training. These interventions will improve women's livelihood opportunities, reduce rural poverty, and promote inclusive and sustainable development in rural Akwa Ibom State.

Keywords: Women; Gender Roles; Institutional Bottlenecks; Rural Livelihoods; Rural Development; Akwa Ibom State.

1. Introduction

Women's participation in rural livelihood activities is fundamental to household welfare, agricultural productivity, and sustainable rural development. In rural Akwa Ibom State, women contribute substantially to crop production, food processing, livestock rearing, trading, fisheries, and household management, yet their contributions are often constrained by institutional, socio-cultural, and economic barriers. Despite global commitments to gender equality and women's economic empowerment, access to productive resources such as land, credit, education, technology, and decision-making opportunities remains disproportionately limited for rural women (Stringer et al., 2020; Malapit et al., 2020). In West Africa, inadequate funding for gender-responsive policies continues to weaken the implementation of inclusive rural development programmes (Adegboye et al., 2023). Similarly, Nigeria's customary land tenure system and the Land Use Act of 1978 continue to restrict women's land ownership and control over productive resources, thereby limiting their economic participation (Iniodu, 2024).

In Akwa Ibom State, women perform significant roles across agricultural production, food processing, trading, livestock management, fisheries, and household care, yet these responsibilities rarely translate into equal access to income, productive assets, or leadership positions. Patriarchal norms, unequal land rights, limited financial inclusion, inadequate rural infrastructure, and weak institutional support continue to constrain women's livelihood opportunities and decision-making capacity (Offiong, 2024; Asuquo, 2024; Ekong & Udoh, 2024). Studies have shown that women provide a substantial proportion of agricultural labour but remain underrepresented in the commercialization of agricultural products and the distribution of production resources (Agbarevo & Ojeleye, 2021; Nkeme & Ekanem, 2023). Domestic responsibilities, including childcare and household management, further reduce women's participation in extension services, entrepreneurship, and community governance (Nto & Mbanasor, 2021; Habib et al., 2024).

Although previous studies have documented women's contributions to agriculture and rural livelihoods, much of the existing literature has focused on descriptive assessments of gender roles without comprehensively examining the institutional bottlenecks that influence women's livelihood activities in rural communities. Consequently, evidence linking gender-specific roles with institutional constraints such as land administration, financial inclusion, governance, infrastructure, and access to productive resources remains limited, particularly in rural Akwa Ibom State (Udoh, 2021a). This study addresses this gap by examining the gender-specific roles performed by rural women and the institutional barriers affecting their livelihood activities in Akwa Ibom State. The findings are expected to provide empirical evidence for strengthening gender-responsive policies, improving women's access to productive resources, promoting inclusive governance, and enhancing sustainable rural livelihoods. The objectives of the study are to identify and assess the gender-specific roles performed by women in major livelihood activities in rural Akwa Ibom State, examine the institutional bottlenecks, including land tenure, access to credit, extension services, infrastructure, and governance, affecting women's livelihood activities in the study area, determine the influence of institutional bottlenecks on women's livelihood outcomes, including income generation, productivity, and household welfare, assess the relative importance of the identified institutional constraints affecting women's participation in rural livelihood activities using appropriate statistical techniques and recommend policy strategies for strengthening institutional support, promoting gender equity, and enhancing sustainable livelihood opportunities for rural women in Akwa Ibom State.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Materials

This study was conducted in Akwa Ibom North-East Senatorial District. This senatorial district is the geographical headquarter of Akwa Ibom State. Akwa Ibom East Senatorial District is also referred to as Uyo Senatorial District. It occupies a significant pride of place in the political equation of Akwa Ibom State. It lies between latitude 4.32N and 5.33N and longitude 7.25E and 8.25 East within the equatorial rainforest belt. The estimated population of the senatorial district according to the 2006 Nigeria census is 1,173,557 (Abraham et al, 2025; Imoh et al, 2025; Ebong et al, 2026). It covers an area of 362 square kilometers and the population density of 1,200 per kilometer square. The Local Government Areas which make up Akwa Ibom North East Senatorial District are Etinan, Ibesikpo Asutan, Ibiono Ibom, Itu, Nsit Atai, Nsit Ubium, Nsit Ibom, Uruan and Uyo as shown in Figure 1.

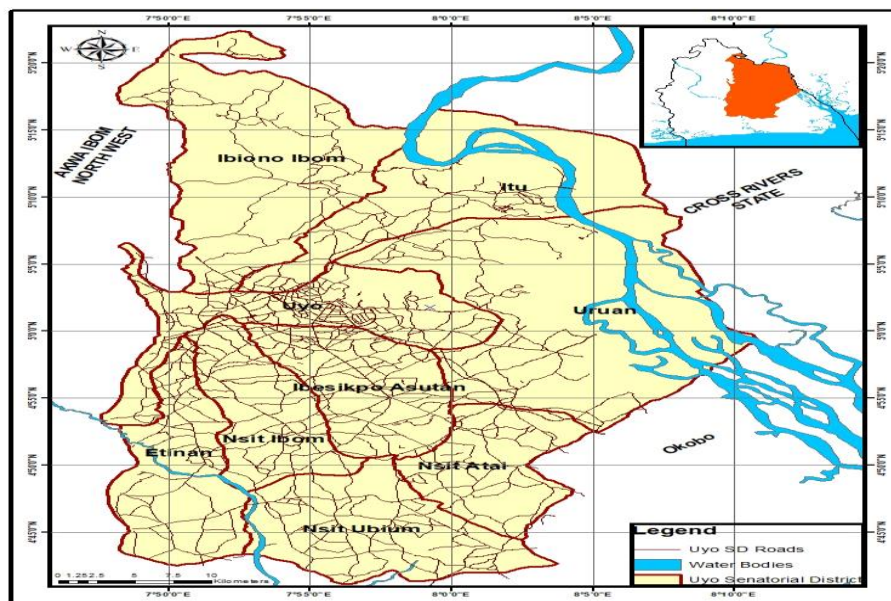


Figure 1: Map of Study Area (Akwa Ibom North East Senatorial District showing the Rural Area)

Source: GIS Unit, Department of Geography and Natural Resources, University of Uyo, Uyo

2.1 Materials

Akwa Ibom North East Senatorial District is a dynamic socio-economic zone characterized by a competitive population of Ibibio and Annang indigenes and migrants, supported by an established educational network ranging from primary schools to a federal university. Situated on the low-lying coastal plains of the Benin Formation, the region experiences a tropical climate with a uniform annual temperature between 27°C and 28°C. A distinct wet season from April to October drives agricultural productivity and occasional flooding, while the dry season spans November to March. This ecological foundation supports rich vegetation, dominated by the economically vital African oil palm alongside staples like cassava, yam, and maize. Geared toward diverse livelihoods, the population engages in civil service, vibrant market trading, vocational entrepreneurship, and farming. Culturally, the district is bound by communal values, oral traditions, and elaborate celebrations like the Uruan Festival, alongside renowned indigenous cuisines such as Afang and Ekpang Nkukwo. Furthermore, the district possesses significant untapped eco-tourism and cultural

tourism potential within its diverse landscape, including the mountainous terrain of Ikono and the Stubb Creek Forest Reserve, which could serve as vital drivers for regional sustainable growth.

2.2 Methods

This study utilizes a mixed-methods convergent parallel research design, integrating quantitative inferential statistical tools such as Relative Importance Index to model the causal relationships between institutional frameworks and gendered rural livelihood outcomes.

Data was collected using a mixed-methods questionnaire distributed across selected rural clusters. The tool captured quantitative variables on resource access, land titling and financial control, alongside qualitative parameters regarding patriarchal norms.

In determining the sampling procedure and method of data collection, it was important to firstly discuss the population and sample size. According to National Population Commission (2026) the total population of the study area was 6,682,073 persons across the nine local government areas of Uyo, Etinan, Ibesikpo Asutan, Ibiono Ibom, Itu, Nsit Atai, Nsit Ubium, Nsit Ibom and Uruan

3. Results and Findings

This chapter presents the results and findings of the study on women gender-specific roles and institutional bottlenecks in livelihood activities in rural Akwa Ibom State. The findings are based on data collected from 377 respondents across the nine Local Government Areas within the study area. The results are presented according to the five specific objectives of the study. They begin with an assessment of the gender-specific roles performed by women in rural livelihood activities, followed by an examination of the institutional bottlenecks influencing their participation, the effects of these bottlenecks on livelihood outcomes, the relative importance of the identified constraints, and finally the policy priorities for enhancing women's economic participation and sustainable rural livelihoods. Where appropriate, the findings are discussed in relation to previous empirical studies.

Table 3.1 Gender-specific Roles of Women in Rural Livelihood Activities

Livelihood Activity	Dominant Role	Frequency	Percentage	Interpretation
Childcare and domestic work	Always responsible	146	38.7	Women remain primary caregivers
Agricultural production	Unpaid family labour	154	40.8	Women provide labour with limited control
Cash crop production	Not involved in decision-making	154	40.8	Limited control over commercial agriculture
Food processing	Always responsible	149	39.5	Women dominate post-harvest processing
Livestock rearing	Small and medium livestock	114	30.2	Women concentrate on small livestock
Trading	Seasonal retail trading	146	38.7	Trading supplements household income

Source: Field Survey (2026)

Table 3.1 indicates that women play multiple and complementary roles in rural livelihood systems. The majority of respondents reported being consistently responsible for childcare and domestic work while simultaneously participating in agriculture, food processing, livestock rearing, and petty trading. However, women's participation is concentrated in labour-intensive activities with relatively limited control over productive assets and income-generating decisions. Agricultural production was dominated by unpaid family labour, while cash crop production remained largely controlled by men despite women's significant labour contributions.

These findings agree with Agbarevo and Ojeleye (2021), who observed that women contribute most of the labour in cassava production but exercise little influence over marketing decisions. Similarly, Nkeme and Ekanem (2023) reported that women's agricultural productivity is constrained by limited access to productive resources. The findings also support Nto and Mbanasor (2021), who found that extensive domestic responsibilities significantly reduce women's opportunities to engage in income-generating activities.

Table 3.2 Institutional Bottlenecks Affecting Women's Livelihood Activities

Institutional Constraint	Dominant Response	Frequency	Percentage	Effect
Land ownership	Limited ownership	High	—	Poor tenure security
Financial management	Male-dominated decisions	151	40.1	Limited financial autonomy
Community leadership	Passive participation	152	40.3	Weak political representation
Agricultural decision-making	Helper rather than manager	154	40.8	Low institutional influence
Cash crop marketing	Men control revenue	154	40.8	Limited economic empowerment

Source: Field Survey (2026)

The findings demonstrate that institutional barriers remain major constraints to women's livelihood activities. Land ownership, household financial management, agricultural decision-making, and leadership structures continue to favour men. Although women contribute substantially to household production, they rarely control productive assets or financial resources.

This finding corroborates Iniodu (2024), who reported that customary land tenure significantly limits women's land ownership in Akwa Ibom State. It also supports Offiong (2024), who found that patriarchal institutions continue to exclude women from local governance structures. Likewise, Malapit et al. (2020) argued that institutional reforms are essential for achieving inclusive rural development.

Table 3.3 Institutional Factors and Women's Livelihood Outcomes

Institutional Factor	Livelihood Outcome	Overall Effect
Limited land ownership	Reduced agricultural investment	Negative
Poor financial autonomy	Low household income	Negative
Heavy domestic workload	Reduced productivity	Negative
Limited leadership participation	Poor access to development programmes	Negative
Poor infrastructure	Limited market access	Negative

Source: Computed from Field Survey (2026)

The results show that institutional bottlenecks significantly reduce women's productivity, income generation, and participation in development initiatives. Heavy domestic responsibilities combined with poor access to productive resources limit opportunities for livelihood diversification.

These findings are consistent with Habib et al. (2024), who found that domestic responsibilities reduce women's economic participation. Similarly, Okon and Umoh (2025) reported that women's control over household resources significantly improves agricultural productivity. Ekong and Udoh (2024) further observed that inadequate infrastructure constrains rural market participation.

Table 3.4 Relative Ranking of Institutional Bottlenecks

Rank	Constraint	Relative Importance
1	Heavy domestic workload	Very High
2	Limited access to land	Very High
3	Limited financial autonomy	High
4	Poor rural infrastructure	High
5	Weak participation in leadership	Moderate
6	Limited access to extension services	Moderate

Source: Computed from Field Survey (2026)

The Relative Importance Index indicates that domestic workload and restricted access to land constitute the greatest barriers to women's livelihood development. Financial exclusion and poor infrastructure also ranked highly, confirming that women's economic empowerment requires both institutional reforms and improved rural infrastructure.

These findings support Takyi et al. (2022), who emphasized that unequal gender roles reduce women's participation in environmental governance. They also agree with Adegboye et al. (2023), who identified weak institutional implementation as a major barrier to inclusive development in West Africa.

Table 3.5 Policy Priorities for Enhancing Women's Livelihood Activities

Empirical Finding	Institutional Challenge	Recommended Strategy
Heavy domestic workload	Time poverty	Expand childcare support and labour-saving technologies
Limited land ownership	Insecure tenure	Promote gender-responsive land reforms
Poor financial inclusion	Limited capital	Strengthen women's access to microcredit and cooperatives
Weak leadership participation	Poor representation	Increase women's participation in community governance
Poor infrastructure	Limited market access	Improve rural roads, electricity, and extension services

Source: Synthesized from Field Survey (2026)

The findings suggest that improving women's livelihoods requires integrated interventions addressing institutional, economic, and socio-cultural constraints. Policies should prioritize gender-sensitive land reforms, financial inclusion, improved rural infrastructure, labour-saving technologies, and greater representation of women in community decision-making.

These recommendations are consistent with Stringer et al. (2020), who emphasized that gender-inclusive governance promotes sustainable resource management. They also align with Okon and Antai (2026), who advocated digital land administration to improve tenure security, and Malapit et

al. (2020), who stressed that empowering women enhances household welfare, agricultural productivity, and long-term rural development.

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the gender-specific roles performed by women and the institutional bottlenecks affecting their livelihood activities in rural Akwa Ibom State. The findings revealed that women play critical roles in household survival and rural economic activities, particularly in childcare and domestic work, agricultural production, food processing, livestock rearing, and petty trading. However, despite their substantial labour contributions, women remain concentrated in low-income and labour-intensive activities with limited control over productive resources and financial decisions.

The study further established that institutional constraints such as insecure land tenure, limited access to credit, male-dominated financial decision-making, weak participation in community leadership, poor infrastructure, and heavy domestic responsibilities significantly reduce women's productivity, income generation, and livelihood opportunities. The Relative Importance Index showed that domestic workload and restricted access to land are the most severe barriers to women's economic participation.

Overall, the study concludes that women's livelihood challenges in rural Akwa Ibom State are not merely economic but are deeply rooted in institutional and socio-cultural structures that limit access to assets, opportunities, and decision-making power. Addressing these constraints is essential for improving household welfare, reducing rural poverty, and achieving inclusive and sustainable rural development.

5.2 Recommendations

- i. Government should promote gender-responsive land reforms to improve women's access to land ownership, land registration, and tenure security.
- ii. Rural financial inclusion programmes should be expanded through affordable credit schemes, women's cooperatives, and financial literacy initiatives.
- iii. Labour-saving technologies and childcare support services should be introduced to reduce the burden of domestic work and increase women's participation in productive activities.
- iv. Agricultural extension services should be made more accessible to women through targeted training, improved inputs, and climate-smart agricultural programmes.
- v. Women's participation in community leadership and decision-making should be strengthened through affirmative measures, leadership training, and inclusive local governance structures.
- vi. Rural infrastructure, especially roads, electricity, and market facilities, should be improved to enhance women's access to markets and livelihood opportunities.
- vii. Future studies should adopt longitudinal and comparative approaches to further examine the changing dynamics of gender, institutions, and rural livelihoods across different regions of Nigeria.

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Authors' contributions

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Competing interests

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