

ABSTRACT

ANICHE, ABASIAMA-ARIT AMANDA. How Can Women Engage in Leadership in Agriculture and Agripreneurship in Rural Communities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria? (Under the direction of Dr. Katherine McKee)

Research has indicated that Nigerian rural women are essential to food security because of their active participation in agriculture and the agricultural value chain. However, they are viewed as insignificant partners and face many limitations, especially in the leadership space. This study focuses on rural women in Akwa Ibom State and investigates the connections between cultural norms and traditional beliefs, leadership, gender, agriculture, and economic activities, with the goal of bringing to the fore the barriers women face, how they are included in leadership, and strategies to empower women in leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship, promote female leadership, and decolonize ancestral and community structures. It employs a multifaceted approach that combines economic skill development, leadership development, and a focus on decision-making. The study was based on the social role, transformative leadership, and adaptive leadership theoretical frameworks. This basic qualitative research study drew participants from the three senatorial districts of the state. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews and a focus group. The data was analyzed using descriptive and pattern coding, which led to five major themes: ancestral loyalties—the dictator, inhibitors of women in leadership and decision-making, catalysts of women in leadership and decision-making, challenging the status quo, and suggested drivers of change. The study's findings have the potential to contribute to long-term development by promoting women's leadership capacity development interventions and initiating sustainable positive socio-economic change in rural communities.

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How Can Women Engage in Leadership in Agriculture and Agripreneurship in Rural
Communities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria?

by
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DEDICATION

To Akachi, Chinaemerem, and Chimdindu

BIOGRAPHY

Abasiama-Arit Amanda Aniche was raised in Calabar, a coastal town in Nigeria. She earned a Bachelor of Agriculture degree in Agricultural Economics and Extension from the University of Uyo, and the primary focus of her research was to conduct a comparative analysis of consumer preferences for selected food animals in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. A'Ama attained her Master of Science degree in Sociology of Development from the University of Abuja, Nigeria, where her research examined the implementation of agricultural development policies in Nigeria. She has a professional background that includes service in ActionAid Nigeria's Partnership Against Poverty (PAP) program, the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA)—a Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research center, Catholic Relief Services Nigeria, and as a graduate research and teaching assistant in the Transformative Leadership Lab at North Carolina State University. A'Ama is passionate about building transformative and adaptive leadership capacity to drive change in rural and underserved communities and enjoys serving in her community and church.

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CHAPTER 1

Background

Women make up the majority of farmers in the rural smallholder communities of developing and underdeveloped countries (World Food Program [WFP], 2021), and most foods consumed in the households are products of female farmers' labor (Amusan et al., 2021). According to Doss (2014), 79% of women in the least developed nations who report being economically active consider agriculture to be their main source of income, and globally, 48% of women who are economically active say that farming is their main source of income.

Women are heavily involved in activities in the agricultural and food value chain, which mainly provide income in rural areas (about 1.4 billion rural women worldwide); rural women have a wealth of indigenous knowledge about food processing and preservation, as well as livestock management, gathering resources, participating in most post-harvest activities, and other essential survival skills (Botreau & Cohen, 2020; Glazebrook & Opoku, 2020; Ibnouf, 2012). Rural women are in the best position to ensure sustainable and safe food supplies and thus achieve household food security as managers of agricultural resources and custodians of local resources and the environment (Doss et al., 2018; Ibnouf, 2012). They frequently produce certain crops or livestock products that are traditionally important for consumption; however, men often control the cash income (Hoffmann et al., 2019). Even though women produce more food and earn less, they invest up to ten times more of their incomes in their family's well-being, including children's education, health, and nutrition, compared with men (Kehinde et al., 2021). Women's role in the family is multifaceted. Ironically, despite being major producers of food, women are often at a higher risk of undernourishment and malnutrition due to a lack of education,

joblessness, and limited household bargaining power (Broussard, 2019). The reality of their daily lives is greatly influenced by gender-based social relations (Fletcher & Kubik, 2016).

According to McMahon (2002), agriculture across the world is imbued with a masculinist culture and hegemony sustained by ideologies, discourses, and practices on farms and up to national policy levels. For decades, the policy agenda has prioritized production, where men predominate, and has primarily ignored processing and marketing, where women frequently play key roles (Ejike et al., 2018). Especially in underdeveloped and developing countries, cultural norms and traditional beliefs hinder women in agriculture and agripreneurship from meeting and surpassing their potential (Amusan et al., 2021). Cultures impact women's access to resources, decision-making, and overall well-being. Patriarchy regards women as subservient and solely dependent on men, excluding them from owning assets like land (Amusan et al., 2021). It reinforces gender stereotypes and inequalities and hinders women from succeeding in agriculture. Gender role orientations have positioned women at home due to the belief that farming with a plow is incompatible with childcare (Giuliano, 2020). Ruel et al. (2018) noted that societies can change the narrative by empowering women to participate in agriculture, gain access to and control over resources, and implement new agricultural technologies. The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10 includes monitoring and improving legislation and policies to reduce inequality in global markets (Tanumihardjo et al., 2020). Ensuring that women have equal access to agricultural resources as men is estimated to increase agricultural output by 20-30%, resulting in the reduction of the number of hungry people by approximately 12 to 17% (Etim et al., 2019).

Sub-Saharan Africa, including Nigeria

Africa principally relies on women's subsistence production to fill its food baskets (Glazebrook & Opoku, 2020) as they significantly contribute to rural agriculture in multiple domains (Uduji et al., 2021). It is estimated that in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), including Nigeria, women account for 40 to 42% of the agricultural labor force (Palacios-Lopez, et al., 2017; Umar et al., 2019; World Bank [WB], 2017). They work throughout the food production chain, from crop growing to harvesting and crop processing (Ake et al., 2020). They primarily produce vegetables, rear farm animals, and poultry (Ake et al., 2020; Amusan et al., 2021) and participate in all on- and off-farm tasks, including land clearing, land tilling, planting, weeding, fertilizer or manure application, harvesting, food processing, threshing, winnowing, milling, transportation, and marketing (Ejike et al., 2018). Approximately 73%, 16%, and 15% of African women work in cash crops, arable and vegetable gardening; post-harvest activities; and agroforestry, respectively (Baba et al., 2015). Women are thus the unseen face of agriculture because they hold critical positions in agriculture, actively participating in farming and agricultural product marketing in rural African economies (Amusan et al., 2021).

Although it is undeniable that rural women provide 40% of agricultural labor on average, their leadership role in rural development has been overlooked (Savari et al., 2020). Women participate in all aspects of farming but are not considered farmers and thus are denied the benefits of their farming labor (Amusan et al., 2021). Furthermore, there has been little focus on their capacity to hold leadership positions and engage in the decision-making process within the agricultural value chain. This neglect of equitable representation and participation in decision-making and governance has entrenched women in a vicious cycle of poverty that places

them in a less advantageous position (Lwamba et al., 2022; Oyebamiji et al., 2022; Staab et al., 2024).

Women, Leadership, and Power

Women's leadership is also underappreciated in Africa. Women in Africa, including Nigeria, historically and currently face numerous inequalities; most women spend an average of 23 years of their lives cooking, cleaning, and caring for children and elderly parents, while men are not involved in these family care duties (Afolabi, 2019). Furthermore, women are frequently faced gender discrimination and gender-based violence (Afolabi, 2019) and denied opportunities to pursue meaningful roles outside of their domestic and sexual functions, limiting their participation in long-term development efforts. This challenge has hampered progress across the continent, as women's lack of empowerment impedes national advancement (Jimmy & Olsson, 2023). Men continue to dominate leadership positions since they are three times more likely than women to hold leadership positions in Africa because, in most cases involving leadership, women leaders' aptitudes are questioned (Babalola et al., 2021). Such prejudices and stereotypes prevent women from fully exploiting their leadership abilities. Irrespective of their significant contribution to agriculture and agripreneurship, women still have less access to resources and less decision-making power over their farms, resulting in a gendered harvest value gap (Enfield, 2019). Patriarchy remains a significant impediment to women's leadership and economic development in agriculture.

Gender roles and expectations have limited women's access to income-earning opportunities because agriculture is subsistent (Amusan et al., 2021; Botreau & Cohen, 2020; Jaiyeola & Isaac, 2020). Subsistence farming leaves women farmers with nothing to sell and generate income, and this has a significant impact on their lives. Ingrained patriarchy socially

constructs girls and women as inferior to boys and men in every possible way, ranging from access to resources to employment, corporate, and domestic roles, suffocating women and girls in marginalized areas (Jaiyeola & Isaac, 2020). Patriarchal norms create power imbalances that disadvantage women in agriculture, especially in areas such as labor, access to productive resources, land rights, and participation in decision-making processes (Botreau & Cohen, 2020). Furthermore, discriminatory inheritance practices, difficulties in acquiring property, and limited access to extension services, credit, and inputs are all obstacles (Botreau & Cohen, 2020). Some of these disparities and inequalities are due to colonialism (Aniche, 2023; Jaiyeola & Isaac, 2020; Matandela, 2020).

Colonial Past

The colonial past and early community structures supported male dominance in African systems by empowering patriarchal positions like kings and chiefs and hiring men as migrant interpreters, laborers, and general employees. African women were sexualized and did not have any social, political, or economic power (Aniche, 2023; Matandela, 2020). This tendency solidified the belief that women should work behind the scenes and not publicly, making men appear superior and isolating women from active roles and decisions (Jaiyeola & Isaac, 2020). When British colonizers removed women from public spaces and denied them access to education, they imposed a form of dominant, masculine culture even on Nigerian men, later reinforced by patriarchal culture and a neocolonization agenda (Jaiyeola & Isaac, 2020). This male culture denied women roles and positions in society, as well as the ability to work and earn money, causing women to be reliant on men, who were dubbed "breadwinners" (Jaiyeola & Isaac, 2020). Colonialism was a significant factor in excluding women from positions of power in Africa.

Most traditional African families have thus remained patriarchal, with men being considered the heads of their households and women and children expected to submit to men's authority (Monga et al., 2019). Due to cultural and religious factors, women should submit entirely to their husbands and not engage in any economic ventures without their husbands' consent; for example, in Southern Nigeria, women are not allowed to own cash crops on their own, despite having participated in all stages of crop production (Amusan et al., 2021). Men believe women should control subsistence farming, where crops are grown for household consumption with little or no surplus for sale, while the men control cash crop sales (Amusan et al., 2021). As a result, despite Africa having a significant number of female farmers, they frequently do not receive support from their communities and end up dealing with resource scarcity, limited commercial opportunities, and violations of their rights (Uduji et al., 2021).

Women and the Hidden/Shadow Economy

Concerning women's contributions to agriculture, agripreneurship, and the economy, the term “hidden (or shadow) economy” comes to mind. Hidden economy refers to any economic activity that operates outside the scope of government assessment and can be described as a shadow, unofficial, informal, illegal, irregular, underground, hidden, or moonlight economy (Abada et al., 2021). In addition, the shadow economy is the market-based manufacturing of legal or illegal goods and the provision of services that go unnoticed in official Gross Domestic Product (GDP) estimates (Dell'Anno & Adu, 2020; DiRienzo & Das, 2021). Hidden economies contribute to countries' rural economies despite being frequently overlooked (Nason & Bothello, 2023). The size of a country's shadow economy is often directly proportional to the number of women it employs, as seen in rural areas where women dominate the shadow economy and play central and pivotal roles within its dynamic framework (DiRienzo & Das, 2021). Countries with

large shadow economies have more opportunities for informal jobs for women than those with smaller ones (DiRienzo & Das, 2021). Shadow economies attract women for a variety of reasons. They frequently consist of jobs that require a low level of skill and technology; many untrained and unskilled female workers with little or no education find it easy to work in this sector of the economy (Ebisi, 2022). Most women in rural areas rely on the shadow economy for financial survival (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2019; World Economic Forum [WEF], 2024a).

Women responsible for food crops, storage, processing, and preservation continually grapple with economic challenges in food processing and safety (Asogwa et al., 2017). Rural women, in particular, are one group within a community with extensive indigenous knowledge of food production, storage, and processing techniques such as fermenting and sun drying (Asogwa et al., 2017; ILO, 2019). In SSA, women are typically responsible for processing and preparing food for households, and they also play a more prominent role in ensuring food nutrition, safety, and quality (Njoagwuani et al., 2023); therefore, it is not surprising that they are increasingly interested in the agricultural food value chain involving food processing and safety that contributes to economic development (Ejike et al., 2018).

Food handlers are central in ensuring food hygiene and safety (FHS) throughout the food chain, from production to consumption (Okojie & Isah, 2019). Since food preparation in African society is culturally regarded as a female gender role; women play an essential role in its safety and tend to dominate household and street food preparation and serving, as most of them were nurtured and taught how to cook from a tender age (Okojie & Isah, 2019). Women dominate street food vending in Ghana, Ethiopia, and Uganda, confirming women's sociocultural role in food preparation and serving in most African urban settings (Addo-Tham et al., 2020).

Furthermore, as a result of difficult economic times, women in Nigeria and most developing countries are embracing food vending businesses as a visible, easy-to-start, and supplemental source of family income and employment, which is consistent with existing cultural orientation and gender roles for food vending businesses (Odipe et al., 2019). The few women who control wealth or create high-value products have greater access to decision-making power than women who do not have economic independence (Monga et al., 2019).

Supporting women in their development efforts is critical because women are more likely than men to invest their resources and finances in developing their families and communities (Amusan et al., 2021; Raimi et al., 2019). Additionally, women play important management roles in a variety of institutions around the world, and ignoring gender equity and continuing unfair treatment of women and girls will only impede Nigeria's sustainable development (Olonade et al., 2021). Involving women in leadership or policy-making processes increases their chances of highlighting, addressing, or changing overlooked issues of interest to women (Ogharanduku et al., 2021). Women's collective power and leadership are clear and necessary pathways to women's empowerment and inclusive and sustainable development because of their predisposition to thinking systematically/holistically, managing complexity, and inclusive approach to leadership (Gordon, 2020; Pierli et al., 2022).

Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

Akwa Ibom State is in the tropical rainforest belt and lies between latitude 4°33' and 5°53' North and longitude 7°25' and 8°25' East. The total land area in the state is 2,734 square miles, and it has an estimated population of 6 million. Politically, the state is divided into three senatorial districts: Eket, Ikot Ekpene, and Uyo. Akwa Ibom State is predominantly inhabited by the Ibibio, Annang, and Oron ethnic groups, with smaller populations of other groups who share

similar cultural heritage and languages (Akwa Ibom State [AKS], 2023). Historically, these groups were known for their sophisticated governance systems and trade before the arrival of European colonizers (Akpan, 2019; Akpan & Iseyen, 2022). The state experiences a tropical monsoon climate characterized by two main seasons—the rainy season of March to October with peak rainfall in July and September and an annual precipitation range between 2000-3000 mm and the dry season of November to February. The average annual temperature is 83.25°F, with January and February being the warmest months (97.47°F average) and August the coolest (72.23°F) (Etim et al., 2019; Nomad Season, 2025).

In Akwa Ibom State, and Nigeria in general, agricultural extension service is provided by the Agricultural Project Development (ADP), which operates as a department in the state's Ministry of Agriculture (Naswem & Ejembi, 2017). There are six ADP zones in the Akwa Ibom State, namely; Uyo, Abak, Oron, Etinan, Eket, and Ikot Ekpene (Etim et al., 2019). The idea behind the ADP was to put small farmers at the center of Nigeria's agricultural development strategy. The goal was to boost food production and farm incomes in all host communities across the federation by setting up systems to help farmers learn new technologies and get modern inputs, as well as improving land (Inegbedon et al., 2019). Nonetheless, several Nigerian universities provide extension services to their host local communities, and some NGOs also do so as part of their mandate. The FADAMA project series (1992-2019) consisted of various activities, including infrastructure development, irrigation, capacity building, advisory services, and environmental protection and awareness. It was implemented by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development through the ADPs.

Although Akwa Ibom's economy is predominantly driven by oil and gas, it is one of Nigeria's leading crude oil and natural gas producers, agriculture plays a significant role in Akwa

Ibom's economy, as it is the primary means of livelihood for rural communities. According to AKS (2011), key agricultural activities include crop farming (cassava, yam, maize, rice, and oil palm are the main crops), fishing (coastal and riverine communities are heavily engaged in fishing, benefiting from the Atlantic Ocean), livestock farming (goats, pigs, and poultry are widely reared), and cocoa production (the state is gradually reintroducing cocoa farming as a significant cash crop). Some of these crops are cultivated at a subsistence and commercial level; however, rural women's efforts are concentrated at the subsistence level. In Akwa Ibom State, women are particularly active in the agricultural sector, comprising about 51.4% of the agricultural workforce (Odubo et al., 2019). This high participation of women in agriculture contributes significantly to the state's socio-economic development.

Several agricultural programs and investment initiatives have been championed by successive governments. These include the Grain Storage Programme, Farm Subsidy, Strategic Food Production Plan, Foreign Partnership, Oil Palm Production, Rice Cultivation, Tractor Leasing, and Investment in Livestock (AKS, 2011). Akwa Ibom State has taken significant strides to promote gender equality and protect women's rights, often in alignment with Nigeria's federal laws. The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, the Child Rights Act, the Gender-Based Violence Response, Widowhood Rights, the Women's Right to Inheritance and Property, Equal Access to Education, the Prohibition of Discrimination in Employment, and Advocacy Against Harmful Traditional Practices are some of the laws and programs that support these goals (Invictus Africa, 2023; Ukpogon, 2017). Despite these legislations, initiatives, and investments, rural women are still bound by restrictive cultural practices.

Problem Statement

Agriculture in rural communities of Nigeria is influenced by conservative cultural norms that enforce traditional gender roles—rural hegemony (Keller, 2014). The contributions of women to agriculture abound in literature (Adebayo & Worth, 2024; Amusan et al., 2021; Oxfam, 2025; Uduji et al., 2021); therefore, it is essential to understand the agriculture industry from the perspective of women farmers since they represent an understudied but expanding social group.

In a study on gender issues and agriculture in Nigeria, Ogunlela and Mukhtar (2009) noted that the Nigerian woman has proven that she is more than just a bystander in the profession and that, given the opportunity, she can contribute effectively to leadership, governance, and decision-making. Research has shown that smallholder rural women farmers in Nigeria produce two-thirds of the food crops (ActionAid, 2015), and rural women constitute 51.4% of labor in the agricultural sector in Akwa Ibom State (Odubo et al., 2019). Notwithstanding the dominant and prominent role women play and their position in addressing the challenges of household management and agricultural production and development, men, and not women, make the crucial decisions. Empowering women to lead in agriculture and agripreneurship in Akwa-Ibom State in Nigeria is therefore critical.

According to Fremstad and Paul (2020), more research is required to investigate how women's dynamics in agriculture have evolved, the entry barriers that they face, and why many of these challenges remain gender-specific. Furthermore, there is a gap in literature on how rural women in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, can engage in leadership in the agricultural and food value chains in their communities. This study seeks to ascertain the barriers they face and provide insight into the connection between cultural norms, traditional beliefs, leadership, gender,

agriculture, and economic activities in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. It will employ a decolonizing lens to challenge and redefine gender roles within familial and community structures.

Purpose of the Study

This study explored how women can engage in leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship in rural communities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. An understanding of barriers and challenges to rural women's engagement in agricultural leadership and agripreneurship can help relevant stakeholders in tailoring interventions that will improve women's social, cultural, and economic standing in the state.

Research Questions

The following questions provide direction to this study:

1. How do cultural norms and traditional beliefs influence the role of rural women in agriculture?
2. How are rural women barred or discouraged from leadership and decision-making?
3. How are rural women encouraged or included in leadership and decision-making?
4. How can power be redistributed?

Significance of the Study

The contributions of women, in general, to agriculture abound in literature; therefore, it is essential to understand the agriculture industry from the perspective of rural women in agriculture and agripreneurship since they represent an understudied but expanding social group. Beach (2013) states that interviewing women specifically about roles in farming households and gender relations in the agriculture industry would be beneficial and informative because it would allow for the perspective of women in agriculture to be seen and heard. The primary purpose of this study is to fill a gap by examining the experiences of rural women in Akwa Ibom State,

Nigeria. This study sought to examine the barriers these women face in leadership and the decision-making space and to explore strategies to decolonize familial and community structures by empowering rural women through leadership development. This study is of the essence based on preceding studies, such as Fremstad and Paul (2020), which assert that more research is required to investigate how women's dynamics in agriculture have evolved, the entry barriers that women farmers face, and what other options exist to open the farm gate to women.

Operational Definition of Terms

- **Agriculture:** The science, art, or practice of cultivating the soil, producing crops, and raising livestock, including the preparation and marketing of resulting products. It encompasses crop and livestock production, aquaculture, and forestry for food and non-food products.
- **Agripreneur:** An individual who starts, organizes, and manages a business venture that focuses on the agricultural sector.
- **Agripreneurship:** This refers to entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector.
- **Ancestral loyalties:** This refers to the adherence to old ways of doing things.
- **Hidden economy:** Also referred to as the shadow economy, it is any economic activity that operates outside the scope of government assessment and can be described as a shadow, unofficial, informal, illegal, irregular, underground, hidden, or moonlight economy (Abada et al., 2021). The terms “hidden” and “shadow” will be used interchangeably in this report.
- **High control group:** A group of people formed around a frequently authoritarian and totalistic central belief or set of tenets, with strict rules and guidelines, and influenced through systems of psychosocial control.

- **Leadership:** A process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2022, p. 6).
- **Mbiam:** A sacred oath-taking substance often used as a judicial instrument in conflict management in traditional Akwa Ibom society. It is believed to have divinatory powers, and neglect or nonadherence would have a higher detrimental effect on the culprit as well as on the larger community; for instance, death.

Assumptions of the Study

In conducting this research, the following assumptions were made by the researcher:

1. That the interview questions will generate quality information required to answer the research questions.
2. That individual participants define and see the world uniquely.
3. That the participants will understand the questions and the context in which they are asked.
4. That the participants are honest and provide accurate information.
5. That culture intersects with gender dynamics and social roles that influence individual perspectives; therefore, data was also collected from men in these communities.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to indigenes of rural communities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, 18 years of age or older, who are engaged in agricultural practices either as smallholder farmers, fishermen, and/or small rural agribusiness owners; therefore, factors contributing to their experience and the findings of this study may be unique to this group only. Hence, the information presented here may not be generalizable outside of this population.

Chapter Summary

Women constitute the majority of farmers in these regions, contributing significantly to food production, processing, and household food security. Despite their substantial involvement in agricultural activities—ranging from crop cultivation to livestock management and post-harvest tasks—women often face systemic barriers that lead to their contributions being frequently undervalued, limiting their access to leadership and decision-making opportunities.

Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, exemplifies the broader challenges and opportunities for women in agriculture. Despite comprising 51.4% of the agricultural workforce, rural women in Akwa Ibom face cultural and structural barriers. While successive governments in the state have launched several agricultural programs and investment initiatives to promote gender equality, traditional practices often seem to undermine these efforts.

This study explored how rural women in Akwa Ibom State can overcome barriers to leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship. It aimed to understand the influence of cultural norms, identify exclusionary practices, and propose strategies for empowering women through decolonizing familial and community structures. Four research questions guided this study: 1) How do cultural norms and traditional beliefs influence the role of rural women in agriculture? 2) How are rural women barred or discouraged from leadership and decision-making? 3) How are rural women encouraged or included in leadership and decision-making? 4) How can power be redistributed?

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), agriculture accounts for about 22% of the region's gross domestic product (GDP) and provides employment for 60% of the labor force, and accounts for more than 10% of export revenues (Wudil et al., 2022). Oxfam (2025) indicates that low growth and food insecurity are caused in part by women smallholder farmers' being held back from reaching their full potential in the agricultural sector. Rural women contribute to the household income, and they usually help earn this additional income by working in the agricultural sector (Antriyandarti et al., 2024). Thus, eradicating food insecurity and rural poverty requires the full and equal participation of both women and men in agriculture as well as the equitable distribution of the benefits from agricultural and rural development activities.

Women have always been significant in the agriculture industry, but their perspectives have been absent because they are typically part of the unpaid and invisible labor force (Contzen & Forney, 2016). In addition to their traditional domestic responsibilities, women produce more than 50% of the world's food and make up around 48% of the agricultural workforce, both globally and in developing nations (Doss, 2014; Kehinde et al., 2021). The majority of smallholder farmers are women, providing most of the labor and managing a large part of daily farming activities (Ochieng et al., 2014). Despite their significance in the economies of these countries, development projects focused on their productivity are yet to be considered in national agricultural planning and policies (Adeniyi, 2010; Olaitan, 2023). About 54 million of Nigeria's estimated 78 million women live in rural areas and off the land. Though agriculture remains the largest economic platform for women, their work is mostly subsistence farming with hoes and

cutlasses. Women remain disadvantaged: 55% of female-headed households are landless, and 29% own less than one hectare (Oxfam, 2017).

Beach (2013) noted that society portrayed women in agriculture as support to the male farmer, the homemaker, or the one who raises the children and is the caregiver for the elders. While men in the agriculture industry agree that women have a place in the industry, they disagree over the value of the contributions of women (Duncan, 2022). According to Fremstad and Paul (2020), breaking down historically entrenched patriarchal roles and norms is the only way to help women identify as farmers. In Africa, due to tradition and culture, agricultural (and domestic) decision-making has been dominated by men (Mgalamadzi et al., 2024; Nartey et al., 2023; Enete & Amusa, 2010b), even in areas where women are the largest providers of farm labor.

Another demographic is widowed women involved in agriculture. In parts of Africa, widowed rural women are disadvantaged heads of households because they may not control the household land, and/or other resources, after the demise of their husbands (Adebayo & Worth, 2024; Dillon & Voena, 2018). Numerous myths, prejudices, and stereotypes surround widowed women. One is the view that widowed women have no identity beyond having a deceased husband (Pini, 2003a). According to Pini (2003a), the widowed woman who farms in the absence of a male partner is of significant interest because of how gender informs roles, identities, and access to resources in agriculture. Being that they have transitioned from the role of the farm wife, the widowed women believe they have a right to participate in agriculture and the politics around it, but they are limited by the prevalence and dominance of masculinities in the discourses surrounding the farmer and agricultural leader (Keller, 2014; Ball, 2014).

Sociocultural norms, women's multiple burdens and triple duties, access to assets and resources, agricultural training and education, suitable working conditions, and decision-making are some of the ways that women have been traditionally excluded from participation in agricultural organizations (Kaaria et al., 2016; Kennedy-Duckett, 2022). According to Ochieng et al. (2014), the main issue affecting women farmers in SSA is restricted access to land due to several statutory and traditional norms. In addition to making it difficult for them to participate in decisions about their farms, not owning any land also poses a serious problem because land tenure is a prerequisite for access to other productive resources like water, loans, and other inputs. Irrespective of women's important role in the agricultural sector, they are less likely to have access to resources, such as land, credits, education, technology, and extension services, than men (Kehinde et al., 2021). In places like the United States, where women can own farmland today, it is still a scarce and expensive commodity. New challenges make acquiring farmland difficult for women, with many of these challenges remaining gender-specific (Fremstad & Paul, 2020). Among these challenges are financing, training and education, fair treatment, and appropriate working conditions (Kennedy-Duckett, 2022).

These challenges are not restricted to SSA. According to Leder (2022), in parts of Asia, although women contribute more to the management of the family farm and other areas of revenue generation, there is still a gendered division of labor in the home that leaves women nearly entirely responsible for maintaining the home and caring for children. Gendered views persist even though women's lives have changed, with many young female graduates now making their marks in previously male-dominated domains such as disciplines of agronomy, animal husbandry, etc. (Yavorsky et al., 2015).

In Australian agriculture, women are mainly appointed to leadership positions as token gestures and are often left feeling isolated and ignored (Alston, 2014). Even though Australia has equal opportunity policies, their issues are often sidelined, and their presence is merely tolerated (Alston, 2014). This can be seen in how agricultural women have been under-represented as leaders in commodity boards, producer groups, agricultural bureaucracies, agricultural research and development, and agricultural media (Alston, 2014; Pini, 2005). Pini (2003b) identified organizational strategies, education and training strategies, remuneration strategies, support strategies, and time strategies; as strategies that could be engaged to increase women's representation in decision-making and governance in agriculture.

Women's Emancipation, Liberation, and Empowerment

Empowerment is the process of increasing people's or groups' ability to make decisions and turn those decisions into desired actions and outcomes (Cornwall, 2016). Women empowerment involves transforming women from having limited power due to gendered barriers to having equal power with men (Kidder et al., 2017). Its historical journey has had significant struggles, turning points, and accomplishments that have shaped the women's rights movement over the centuries. In the 1970s, feminist consciousness-raising and collective action informed early applications in international development (Cornwall, 2016). In the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of women's empowerment was developed as a radical strategy for altering power structures in favor of women's rights and increased equality between men and women (Cornwall, 2016). Women's economic empowerment provides equal access to and control over important economic resources and opportunities, eliminates structural gender differences in the labor market and society as a whole, and ensures that unpaid care work is shared fairly (Kidder et al., 2017; Lwamba et al., 2022).

The mandate for equitable change through women's emancipation and liberation is a powerful call to action to foster gender equality in various societal spheres because empowering women means empowering our future (Raimi et al., 2019b). Emancipation refers to the act of liberating someone, especially from political, legal, or social constraints that limit what they can do. It involves dismantling various discriminatory systems that hinder individuals from seeking and obtaining their entitlements (Chakraborty, 2023). Liberation is freedom from oppression (Andrade Costa, 2024). According to Sinclair et al. (2022), women's ability to influence or control choices that affect them positively impacts their socioeconomic, food security, and nutrition outcomes. Food insecurity disproportionately affects women, with the gender gap in food access widening, particularly in Africa and Latin America; these inequalities are rooted in complex socioeconomic, cultural, and political conditions (Sinclair et al., 2022).

Women's emancipation, liberation, and empowerment are not only reflected in some of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); they are a key part of achieving the SDGs by 2030 and are also intrinsically important for women's and men's well-being (Glazebrook & Opoku, 2020; UN Women, 2018). For example, SDG 5 prioritizes gender equality and empowerment for all women and girls (Glazebrook & Opoku, 2020; FAO, 2023). Because of women's important role in agriculture and food security, this goal is linked to SDG 2, which addresses hunger (Glazebrook & Opoku, 2020). The connection between poverty and hunger establishes a link between SDG 5 and SDG 1, which aim to reduce poverty (Glazebrook & Opoku, 2020). Furthermore, access to decent work and regular income in the hands of women, for example, contributes not only to poverty reduction (SDG 1) but also supports better education (SDG 4), health (SDG 3), and nutrition (SDG 2) outcomes for women and girls and those who depend on them (UN Women, 2018).

Despite the potential of the SDGs to revolutionize gender equality, no country is currently on track to meet the 2030 deadline for gender equality (Raimi et al., 2019b; UN, 2023). Following gender inequality, Africa will not meet SDG 2 because the structural causes of hunger remain unaddressed and new issues have emerged since 2007 (Botreau & Cohen, 2020). Humanitarian crises in hunger are happening all over the region because of a number of intersecting violations of gender justice, such as the loss of food sovereignty, agriculture, food security, and the rights of future generations (Glazebrook et al., 2020). Africa's success in combating hunger and poverty remains uncertain; however, the link between poverty and food insecurity in Africa is a gender issue, as women's subsistence is disproportionately affected (Glazebrook & Opoku, 2020; Moyo & Dhliwayo, 2019). According to UN Women (2018), SDGs on poverty, gender equality, and food security can be met by emancipating and empowering women. In Nigeria, women and youth comprise a large percentage of the population, and they contribute to the agricultural sector's development; however, they require government awareness, motivation, training, and funding to strengthen their capacities (Odunze, 2019). Women's emancipation, liberation, and empowerment, therefore, require concerted efforts and strategies.

Effectiveness of Starting Empowerment Initiatives in Agriculture at the Household Level vs Starting at the Government (Policy/Higher) Level

Rural women are a vulnerable group that bears the brunt of poverty (Monga et al., 2019; Moyo & Francis, 2010). Therefore, needs assessments at the grassroots, community, or household levels should help identify the issues that women are concerned about (Moyo & Francis, 2010; Robles & Benavidez, 2020). Working from the community level is essential because women's needs are bound to differ based on the social and cultural realities of the

communities in which they live, and the perceptions of other segments of their societies must also inform such interventions (Moyo & Francis, 2010).

Beginning at the household level promotes inclusivity and non-discriminatory participation of all relevant groups because it will take into account their perspectives and also help them take control of the process (Moyo & Francis, 2010). Men and community leaders, for example, must be mobilized and engaged in women's empowerment initiatives' development, implementation, and evaluation (ILO, n.d.; UN Women, 2023). This argument stems from the realization that the majority of the challenges that women face and patriarchal cultural beliefs and norms are intertwined (Moyo & Francis, 2010). Furthermore, communal values are passed down from generation to generation through kinship, territoriality, and social structures that begin at the household level (Mugabi, 2012). As a result, starting any community initiative at the grassroots or household level allows for equal participation of all relevant stakeholders and community leaders.

Beginning at the household level promotes community empowerment. Instead of relying solely on external assistance, the approach of households banding together accentuates community mobilization and the development of local capacities to address social issues (Gordon, 2020). Grassroots leadership, driven by actors outside dominant power structures, facilitates bottom-up change by mobilizing resources for collective action (Raj et al., 2022; Subramaniam, 2012). Grassroots women leaders overcoming gender norms offer valuable insights for policymakers aiming to empower women and address inequalities (Lwamba et al., 2022; Sanni, 2025). Their innovative strategies highlight the importance of women's leadership in challenging societal constraints and promoting the direct exercise of power (Gordon, 2020). As a result, the household approach empowers communities to solve their problems.

Starting at the grassroots or household level also promotes social cohesion by allowing individuals to openly acknowledge power disparities and use strategic engagement to build trust between communities and governments (Lansing et al., 2023; Sarmiento Barletti et al., 2020). Commitment to innovation and dialogue processes increases the participation of marginalized women as it raises their awareness of their rights, increases their civic engagement and expression of ideas and opinions, and connects them with peers. (Sarmiento Barletti et al., 2020; UN Women, 2023). Farmers' ability to gather and connect women from various backgrounds allows solidarity to grow and transform over time (Spangler & Christie, 2020).

Table 1

Summary of the effectiveness of starting empowerment initiatives in agriculture at the household level vs starting at the government level

Aspect	Household-level	Government level
Focus	Individual households Local communities	Entire agricultural stakeholders Rural communities
Scale	Small scale in nature Emphasis on individual families	Large scale Covers vast geographical areas at a go
Customization	Tailored to specific households and communities' felt needs	Standardized policies that may or may not be adaptable to local communities' needs
Implementation	Implemented via grassroots organizations	Implemented by specific government agencies, extension officers, and agricultural ministries
Decision-making	Decentralized within community households	Centralized at the government level

Adaptability and flexibility	Very flexible and adaptable to local communities	Might be challenging to adapt to diverse communities and localities
Resource allocation	Done at a smaller scale depending on local partnerships and needs	Government initiatives may have financial muscle and cover larger areas
Implementation	Tend to be faster due to fewer bureaucracies	May take time due to several bureaucracies
Sustainability	Sustainable when adapted and integrated into daily community routines	Sustainability is dependent on political stability, budget flows, and policy support
Gender issues	Challenges the traditional status quo on gender inequalities in households and communities	
Community engagement	Participatory decision-making with households and communities	Might employ public participation, but views will be varied and unique to different areas.

Sources: (Cejudo & Navarro, 2020; Eidt et al., 2020; Gordon, 2020; ILO, n.d.; Lansing et al., 2023; Lwamba et al., 2022; Mapiye et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2019; Monga et al., 2019; Moyo & Francis, 2010; Mugabi, 2012; Mullenbach et al., 2019; Raj et al., 2022; Robles & Benavidez, 2020; Sanni, 2025; Sarmiento Barletti et al., 2020; Spangler & Christie, 2020; Subramaniam, 2012; UN Women, 2023).

Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework encapsulates women in agriculture, women in leadership, and women's work.

Women in Agriculture

Women have always contributed to agriculture, but until recently, their efforts were generally ignored. They labored in the background, performing routine tasks (Prater, 2018).

Given that property ownership is traditionally patrilineal, women are mostly connected to the farm through their father or their spouses and are rarely considered farmers in their own right (Curtin et al., 2024; Pilgeram & Amos, 2015). In rural communities of underdeveloped and developing countries, due to their restricted access to higher education, women have been pushed further away from agricultural occupations as agriculture is transitioning from a knowledge-based to a science-based industry (FAO, n.d.; Savari et al., 2020).

Traditionally, a farm woman's identity as wife, mother, daughter, or sister to the farmer gave her financial stability, respectability, and prestige. According to Braiser et al. (2014), the heteronormative nuclear family and its related gender norms governed women's sense of belonging in farm communities. Women do not function solely as farm wives or mothers; they are chameleonic and take on the third shift (Bharadwaj et al., 2013; Tutor-Marcom et al., 2014). They take on multiple roles on and off the farm, which include maintaining three working shifts: managing the household and children, maintaining off-farm employment, and performing their farm duties (Bharadwaj et al., 2013; Pierotti et al., 2022; Tutor-Marcom et al., 2014).

A woman's claim to the title of a farmer is an identity problem (Carnegie et al., 2020; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023; Leslie et al., 2019; Pilgeram et al., 2022). When referring to a female involved in agriculture, researchers and writers use the terms woman or female, but no descriptor for a male farmer. Societal norms have formed the gendered stereotype of farmer and farm wife. When one thinks of a farmer, a man comes to mind (Carnegie et al., 2020; Leslie et al., 2019). The farm wife is the domestic partner who manages the home, cooks for the farmhands, tends to the cows, works the machinery, and whatever else is required (Carnegie et al., 2020; Leslie et al., 2019). They perform the duties of both a farmer and a farmwife and are generally not given the title of farmer. According to Keller (2014), the farm wife represents the

hegemonic feminine position in the gender hierarchy, whereas the farmer represents the hegemonic masculine position. Many farm women hope that as the growth of women in agricultural jobs continues, especially as farm owners and managers, the traditional divisions of labor will break down (Ball, 2014; Keller, 2014). As women try to succeed in all three shifts, their identities and responsibilities will continue to evolve and adapt as they embrace leadership.

Women in Leadership

Women constitute about fifty percent of the world population and approximately forty percent of the labor force (World Bank [WB], 2023). In the United States, the participation rate in the labor force for college-educated women is 69.6% (Fry, 2022). However, women are frequently underrepresented in leadership positions despite having postgraduate degrees and being widely employed in most professional sectors, including healthcare, business, and higher education.

Horowitz et al. (2018) reported that most Americans believe women hold marginal leadership positions in the corporate world and politics and would like to see a change. According to the report, a major reason women are underrepresented in these leadership roles is that they must put in more effort to prove themselves. Another major obstacle to female leadership is gender discrimination (Horowitz et al., 2018). Chanda & Ngulube (2024), Horowitz et al. (2018), and Lombard et al. (2021) acknowledge that while women are capable, men are more likely to hold leadership positions in business and politics than women because women face more structural barriers and uneven expectations. This biased representation affects decision-making processes and the prioritization of a gender-inclusive approach to designing and deploying policies and interventions, especially in rural settings (WEF, 2024b).

Women in the labor force are affected by an almost impervious barrier to their leadership aspirations (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017; Surawicz, 2016). They are not only turned away as they aspire to reach leadership positions but also disappear in various numbers at different points along the path; thus, the metaphor “labyrinth” describes the many barriers they face in their professional endeavors (Eagly & Carli, 2008). The labyrinth metaphor acknowledges the advancement of women in leadership and is also realistic that women face difficulties that require more time to navigate and success is uncertain, making it challenging for others to follow (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

In a study analyzing how gender mainstreaming in development programs affects women in rural Europe, Bock (2015) noted that addressing the gendered nature of policy domains and changing structures and processes has been both conciliatory and conflicting, particularly within the institutional framework and cultural norms of specific countries. The study concluded that gender is a political process; for gender mainstreaming to be effective, it requires a participatory approach that includes women’s presence and women’s specific needs for revitalizing rural communities taken into account. In their review of women’s membership in various women farmer groups and organizations, specifically their roles in agricultural development programs in rural communities, Baba et al. (2015) suggested that encouraging women to participate in agricultural leadership through gender-sensitive institutional frameworks is effective and should be supported. Few women in Africa hold national policy-making roles. The fact that women are underrepresented in administrative structures in technical ministries like agriculture gives them limited opportunities to contribute to agricultural development processes and has a significant impact on the policies that are developed there (Antriyandarti et al., 2024). There are extremely few women in positions of authority in public policy-making agencies and organizations

(Oyebamiji et al., 2022). This has led to a neglect of issues of most concern to women in the design and implementation of many development policies and programs. The policies of organizations and governments would more fairly balance the concerns of women and men if women had unrestricted access to leadership positions (Kark & Eagly, 2010).

Women's Work

African women unite communities despite deeply rooted patriarchal cultural values in most African setups (Olonade et al., 2021). Women in African culture are in charge of domestic responsibilities such as childbearing and raising, household chores, laundry, cooking, and sustaining marriages regardless of their statuses and professions (Adisa et al., 2019).

Women perform the traditional roles that their society recognizes and other economic and social roles (Adisa et al., 2019). Women's work in most patriarchal households revolves around the home and the farm. In contrast, men are effectively immune from domestic duties, burdening women who tend to other duties besides their formal employment (Adisa et al., 2019). Women are thought to be fit for kitchen and farm work, making them dependents and subservient to their male counterparts (Adeosun & Owolabi, 2021)

Women dominate most informal economies in Africa, and in Nigeria, for example, the hand-woven textile industry represents an age-old Yoruba weaving tradition and is an income source, particularly for women. Despite being a casual segment, it represents a hidden enterprise culture (Ogunsade & Obembe, 2016). Small businesses' prevalence in the informal sector results from the prevailing enterprise culture in the sociocultural environment of Yoruba women in southern Nigeria (Ogunsade & Obembe, 2016). Culture and tradition favor men over women; men have more rights and positions as household heads and are employed more frequently than

women in rural communities. As a result, more women than men engage in non-farm and artisanal activities such as hairdressing, weaving, and on-farm labor (Igwe et al., 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Social Role Theory

Research on the differences between men and women started in the 1950s and accelerated in the 1970s after second-wave feminism. By the 1980s, there were definite connections between people's perceptions of gender differences and their social behaviors and personality traits (Eckes & Trautner, 2000). According to Eagly and Wood (1999), the social role theory emerged to understand the reasons behind gender differences and the origins of gender stereotypes. The social role theory (see figure 1) argues that sex differences and similarities in behavior reflect gender role beliefs that, in turn, represent people's opinions of men's and women's social roles in their society (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Society has defined stereotypical gender roles of women. Societal norms have been set for women to conform to. In agriculture, societal norms for women's roles include gendered division of labor (Amusan et al., 2021), lack of access to resources (Botreau & Cohen, 2020), and discriminatory cultural practices (Amusan et al., 2021).

Human structures rely heavily on social roles (Tomasello, 2020). Social roles are expectations associated with positions held in networks of relationships, whereas identities are internalized role expectations (Yamin et al., 2021). Gender differences in behavior, according to the social role theory, are primarily the result of a social construction process (Eagly, 1987; Li et al., 2021). Similarly, gendered traits are a result of historical and biological roles where men have traditionally engaged in public economic activities due to physical strengths, whereas women have usually focused on the home and childcare; these roles, which are deeply rooted in biological differences, have persisted, shaping gendered expectations and stereotypes in societies

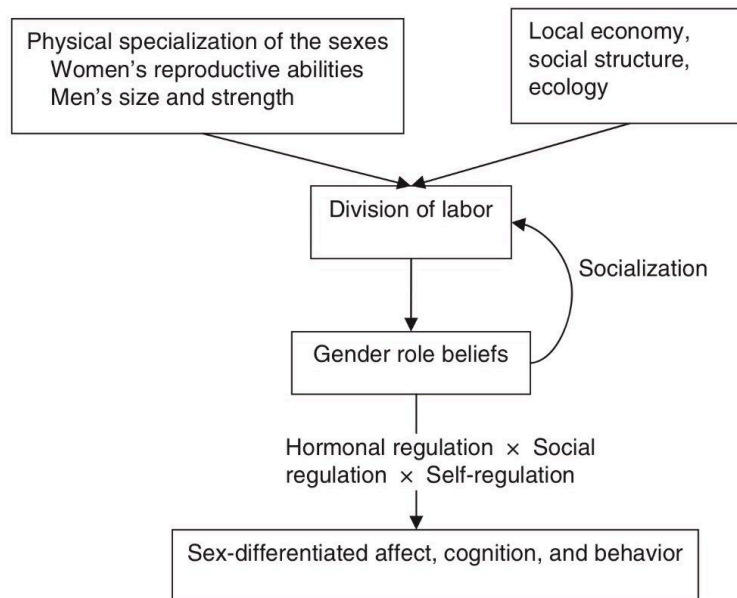
as people observe male and female behavior and infer that the sexes possess corresponding dispositions (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Schneider & Bos, 2019). Gender roles seemed to reflect men's and women's innate biological characteristics, making them appear to be inevitable and natural (Eagly, 1987; Anglin et al., 2022). Even in modern societies, where these physical differences are a non-issue, the gender roles and stereotypes persist due to long-held cultural socialization and lead to divisions of labor in economic and social systems (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Gender stereotypes are perpetuated by observing men and women in different roles, leading to assumptions that women have communal characteristics such as empathy and are suited to caregiving responsibilities and men have agentic ones such as ambition and aggression suited to roles such as hunting and leadership (Anglin et al., 2022; Schneider & Bos, 2019). According to social role theory, women are assumed to be more inclusive, moral, compassionate, diligent, and stakeholder-oriented (Anglin et al., 2022; Schneider & Bos, 2019). Women are more likely than men to respond to social expectations and are more sensitive to ethical issues (Yang et al., 2019). Regarding the relationship between gender and ethics, more women are moral than men (Yang et al., 2019). The prevalence of communal leadership styles among women, compared to agentic leadership styles among males, reinforces our presumptions about gendered roles even in leadership (Bass et al., 1996).

Socialization reinforces these characteristics by encouraging conformity to traditionally associated behaviors (Solbes-Canales et al., 2020). Society defines feminine leadership styles in terms that conform to the conventional gender roles of women. This puts women under pressure to conform to cultural norms for leadership in the struggle to be taken seriously and advance in leadership positions (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). They are expected to play the

traditionally defined roles of nurturers and homemakers, including communal, cooperative, and nurturing (Archer, 1996). Carli and Eagly (1999) infer that leaders must simultaneously conform to the expectations of their gender and the roles that are determined by their unique positions in a hierarchy.

Using the social role theory, we can begin to comprehend why labor division occurs based on men’s and women’s distinctive physical capabilities and characteristics. The continuous socialization of men and women into predefined gender roles has blurred into other characteristic depictions, like leadership (Carli & Eagly, 1999; Eagly & Carli, 2008). The gendered division of labor and the distribution of resources, responsibilities, agency, and power are governed by different laws, norms, and principles (Wood & Eagly, 2012). These elements influence and are critical to understanding the nature of gender inequality and inequity in different cultures. This study seeks to explore the impact of these gendered divisions on the lived experiences of rural women in agriculture through the gender role lens.



Gender roles guide sex differences and similarities through biosocial processes

Figure 1: The Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012)

Transformative Leadership Theory

This theory posits that leadership is a democratic process that focuses on “creating conditions for emancipation, empowerment, and full participation” (Shields, 2016, p. 39). It seeks to transform the individuals practicing it and the society in which they work and live with an overriding commitment to justice, equity, and a democratic society (Shields, 2011; van Oord, 2013). It is distinguished by its activist agenda and overarching commitment to social justice, equality, and democracy; thus, transformative leadership inextricably links education and educational leadership (Shields, 2010).

Transformative leadership, as shown in figure 2, is enacted through the application of eight tenets: a) a mandate for deep and equitable change; b) the need to deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge frameworks; c) the need to address the inequitable distribution of power; d) an emphasis on private and public good; e) a focus on emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice; f) an emphasis on interconnectedness, interdependence, and global awareness; g) the necessity of balancing critique with promise; and h) the call to exhibit moral courage (Shields, 2016). As a result, transformative leadership and inclusive and socially just environments are inseparably associated (Shields, 2010). Transformative leadership is, in essence, a distinct and principled approach to achieving positive and equitable change as it emphasizes the critical relationship between justice and trust, cautions against the abuse of power, advocates for a balance of individual and collective well-being, and emphasizes global awareness. The framework also promotes a dynamic balance of critique and promise while requiring moral courage from leaders for noble causes (Caldwell & Anderson, 2021) and is a highly ethical standard of leadership that merits society’s respect since transformative leaders share an authentic concern for the welfare of others (Caldwell et al., 2012).

In the context of this study, transformative leadership theory offers a vision of hope and solidarity for an interdependent world in response to the current sense of alienation, marginalization, or even oppression expressed by many people worldwide (Shields, 2020). To benefit individuals and societies, transformative leadership prioritizes pedagogical shifts, power redistribution, and mental models over mere knowledge or experience (Shields & Hesbol, 2020). Furthermore, transformative leadership theory promotes a social justice agenda that prioritizes emancipation, equity, liberation, and democracy, particularly for marginalized groups. It emphasizes profound change, urging leaders to shift knowledge frameworks, redistribute power, and balance interests (Munive et al., 2023). Thus, transformative leadership provides a theoretical framework to initiate difficult conversations and inquiry, foster respectful and dynamic communities, address power differences, attend to the welfare of all, engage in critique and critical action, and act courageously with others to enact change (Freire, 2000; Green, 1999; Shields, 2020).

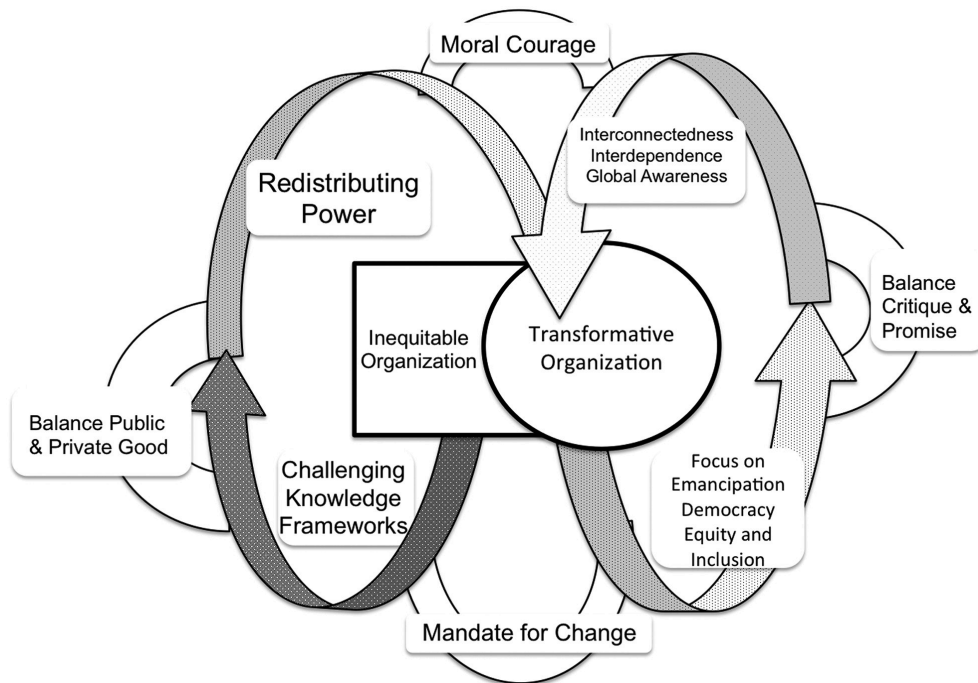


Figure 2: The Transformative Leadership Model (Shields et al., 2017)

Adaptive Leadership Theory

Adaptive leadership is “the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 14). This form of leadership is inspired by adaptive challenges, challenges that have no existing solution within the community and require a shift in attitudes, values, and behaviors (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). The adaptive leadership framework (figure 3) focuses on engaging individuals to do adaptive work and supporting them during changes in the environment as it navigates uncertainties, encourages innovation, and facilitates organizational learning in response to constant change (Andrin, 2023). This leadership paradigm promotes resilience and adaptation by acknowledging and responding to the unique needs of different groups (Nöthel et al., 2023).

To engage in adaptive leadership, people must be prepared for deep learning that will change values and assumptions, create losses, and encounter resistance and then drive individual and collective behaviors (Dugan, 2017; Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Community members need to learn how to iteratively observe and interpret, come up with possible interventions based on interpretations, engage as both an observer and a participant, manage disequilibrium and create a holding space, keep the focus on the work, give the work back to the people, and protect the voices of those without power (Dugan, 2017; Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

Adaptive leaders guide individuals to deal with stress by providing a change-friendly environment and help people circumnavigate challenging times by scrutinizing what is essential or expendable, and they also experiment with solutions to implement the most adaptable ones (Abukalusa & Oosthuizen, 2023; Heifetz et al., 2009). They can achieve this by working with

local governments and meaningfully organizing ongoing decision-making and learning processes involving key interest-holder representatives (Susskind & Kim, 2022).

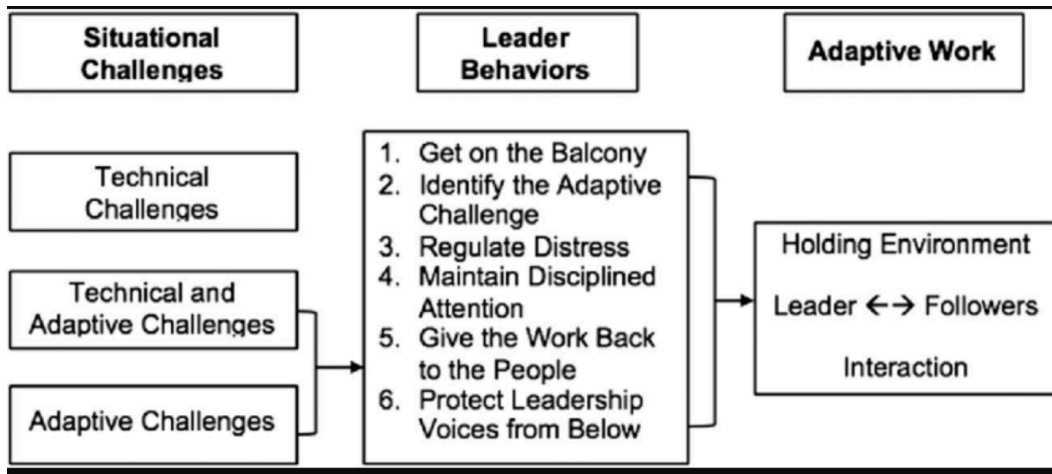


Figure 3: The Adaptive Leadership Model (Heifetz et al., 2009; Northouse, 2022)

Contextual Framework

Most developing countries' agricultural sectors are struggling partly due to the underutilization of women, who play critical roles as farmers, laborers, and entrepreneurs (FAO, 2011). Women consistently face more significant barriers to essential resources than men, limiting their contributions to the rural economy (FAO, 2011). Some of the vulnerabilities and constraints that resource-poor women farmers face are a lack of information concerning value chains, social restrictions, and gender stereotypes (Tanumihardjo et al., 2020). Women thus bear the brunt of the gender inequalities that persist in agriculture compared to their male counterparts (Botreau & Cohen, 2020).

Women are known to engage in agricultural activities more than men in SSA countries, including Nigeria (Baba et al., 2015). It is essential to recognize their role and capacity in addressing the challenges of agricultural development, given their contribution to ensuring food security (Odey et al., 2022; Ogunlela & Mukhtar, 2009). Their position and capability of meeting

agricultural development challenges cannot be overemphasized as they shoulder the primary responsibility for food security (Odey et al., 2022; WB, 2008). Ironically, they significantly contribute to food production and processing, but men seem to hold leadership positions, have more control over farm decisions, and thereby control the productive resources (Babalola et al., 2021; Damisa & Yohanna, 2007).

Agriculture is the most important economic activity in Akwa Ibom State and is the largest contributor to the state's economy after crude oil/petroleum. The state takes pride in being “a home of culture” (AKS Online, 2014), which is expressed in four distinct cultural characteristics that affect and direct the behavioral patterns of the people: the preoccupation with the supernatural, concern for upright morals, rebellion against injustice, and belief in a strong family system (AKS Online, 2014). These four characteristics act as instruments of social control and influence their music and dance (AKS Online, 2014).

Akwa Ibom State has three major ethnic groups: Annang, Ibibio, and Oron. It is essential to examine the impact that the cultural similarities and differences of these ethnic groups may have on women in agriculture. Thus, this study selected four core communities from the three senatorial districts—Eket, Ikot Ekpene, and Uyo.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a review of the literature on women's roles in agriculture, the systemic barriers they face in leadership, and the importance of emancipation, liberation, and empowerment initiatives. Primarily focused on Sub-Saharan Africa, with additional insights from global contexts, the literature review revealed that women's ability to make decisions and enact change is linked to equitable resource access, fair labor distribution, and policy inclusion; and emphasized the need for women's full participation in agriculture to achieve global

development targets (Cornwall, 2016; Glazebrook & Opoku, 2020; Kidder et al., 2017; Lwamba et al., 2022; UN Women, 2018). However, progress toward these goals remains slow, especially in Africa, where structural inequalities persist.

The chapter also discussed this study's theoretical framework. This research was supported and guided by the three theoretical frameworks: the social role theory, transformative leadership theory, and the adaptive leadership theory. The social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) posits that societies associate men with their physical strength and women with their reproductive biology, which leads to a gendered division of labor and the distribution of resources, responsibilities, agency, and power governed by different laws, norms, and principles. By enacting this labor division in an economic and social structure, the differences lead to gender role beliefs and persistent stereotyping (Anglin et al., 2022; Eagly & Wood, 2012; Schneider & Bos, 2019).

The transformative leadership theory (Shields, 2010) offers a distinct and principled approach to achieving positive and equitable change that benefits individuals and societies. It seeks to transform the individuals practicing it and the society in which they work and live and promotes a social justice agenda that prioritizes equity, liberation, and democracy, particularly for marginalized groups, through shifting knowledge frameworks, redistributing power, and balancing interests (Munive et al., 2023; Shields, 2016; Shields, 2020; van Oord, 2013). Adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009) involves preparing and encouraging people to deal with change. It acknowledges that change is complex and with interconnected parts, and people must be prepared for deep learning that will change values and assumptions, create losses, and encounter resistance, and then drive individual and collective behaviors (Andrin, 2023; Dugan, 2017; Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). This literature review further

highlighted the underutilization of women in agriculture in developing economies, particularly Nigeria's Akwa Ibom State, where cultural norms influence gender roles (AKS Online, 2014; Babalola et al., 2021; Damisa & Yohanna, 2007). It also set the stage for the phenomenon being studied.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This study aimed to explore how women can engage in leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship in rural communities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. This section will discuss the approach used in this research; this includes the researcher's positionality, interpretive framework, research design, population, data collection and analysis methods, and trustworthiness criteria.

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do cultural norms and traditional beliefs influence the role of rural women in agriculture?
2. How are rural women barred or discouraged from leadership and decision-making?
3. How are rural women encouraged or included in leadership and decision-making?
4. How can power be redistributed?

Positionality Statement

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), human beings construct meaning of the world they are living in through engagement and interpretation of their experiences. To ensure the validity of the study results and identify any potential biases that may have been brought into the study, it is imperative to acknowledge the researcher's background, unique knowledge, and perspectives to enable the observation of points of view that could influence the interview process and obstruct objective data processing and reporting of study findings (Creswell, 2012; Holmes, 2020).

I am a middle-aged Nigerian doctoral student in the United States. I have expertise in agricultural program management, where I have provided leadership, mentorship, and hands-on

support to develop quality agricultural capacity in resource-poor farmers and rural farmer groups for sustainable economic and community development. I am also versed in building and enhancing relationships in/with community-based, national, and international development and research organizations. In the course of my career, I have witnessed the vital role of women in agriculture and their contribution to the development of the community and the country. I have also observed the challenges and barriers they face in accessing resources, opportunities, and decision-making power in the agricultural sector (and other professions). Journal articles and reports have documented that this reality is not only limited to the Nigerian agricultural and community development space but also that of many developing and underdeveloped nations.

As a woman who believes that women can be the best in any field and has experienced gender stereotyping, I bring my cultural heritage and personal and professional experiences in administration, extension, volunteering, outreach, and organizing to my research. I also recognize that as a researcher, I am able to access the resources needed to conduct my research, yet I acknowledge and recognize that based on my own experiences and opinions, I may be exhibiting gender and affinity bias and also be conscious of how these may shape my research. To reduce this bias, I am constantly aware of my feelings, opinions, and prejudices, open to and actively searching out divergent views, consciously open to those perspectives, and reflecting on them by journaling to examine the influence of my judgments, practices, and belief systems. Reflection, clear and transparent descriptions of the process, and analysis of emerging themes are strategies for enhancing the credibility of qualitative research (Noble & Smith, 2015).

As a social constructivist, my goal is to comprehend the society in which we live and work (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The realities of these women are multiple and different. They are constructed through their lived experiences and interactions with others, so there will be a

complexity of viewpoints on how they navigate the world and what it means to them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My role as a social constructivist is to actively facilitate open discussion and interaction with research participants to gain a deeper understanding of their lived experiences and perspectives and collaboratively construct meaning. I acknowledge that there is no single, objective reality, and different people may interpret the same situation differently based on their experiences and social context; therefore, I pay close attention to the social and cultural context in which participants' experiences occur, and I am also mindful of power dynamics and potential impacts, and ensure that participants feel respected and heard throughout the research process.

Research Design

A research design entails the data collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting processes in research endeavors; it outlines the entire research procedure and points out how all the processes will help answer research questions (Boru, 2018). This study used the qualitative research approach. Qualitative research entails studying the nature of a phenomenon by examining its quality and manifestations while excluding their frequency; in essence, qualitative studies include data presented in terms of words rather than numbers (Shaffer, 2023).

This study was conducted using the basic qualitative research design. The basic qualitative research design is an approach where the researcher would be interested in “(1) how people interpret their experience, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). According to Austin and Sutton (2014) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), basic qualitative research stems from the belief that people acquire knowledge by participating in, interpreting, and making sense of an experience or activity within the unique circumstances they find themselves in; the primary goal is to understand these meanings. Qualitative inquiry is a reflective process, and creating quality

research questions generate the credibility, reliability, and transparency of a qualitative study (Agee, 2009).

The primary sources of information were semi-structured interviews and a focus group (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Seidman (2006), interviewing reflects an “interest in understanding the lived experiences of people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9). The use of semi-structured interviews offers flexibility and adaptability, allowing for open-ended questions and follow-up inquiries, while still maintaining an organized framework (Ruslin et al., 2022). It also allows for participants to provide more detailed information (Carter & Baghurst, 2014). Focus groups are discussions with groups of a few people with the aim that the interactions will help participants produce more helpful information (Thelwall & Nevill, 2021). They are commonly used as a triangulation method in qualitative research but can also be used as independent research tools (Luke & Goodrich, 2019) and involve in-depth group discussions guided by a trained moderator to explore specific topics and provide valuable insights into the relevant experience or the subject matter (Gundumogula, 2020).

The population of this study was indigenes of rural farming communities residing in rural communities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, 18 years of age or older, who are engaged in agricultural practices either as smallholder farmers, fishermen, and/or small rural agribusiness owners, or members of families, and rely on agriculture as a source of living or a way of life; are knowledgeable in the area of research; and can articulate their experiences. These individuals were selected based on their willingness to take part in the study, be honest, and be audio recorded. Descriptions of participants, which maintain confidentiality and gain a deeper insight into the population (Kaiser, 2009), are shown in the results/findings section.

Participant Selection

In a qualitative study, participant selection is a crucial process to ensure that participants are pertinent to the research objectives. Purposive sampling was used in this study to enable me to choose a sample from which the most can be learned and to discover, comprehend in-depth, and gain insight into the subject matter (Dooley, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Establishing precise selection criteria and taking into account variables like availability, willingness to participate, and data collection feasibility are essential (Dahal et al., 2024). I aimed to select participants with diverse experiences and perspectives that can provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

On the assumption that culture intersects with gender dynamics, male participants were included in this study because men's roles as partners, family members, and community members can significantly influence women's lives. They may help to explore how men's behaviors, attitudes, and societal roles impact women's experiences. Including male participants allows for comparative analyses between genders. This can help identify differences in perceptions, behaviors, and experiences that are relevant to the objectives of this research (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Yin, 2018). Engaging men in studies about women can challenge traditional gender norms, encourage more inclusive conversations about gender equity, and foster empathy and allyship among men while advancing gender equality (UN Women, n.d.; UN Women, 2023). In this study, the ratio of participants (two women to one man) per community was to ensure that including male participants does not overshadow or dilute the primary focus on women's experiences.

Following IRB approval [Appendix A], 12 people were purposefully selected from four communities in the three senatorial districts: Eket, Ikot Ekpene, and Uyo. These communities

were selected based on their positions as cradle communities for the major ethnic groups (Annang, Ibibio, and Oron) in the state. It is important to note that two communities were selected in the Eket senatorial district because it is home to two major ethnic groups, the Ibibio and Oron, which is on the coastal border of the state. A professor affiliated with a higher institution in the state was also interviewed as a key informant. Their interview served to validate, triangulate, and provide additional depth to the responses provided by the participants from the rural communities. A local contact who is an indigene of the state and works for a non-governmental organization (NGO) with a focus on rural communities in the region served as a recruiter. They were provided with the participation criteria and the purpose and objectives of the study to explain the study to would-be participants and gain consent. A consent form with information on the overview of the researcher and the study, criteria for participation, compensation, and participants' rights was sent to the participants to append their consent. Participant description is provided in the results/findings section.

Data Collection

According to Creswell and Poth (2016), the process of data collection includes anticipating and responding to emerging ethical issues; obtaining permissions to study sites and individuals; selecting purposeful sampling strategies; developing means for collecting and recording information; mitigating filed issues as they arise; and storing data securely. Qualitative data conveys someone else's experience of the world in their own words (Patton, 2002). Boyland (2019) states that naturalistic methods, like in-person interviews, are often used in constructivist research, and Lavee and Itzchakov (2023) assert that direct interpersonal communication improves conversational effectiveness by allowing listeners to actively participate as co-narrators through both verbal and non-verbal reactions, which ultimately leads to better storytelling.

I conducted two 60- to 90-minute face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with each participant in their community. The faculty member was interviewed in her office at the university. The interview protocol was a set of open-ended questions designed to explore the participants' experiences, attitudes, and perceptions related to the phenomenon being studied. The questions were centered on the existing cultural norms and traditional beliefs of their community and how they are impacted as a woman/man in agriculture, their on-farm and off-farm agricultural activities, their decision-making processes, and their involvement in leadership [Appendix C, interview protocol]. Open-ended semi-structured questions allowed interviewees to deviate from the pre-planned format and offer in-depth details that would not have been disclosed in a structured questionnaire (Dunwoodie et al., 2023). Some of the questions were paraphrased based on the participant's responses, and follow-up questions were used to clarify and probe deeper into the issues raised. The assumption was that individual participants define and see the world uniquely. Although specific information on issues being explored was required from all respondents, the questions were used flexibly and were designed to generate participant perspectives about ideas, opinions, and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In addition to individual interviews, all the 12 participants were brought together for a focus group discussion [Appendix D, focus group protocol]. According to Luke and Goodrich (2019), focus groups are frequently utilized in qualitative research as a method of triangulation; however, they can also be utilized as independent research tools. Bringing the participants together allowed me to see their interaction with each other and the co-creation of understandings. In this study, I acted as the facilitator to guide group discussions and fostered interaction among the participants as supported by Nyumba et al. (2018).

Data Analysis

Qualitative research seeks to find the meaning of an experience from the participants of the study by gathering detailed data/information to provide answers to emerging research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data is prepared and organized before being reduced into themes through coding, condensing the codes, and finally presented (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The transcripts from the interviews and the focus group were uploaded into the ATLAS.ti Qualitative Data Analysis Software and were analyzed using descriptive coding for the first cycle and pattern coding for the second cycle.

Descriptive coding is appropriate for qualitative studies with a wide variety of data sources (Saldana, 2009), and its primary objective is to help the reader see what the researcher saw and hear what the researcher heard (Saldana, 2021). In this study, words or phrases that describe the content or topic of a text segment were used as codes. The first cycle of coding was the foundation for an in-depth presentation of each case and its context.

A second cycle of coding was carried out to “reorganize and reanalyze data coded through the first cycle ... to develop a sense of categorized, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization” (Saldana, 2021, p. 296-297). For this cycle, pattern coding was utilized. Pattern coding generates “meta code” and is appropriate for condensing large summaries into a smaller number of analytical units, searching for causes and explanations in the data, analyzing social networks and patterns of human relationships, and establishing the foundation for generating common themes and guiding procedures (Saldana, 2021).

Trustworthiness Criteria

Qualitative research enables the researcher to discover, comprehend in-depth, and gain insight from the case of interest (Dooley, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, such

research is frequently considered less reliable due to tiny sample numbers that cannot be generalized (Dooley, 2007); therefore, qualitative researchers must carefully explain the trustworthiness of the study in question (Ingerson, 2013). Trustworthiness is the degree of confidence that the findings of the study reflect the respondents and their context (Dooley, 2007). To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, the following steps were taken to address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

According to Graneheim and Lundman (2004), selecting participants with a range of experiences increases the likelihood of providing insight into the research issue from different perspectives. Choosing the best method for collecting data is also important in establishing credibility. Both women and men from multiple communities were selected as participants to provide different perspectives, and data collection was done by conducting semi-structured interviews and a focus group because they enable the collection of rich data and the drawing of more detailed findings that take into account nonverbal cues, spontaneous reactions, and emotional responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Credibility

Credibility is hinged on the question, “How congruent are the findings with reality?” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 242). Credibility was addressed through member checking and peer debriefing (Ahmed, 2024; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003). Member checking was implemented by soliciting feedback on the emerging findings from the participants in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The process took place in two stages: 1) Interview transcripts were sent to the local contact, who was part of the data collection team, to confirm that the participants' responses were accurately captured and also to ensure that meaning was not lost during translation. Feedback was incorporated, where applicable; and, 2) findings from the

first round of analysis were also shared with the local contact to ascertain if the information is representative of the group being studied.

Peer debriefing was used to provide multiple perspectives on emerging themes and to hold me accountable in reporting findings and the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stahl & King, 2020). Peer debriefing was conducted verbally by discussing and reflecting on specific experiences after each round of data collection (Schertzer & Waseem, 2023; Yoong et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2019). This was to allow for immediate feedback, clarification, and validation. The peer debriefers were my doctoral advisor and a colleague with expertise in qualitative research methods and agricultural and rural sociology. After the data collection, transcripts of the interviews, the coded data, and the emerging themes were shared and discussed with my advisor for feedback. This feedback ensured that all possible emerging themes were considered.

Transferability

Merriam & Tisdell (2016) suggest that “the investigator needs to provide sufficient descriptive data to make transferability possible” (p. 254). In this study, transferability was by a detailed description of the research process and the experiences shared by the participants; this will enable readers to properly comprehend the research and compare the cases of the phenomena detailed in this report with those they have observed in their own situations (Shenton, 2004). Furthermore, a purposive sample was used in the study so the researcher could have an in-depth understanding of the subject of study (Ahmed, 2024; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Dependability

Dependability refers to the research findings' consistency and longevity over time (Ahmed, 2024). To address dependability, the study's procedures should be described in detail so that a future researcher might duplicate the work, if not necessarily to achieve the same results

(Ahmed, 2024; Shenton, 2004). For this study, dependability was addressed by a detailed description of the research design, the detailed data collection process, and reflective journaling to appraise the process. As a result of reflective journaling, I was able to check any potential bias, and maintain a more objective stance during data collection, analysis, and interpretation. These reflections also ensured confirmability.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree of fairness of the results, which includes the authenticity of the original responses provided by the participants in the study and the absence of bias (Haq et al., 2023). It indicates how close to objective reality a qualitative study can get (Stahl & King, 2020). According to Shenton (2004), the extent to which the researcher accepts their own predispositions, which may be generated from ongoing reflection, is crucial for confirmability. In this study, confirmability was also ensured through transcript review by peer debriefing and member checking, which also minimized researcher bias.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology employed in a study exploring how women engage in leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship in rural communities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The study adopted a qualitative approach, specifically a basic qualitative research design, to explore participants' interpretations, constructions, and meanings of their experiences. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion. Participants underwent two 60–90 minute face-to-face interviews, conducted in their communities, focusing on cultural norms, agricultural practices, decision-making, and leadership roles. These semi-structured interviews provided flexibility for open-ended questions and follow-up probes. The focus group discussion brought all participants together to facilitate

interactions and co-creation of knowledge and collective meaning-making among participants. Both methods aimed to gather rich, detailed data on participants' experiences and perceptions.

Purposive sampling was used to select 12 participants from four rural communities in Akwa Ibom State, representing major ethnic groups (Annang, Ibibio, and Oron). The sample included women and men (in a 2:1 ratio) to capture diverse perspectives, with men included to examine their influence on gender dynamics. A local NGO contact assisted in recruitment, and a university professor served as a key informant to validate findings. Interview and focus group transcripts were analyzed using ATLAS.ti software. Descriptive coding was applied in the first cycle to categorize data, followed by pattern coding in the second cycle to identify themes and relationships. This two-cycle approach ensured a thorough exploration of the data, from detailed descriptions to broader thematic insights. Trustworthiness was ensured by implementing measures for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. My positionality statement was also provided in this chapter.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

Purpose of the Study

This study explored how women can engage in leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship in rural communities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Smallholder rural women farmers in Nigeria produce two-thirds of the food crops and provide 60–80% of the agricultural labor (ActionAid, 2015), and rural women constitute 51.4% of labor in the agricultural sector in Akwa Ibom State (Odubo et al., 2019). Notwithstanding the dominant and prominent role women play and their position in addressing the challenges of household management and agricultural production and development, men, and not women, make the crucial decisions. An understanding of barriers and challenges to rural women's engagement in agricultural leadership and agripreneurship can help relevant stakeholders in tailoring interventions that will improve women's social, cultural, and economic standing in Akwa-Ibom State, Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following questions provided direction to this study:

1. How do cultural norms and traditional beliefs influence the role of rural women in agriculture?
2. How are rural women barred or discouraged from leadership and decision-making?
3. How are rural women encouraged or included in leadership and decision-making?
4. How can power be redistributed?

Participants

Twelve participants were purposefully selected from four rural farming communities in four local government areas (Abak, Etinan, Mkpato Enin, and Oron) in the three senatorial

districts; Eket, Ikot Ekpene, and Uyo, to participate in this study. These communities were selected based on their positions as bastion communities for the major ethnic groups (Annang, Ibibio, and Oron) in the state.

Abak

Abak is a town and a local government area in Akwa Ibom State. Abak town is located about 11 miles from Uyo, the state capital, and spans a landmass of 117 square miles. Culturally, Abak is rich in traditions, with practices such as Ekpe, Ekpo, and Idiong societies reflecting its heritage. Despite the influence of Western civilization and Christianity, these traditional institutions remain significant. It is the central hub for the Annang ethnic group, known for their hospitality and resourcefulness, and it serves as a focal point for Annang cultural and social integration (AKS, 2014).

Economically, Abak is endowed with natural resources, including sand, gravel, clay, salt, and crude oil. Its tropical rainforest supports the production of palm produce, cassava, yam, cocoyam, trifoliate yam, and various vegetables. The people are predominantly farmers and traders, with others engaged in pottery and weaving. Abak is also home to the Nigerian Army Barracks, popularly known as Ibagwa Barracks (AKS, 2014).

The name "Abak" was derived from the local words "Aba-ag" (valley) and "Anwan" (fighting), forming "Aba-ag Ikot Anwan." It became the seat of government in 1902 following a conflict with British colonial forces in the valley between Ediene and Abak Clans. By 1957–1958, Abak attained the status of a Divisional Council Headquarters. Following the Nigerian Civil War, Abak became a Development Administrative Headquarters and, after the 1976 local government reforms, a full-fledged LGA (AKS, 2014).

Etinan

Etinan is one of the local government areas in Akwa Ibom State. It is located at latitude 05001’N and longitude 07054’E. It is about 16 miles south of Uyo, the Akwa Ibom State capital. Etinan lies in the tropical rainforest belt and has two distinct seasons—the rainy season and the dry season; the vegetation is evergreen. Its central town is made up of three villages—Etinan, Ikot Ebo & Ikot Ebiyak. Ekom Iman is the ancestral home and the original home of all Iman clan (AKS, 2014; Etinan State Constituency [ESC], 2023).

Etinan LGA is mainly inhabited by the Iman Ibom people, who generally speak the Ibibio language and have a rich cultural heritage. Their culture is reflected through the cultural societies (Ekpo, Ekong, Ebre, and Idiong) and displayed through dances, arts, and crafts. Cultural norms and beliefs define the traditional leadership structures, farming practices, and gender roles. The main occupations of the people include farming, petty trading, and metal fabrication. Crops cultivated include yam, cassava, cocoyam, trifoliolate yam, and maize. A number of the people also engage in wine tapping, crafts-making, wood-carving, and sculpting. While a few people practice some forms of traditional religion, the majority of the population is Christian (AKS, 2014; ESC, 2023).

Etinan is home to one of the oldest secondary schools in Nigeria, Etinan Institute, and is believed to have been selected as one of the first settlements by British missionaries because of its well-organized families (Ekpuk). The old seaport on the Ekpene Ukpa River was an ideal point for trade in goods and services, and the Portuguese came from Port Harcourt to do business, thus making Etinan a booming town and a good place to live at the time (AKS, 2014; ESC, 2023).

Mkpat Enin

Mkpat-Enin is a town and a local government area in Akwa Ibom State. It is located within the industrial belt of the state, between 4°35" and 4°40" north and 7°45" and 7°50" east, and is around 607 feet above sea level with a total land area of 124.461 square miles. Mkpat Enin is located in the equatorial zone and has wet and dry seasons; it is strategically located within the industrial corridor of the state. Administratively, the LGA is divided into four clans—Ibiaku, Ikpa Ibom, Ikpa Ikono, and Ukpum Minya, and the people are traditionally Ibibio speakers. Mkpat Enin hosts the main campus of Akwa Ibom State University (AKSU), underscoring the area's role as a key contributor to educational development in the state (AKS, 2014; Usuh et al., 2023).

The area is endowed with significant agricultural and natural resources. Key agricultural produce include palm fruit, coconut, plantain, cassava, and various vegetables. Mkpat Enin also boasts substantial deposits of natural resources such as gypsum, limestone, magnesium, iron ore, salt, natural gas, and crude oil - which was discovered in 1953; and also has forest reserves that support the production of timber and palm-based products (AKS, 2014; Usuh et al., 2023)

Oron

Lying on the lower basin of the Cross River, Oron is in the tropical region, has both wet and dry seasons, and is characterized by numerous streams and tributaries that flow into the Cross River. It possesses extremely fertile soil and is known for its topographical Oil Palm Belt, tropical rainforest, swamps, beaches, and mangrove forests that provide timber and raw materials for medicinal purposes. There are also deposits of solid minerals such as iron and silica. Seafoods such as catfish, crayfish, clams, snappers, periwinkles, etc., abound richly in Oron. Oron is also rich in oil and natural gas, with most of its reserves being offshore. The people, who

generally speak the Oron language, are known for their industrious and hospitable nature. Their primary occupations include fishing, farming, craft-making, and cross-border trade across the Gulf of Guinea (AKS, 2014).

Oron embraced Western education early, with the establishment of one of the oldest secondary schools in Nigeria, Methodist Boys' High School, in 1905. It has a seaport and is the home of the first national museum in eastern Nigeria and the Maritime Academy of Nigeria, underscoring its historical and maritime significance. Culturally, the Oron ethnic group shares some similarities with the Ibibio and Annang ethnic groups reflected through the cultural societies (Abang, Akata, Ekpe, and Nnabo) and displayed through traditional attire, dances, food, rituals, beliefs, arts, and crafts (AKS, 2014).

To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, each was assigned a pseudonym. Based on the demographic data collected throughout the interview process, their descriptions are presented below, and a summary of their demographic information is provided in Table 2.

Ekom

Ekom, a widow, is a subsistence farmer. She is the primary caregiver and head of her immediate household. Off the farm, she processes oil palm and also runs several seasonal businesses. During the peak times of the farming season, she spends approximately 10 to 11 hours daily on the farm. Although Ekom is not a member of any agricultural cooperative or farmer union, she joins an ad-hoc rotational weeding group during the farming season. Her highest level of education is primary four.

Mfon

She holds a Grade II Teacher's Certificate. Mfon is involved in crop farming, oil palm processing, and trading. As a hardworking and dedicated farmer, she spends about 10 hours daily

during peak farming seasons working on her farm with the help of her children. Mfon is not a member of any agricultural cooperative; however, she is currently mobilizing women in her community to form a women's group.

Ufok

Ufok is a self-sufficient farmer and owns a high-value vegetable farm. He is the head of his household. Ufok takes pride in his ancestry, although he acknowledges the major shortcomings in most cultural norms and beliefs in his community. With regard to educational level, Ufok holds a National Diploma. He belongs to a union that oversees the vegetables he farms, but this union is based in a neighboring community.

Akan

Akan is involved in crop, fish, and livestock farming and is very dedicated to his means of livelihood. He is affiliated with several agricultural cooperatives and groups and holds leadership positions in some of these groups. Akan is the head of his household. Akan holds a Junior School Certificate.

Nsikan

Nsikan's highest level of education is the Senior School Certificate. She is a crop and livestock farmer and also engages in seasonal trading. Nsikan is a widow; therefore, she is the head of her immediate household and also the primary caregiver. She is a member of several agricultural cooperatives and groups. Nsikan seeks to contribute to the liberation of women in her community by mobilizing and motivating them through the multipurpose cooperative society she founded and leads.

Unyime

Unyime is a subsistence farmer. She is the primary caregiver and provider for her immediate household. Off the farm, she processes oil palm and cassava for sale. During the peak times of the farming season, she spends approximately 10 to 11 hours daily on the farm. She is a member of a women's farmer group and a multipurpose cooperative society. Her highest level of education is the primary six.

Esang

Esang's major occupation is fishing, although he farms oil palm and other food crops, including staples. He is the head of his household and provides for his family. Off-season, he engages in net repairs and tends his farm. Esang does not belong to any agricultural cooperative but is involved in a rotational savings group. Although he had no form of formal education, Esang is an advocate for education, especially the girl-child, and women empowerment in his community.

Nkoyo

Nkoyo is a subsistence farmer. She also processes oil palm and seafood and sells the products from home and in the local market. Nkoyo spends about five hours daily on the farm and splits the rest of the day between processing and selling, depending on the time in the season. She is not a member of any agricultural cooperative but is involved in a rotational savings group. Nkoyo is the primary caregiver in her household and has had no formal education.

Uduak

Uduak, a widow, is the primary caregiver and head of her immediate household. She farms staples and vegetables, processes oil palm, and trades in seafood, which she buys

wholesale from fishing ports. During the peak times of the farming season, Uduak spends approximately five hours daily on the farm and spends the rest of the day on “buying and selling”. Although she had started, Uduak could not complete primary school due to extenuating circumstances. She does not belong to any agricultural cooperative but is involved in a rotational savings group.

Idara

Idara owns a high-value staple crop farm. She also farms other food crops, fruits, and vegetables; and processes staples into products for domestic use. Idara is a foundation member in a local cooperative in her community that awaits government registration. Although Idara is a widow with an empty nest, she is a caregiver and the household head by virtue of association because she caters for some members of the community.

Ito

Ito is a subsistence farmer. She is involved in crop farming and oil palm processing and also runs several seasonal businesses. During the peak times of the farming season, she spends approximately 10 to 11 hours daily on the farm. Although Ito does not belong to any farmer union or agricultural cooperative, she is part of a women's weeding group that comes together during the weeding period and disbands afterward until the next planting season. She holds the Senior School Certificate as her highest level of education, and she strongly believes that education serves as a leveler and plays a crucial role in the development of society.

Umoh

Umoh is a self-sufficient farmer. He is the head of his household and takes pride in his ancestry. Umoh is widely traveled and is affiliated with several agricultural cooperatives and groups outside his community and is a foundation member in a local cooperative in his

community that awaits government registration. His highest level of education is Standard Six. Umoh is a strong advocate for abolishing harmful cultural norms and traditional beliefs and equal opportunities for all irrespective of gender.

Prof

Prof is an agricultural sociology expert affiliated with a higher institution in Akwa Ibom State. Her research focuses on social dimensions of climate change, gender issues in development, and power relations both at the household and community level. Prof has a wide scope of consulting experience across education, community development, and agricultural livelihoods in both the public and private sectors.

To ensure confidentiality, these participants have been assigned pseudonyms and labels in the reporting of results as follows: Ekom (Ek), Mfon (M), Ufok (Uf), Akan (A), Nsikan (Ns), Unyime (Uy), Idara (Id), Itoro (It), Umoh (Um), Esang (Es), Nkoyo (Nk), and Uduak (Ud). The key informant, a professor affiliated with a higher institution in the state, is assigned, Prof (P).

Table 2

Summary of participants' demographic information

Participant	Gender	LGA	Occupation	Cooperative Membership	Cooperative Leadership
Ekom	Female	Abak	Crop farming, Produce processing, Sales	No	No
Mfon	Female	Abak	Crop farming, Produce processing, Sales	No	No

Ufok	Male	Abak	Crop farming, Sales	Yes	No
Akan	Male	Etinan	Crop and livestock farming, Sales	Yes	Yes
Nsikan	Female	Etinan	Crop and livestock farming, Produce processing, Sales	Yes	Yes
Unyime	Female	Etinan	Crop, Produce processing, Sales	Yes	No
Idara	Female	Mkpat Enin	Crop farming, Produce processing, Sales	No	No
Ito	Female	Mkpat Enin	Crop farming, Produce processing, Sales	Yes	No
Umoh	Male	Mkpat Enin	Crop farming, Sales	Yes	No
Esang	Male	Oron	Crop farming, Fishing	No	No

Nkoyo	Female	Oron	Crop farming, Produce processing, Seafood processing, Sales	No	No
Uduak	Female	Oron	Crop farming, Produce processing, Sales	No	No

Themes

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) posit that “all qualitative data is inductive and comparative in the service of developing common themes or patterns or categories that cut across the data” (p. 297). An analysis of the 24 interview transcripts from the four LGAs, the focus group (FG), and a key informant interview generated the following common themes that provide answers to the research questions.

1. Ancestral Loyalties: The Dictator
 - a. *Patriarchy*
 - b. *Land ownership and inheritance rights*
 - c. *Restriction of women*
 - d. *Oppression, enforcement, and punishment*
2. Inhibitors of Women in Leadership and Decision-making
 - a. *Gendered expectations*
 - b. *Limited access to resources*
 - c. *Subsistence farming*

- d. Non-affiliation to formal groups*
- 3. Catalysts of Women in Leadership and Decision-making
 - a. Agricultural cooperatives and agripreneurship unions*
 - b. Increased access to quality education*
- 4. Challenging the Status Quo
 - a. Deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge frameworks*
 - b. Non-adherence*
- 5. Suggested Drivers of Change
 - a. Abolishing harmful cultural norms and traditional beliefs*
 - b. Leadership development support*
 - c. Technology and infrastructure support*

Ancestral Loyalties: The Dictator

Ancestral loyalties to cultural norms, traditional beliefs, and values are subtle dictators and have a significant influence on rural household and community dynamics and economies, which over the years have depended strongly on agriculture. These norms, beliefs, and values also define the community's leadership structures, farming practices, and gender roles. From the participants' responses, these communities tend to share a sociocultural structure that thrives on seeking and preserving traditional institutions, practices, and values. "Our general behavioral patterns are regulated by laid-down customs and traditions, which attract grave sanctions upon violations" (Uf1). "We are not allowed to violate our norms and traditions, they are the laws of the community, which regulate our behavioral patterns" (Uy1).

We are peace-loving and religious people. We have Christians, traditionalists, and a few Muslims (who are settlers). We are patriarchal. We also have the *Ekpe* (a high-control

group) society. We are predominantly farmers, fishermen, and traders. We have guiding principles, e.g., we attach importance to authority and respect for the elderly or leaders ... (Ud1).

Here, we have different deities, families, and farmlands where leading families usually perform rituals before they are cultivated... Our lifestyle before now was unique and hospitable, ... but recently, things have started to change with the infiltration of new people coming to settle down here; you have different people with their own culture and religion...has negatively influenced the behavioral patterns of our people, now it is different ... The traditional rites make us be law-abiding and strive towards not violating them (Um1).

These communities have a form of- or several high-control groups as part of the traditional governance structure. The *Akata*, *Ekpe*, *Ekpo*, and *Nnabo* societies are high-control groups that are part of the governance instruments of the community and are used to enforce widely accepted societal norms and laws.

Patriarchy

There is a strong adherence to patriarchal norms that is evident across all communities. All the participants acknowledged that men control a disproportionately large share of power in their community. This is characterized by the supremacy of the father/most senior adult male in the family or clan, the dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of succession and inheritance in the male line. They are generally the final decision-makers in families and the community. As noted by Ufok, “Our tradition empowers me (the man) to be in charge of the decision-making process of the household” (Uf2), and Umoh, “Women are subservient to the views and opinions of their husbands” (Um2). The participants also made responses alluding to

the trend that there is institutionalized discrimination against women, exclusion of women from decision-making, and the relegation of women to domestic duties. According to Unyime,

... We are a patriarchal society, so we defer to men, and women are seen as subordinates. We have had a few people try to challenge this, but it has never ended well because fellow women mount resistance and work against the initiative, maybe because of the fear of the unknown or fear of change ... Men generally make decisions. That is not to say that some men do not discuss certain things with their wives, but this cannot be public knowledge, or they may be exposed to ridicule by their peers (Uy2).

Cultural norms and traditional beliefs fuel male chauvinism and empower men to control their wives and children since they are the household heads. Women and children are placed under the same category when it comes to men exercising their authority. Umoh elaborated:

This (norms and beliefs) makes men the sole decision-makers. It has empowered me to regulate the activities of my wife and children effectively and not to allow them to keep bad company because I am the head of the family (Um3).

Land Ownership and Inheritance Rights

Land tenure refers to the rights to hold, use, and possess the natural resources found therein. Traditional norms limit women's access to the right to use, own, or transfer land. They often have to acquire land through purchase, lease, or male proxies. According to Nkoyo, "Families own land, not individuals, and fathers typically don't give land to daughters because the women would 'marry out'" (Nk1). All the participants alluded that women generally do not claim ownership of or inherit land. Idara elaborates,

Except you outrightly buy the land. According to our customs, we can't inherit land. Only the male child has that privilege. Also, you may have a right to your deceased

husband's land if you have a male child for whom you are holding the land in trust. You can also lease land, where a memorandum of understanding is prepared and can be returned as agreed (Id1).

In Ufok's words,

In this community women are not permitted to own land; this has been a long practice from our forefathers; no matter the contribution of a female child in her father's house, she is not given any land. Even if the father of a girl child promised and wrote the name of his girl child to inherit one of his lands when he is no more, upon his demise the girl child will be denied that inheritance (Uf3).

Some women who own land have had to buy it through male proxies. Akan said, "Women can buy land but through a male proxy. They can also lease land and inherit it by marriage if they have young/underage male children for whom they can administer the land." (Ak1). Buying land does not guarantee women land tenure security, since it depends on whether the male proxy through whom she bought the land or the witnesses are honest and ethical. Otherwise, it can be an unpleasant experience. Nsikan explained, "For instance, if the proxy dies without informing his family that the land is not his, the woman is forced to forfeit the land unless there were reputable witnesses to the transaction." (Ns1). Ekom added, "... a woman can front a male relation to purchase land. I will not use my name on the purchase documents; it is advisable to use either my son's name or that of my husband." (Ek1). This was corroborated by data from the focus group: "Community laws do not permit women to buy or own land directly; land inheritance is mainly reserved for men. If there are only women in the family, extended relatives will forcefully grab the land." (FG1).

Inheritance is patrilineal, and only men have the inheritance right to land, but women may inherit lands procured by their fathers, depending on the family dynamics. Esang stated:

..., a father can give his daughter his personal land if he wishes, but before he does that, he must call credible people to witness it so that no one can take that land from her on his demise, or she may pour libation (local ritual) or *mbiam* to restrict anyone from collecting the land from her (Es1).

This was corroborated by Umoh: “If a father gives land to his daughter, he has to perform some family rites so that the land can't be taken from the daughter after his death.” (Um4); and Ufok,

... my mother bought land through such arrangements and planted oil palm trees; this is the responsibility of a man, but my mother did it because of her male children so that if our father's inheritance is not enough for us, we can also use her palm plantation (Uf4).

Restriction of Women

Ancestral loyalties to norms and beliefs impose restrictions on women's activities and economic autonomy. They influence the choice of crops women can plant on their farms, with men typically growing cash crops, while women cultivate food crops for household consumption. Women are also not allowed to harvest palm fruits. “Women are engaged in the planting of crops like okra, cassava, corn, vegetables, etc.; ... men plant crops like palm fruit, yam, water yam, etc., mostly as cash crops. They are responsible for harvesting the palm fruit, which is forbidden for women,” according to Ekom (Ek2). This is consistent with the assertions of other participants. Ufok added, “As a man, the norms and beliefs of our community do not affect my choice of crop” (Uf5). In Oron, fishing is prohibited for women; “Here, women are not allowed to fish or climb/harvest palm fruits,” said Nkoyo (Nk2).

Widows may plant cash crops since they become household heads and decision-makers at their husbands' demise, and women are also at liberty to grow crops of their choice only on pieces of land that they have purchased. However, despite owning land, men can still control what women do with the purchased lands. Ekom provides a vivid explanation:

Men decide the kinds of cash crops grown in the farmlands, but I can make that decision now in his absence. With the looming hunger and hardship these days, I can plant anything I choose to. However, generally, women can plant common food crops for the family's sustenance and can also plant any kind of crops on land they purchase without any interference. Most men can stop their wives even in their land based on tradition. Men plant palm trees and other cash crops, but their wives may plant in their absence/demise (Ek3).

The oil palm harvesting prohibition has resulted in women being exploited by men who assist with the oil palm harvesting. These men take advantage of women by making high demands on labor costs and feeding. These expenses drain women financially and they wish they were allowed by the community to do the harvesting themselves to avoid exploitation. Itoro explains:

During the oilpalm fruit harvesting season, male laborers are nonchalant and exploitative. When you engage someone to harvest for you, he collects money for each head of oilpalm fruits harvested, the *ikpo* (the rope for climbing the tree) even when it is yours, you cook for them (the *fufu* has to be a very significant quantity), and pay his daily wages. If women were allowed to do it from the onset, we would learn how to do it and be doing it ourselves. The men are using this to exploit the women (It1).

The freedom to harvest oil palm fruits has the potential to empower women financially since, apart from saving them from exploitation by male oil palm harvesters, it is among the community's high-value crops that fetch a lot of money alongside other agricultural activities, including fishing, palm wine tapping, and growing yams. The freedom to venture into these activities would improve women's financial standing. Nkoyo narrated, “For instance, women are restricted from fishing, oil palm harvesting, palm wine tapping, and planting crops like yam, and these are the activities that generate the most income.” (Nk3).

Participants noted that women are excluded from membership in formal leadership and governance structures like the village council and high-control groups (*Akata, Ekpe, Ekpo*, and *Nnabo* societies). Nkoyo expressed that “elderly men lead the society in the community, and membership is open only to men.” (Nk4). Itoero emphasized,

Women are not part of the village council, so we cannot attend council meetings or contribute to decisions; even if the issue concerns women, we cannot share our perspectives. Also, the days forbidden for women to be seen outside affect us because women cannot be initiated into the *Ekpo* society (It2).

In the traditional Akwa Ibom society, there is a belief system that the physical and spiritual realms are connected and should be in harmony at all times. Therefore, several festivals and rituals are held to honor the spirits/ancestors and express gratitude to the associated deity. An example of this is the celebration of the new yam festival. Yam is revered as the king of crops, so in most communities, harvesting yam is usually activated by festivals. The aim is to show appreciation for the abundant harvest and to seek blessings for future seasons.

At the beginning of these festivals, rituals are performed by elders. It is pertinent to note that these elders are men who are members of the council and/or high-control groups. Mfon

stated that “... even if a woman owns the largest yam farm in the community, she cannot participate in this ceremony.” (M1). During these periods, several rules are observed, such as curfews. According to Esang, “People can be restricted from moving around during village preparation (rituals) for traditional events and festivals, depending on the type of event.” (Es2). Several days (usually three) are designated for masquerade (symbolic of the deity) display by the high-control groups; movement is restricted for women. Mfon expounded,

... during this period, women remain indoors, so they will not see the masquerades; women gather their foodstuff and stock their homes to avoid stepping outside their compounds. No one is allowed to go to their farms. No one is allowed to shout, pound their mortar, or break kennels because it is said that the fellow has broken the head of the deity. It is sacrilegious for women who are married to men and mothers who have sons, who are members of the society, to see their husbands/sons during this period because it will be termed as they have seen the nakedness of the deity. This prevents them from carrying out their marital responsibilities and limits communication (M2).

According to Idara, “On the days of the society’s outing and masquerade displays, women are forbidden from going to the streams. In addition, there are days that we are forbidden from going to the farms on certain market days; violation of these laws attracts penalties.” (Id2). It is also worth noting that the masquerade display is not restricted to festivals. Uduak stated that “an example of such an outing is during the funeral or mourning period of a very elderly man or a man of authority and influence, or a member of the society, and it can last an entire day.” (Ud2). Itoro lamented that the days of restriction of movement “impact me negatively because I am a subsistent farmer; it stops me from getting fresh farm produce for my household, and it may interfere with the maturity and harvest time of perishables and other vegetables.” (It3). It is safe

to say that these events therefore leave women idle since they cannot attend to their farms or participate in other agricultural activities while waiting for the rituals to end.

Oppression, Enforcement, and Punishment

Participants decried the enabling of the oppression of women. This has been witnessed in some cases where women have attempted to purchase land. Uduak shared that “women are not allowed to buy land directly (without proxies or male witnesses) to avoid being oppressed.” (Ud3); Ekom explained, “Most landowners are very dishonest and are in the habit of cheating or exploiting women when we want to buy a piece of land. They will sell land to you and then take it back after collecting your money.” (Ek4). Widows have also not been spared from the scourge, as she lamented that “... our people, especially male members of the deceased family, are in the habit of oppressing widows and forcefully taking over farmlands and other valuable property from them.” (Ek5).

Adherence to ancestral loyalties is enforced through financial levies, livestock fines, and punishment by high-control groups. As Unyime explains, “Women are forbidden from disrespecting the menfolk and harvesting oil palm fruits without the approved monthly timelines sanctioned by the community leadership. If you do, you will pay money and give a goat.” (Uy3). In some communities, “violations of this age-old tradition attract a fine of a cow,” according to Ufok (Uf6). Idara summed it up as “... our general behavioral patterns are regulated by laid-down customs and traditions, which attract grave penalties upon violations” (Id3). Some participants expressed that some women who have attempted to challenge the status quo have had to face some form of sanctions or punishment. Umoh stated, “There have been cases where strong-willed women are divorced by their husbands, the reason being that they must not be higher than their husbands or they are being disrespectful.” (Um5). According to Unyime,

It has also led to abuse. There is a lot of physical, sexual, and mental abuse, with all sorts of excuses, to show masculinity, except in a few places or families where there has been a pushback because of some form of exposure or level of education (Uy4).

The enforcement of cultural norms limits women's rights and decision-making power. It is pertinent to note that the customary laws recognize cultural practices; however, statutory laws of Nigeria, such as Section 42(1) and (2) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended) (PLAC, 2023), and Article 21 of the Protocol to the Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, which has been ratified by Nigeria, prohibit gender discrimination in inheritance and guarantee every Nigerian the right to inherit. Section 14(3) states that the government shall ensure the "full participation of women in the affairs of the nation" (PLAC, 2023). Sections 15(2) and 42(1) prohibit sex-based discrimination (PLAC, 2023). Section 40 provides for equality of the sexes and states that women shall be accorded full and equal dignity as human persons (PLAC, 2023). Section 42(3), which prohibits discrimination based on gender in the areas of employment, education, and housing (PLAC, 2023). Section 43 guarantees the right of every Nigerian citizen to acquire and own immovable property anywhere in Nigeria (PLAC, 2023). Implementation and enforcement of statutory laws in rural settings are still challenging.

Inhibitors of women in Leadership and Decision-making

Gendered Expectations

These are the societal norms, roles, and expectations that individuals are expected to adhere to based on their assigned gender, which can also influence how they behave, dress, and interact with others. A clear gendered division of roles in the household, agricultural activities, and agribusiness is consistent across the communities. The participants expressed that traditional

gender roles and responsibilities in their communities limit women's involvement in leadership and decision-making in their homes and agriculture. This leads to fewer opportunities and lower income for women. Men are generally considered the heads of households and primary decision-makers. Women's roles are often seen as supportive. Mfon: "Our customs and traditions assign men as heads of households. My role is to support my husband. The husband has the final say in whatever happens in the home unless and until they are absent or deceased." (M3). Nkoyo also noted that "... men are viewed as providers, protectors, disciplinarians, and family spokespersons. Women are the caregivers, do domestic chores, and maintain the household. My husband doesn't do house chores." (Nk5). In the households, women are relegated to performing sexual functions and domestic chores like cooking and cleaning and caring for the sick and elderly. Akan summarized it: "I am the head of my household, so I play that role. My wife supports me and cares for the household." (A2).

In cases of widowed women, they can make certain decisions within their immediate households but remain limited by the established norms. For example, Nsikan said

As a widow, I am kind of like the head of my immediate household, so I can make some decisions, provide upkeep, create and maintain a clean and healthy environment, and I am also the primary caregiver. Other decisions are taken by my adult children (Ns2).

All the participants confirmed that there is a gendered division of labor on the farm and other agricultural and agribusiness activities in these communities. Men typically handle land clearing, tilling, and fishing (in riverine communities) while women focus on planting, weeding, harvesting, processing, and selling produce. For instance, Akan said, "I do the bush clearing, tilling, and making of ridges but sometimes assisted by my wife and children. My wife supports the clearing of the farmland, but her main work is planting, weeding, and processing the produce.

She also trades in any produce and product we have for sale.” (A3). Uduak corroborates his statement:

The men usually clear the bush and make mounds and ridges. The women burn the bush, till the soil, prepare the cuttings/seeds/seedlings, plant, weed, harvest, process, and sell the finished products. In the fish business, the men fish while the women process the fish and sell (Ud4).

Unyime added that

... from the provision of fodder for livestock, bush clearing and burning, planting, weeding, harvesting, processing, trading; you name it! We practically do everything.

Well, except for the restriction on oil palm. In the case where the man is irresponsible and you have children to feed, you do it... he gets the praise (Uy4).

Among the participants, women spend an average of 10 - 12 hours daily on agricultural and agribusiness activities, while men spend an average of nine hours. 10 of the participants agreed that women spend more time on “work” than men because they do not like doing things by halves. In Umoh's words,

Women spend more time (in agricultural activities) because of their increased passion and the quest to support the family. Women know the importance of farming and the products derived from it. Women have a passion for supporting the family more than men, which is why they spend more time on the farm and other activities (Um6).

According to Uduak, “Aside from time spent on the farm, women are also the ones to do the processing, like producing palm oil, *garri*, and *fufu*, and cleaning and drying the catch when men return from fishing.” (Ud5). For Nsikan, “Women often multitask because of the traditional roles assigned to them. After returning from the farm, a woman could be preparing dinner, processing

something, minding the children, and making plans for the next day—all at the same time.” (Ns3).

Limited Access to Resources

Access to resources such as land, finances, technology, implements, and other agricultural inputs is often unequal, with women facing significant disadvantages and hinders their ability to exercise leadership and decision-making capabilities. Participants highlighted that there is limited access and, in some cases, no access to these resources. Some cultural and traditional practices hinder women’s access to resources, including extension services. With limited access to legal ownership of tangible assets, women cannot provide collateral for credit.

As Unyime laments,

It is not easy getting help. I can only lease a small portion of land, and since it's not my land, it limits what I can plant every year. Perennial crops cannot be cultivated on leased lands, and perennial crops fetch you more money in the long run. Also, securing a loan is difficult. What will you give them as collateral? We make do with what we have. ... we put aside good seeds for the next planting season. ... I have only heard of extension agents; I have never seen any (Uy6).

On the issue of extension services and agents, most of the participants have no idea what those are. Only two of the participants have an understanding of Extension; one of them (Akan) has had access to extension services and microcredit: “I have had access to agricultural extension officers in the FADAMA era, mainly because one of them is a relation, from my community.” (A4). The FADAMA project series (1992-2019) consisted of various activities, including infrastructure development, irrigation, capacity building, advisory services, and environmental

protection and awareness. This unequal access underscores how structural and social barriers hinder women's economic opportunities.

In these communities, it is a narrative of daily drudgery for women due to their assigned responsibilities for household tasks, childcare, and agricultural labor (including planting, weeding, harvesting, and processing); they are left with little time for rest, education, or other activities, especially because of the lack of technologies that can reduce the physical burden of domestic and agricultural work. Women still use crude farming tools like hoes, machetes, spades, and sticks. Men showed wider ownership and use of additional tools (e.g., the knapsack sprayer and wheelbarrows) than women. "We own our local tools like hoes, shovels, and machetes." (It4). Nkoyo added that "some women own their drying mesh." (Nk6).

With limited access to financial resources, women are dependent on their men to provide and may be subject to some challenges. For example, women who depend on their husbands' (fishermen's) catch to generate income sometimes face challenges when their husbands give the catch to their lovers instead, leaving them with nothing or very little for the home or trade. This also causes women without fish stocks to indulge in sex to get fish (fish-for-sex phenomenon). Esang expounded:

Some fishermen do give the fish to their lovers to sell and not their wives, which means the wife may not earn any money and also reduces the household's income because these lovers will never pay back or return complete money. Women who do not have money to buy stock for sale may be subjected to having sexual relations with fishermen or middlemen as collateral before they are given stock for sale (Es3).

Many participants expressed the need for financial independence of women to boost their confidence in their decision-making and leadership capacity. Mfon noted that

Land ownership and financial muscle build influence and give you access to many things, like agricultural inputs and places. These days, if you have money, you have the influence to do anything. It is only a woman who has money that has a voice and can contribute effectively (M4).

Esang, an advocate for girl-child education and women empowerment in his community, is convinced that if he had economic power, he would support other women to be financially independent and confident. He said, “Almost everything revolves around money. If my financial situation were to change and I had money, it would boost my influence, and I would champion the provision of financial empowerment for women to boost their confidence and finances.”

(Es5). Nkoyo adds that empowering women economically enhances their mobilization power;

Having money or financial backing is important when you want to build influence so that you can quickly mobilize people...if we could have access to improved seeds, affordable technology, grants, stable electricity, good roads, and other infrastructure; it would be good (Nk8).

Even though the government of Akwa Ibom State, in the bid to make non-fixed assets available, has launched several intervention initiatives in agriculture, there is no tangible presence of any current program in the communities. While the participants are not aware of the state’s policies on agriculture, they have heard of some of the programs launched by the government. However, there is perceived politicization of government programs and a lack of political will, resulting in a lack of trust in the authorities. According to Umoh, “The intervention programs are insignificant and do not meet our needs due to the politicization of the process...The execution strategies and the corruption in the system are stumbling blocks.”

(Um7). Nsikan also shared, “Yes, we heard that there is government support, but you have to

know ‘somebody,’ be a party member, or dance to the tune of a politician before you can benefit. As a woman, you know what that means.” (Ns5).

In the words of Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General, "When women thrive, all of society benefits, and succeeding generations are given a better start in life." Equitable distribution of power includes equal access to land ownership, funds, markets, extension services, justice, and full participation of women in leadership and decision-making frameworks and ensures the thriving of women and that of the community as a whole. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), Section 14(3), states that the government shall ensure the “full participation of women in the affairs of the nation.” Sections 15(2) and 42(1) prohibit sex-based discrimination. Section 40 provides for equality of the sexes and states that women shall be accorded full and equal dignity as human persons. Section 42(3), which prohibits discrimination based on gender in the areas of employment, education, and housing. Section 43 guarantees the right of every Nigerian citizen to acquire and own immovable property anywhere in Nigeria.

Subsistence Farming

Availability and accessibility of food are mainly achieved through subsistence agriculture, where community members produce and preserve food using local traditional practices. Subsistence farming describes a form of farming in which nearly all the crops produced or livestock raised are used to support the farmer and their family, with little to no surplus left for trade. An objective is self-sufficiency and reduction of hunger. This is a common thread that connected the female participants. Unyime explains, “Men mostly farm cash crops, and women mostly farm food crops because most of us farm to feed our families first, then sell the remaining to provide the necessary support for the family.” (Uy7). In cycles where women

can earn more money from food crops like cassava, land ownership is a hindrance as they may not have access to large plots at the time.

As we speak, a bag of cassava is about eight to eleven thousand naira in a small sack (unit of measurement). We can shift our focus to cassava production, which is highly profitable, but how many women have the size of land needed for this? (Id4).

Women farm jointly with their husbands on larger family farms, from which they may benefit but do not control the outputs, and also manage a smaller plot of their own, from which they do control the outputs. “Women and children contribute labor on their husbands farms too because these farms are for commercial purposes. Ours is for the family and for petty cash.” (FG2). Women often use the outputs from their farms to feed their households, trading any small surplus for additional income. The additional income is spent on personal items for themselves, children’s education and upkeep, support for their natal family, social obligations, and satisfying other household needs. “We support our families and community initiatives with the proceeds from our farms and businesses.” (FG3). “I usually give my village head some money from selling my farm produce to support indigent students in our community.” (FG4).

Non-affiliation to Formal Groups

Most women do not belong to agricultural cooperatives or farmer unions. This is due to several reasons, like lack of awareness, misunderstanding of how a cooperative functions, time constraints, lack of funds, and lack of support from their husbands. Of the four communities, only one had established cooperatives and farmer groups, and another community is in the process of formal registration. Nsikan shared:

Some women have not joined cooperatives because they have poor knowledge about the importance of cooperative societies, justifiably so because some of these groups are used

for political jobbing. Time constraint is another factor, as well as the lack of money for registration fees and dues. Some, because of selfishness, fear of being cheated, distrust, and some just don't like socializing. Also, some may not join cooperatives because their husbands are not in support of any group that will empower their women (Ns6).

Umoh was of the view that women's apathy towards these groups is "due to lack of information or poor sensitization, the 'politicization' of these unions... also, the labeling of women who join associations as prostitutes and adulterers, communities often want women to associate with women and not with other men." (Um8).

Cultural norms grant men authority over their wives, which they may exercise when it comes to giving consent for their wives to join these groups. However, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) Sections 38 and 40 (PLAC, 2023), provide rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, association, and religious beliefs, protect the coming together of people and individuals working for a common goal and for the protection of their interest provided it is not in conflict with the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Catalysts of Women in Leadership and Decision-making

Agricultural Cooperatives and Agripreneurship Unions

Membership in agricultural cooperatives, agripreneurship unions, and other groups can encourage women's leadership by providing access to resources, information, and decision-making opportunities. In two communities, Etinan and Mkpato Enin, cooperatives have enabled women to exercise leadership, gain new insights, obtain small revolving loans, and aggregate their produce for better income. Nsikan stated,

I am fully affiliated with agricultural cooperatives, membership includes farmers in areas such as piggery, oil palm processing, vegetable farming, poultry, and general crop

farmers. I currently lead one of the groups I belong to; being the president of this group has afforded me some level of exposure, respect, and growth (Ns7).

Some groups are gender inclusive and some are strictly for women. According to Akan, gender-inclusive groups do not discriminate when it comes to enjoying benefits and give women a platform and opportunities to develop and exercise their leadership skills because women can hold elected offices. He expounded by saying:

As members of this association, we have access to finance through contributions (thrift and savings) within members, and information/knowledge and experience sharing. . . ., also in the association, women hold leadership positions like Secretary, Vice President which make them part of the decision-making process (A5).

Umoh adds that the cooperative he belongs to

... has women as some of the leaders. We aggregate and sell our cassava at a better price than other farmers and we get referrals among members. Another thing we are enjoying as members of the cooperative is we have a large area for farming from the free lands which gives us capacity of scale, therefore, more income. I think that having a strong purse would boost a woman's confidence at home and in society (Um9).

Some women have formed ad-hoc groups to build solidarity and support during the farming season. Itoro explains,

... we mobilize during the farming season. We engage in different agricultural activities together. For example, when it is time for weeding, we all come together to help each other weed their farms, which makes it timely and easy. After the season, we disband until another planting season (It5).

Increased Access to Quality Education

Several studies show the correlation between education and rural development because the education of the workforce facilitates the adoption of innovation and resilient adaptation to change; therefore, education is a key driver of sustainable development. According to Prof, "... another key intervention is academic empowerment of women and girls, starting from their households, communities, and national level ..." (P2). Ekom's statement agrees with this. She said, "To break free from the shackles of misery, I would like them (her female offspring) to have quality education to the highest level, to break this cycle of suffering." (Ek6).

Participants decried the limited access to formal education and highlighted the importance of formal education, especially for the girl child, in galvanizing women in leadership and decision-making. Uduak believes that formal education "boosts women's confidence and allows them to have a place in the decision-making space and creates opportunities for other women to have a voice." (Ud6). Unyime sums up these catalysts by saying,

Increased sensitization of the community women involved in agriculture on the need to belong to cooperative societies. Also, girls should be encouraged to go to school! That is why I am doing everything possible to give my children basic education. Also, if people would acknowledge that women are as hardworking as men, it would be good. Some of us work even harder than the men. I know of women in our community who are the breadwinners in their families; they do everything to take care of their families, while their husbands do nothing to help or provide. It is a sad reality, and women need every catalyst possible (Uy8).

Nigeria is a party to a number of international legal instruments and conventions that aim to protect women and children, more specifically their right to education. These instruments have

been ratified, and some of these provisions have been domesticated under the national laws.

Nigeria also has numerous laws, policies, and declarations that claim education as a right for all; quality education remains a privilege only a few have access to. According to Action 4 Justice Nigeria (2017), Arowolo & Arowolo (2024), Federal Ministry of Education Nigeria (2021), and PLAC (2023), these include:

- The National Policy on Gender in Education 2021, which aims to ensure equitable access for girls and promotes quality and inclusive education for all.
- The Universal Basic Education Act of 2004 prescribes compulsory free education up to junior secondary school level.
- The Child Rights Act 2003 has provisions such as a right to basic education and the right to be protected from neglect, negligent maltreatment, or exploitation; and early/child marriage. Only 26 (including Akwa Ibom State) out of the 36 states and the FCT have domesticated this.
- The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) Chapter II, Section 18(3)(a), provides for free, compulsory and universal education and free adult literacy programs
- The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26, proclaims the right to education and that it shall be free and compulsory at least in the elementary and fundamental stages.
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, Articles 28 and 29, provides for the right to education

- The African Charter on Human Peoples' Rights 1981, Article 17(1), provides that every individual shall have the right to education. Article 21(1) prescribes the minimum age of marriage for girls as 18.
- The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) 1979 establishes the obligation of the States Parties to 'take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure them equal rights with men in the field of education' and emphasizes the need to ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning.
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966) declared education as a human right and emphasized 'compulsory free of charge for all'.
- The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education 1960 prohibits discrimination or depriving any person or group of persons of access to education or limiting them to education of an inferior standard. Under Article 9, reservations to this convention are not permitted.

Although Akwa Ibom has implemented programs to promote free and compulsory education for girls up to secondary school, aimed at reducing gender disparity in enrollment, numerous factors make it difficult for girls to access formal education. These factors include patriarchal norms, traditional preferences, gender-based/sexual violence, early or forced marriage, and the rising cost of education despite government pledges to make it free. Many girls will have to put their education on hold when budgetary constraints arise.

Challenging the Status Quo

Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Knowledge Frameworks

Traditional knowledge frameworks have stifled women's contributions to agricultural leadership and agribusiness in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, because the existing frameworks often perpetuate gender stereotypes. Cultural norms often discourage women from taking on leadership roles. Patriarchal systems and traditions also reinforce gender stereotypes that question women's leadership aptitudes. Data from the focus group reveal that the participants are not aware of the laws establishing their rights and also government policies that support women in agriculture; "We are not aware of these policies" (FG5), "There is no support for agriculture" (FG6). In addition to the laws presented in the *Increased access to quality education* section, according to Action 4 Justice Nigeria (2017), Amnesty International (2004), Arowolo & Arowolo (2024), BudgIT (2024), and PLAC (2023), other legal frameworks that protect and promote the rights of women include

- National Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) Policy and Action Plan (2023), which outlines the structural reforms and sectoral interventions required to democratize economic access and opportunity for Nigerian women and girls. It aims to increase women's participation in the economy, reduce poverty, increase employment, and improve women's decision-making power.
- National Gender Policy on Agriculture (2019) to promote the adoption of gender-sensitive and -responsive approaches in the agricultural sector and ensure that men and women have equal access to, and control of, productive resources.
- Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (2015) to eliminate violence in private and public life, prohibit all forms of violence against persons to provide maximum protection

and effective remedies for victims and punishment of offenders and other related matters.

Akwa Ibom State has domesticated this framework and also has an office dedicated to enforcing this law and providing counsel to impacted persons.

- National Action Plan (2013) to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace, and security.
- The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), Section 14(3), states that the government shall ensure the “full participation of women in the affairs of the nation.” Sections 15(2) and 42(1) prohibit sex-based discrimination. Section 40 provides for equality of the sexes and states that women shall be accorded full and equal dignity as human persons. Section 42(3), which prohibits discrimination based on gender in the areas of employment, education, and housing. Section 43 guarantees the right of every Nigerian citizen to acquire and own immovable property anywhere in Nigeria.
- The Married Women’s Property Act, Section 1, provides that a married woman can acquire, hold, and dispose of by will or otherwise any real or personal property as her separate property, just like if she were an unmarried woman, spinster, or divorcee, without the intervention of any trustee.
- The Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, 2004, reaffirms the commitment of member states to continue, expand, and accelerate efforts to promote gender equality at all levels.
- The Protocol to the Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003), which, among other declarations, mandates state parties to modify the social and cultural patterns through public education, information, and communication strategies to eliminate harmful cultural, traditional, and other practices based on the idea

of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes, or on stereotyped roles for women and men. It also requires member states to ensure that women and men enjoy equal rights and are regarded as equal partners in marriage; no marriage shall take place without the free and full consent of both parties; and the minimum age of marriage for women shall be 18 years. Under this protocol, member states are obligated to take specific positive action to encourage participative governance and the equal participation of women in the political life of their countries through affirmative action, enabling national legislation and other measures.

- United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace, and security.
- The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action for the Advancement of Women (1995), which, among other declarations, set out a plan to protect women's human rights and ensure that gender equality issues are mainstreamed into all policies and programs and endorsed having 30% women in positions at decision-making levels by 1995.

Constitutions and conventions are important, but since gender discrimination is frequently deeply ingrained and would require a community-focused approach to effect meaningful change, it is crucial to give women the knowledge and resources they need to stand up for their rights. Idara proposed, “Constant sensitization of the women, frequent engagement of various women with information on how to build and strengthen the capacity in preparation for formal leadership roles.” (Id5). Unyime suggested that at the community level, women need to be in the village council and be in the decision-making docket: "We need to have a seat on the council, not just any seat but a decision-making capacity. It is long overdue." (Uy9).

The pervasive gender stereotypes and division of labor call for challenging traditional social roles. Akan believes that women need to stand up and take up leadership positions because

they are capable; “Women should not be shy to display their outstanding skills and devotion. People will see that they are serious and support them accordingly...with increased support and encouragement from other women and also that of their husbands, women will grow.” (A6). Ufok is of the view that the government needs to take the lead by enforcing any laws that advocate for women’s right to self-actualization.

If women are incorporated into our family structures, there is no reason not to incorporate them into our community structures; hence, the government should mandate all communities to infuse women into the communities' governance structures. If truth be told, women are in charge of savings in most families and are also involved in thrifts and savings groups to strengthen the family financially (Uf5).

Education is key to deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge frameworks. Educating women and girls can empower them to question traditional norms and advocate for their rights. Education has played a significant role in fighting patriarchy. Educated individuals have stood up against it and condemned it. Itoro is emphatic that education is a leveler and plays a key role in the scheme of things. She explains, “I want my children to have quality education up to university level so they can be exposed and have the best opportunities, learn critical thinking, be creative, and be able to advocate for themselves.” (It6).

Non-adherence

Despite the dominant trend, some men do not conform to the rules set by tradition. Non-adherence to some of the cultural norms is one of the strategies through which traditional knowledge frameworks are being challenged and fragmented. For instance, Esang is no longer influenced by some cultural practices, such as being the sole decision-maker, due to his religious

affiliation. He explained, “Honestly, it doesn’t because I am not a strict adherent due to my religious affiliation.” (Es4). The same scenario was depicted by Akan, who said:

My wife and I make decisions together. Generally, I am not adherent to them (cultural norms and traditional beliefs), so there is no extant tradition influencing my decisions or barring me and members of my household from harvesting and consuming any of the crops I planted (A7).

Nkoyo asserted that her husband involves her in decision-making: “Men are empowered to be the head of the household and, therefore, make decisions. My husband usually consults me for my input before making a decision.” (Nk7). This evidence indicates a potential for change.

Furthermore, some women, especially widows, are now making certain decisions within their immediate households.

Suggested Drivers of Change

There is a strong desire for change. This was evident in the focus group as the participants recommended abolishing harmful cultural norms and traditional beliefs and advocated for increased access to quality education, access to resources, leadership capacity development, and technology/infrastructure support.

Abolishing Harmful Cultural Norms and Traditional Beliefs

Participants recommended the abolishing of harmful and restrictive cultural practices, e.g., inheritance rights. This recommendation was also reiterated in the focus group. Harmful cultural norms and traditional beliefs perpetuate and drive inequality, injustice, poverty, and discrimination. They can hinder governments’ efforts aimed at creating and supporting an inclusive society. Umoh champions the eradication of restrictive cultural norms as a way of

improving women's economic situations since they will be in a position to acquire input and compete constructively with men. He expounded,

Repeal the laws restricting women from inheriting land. Abolish the traditional norms that restrict women from going to farms, access to improved varieties of seedlings, and access to increased funding. With these, women can compete more favorably with their male counterparts, thereby scaling up the rate of food productivity and income generation (Um9).

Customary laws have historically denied women and widows inheritance rights; this practice is discriminatory and unlawful and is inconsistent with statutory laws and these legal frameworks.

Leadership Development Support

The idea of leadership needs to be broadened to include women's contributions and welfare. This includes recognizing and valuing the work that women already do, sensitizing and reorienting them to the need to join groups like cooperatives and farmer unions, promoting their participation in decision-making processes, investing in leadership development programs, and creating pathways for taking on formal leadership roles. There was a consensus by the participants that women are capable of holding leadership positions and making equitable decisions, thereby contributing more to agricultural and community development, but are hindered by cultural and structural barriers. Itoro suggested that women in the community should be “sensitized to the benefits of being in such positions, preparing and developing them to be ready for such roles, and mobilizing the women to support women who want to engage in such roles.” (It7). Mfon advocates for

Increased sensitization of the community women involved in agriculture on the need to belong to cooperative societies. Also, women in leadership positions, especially those with political power, should mobilize other community women to amplify their voices. Women who are successful in other professions can inspire and motivate other women and girls. Through workshops, advocacy, and education, it is time for us to drive the process and occupy leadership positions to influence decisions and create equitable opportunities (M5).

Increase the sensitization of more community women to new farming techniques and provision of improved seedlings; they will make more money, thereby igniting their interest and confidence to participate in the decision-making process. Women, if given the opportunity, will do more farming than men so that things can be easy, some lands given to women (Um10).

Some participants recommended that women should be “encouraged to form cooperatives and other advocacy and solidarity groups to give them a voice and a step toward having representation.” (FG7). According to Nsikan, who leads a cooperative and has been part of a delegation that represented my community in a statewide meeting, “... being the leader of this group has afforded me some level of exposure and growth.” (Ns8). Itoro also adds that “... sensitization of the benefits of being in such positions, preparing and developing them to be ready for such roles, and mobilizing the women to support women who want to engage in such roles.” (It8).

Technology and Infrastructure Support

The participants cited drudgery and non-availability of basic infrastructure as some of the challenges women face in agripreneurship. All the female participants lack access to improved

farm tools and labor-saving technologies, as they still make use of basic traditional tools like hoes, machetes, spades, and sticks. Some of them own locally fabricated boiling drums and drying mesh.

Aside from their on-farm contributions to agriculture, women handle the bulk of the processing in agricultural value chains but are still not actively involved in the leadership and decision-making space. Rural women, in particular, have extensive indigenous knowledge of food production, storage, and processing techniques. The use of these traditional methods is prevalent across all communities and highlights their resourcefulness and adaptability given their limitations. For instance, cassava is processed into *garri* by frying and stored in jute bags or processed into *fufu* and stored in plastic coolers; seafood is dried or smoked; oil palm is processed into palm oil, kernels, and husks; and yam is stored in barns. However, these methods are inefficient and can sometimes compromise food safety standards and their ability to earn commensurate income. Nsikan explains,

Most of our methods are based on what has always been practiced by our forebears, from generation to generation. We know that some new techniques, like cooling, are easier, but most people cannot afford a fridge, and the unstable electricity supply does not encourage saving up for one. I have seen large cooling facilities in some places where you can pay to cool your produce and products, but we don't have any here. Some people have the tools for processing palm oil; those who don't have to take turns at a private commercial mill (Ns9).

The impacts of climate variabilities and extreme weather patterns on agricultural practices highlight the need for adaptation. Participants across the communities are aware of changes in weather patterns, erratic rainfall, and seasonal shifts impacting their agricultural

practices. Mfon states, “I have personally observed changes in weather, for example, August break. These days, we can rarely determine when such takes place.” (M6). The participants expressed that these changes negatively impact crop yields, food preservation and storage, and incomes. “Sometimes it floods when you least expect, which causes the destruction and loss of crops, and sometimes we get prolonged dry spells. We can hardly predict the seasons anymore, and this affects our preparations for the farming season” (Ns10). “We now experience infestation by pests and insects, such as termites, drought, and excessive flooding leading to the destruction of crops, drying up of streams.” (Um11). Esang expounds,

A lot has changed. We have to go far deep into the high sea before we can see fish to catch, but it is still not comparable to what our fathers used to get close to shore. We are also experiencing changes along the coastlines, although we are not sure if that is caused by the oil spillage. We used to experience one week of heavy rainfall at a stretch, but now things have changed...hail is rare now. There is no more August break in the said month; sometimes, it comes earlier or later... flooding now occurs, and we experience longer dry spells. All these have contributed to poor yields and low income (Es6).

Participants believe that introducing and providing access to modern labor-saving farming tools, processing technologies and techniques, and climate-resilient technologies (which are complementary to indigenous knowledge, where possible) can enhance their economic opportunities and empower them to lead in these sectors.

Chapter Summary

This study was directed by four research questions aimed at exploring how women can engage in leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship in rural communities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Data was collected from twelve participants purposively selected from four rural

communities (Abak, Etinan, Mkpato Enin, Oron), representing major ethnic groups (Annang, Ibibio, Oron). After data analysis, 5 major themes emerged to explore the influence of cultural norms and traditional beliefs on the roles of rural women in agriculture, the barriers that prevent women from leadership and decision-making, how women are encouraged or included in leadership, and the strategies for redistributing power.

Theme 1: Ancestral loyalties: The dictator. Cultural norms and traditional beliefs heavily influence gender roles, land ownership, and leadership structures. Sub-themes include:

Patriarchy — men dominate household and community decision-making, while women are relegated to supportive roles. Widows gain some autonomy but remain constrained by norms.

Land ownership and inheritance rights - inheritance is patrilineal and women may lease or purchase land through male proxies; however, this offers little security as women may lose land upon a male proxy's death.

Restriction of women — women are excluded from membership in the village councils and high-control groups (e.g., *Ekpe* and *Ekpo* societies) and prohibited from participating in certain agricultural activities. Rituals and festivals further restrict their mobility and economic activities.

Oppression, enforcement, and punishment — violations of norms attract fines (e.g., livestock, monetary penalties); widows face land grabs; and women who challenge norms risk divorce or social ostracism. Statutory laws protecting women's rights are poorly enforced in rural areas.

Theme 2: Inhibitors of women in leadership and decision-making with sub-themes including *gendered expectations* — women are expected to handle domestic chores, childcare, and perform sexual functions, leaving little time for leadership while men control commercial farming and income-generating activities. *Limited access to resources* — women lack land, credit, and modern farming tools; extension services are scarce; and government programs are

politicized. *Subsistence farming* — women focus on food crops for household consumption, while men grow cash crops, thereby limiting women's income and economic independence. *Non-affiliation to formal groups* — cooperatives, where they exist, provide access to resources and collective bargaining power; however, few women join cooperatives due to lack of awareness, funds, or spousal disapproval.

Theme 3: Catalysts of women in leadership and decision-making. Sub-themes include *agricultural cooperatives and agripreneurship unions* — in Etinan and Mkpato Enin, cooperatives enable women to access loans, share knowledge, and facilitate their inclusion in leadership spaces. *Increased access to quality education* — formal education boosts women's confidence and decision-making abilities; however, barriers like early marriage and poverty limit girls' access to schooling. Theme 4: Challenging the Status Quo with subthemes including *deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge frameworks* — participants advocated for sensitization on women's rights, inclusion in village councils, and enforcement of gender-equitable laws. *Non-adherence* — the study found that some men are not strict adherents to the cultural practices of their communities, mostly due to their religious affiliations. Theme 5: Suggested drivers of change — participants advocated for *abolishing harmful cultural norms and traditional beliefs* by repealing discriminatory customary laws inconsistent with statutory laws. They suggested that *leadership development support* where programs like workshops and advocacy are tailored and delivered to prepare women for leadership roles; and *technology and infrastructure support* such as access to labor-saving tools, climate-resilient farming techniques, and storage facilities to reduce drudgery and improve productivity.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

This study provides a synopsis of the study. It highlights the purpose of the study, research questions, research design, and data collection methods. It includes the conclusions drawn from the findings, implications, and recommendations. The study involved 12 participants who were drawn from four Local Government Areas (LGAs): Abak, Etinan, Mkpato Enin, and Oron. They were interviewed to provide insight on how women can engage in leadership in agriculture and agribusiness in rural communities of Akwa-Ibom State, Nigeria. The analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts generated the following themes and sub-themes:

1. Ancestral Loyalties: The Dictator
 - a. *Patriarchy*
 - b. *Land ownership and inheritance rights*
 - c. *Restriction of women*
 - d. *Oppression, enforcement, and punishment*
2. Inhibitors of Women in Leadership and Decision-making
 - a. *Gendered expectations*
 - b. *Limited access to resources*
 - c. *Subsistence farming*
 - d. *Non-affiliation to formal groups*
3. Catalysts of Women in Leadership and Decision-making
 - a. *Agricultural cooperatives and agribusiness unions*
 - b. *Increased access to quality education*

4. Challenging the Status Quo

a. Deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge frameworks

b. Non-adherence

5. Suggested Drivers of Change

a. Abolishing harmful cultural norms and traditional beliefs

b. Leadership development support

c. Technology and infrastructure support

Summary of the Study and Procedures

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to explore how women can engage in leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship in rural communities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Understanding the role of cultural norms and beliefs on women's engagement in leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship will inform changes in attitude by policymakers and interest-holders who usually assume that women play a subordinate role in the agricultural economy, yet they are often saddled with more agricultural responsibilities compared to their male counterparts (Sanusi & Ibrahim, 2023). The study findings could also help improve rural women farmers' lives since agripreneurship is a critical sector in rural economies through which women can invest in and employ themselves amidst economic uncertainties (Jamri, 2020).

Research Questions

The study's research questions were:

1. How do cultural norms and traditional beliefs influence the roles of rural women in agriculture?
2. How are rural women barred or discouraged from leadership and decision-making?

3. How are rural women encouraged or included in leadership and decision-making?
4. How can power be redistributed?

Procedures

This study used a basic qualitative research approach to understand how women can engage in leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship in rural communities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. This approach acknowledges that people acquire knowledge by participating in, interpreting, and making sense of an experience or activity within the unique circumstances they find themselves (Austin & Sutton, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and enabled me to explore and find insights into the barriers and enablers of women leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship across individual cases (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021).

The study population comprised individuals from Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, from four communities purposefully selected from Abak, Etinan, Mkpato Enin, and Oron Local Government Areas. Three participants were purposefully selected from each of the communities, leading to a total of twelve participants. Two 60–90 minute semi-structured interviews with each participant and a focus group helped collect data from the participants. Also, a key informant interview was conducted, and relevant documents were analyzed. Data was coded using descriptive coding and pattern coding, which produced themes that are reported in the previous chapter of this dissertation.

Connection of Findings to Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the social role, transformative leadership, and adaptive leadership theoretical frameworks.

The **social role theory** posits that sex differences and similarities in behavior reflect gender role beliefs that in turn represent people's opinions of men's and women's social roles in

their society (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012; Li et al., 2021). It argues that societies associate men with their physical strength and women with their reproductive biology, which leads to a gendered division of labor and the distribution of resources, responsibilities, agency, and power governed by different laws, norms, and principles (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Schneider & Bos, 2019). By enacting this labor division in an economic and social structure, the differences lead to gender role beliefs and persistent stereotyping (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

The findings of this study indicate that there is a prevalence of gender disparities and a clear gendered division of roles in the household, agricultural activities, and the community (see summary in Table 3). These roles are governed by ancestral loyalties to age-long cultural norms and traditional beliefs. Examples are patriarchy; gendered division of farm labor; choice of crops; women's limited access to the right to use, own, or transfer land; restriction from membership of the governance instruments/structures of the community; and access to resources. The participants expressed that these limitations lead to fewer opportunities and lower income for women. Violations of these laid-down norms and beliefs are usually met with sanctions. These highlight how socialization has reinforced gender disparities in agriculture, leadership, and agripreneurship by encouraging societies to conform to traditionally set gender roles (Amusan et al., 2021). This also shows how society continues to violate women's rights to equitable inclusion despite their contributions.

Table 3

Comparison of women's and men's roles

Agricultural Activities	Women	Men
Labor	Till the soil Prepare cuttings/seeds/seedlings Plant	Bush clearing Make mounds and ridges Harvest

	Weed Harvest Process Sell finished products	
Choice of crops		
Yam	Subsistence level	Commercial level
Oil palm	Only involved in the processing and trading of products	Subsistence and commercial level
Cocoyam	Subsistence level	
Trifoliolate yam	Subsistence level	
Cassava	Subsistence level. Can aggregate in groups	Subsistence and commercial level. Can aggregate in groups
Maize	Subsistence level	Subsistence level
Vegetables	Subsistence and commercial	Commercial level
Fishing	Only involved in the processing and trading	Subsistence and commercial
Livestock		
• Chickens	Subsistence	Subsistence and commercial
• Goats	Subsistence	Subsistence and commercial
• Pigs	Subsistence	Subsistence and commercial
Land ownership	Generally cannot inherit; however, can lease or purchase under certain conditions	Can inherit, lease, and/or purchase
Access to resources	Limited access	Accessible when/if available
Membership of governance instruments	Restricted	Not restricted

Furthermore, this study found that women in these communities are expected to be subservient to men and should generally be seen, not heard. For instance, women who expressed any form of agency were considered as being disrespectful. The social role theory posits that men possess agentic traits like aggression and ambition, which are used to support their claim to leadership positions, whereas women possess communal traits like empathy suited for caregiving (Anglin et al., 2022; Schneider & Bos, 2019).

The findings of this study show that men are typically regarded as the heads of households and primary decision-makers while women are the support system. Per the social role theory, this is mainly because leadership is linked with aggression and ambition, which are often considered masculine and also explain why women were dismally involved in decision-making.

The **transformative leadership theory** offers a distinct and principled approach to achieving positive and equitable change that benefits individuals and societies (Shields, 2010). It seeks to transform the individuals practicing it and the society in which they work and live and promotes a social justice agenda that prioritizes equity, liberation, and democracy, particularly for marginalized groups, through shifting knowledge frameworks, redistributing power, and balancing interests (Freire, 2000; Green, 1999; Munive et al., 2023; Shields, 2011; Shields, 2020; van Oord, 2013).

According to the findings of this study, male and female participants desire a shift from the status quo to enable rural women to engage meaningfully in leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship. This necessitates the deconstruction and reconstruction of traditional knowledge frameworks because it requires dismantling existing structures that perpetuate inequity and actively and democratically building new ones that support equity. For instance, traditional norms limit women's access to the right to use, own, or transfer land.

To facilitate liberation and foster inclusive and equitable change, it is imperative to challenge customary laws, cultural norms, patriarchal systems, and traditions that reinforce gender stereotypes that question rural women's leadership aptitudes and discourage women from taking on leadership roles. Customary laws uphold these practices, but they are discriminatory, unlawful, and inconsistent with Nigeria's statutory laws. Section 42(1) and (2) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended), prohibits gender discrimination in inheritance and guarantees every Nigerian the right to inherit, and Section 43 guarantees the right of every Nigerian citizen to acquire and own immovable property anywhere in Nigeria (PLAC, 2023).

This study found that the majority of women and men in rural communities are not aware of the laws establishing their rights and also government policies that support rural women in agriculture. It is crucial to empower women with the knowledge and resources they need to stand up for their rights. Furthermore, women must have positions in the decision-making space as guaranteed by Sections 14(3), 15(2), 40, and 42(1) of the Nigerian Constitution 1999 (as amended) (PLAC, 2023).

Transformative leadership engages and empowers followers to participate in the process, leading to greater ownership and commitment to change; therefore, investing in leadership capacity development and creating pathways for rural women to take on formal leadership roles and participate in decision-making is expedient. In the course of this study, it was observed that participants who belong to and hold leadership positions in cooperatives/groups were more assertive and confident than others. Both male and female participants agreed that women are capable of holding leadership positions and making equitable decisions that will make positive change in their homes, livelihoods, and communities if they are accorded the opportunities and

support needed. It is important to note that the Nigerian Constitution 1999 (as amended) explicitly states that the government shall ensure the “full participation of women in the affairs of the nation” in Section 14(3) (PLAC, 2023).

Transformative leadership theory stresses looking closely at existing power structures and beliefs in a system, identifying biases and power imbalances, and actively challenging them to create positive change by building new, more fair understanding and practices. The results of this study indicate that rural women have limited access to quality education, resources, technology, and infrastructure. The importance of quality education cannot be overemphasized. It is a key driver of sustainable development. Education is essential for galvanizing rural women to take part in leadership and also for facilitating the adoption of innovation and resilient adaptation to change. Furthermore, this study observed that women who opposed harmful cultural practices in their communities had attained a certain level of formal education. Nigeria has numerous laws, policies, and declarations that claim education as a right for all. It is also a signatory to a number of international legal instruments and conventions that aim to protect women and children's right to education. For example, Chapter II, Section 18(3)(a), of the Nigerian Constitution, 1999 (as amended) provides for free, compulsory, and universal education and free adult literacy programs (PLAC, 2023).

The **adaptive leadership theory** involves preparing and encouraging people to deal with change. Adaptive leadership has become a crucial crisis management strategy as it promotes resilience and enables innovative solutions to complex challenges (Uy, 2023). It requires leaders to adapt their behavior to meet changing demands and adjust their actions accordingly (Nöthel et al., 2023). Adaptive leadership acknowledges that change is complex and with interconnected parts, and people must be prepared for deep learning that will change values and assumptions,

create losses, and encounter resistance and then drive individual and collective behaviors (Dugan, 2017; Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

The findings of this study reveal that male and female participants desire change, which can be achieved through deconstructing and reconstructing traditional knowledge frameworks. The process of dismantling existing structures that perpetuate inequity and actively and democratically building new ones that support equity is not straightforward; therefore, it presents an adaptive challenge (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). Rural communities need to build adaptive capacity and take adaptive actions to facilitate liberation, engagement, empowerment, and inclusive and equitable change. Adaptive capacity refers to the ability to adapt to one's operating environment, and adaptive actions involve changing/altering existing practices, adjusting to new situations, and upgrading knowledge and skills to meet evolving demands and accommodate change (Barnes et al., 2020; Castillo & Trinh, 2019; Rahmawati et al., 2019).

Conclusions

The conclusions of this study are structured and presented by each research question.

Research Question 1: How Do Cultural Norms and Beliefs Influence the Role of Women in Agriculture?

This study's findings revealed that ancestral loyalties dictate lifestyle in these rural communities and thereby influence the role of women in agriculture in Akwa Ibom State. Gender inequality and male dominance persist, limiting women's access to resources and opportunities in agriculture. This is evident in property ownership and inheritance being conventionally patrilineal, and women are mostly connected to the farm through their fathers, husbands, or male proxies (Curtin et al., 2024; Pilgeram & Amos, 2015). This current research sheds light on the effect of cultural norms and traditional beliefs on women in rural communities. This finding is

corroborated by Ogisi and Bhego (2023), who argued that in Africa, social and cultural issues are significant determinants of how most agricultural practices are run, particularly affecting women.

This study found that the majority of rural women in the state were hardly involved in leadership and decision-making at the household level, except in a few instances, and at the community level, where they are restricted from participating in governance structures. In the instances where they are involved in decision-making in their households, their spouses have intentionally included and supported them to do so. This aligns with Kelechi (2023), who argued that non-inclusion in decision-making is an infringement on women's rights, and including women in decision-making is a social justice and a fundamental human right that not only boosts their psychology but also benefits men and women. Kelechi (2023) also added that despite women's academic and economic achievements, they still play second place in most decision-making platforms, mainly due to the deeply ingrained gender roles and opinions. The current findings also resonate with Acosta et al. (2019) that the extent of women's involvement in intra-household decision-making is an indicator of their empowerment and bargaining power and vice versa.

Research Question 2: How Are Rural Women Barred or Discouraged from Leadership and Decision-Making?

Traditional gender roles and responsibilities are still firmly entrenched in rural communities, hindering women's ability to participate fully in agricultural activities. Rural women's responsibilities as support to the male farmer, homemaker, caregiver, farm worker, and businesswoman are influenced by the socio-cultural and economic situations of the communities. This study's findings were consistent with Sabar et al. (2022), that culture underscores gender differences with patriarchy always taking center stage in the discrimination against women,

resulting in male dominance in most areas; and OlaOlorun and John (2021), that patriarchal culture limits women's capacity to make joint decisions with their husbands at the household and community levels.

Rural women in Akwa Ibom State have limited access to resources, such as land, credits, education, technology, and extension services, compared to men (Kehinde et al., 2021). The practice of subsistence perpetuates a cycle of hunger and poverty (Botreau & Cohen, 2020; Glazebrook & Opoku, 2020; Moyo & Dhliwayo, 2019) and denies these women of economic power, equitable representation, and participation in decision-making and governance (Lwamba et al., 2022; Oyebamiji et al., 2022; Staab et al., 2024). Additionally, this study found that sociocultural norms hinder women from involvement in agricultural organizations (Kaaria et al., 2016; Kennedy-Duckett, 2022), and they have become apathetic towards engaging in leadership and advocacy due to oppression and fear of punishment by *mbiam* (Prof [academic/researcher] in discussion with the author, December 2024), suggesting a need for increased awareness and advocacy to promote gender equity and empower women in these communities.

Research Question 3: How Are Rural Women Encouraged or Included in Leadership and Decision-Making?

This study's results highlighted that quality education and membership in agricultural organizations can act as catalysts to provide rural women with platforms for leadership capacity development and intentional ways of participating in decision-making spaces in Akwa Ibom State. It also found that membership in these groups enabled rural women to share insights on agriculture and agripreneurship, obtain small revolving loans, and aggregate their produce for better income. The finding is in tandem with Kaaria et al. (2016), who posit that producer organizations not only serve rural women's needs but also include these women who cannot fully

participate in these agricultural organizations due to their responsibilities at home and their farms, socio-cultural norms and women's statuses, experiences from previous organizations' membership, entry rules, and policy requirements. Female leadership should be promoted simultaneously with the improvement of women's knowledge to increase agricultural cooperatives' economic performance (Nguyen et al., 2023). However, these findings contrast with Sylvester and Little's (2020) view that agricultural organizations do not give women an audience to voice their concerns, and they fuel division by steering men's dominance in positions of power and leadership.

Research Question 4: How Can Power Be Redistributed?

This study's results underscore the need to deconstruct certain ancestral loyalties that promote and sustain harmful norms and beliefs. There is a need to deconstruct and reconstruct the extant traditional knowledge frameworks and power dynamics so that rural women of Akwa Ibom State can participate fully in and contribute effectively to agriculture and agripreneurship. These results highlight abolishing harmful cultural norms and traditional beliefs and the sensitization and orientation of women to their rights as enshrined in the Nigerian constitution. Results also indicate that increased access to quality formal education is an essential change agent for rural women and girls. Other strategies include access to financial resources and introducing and providing access to modern labor-saving farming tools, processing technologies and techniques, and climate-resilient technologies.

Deconstructing structures and mindsets in Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria to enable redistribution of power and resources requires changes in structural (such as the customary laws that discriminate against women) and cultural (attitudes and beliefs) factors that perpetuate women's subordination and reinforce gender stereotypes (Adom & Anambane, 2019; Fredman et

al., 2016). It necessitates women's inclusion in all public, private, political, and social decision-making processes (Fredman et al., 2016). These efforts recognize women's contributions to agriculture and agripreneurship, address equity challenges, and reshape societal norms.

However, to ensure that rural communities thrive as a result of change, it is important to employ the bottom-up approach to help these communities build resilience and adaptability from the inside out by valuing the local knowledge and perspectives of residents. This approach acknowledges and values the diversity in communities and would empower community members to identify and prioritize their needs; engage in locally driven planning, participatory decision-making, and implementation processes of interventions; strengthen the community governance mechanisms; and ensure equitable, inclusive, and collective distribution of outcomes of development initiatives (Međugorac & Schuitema, 2023; Voltz et al., 2024).

Equitable redistribution of power would involve building transformative leadership capacity alongside adaptive capacity and cultures. Adaptive capacity is the ability to adjust to changes or increase coping limits, emphasizing economic, demographic, social, and cultural factors (Susskind & Kim, 2022). Adaptive actions involve altering existing practices to accommodate change, while transformative actions alter dominant relationships to create a new system or future rooted in adaptive capacity (Barnes et al., 2020; Rahmawati et al., 2019). The transformative leadership framework establishes underlying tenets that guide action and focuses on work that creates a more inclusive and equitable future for everyone; it does not prescribe an iterative process for creating such change (Shields, 2016). Adaptive leadership can provide a process to achieve the values and end goals of transformative leadership (Aniche et al., 2024). This study comes to the conclusion that ancestral knowledge frameworks, root causes, and

systems that present barriers for rural women to fully participate in agriculture and agripreneurship need to be broken down through a blend of the adaptive and transformative leadership models.

Implications

This study examines how rural women can engage in leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship in the rural communities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. It explores the effects of cultural norms and traditional beliefs on the roles they play, how they are barred from or included in the leadership and decision-making process, and strategies for equity.

Rural women's limited access to resources and opportunities in agriculture due to traditional gender roles and male dominance results in reduced productivity and income, which, in turn, exacerbates poverty and food insecurity in rural communities. The persistence of gender inequality in agriculture, as seen in the cultural and social mechanisms that perpetuate male dominance, reinforces stereotypes and limits rural women's potential to contribute to the development of their communities. The restrictions on land ownership, decision-making, and crop choices reinforce gender inequality, reducing women's ability to maximize agricultural productivity and benefit from high-value cash crops. Also, accessing credit from financial institutions to fund agribusiness is almost impossible without property ownership.

Another implication of the study lies in the perpetuation of cultural practices that are contrary to the constituted laws of Nigeria and Akwa Ibom State, which protect the rights of women. Irrespective of these, the overarching system still restricts women's participation in critical policy and economic spheres. This suggests the lack of political will and presence to address these challenges and create an inclusive and enabling environment for women's participation in agriculture, which limits agricultural and rural development and reduces overall

economic growth. This underscores the underutilization of women's potential due to cultural and traditional practices, resulting in a loss of valuable contributions to the development of their communities, the state, and the country.

The eroding of self-esteem and confidence is a possible implication based on the limited access to quality formal education, leadership capacity development, and the widespread apathy among rural women. These constraints can have long-lasting effects on their ability to take on leadership roles and participate in decision-making processes. They could further compromise their enthusiasm to participate in development projects and forums (Gupta & Singh, 2024; Kozica et al., 2015; Tanwir & Safdar, 2013), including agriculture, due to long-imprinted impressions that these are men's domains.

Furthermore, the study identified that transforming gender dynamics and redistributing power equitably in agriculture requires a deliberate shift in societal attitudes and knowledge systems. It requires a multi-faceted participatory approach that includes women's specific needs for strengthening rural communities and empowers women while fostering inclusive agricultural development. This shift will not only empower women but also enhance agricultural productivity and sustainability by ensuring that all capable individuals, regardless of gender, can contribute fully to the sector.

Recommendations to Policymakers and Interest-holders

The following recommendations were informed by the research questions, findings, and conclusions:

Nigeria must abandon regressive traditions and customs that stifle women's development. These frameworks need to be deconstructed and reconstructed so that the significant contribution of women to agriculture will be recognized and justly rewarded. A good starting point in

reworking the system would be the sensitization and orientation of women to their rights as enshrined in the Nigerian constitution and also the laws enacted by the state to empower women. Policymakers and interest-holders should promote and enforce the available gender-inclusive agricultural policies to ensure that women are given a platform to air their views on agricultural issues. They should also safeguard women's land tenures by enforcing inclusive, gender-sensitive legal frameworks to ensure that women's access to land is guaranteed and such rights are protected. Additionally, cultural laws that prohibit rural women from cultivating high-value cash crops should be repealed; grants and incentives should be provided to encourage them to venture into cash crop cultivation; and severe penalties should be imposed on individuals who act contrary to the statutory laws and perpetuate harmful cultural norms and traditional beliefs.

Deconstructing these frameworks involves challenging stereotypes such as the notion that men are naturally suited for leadership roles and women for domestic duties. Interest-holders should also provide platforms for leadership capacity development for rural community women and encourage them to get involved in cooperatives and farmer groups and to take up leadership roles in these groups and their communities. These organizations provide rural women a platform to organize and share knowledge and experiences. They should also collaborate with relevant organizations and experts to empower women and men on high-value concepts like food safety and climate resilience. Furthermore, women who advocate for positive change have a right to do so, and this right should be protected by law enforcement agencies.

To promote gender equity, equality, and empowerment, it is essential to challenge the patriarchal norms and values that reinforce gender inequality. The government can achieve gender justice through community sensitization programs, campaigns, and other awareness-raising activities to educate community members on its benefits. Civil societies and

other interest-holders should advocate for the abolishment of traditions that infringe on women's right to land and other resources, decision-making, and leadership by building male allies to advocate for women in decision-making spaces and also amplify women's voices in such spaces. They should also encourage and support opportunities for community education for people to acquire knowledge and change their attitudes and perceptions toward women's rights.

Prioritizing access to formal education, particularly for girl children, can empower them and enhance their livelihoods. Existing policies and programs should be efficiently implemented and monitored to ensure that education is of excellent quality and accessible to all, regardless of socio-economic status.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on how women could engage in leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship in rural communities. Additional research is needed to develop a structure that will provide a springboard for actionable change and support the development of effective policies and programs tailored to address cultural shifts and the specific needs of women in these rural communities.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval Exempt



Sponsored Programs and Regulatory Compliance
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Jennie Ofstein, Director
IRB-Director@ncsu.edu

Campus Box 7514
2701 Sullivan Drive
Raleigh, NC 27695
P: 919.515.8754

From: Jennifer Ofstein, IRB Director
North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board

Date: 10/09/2024

Title: How can women engage in leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship in rural communities of Akwa-Ibom State, Nigeria?

IRB#: 27493

Dear Abasiama-Arit Aniche,

The research proposal named above has received administrative review and has been approved on 10/07/2024 as exempt from the policy as outlined in the Code of Federal Regulations [46 CFR 46.104 (d)(2)]. Provided that the only participation of the subjects is as described in the proposal narrative, this project is exempt from further review. This approval does not expire, but any changes must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

NOTE:

1. This committee complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NC State University projects, the Assurance Number is: FWA00003429.
2. Any changes to the research must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
3. If any unanticipated problems occur, they must be reported to the IRB office within 5 business days.
4. When all research activities (including analysis of identifiable data) are completed, please submit a [study closure](#) request.
5. As a part of routine best practices, the NC State IRB office engages in [post approval monitoring activities](#). Please refer to the NC State University IRB website.

Please forward a copy of this letter to your faculty sponsor, if applicable.
Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jennifer B. Ofstein".

Jennifer B. Ofstein, Ph.D., IRB Director
North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
irb-director@ncsu.edu
919.515.8754

Appendix B: Exempt Consent Form



Exempt Consent Form

Interviews, Focus Groups, and Benign Behavioral Interventions

Title of Study: How can women engage in leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship in rural communities of Akwa-Ibom State, Nigeria?

IRB Protocol: 27493

Principal Investigator: Abasiama-Arit Aniche, aaniche@ncsu.edu, +1 984-810-9246

Funding Source: None

NC State Faculty Point of Contact: Dr. Katherine McKee, kemckee@ncsu.edu, +1 919-513-2187

You are being asked to participate in a research study about how women can engage in leadership in agriculture and agripreneurship in rural communities of Akwa-Ibom State, Nigeria. Participation is strictly voluntary. You must be 18 years of age or older, reside in Akwa-Ibom State, and be a smallholder farmer and/or a small rural agribusiness owner to participate in this study.

If you participate in this study, you will be interviewed and observed in-person at your location, virtually via WhatsApp and Zoom, and in a focus group meeting in Uyo. The interview questions will center on the existing cultural norms and traditional beliefs of your community and how they affect you as a woman/man in agriculture, your on-farm and off-farm agricultural activities, your decision-making processes, and your involvement in leadership. These interviews will be recorded for transcription purposes, and you may choose not to participate if you feel uncomfortable with being recorded. During observations, the researcher will take notes and may take photographs with your permission. We will ask for verbal consent before taking any pictures.

You can choose to not participate in the study or stop participating at any time by sending an email to Abasiama-Arit Aniche, at aaniche@ncsu.edu or Dr. Katherine McKee, at kemckee@ncsu.edu. Please reference study number 27493.

Participants will be audio and video recorded or have their online activity recorded during the research activities. If you do not want this information collected, you cannot participate in this research. We would like to use these recordings for transcription only. We will keep these recordings until transcriptions have been verified. After all the data is collected, the researchers will review it and remove all identifiers. When the study is completed, we will permanently delete the recording.

There are minimal risks associated with your participation in this research. There are no direct benefits to you from participating in this research.

You will receive the sum of NGN [REDACTED] for participating in this research and NGN [REDACTED] as reimbursement for your transportation to and from the focus group meeting. In order to receive full compensation, you must complete all research activities.

If you have any questions about the research or how it is implemented, please contact the student researcher, Abasiama-Arit Aniche, at aaniche@ncsu.edu and +1 984-810-9246. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this research, Dr. Katherine McKee, at kemckee@ncsu.edu and +1 919-513-2187. Please reference study number 27493 when contacting anyone about this project.

Updated 6/11/24



If you have questions about your rights as a participant or are concerned with your treatment throughout the research process, please contact the NC State University IRB Director at IRB-Director@ncsu.edu, +1 919-515-8754, or [fill out a confidential form online at https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/compliance/research-compliance/irb/irb-forms-and-templates/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/](https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/compliance/research-compliance/irb/irb-forms-and-templates/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/)

If you consent to participate in this research study, please fill in your name and date below.

Yes, I want to be in this research study.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Interview 1

1. Please tell me about your community.
2. How would you describe the cultural norms and traditional beliefs established in your community?
 - a. What is the normal way people in your community behave?
 - b. What are the beliefs people in your community share or talk about?
3. Can you tell me about your roles in your household?
4. How do the norms and beliefs (discussed earlier) influence your roles in your household?
5. In what ways do they influence who gets to participate in decision-making in your household?
6. Are there norms and beliefs about who gets to do what on the farm and its related businesses?
 - a. What are some of the activities you undertake (on-farm and off-farm)?
 - b. How do women contribute to agricultural activities in your community, as a family or individually?
 - c. Approximately how much time do you spend on agricultural activities in a day?
 - d. In your opinion, who spends more time on agricultural activities, men or women?
(Give reasons for your answer)
7. In your opinion, what are some ways women contribute to agricultural activities? (List the activities)
8. In what ways do these norms and beliefs affect your participation in decision-making on the farm and its related businesses?

9. How do these norms and beliefs affect your choice of crops?
10. How do these norms and beliefs influence your access to inputs, e.g., land, loans, extension services, etc.?
 - a. What challenges do women face when contributing to agricultural activities?
 - b. Do women own land for carrying out agricultural activities?
 - i. If women own land, how do they acquire it?
 - ii. If women don't own land, what hinders them from owning land for agricultural activities?
 - c. Do women own implements for use in agricultural activities?

Ikpeghe Mbume Kiet

1. Mbok ndokọ mien mkpo bagha idung mbufo.
2. Akpe kappa die ubono mkpo ye ndutom eduwem abagha ke idung mbufo?
 - a. Nsido mme usung mme owo eduhu uwem ke obio mbufo?
 - b. Nsido mme eduwem mme owo enimme eyung etang ebangha ke obio mbufo?
3. Akpa akan andoko ubiong utom mfo ke ufok mfo?
4. Ndutom ye ubono mkpo (eke tanga ebanga) akpan die ubiong utom mfo ke ufok mbufo?
5. Nsuto usung ke mme ubiongo ami akpan mme ubiong ami akpana mme owo emi ekpe wuanake ke edi nie nsongonda iko ke ufok mbufo?
6. Mme aba ubono mkpo ye ndutom abanga owo emi anamde mkpo ke inwang ye mme mkpo abeheke mbubehe?
 - a. Nsido ubak edinam mfo asinamma (ke inwang ye idaha mme ubaha ke inwang)?
 - b. Nsido ndadnsin iban edate esin ke uto inwang ke idung mbufo nte afid ufok ye idem mfo ikpong?

- c. Ke nte idaha nkanika ifang ke asibiad ke utom uto inwang ke usen kiet?
 - d. Ke ekikere mfo, anie owo ibiad uwak ini ke utom uto inwang ke otu iden ye iban?
(nọ mme ntak ke iboro mfo).
7. Ke ekikere mfo, nsido mme usung iban esine uwam ke utom uto inwang? (siak mme uwam emi).
 8. Nsido mme usung eke ubono mkpo ye ndutom ufinna fien edikene nnie uyo ke inwang ye mbubehe afen?
 9. Mme ubono mkpo ye ndutom ufinna fien ke edi sio mme mkposib?
 10. Mme ubono mkpo ye ndutom ufinna fien ke edisinne mkpo uto inwang, uwot mkpo, isong, ewuot, ifiok uto inwang eke otogho mme edinam?
 - a. Nsido mme mfinna iban ekide ke edi kene nsin uwam ke utom uto inwang?
 - b. Mme iban enyie mme mkpo ke edikene nnam utom uto inwang?
 - (i) Mme iban enie isong, mmo enam die enie isong ami?
 - (ii) Sia iban mi iniehe isong, nso ikpan mmo edi nie isong ke abanga utom uto inwang?
 - c. Mme iban enie mkpoduho ekamake ke utom uto inwang?

Interview 2

1. Do women affiliate themselves as members of Agricultural Cooperatives or Farmers' Unions?
 - a. If they do, what are the benefits of being members of these associations, and do they receive these benefits?
 - b. If women are not members of Cooperatives or Farmers' Unions, what factors hinder women from joining these associations?

- c. How has membership in a cooperative/group/association enhanced your participation in leadership or the decision-making process?
2. Have you formed groups with other women related to agriculture?

Describe what you do in/with these groups.
3. What changes, do you think, will encourage women to take on formal leadership roles?
4. What would have to change for you to make a decision different from your husband or father?
5. How would your farm/business be different if you were to be the sole decision-maker?
6. Recommend some ways that can help women contribute fully to agricultural activities.
7. How would you describe the idea of food safety?
 - a. What strategies do you use to improve food safety in your home/business?
 - b. What has influenced the use/adoption of these strategies?
 - c. Do you carry out these food safety practices because your ancestors did it this way or because you have learned it is the right way to do it?
8. What do you understand by the term climate change?
 - a. What are the local impacts of climate change in your community/business?
 - b. How do you make decisions to mitigate climate change?
 - c. Do you carry out these agricultural practices because your ancestors did it this way or because you have learned it is the right way to do it?
9. If you could make all the decisions, what decision would you make because of the climate?
10. Can you tell me about anything else related to this conversation that I did not ask?

Ask for an impactful story about what has happened in their lives and how they would like it to be different for their daughters and granddaughters.

Ikpeghe Mbume Iba

1. Mme iban esin idem mmo nte kiet ke otu nka uto inwang ye udim mme oto iwang?
 - a. Kpro mmo enam ntro, nsidot udot mmo ediaha nte kiet ke otu nka oro, nko mme mmo esibo mme udot oro?
 - b. Kpro iban idoho inyungo isine ke otu mme nka uto inwang oro, nso mkpo ikpan iban ke ekene esine ke mme nka emi?
 - c. Afo ido kiet ke out mme nka, ebuho, ye udim awam fien ke nda iso, ye unie uyio idem mfon ke ndutom nkaiso?
2. Mme afo ame buk nka ye iban afen abeheke uto inwang?

Tang se afo anam ke ebuho ami/ye ebuho ami.
3. Nso ukpuhore, ke afo ekere, ayung asin ikpifak ano iban yak edad ubiong ndad usung?
4. Nso mkpo ikpi kpuhore yak afo anie uyio idem mfo aniehe ukpohore ye ebe mfo ye ette mfo?
5. Inwang ye mbubehe mfo akpande ado isio kpro afo akedo adaiso ke edi nim ntang nnim iko.
6. Nọ mme usung akemeke ediwam iban ekene esin uwam oyoho-oyoho ke utom uto inwang.
7. Afo atang so abangha ukama ndidia yak ofon ke ufok mfo ye mbubehe mfo.
 - a. Nso ido mme usung afo akamake edisin nkori ke ukama ndidia yak ofon ke ufok mfo ye ke mbubehe mfo.
 - b. Nsoo inekke ifina ke edikama ye edidad mme ikpifak ami.

- c. Afo ama se mkpo abangha ukpeb mkpo abanga ukama ndidia yak ofon sia mbon eset eke nam ke uto usung ami mme afo adikpeb edinam ke eti usung?
8. Adiongo die mkpo abangha ukpuho ndaha ini?
- a. Nsoo ido ikpifak esit idung ke ukpuho ndaha ini ke idung mbufo ye mbubehe mbufo?
- b. Afo amadie uyimme ke edinam ukpuho ndaha ini amanna osuho?
- c. Afo amenam utom utom uto inwang ami sia mbon eset mfo emake ekpangha ema enam ke uto usung ami mme sia afo amakpeb ate ke ado eti usung adinam anye?
9. Sia afo akpe kanna anim ndusuk iko, nso ndusuk iko ke akpenam ke ntak ukpuho ke mmi?
10. Afo akpa akan adoko mien mkpo abanga mkpokied mfen awanake nneme ami, ami mbe mbippe?
- Nso ido abukattip mbuk, atippe k eke uwem mfo ake muk u uyemme yak attippe ano ndito ye ndito ndito mfo iban?

Appendix D: Focus Group Protocol

1. How do women contribute to agripreneurship in your community, as a family or individually?
2. What are some ways women contribute to agripreneurship? (List the activities)
3. What challenges do women face when contributing to these activities?
 - a. Do women own land/facilities they use?
 - i. If they do, how do they acquire it?
 - ii. If they don't, what hinders them from acquiring these ...?
 - b. Do women own implements/machinery for use in agricultural activities?
4. What actions (if any) have the government or any government agencies taken to address these issues?
 - a. Do you think government policies support women in terms of facilitating their activities? And if they do, how does the government support these activities?
 - b. If government policies do not support women, what do you think the government needs to do to support women?
5. Do women affiliate themselves as members of Agricultural Cooperatives or Farmers' Unions?
 - a. If they do, what are the benefits of being members of these associations, and do they receive these benefits?
 - b. If women are not members of Cooperatives or Farmers' Unions, what factors hinder women from joining these associations?
 - c. How has membership in a cooperative/group/association enhanced your participation in leadership or the decision-making process?

6. Have you formed groups with other women related to agriculture/agripreneurship?

Describe what you do in/with these groups.

7. Recommend some ways that can help women contribute fully to agriculture and agripreneurship.

Mbume Ke Mboho

1. Akpan mbuho ibad ibad owo ntop nsin ammo ke ndutim uto inwang ke idung mfo, nte ufok mme owo kied?

2. Nso ido mme usung iban enoho ntopnsin ammo ke ndutom uto inwang (Siak mme adunam ammi)

3. Nsido mme ubiongo iban ekite ke adino ntop nsin iko ammo?

a. Mme iban enie isong ye mme mkpo utom ammo ekamake enam utom?

Akporo enie, mmo ekamadie?

Ammo miniehe, nsi ibiongho ammo adinie?

b. Iban enie mkpo unam inwang ye mme macin unam inwang?

4. Nso ubono mkpo akporo aba ke mme ukara ikpehe mbet enem ebana mkpo ami?

a. Afo amekerke ubono nkpo ukara anwam iban ke edi bene nkori utom ami?, akporo ammo enam, ukara enam die esin unwam eno mme nkpo utom ami?

b. Sia ubono mkpo ukara inwamma iban, nso ke afo akeree ke ukara ekpenam yak enwam iban?

5. Mme iban edian idem ammo nte nka uto inwang ukara konsin ediongode?

a. Akporo ammo edian, nso ido mme udod mmo ediaha enyung ebo ke out nka ami?

- b. Akporo iban idoho kiet ke otu mme nka ammi, nsido mkpo ubiongho iban etre adinie nka ami?
 - c. Afo adido kied ke out mme nka ami, unwam die ke afo edi da iso mme iko nsongho nda ke adinam?
6. Afo ame obob mme ebuhu ye nka iban efen anwamma utom uto inwang? tang mkpo banga se afo anam ke mme ebuhu ammi?
7. No mme usung ntop nsin akemeke edi nwam iban ke mbubehe utom uto inwang.