

ROLES OF WOMEN IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: A STUDY OF ESAN WEST
LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, EDO STATE, NIGERIA.

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Abstract

This study examined the role of women in community development in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. The study explored the areas in which women contribute to community development, their level of participation in decision-making processes, and the socio-cultural and economic factors influencing their involvement. The population consisted of women aged 18–65 actively involved in community activities across Esan West. A sample of 300 women was selected using purposive and simple random sampling techniques. Using a survey and interview approach, data were obtained from women actively engaged in community activities across the study area. Findings revealed that women play significant roles in education (mean = 3.72), healthcare (mean = 3.65), microfinance (mean = 3.81), and social cohesion (mean = 3.69). However, their participation in formal leadership and decision-making structures remains limited due to cultural norms ($\chi^2 = 18.34, p < 0.05$), restricted access to economic resources such as land and credit, and low representation in local governance. The study further established that women's economic empowerment significantly enhances their level of participation in community development initiatives. The study concludes that women are critical agents of grassroots development in Esan West, but their contributions remain constrained by structural and socio-cultural barriers. It therefore recommends the implementation of gender-sensitive policies, improved access to economic resources, and greater inclusion of women in community leadership and decision-making processes to enhance sustainable community development.

Keywords: Development, Community Development, Governance, Participation, Nigeria.

Introduction

Community development refers to the process through which members of a community collectively identify and address their social, economic, and environmental needs through participatory and sustainable efforts. In Nigeria, women have historically played significant roles in sustaining community life through their involvement in agriculture, trade, family care, and local social organizations. Despite these contributions, women's roles in development planning and leadership structures are often undervalued or insufficiently recognized (Mba, 2019). In Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State, a predominantly agrarian and culturally vibrant region, women actively participate in farming, trading, childcare, education, and community mobilization. However, while their activities contribute significantly to local development, the extent to which

these contributions translate into recognized influence and participation in formal development decision-making remains insufficiently examined.

At the global level, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 emphasizes gender equality and the full participation of women in leadership and development processes. Within Esan society, women play multiple roles as caregivers, educators, informal financial organizers through rotating savings groups, and custodians of cultural values. They also contribute to the growth of small and medium-scale businesses within their communities. However, despite these contributions, patriarchal social structures continue to shape access to key resources such as land ownership, political representation, and leadership positions (Igbineweka & Okojie, 2020). These limitations suggest that while women are active contributors to community development, their influence within formal governance and decision-making structures remains constrained.

Previous studies provide useful insights into women's development activities but also reveal important gaps. For example, Egharevba (2018) documented women's involvement in micro-enterprises and community health initiatives in Edo State, while Okonjo (2021) highlighted the role of women's groups in promoting education and resolving community conflicts. Although these studies acknowledge the contributions of women to grassroots development, they largely focus on general participation without critically examining the socio-cultural dynamics that shape women's influence in community leadership and development planning. Furthermore, limited research has specifically examined Esan West Local Government Area, a region characterized by distinct traditional governance structures such as the *Enijie* (kings) and the age-grade (*Edion*) system, which may influence women's participation in development processes.

In view of these gaps, this study examines the roles of women in community development in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State. Specifically, the study investigates women's contributions to community development, the challenges they face in participating fully in development initiatives, and the implications of these challenges for sustainable community development. Focusing on a specific locality with unique socio-cultural dynamics, the study provides contextually relevant insights that can support gender-inclusive development policies and planning at the community level.

Statement of the Problem

Women in Esan West Local Government Area, Edo State, are visibly engaged in a range of community development activities, including agriculture, trade, cooperative societies (Egbe Iyapele), and contributions to local infrastructure projects such as the construction and maintenance of health centers, schools, and markets. Despite this active participation, there exists a paradoxical gap between their substantial contributions and their minimal representation in formal decision-making structures that shape community development agendas. While it is broadly acknowledged that women are central to community life, the specific nature, scope, and impact of

their roles in Esan West remain empirically underexplored, leaving critical questions unanswered about the actual magnitude of their underrepresentation and its consequences.

The challenges constraining women's full participation are multifaceted and deeply interconnected. Cultural practices, including male-dominated inheritance systems and restricted access to land, systematically limit women's economic autonomy and capacity to initiate or lead development projects. These economic constraints are reinforced by their frequent exclusion from traditional governance bodies, such as village councils and age-grade (Edion) leadership structures, which are predominantly male preserves. Consequently, even when women contribute labor, resources, and local knowledge to community projects, their voices are marginalized when priorities are set and resources allocated. This exclusion is compounded by interrelated factors including lower formal educational attainment, economic dependency, and persistent socio-cultural stereotypes that define leadership and public decision-making as male domains. These barriers do not operate in isolation; rather, they form a reinforcing cycle where economic disempowerment justifies political exclusion, which in turn perpetuates economic dependency.

The critical gap, therefore, is not merely the existence of these barriers, but the lack of systematic evidence on how they specifically manifest and interact within the unique socio-cultural context of Esan West. Existing studies from broader Edo State contexts (e.g., Egharevba, 2018; Okonjo, 2021) provide useful but insufficient frameworks, as they do not account for the particular influence of local traditional institutions like the Enijie and the specific configurations of patriarchy in this locality. Without localized empirical data, it is impossible to accurately assess the scale of women's underrepresentation, understand the mechanisms that sustain it, or design targeted interventions that address root causes rather than symptoms. This knowledge gap perpetuates the risk that development planning in Esan West will continue to overlook a significant portion of its human capital, thereby undermining the effectiveness and sustainability of community progress.

If these persistent and interacting barriers remain unexamined and unaddressed, the potential for achieving inclusive and sustainable development in Esan West will be severely constrained. The community risks not only perpetuating gender inequality but also forfeiting the full range of women's perspectives, energies, and innovations essential for holistic social and economic advancement. This study, therefore, is motivated by the need to move beyond generalized claims by empirically investigating the specific roles women play, systematically analyzing the interacting factors that limit their participation, and generating context-specific evidence to inform strategies for more equitable and effective community development in Esan West Local Government Area.

Research Questions

- i. What is the level of women's participation in community development activities in Esan West Local Government Area?

- ii. What relationship exists between women's participation and the success of community development projects in Esan West?
- iii. To what extent do cultural norms influence women's involvement in community leadership and decision-making structures in Esan West?
- iv. What relationship exists between women's economic empowerment and their level of participation in community development in Esan West?

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the roles of women in community development in Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State.

The specific objectives are to:

- i. Determine the level of women's participation in community development activities in Esan West.
- ii. Examine the relationship between women's participation and the success of community development projects in Esan West.
- iii. Assess the influence of cultural norms on women's involvement in community leadership and decision-making structures in Esan West.
- iv. Evaluate the relationship between women's economic empowerment and their level of participation in community development in Esan West.

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 significance level:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between women's participation and the success of community development projects in Esan West.

H₀₂: Cultural norms do not significantly influence women's involvement in community leadership in Esan West.

H₀₃: Women's economic empowerment is not significantly related to their level of participation in community development in Esan West.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework combining Feminist Development Theory and the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model. Rather than presenting these theories in isolation, this section justifies their selection, explains their complementary relationship, and demonstrates how they will be systematically applied to guide data collection, variable identification, and analysis in the specific context of Esan West.

Feminist Development Theory, particularly as articulated by Moser (1993), provides the critical lens necessary for examining the structural dimensions of gender inequality in community development. This theory fundamentally challenges traditional, patriarchal development

paradigms that have historically rendered women's contributions invisible or secondary. Its core propositions include: (1) development interventions must address the practical and strategic gender needs of women; (2) women's agency—their capacity to act independently and make meaningful choices—is central to sustainable development; and (3) gender equity requires analyzing and transforming the institutional structures that perpetuate inequality. For this study, Feminist Development Theory directs analytical attention to the systemic constraints operating in Esan West, including customary land tenure systems that privilege male inheritance, exclusionary practices within traditional governance institutions (such as the *Enijie* councils and age-grade systems), and socio-cultural norms that define leadership as a male domain.

Complementing the critical orientation of Feminist Development Theory, the ABCD model, developed by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), provides a methodological framework for identifying and mobilizing existing community strengths. Unlike needs-based approaches that focus on deficiencies, ABCD emphasizes mapping and leveraging three categories of assets: (1) the skills, knowledge, and capacities of individuals; (2) the networks and associations formed by citizens; and (3) the resources available through formal institutions. This model is particularly suited to investigating women's roles in Esan West because it offers a systematic way to document the often-invisible resources women deploy in community development. These assets include women's indigenous agricultural knowledge, their participation in rotating savings associations (*esusu/asu*), their leadership within faith-based organizations and cooperative societies (*Egbe Iyapele*), and their informal networks for mobilizing labor and resources for community projects.

The integration of these two frameworks is not merely additive but analytically strategic. Feminist Development Theory establishes the critical parameters for investigation by identifying the systemic constraints that shape women's development participation in Esan West. It informs the selection of variables related to structural barriers, including land ownership patterns, representation in traditional councils, access to credit, and educational attainment. Simultaneously, the ABCD model provides the positive lens for recognizing and measuring women's agency and contributions within these constrained contexts. It guides the identification of variables related to women's assets, such as membership in cooperative societies, participation in informal savings groups, leadership roles in community associations, and involvement in specific development project. The analytical synthesis occurs at the intersection of these frameworks. Rather than treating constraints and assets as separate domains, this integrated approach examines how women in Esan West strategically deploy their assets to navigate, resist, or transform the structural barriers identified by feminist theory. For instance, the study will analyze how women's participation in *esusu* groups (an ABCD asset) may serve as an alternative financial mechanism in response to exclusion from formal credit systems (a feminist theory concern). Similarly, it will investigate

whether women's leadership in faith-based organizations provides a platform for influencing community decisions in ways that compensate for their exclusion from traditional councils.

The integration of these frameworks is specifically justified by the socio-cultural characteristics of Esan West. The region's strong traditional institutions (*Enjije* and age-grade systems) create particular forms of patriarchal governance that Feminist Development Theory is equipped to critique. Simultaneously, the region's rich tradition of women's cooperative societies, rotating savings groups, and kinship networks provides a dense landscape of assets that the ABCD model can systematically document. Neither framework alone would suffice: Feminist Development Theory without ABCD risks producing a deficit-focused narrative that overlooks women's agency, while ABCD without feminist critique may romanticize community assets without acknowledging the structural inequalities that limit their deployment. Together, they provide a comprehensive analytical toolkit for understanding both the constraints women face and the resources they mobilize in contributing to community development in Esan West.

Empirical Studies

Nwosu and Eze (2022) investigated women's participation in grassroots governance and its impact on local development projects in Anambra State. Using a mixed-methods case study of five communities, the study found that communities with higher rates of women in Town Union leadership had more successfully executed and maintained projects related to clean water, primary healthcare, and early childhood education. The study concluded that the inclusion of women in local governance structures is a critical correlate of effective and needs-sensitive community development.

Abdullahi and Shehu (2021) examined the role of women's micro-entrepreneurship cooperatives in poverty alleviation and community wealth creation in Kano State. Through surveys and focus group discussions with 150 women across 10 cooperatives, the study found that these groups not only increased household income but also collectively funded community sanitation drives and contributed to Islamic school (*Islamiyya*) scholarships. The study concluded that women's economic collectives serve as vital engines for both economic and social community development.

Akinboye and Iheanacho (2020) assessed the impact of women-led agricultural extension networks on food security and sustainable farming practices in Ondo State. Using a quasi-experimental design comparing villages with and without such networks, the study found that women effectively disseminated knowledge on crop rotation and organic pest control, leading to higher crop yields and improved family nutrition. The study concluded that women are pivotal knowledge brokers in promoting agricultural sustainability and community food security.

Okolo and Nwachukwu (2019) explored the role of women's associations in peacebuilding and post-conflict community reconstruction in Plateau State. Through in-depth interviews with

community leaders and members of women's groups, the study found that women were instrumental in mediating inter-ethnic disputes, providing psycho-social support to displaced persons, and initiating joint economic ventures to foster reconciliation. The study concluded that women play an indispensable, yet often undervalued, role in building social cohesion and resilient communities after violent conflict.

Bello and Yusuf (2023) analyzed the contribution of professional women's networks (e.g., medical, legal) to pro bono community development services in Lagos State. A survey of 200 professional women revealed that over 70% regularly volunteered skills through free medical outreaches, legal aid clinics, and vocational training for youths, filling gaps in public service delivery. The study concluded that the civic engagement of professional women constitutes a significant, skilled resource for human capital development in urban communities.

Ezeife and Onah (2018) studied the mobilization efforts of women in enforcing environmental sanitation laws and managing waste in Enugu urban communities. Using participant observation and interviews, the study found that women's vigilance and advocacy were more effective than formal government enforcement in ensuring compliance and maintaining public cleanliness. The study concluded that women are fundamental actors in grassroots environmental governance and urban livability initiatives.

Suleiman and Ibrahim (2021) investigated the role of mothers and female educators as primary agents in advocating for and supporting the girl-child's education in Sokoto State. A qualitative study involving community dialogues found that women formed monitoring committees to ensure school attendance and challenged early marriage norms through dialogue with traditional and religious leaders. The study concluded that women are the frontline defenders and promoters of educational development for future generations.

Alabi and Adesina (2022) evaluated the impact of women-led Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) on primary healthcare accessibility in rural Oyo State. The study, using a longitudinal approach, found that CBOs led by women were crucial in organizing immunization campaigns, operating drug revolving funds, and transporting pregnant women to health centers, significantly reducing child and maternal mortality rates. The study concluded that women's leadership in health CBOs is a vital determinant of community health outcomes.

Gwary and Pantami (2020) examined the influence of women in preserving indigenous knowledge and cultural practices for community-based tourism in Taraba State. The study documented how women's groups maintained traditional crafts, cuisines, and festivals, creating sustainable tourism models that generated income and preserved cultural heritage. The study concluded that women are key custodians of cultural capital that can be harnessed for sustainable economic community development.

Oladejo and Ahmed (2023) assessed the role of women in adapting to and mitigating the effects of climate change through community action in Delta State's coastal regions. The research found that women pioneered the formation of mangrove restoration collectives, adopted flood-resistant farming techniques, and established early-warning systems for floods, enhancing overall community resilience. The study concluded that women are innovative leaders in community-based climate adaptation, directly safeguarding livelihoods and environmental sustainability.

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining descriptive survey and qualitative case study designs. The population comprised women in Esan West LGA involved in community activities, estimated at 5,000. A sample of 300 women was selected using purposive and simple random sampling. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire titled *Women in Community Development Questionnaire (WCDQ)* and semi-structured interviews with 15 key informants, including female community leaders, local government officials, and representatives of women's groups. The questionnaire was validated by experts in gender studies, and reliability was confirmed with Cronbach's Alpha (0.83). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics (chi-square, mean scores) via SPSS version 25. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

Results and Discussion

Hypothesis One: There is no significant relationship between women's participation and the success of community development projects in Esan West.

Table 1: Chi-square Test of Relationship between Women's Participation and Project Success

Variables	χ^2	df	p-value	Decision
Participation vs. Success	24.67	4	0.000	Reject H_{01}

The chi-square analysis reveals a statistically significant association between women's participation and project success ($\chi^2 = 24.67$, $df = 4$, $p = 0.000$). This result leads to the rejection of Hypothesis One, confirming that the level of women's involvement in community initiatives is not independent of project outcomes. The significant chi-square value indicates that projects with higher levels of women's engagement are significantly more likely to be completed, sustained, and deemed successful compared to those with minimal female involvement. Therefore, women's participation is a critical non-random factor influencing development effectiveness.

Hypothesis Two: Cultural norms do not significantly hinder women's involvement in community leadership.

Table 2: Chi-square Test on Cultural Norms as a Barrier

Variables	χ^2	df	p-value	Decision
Cultural Norms vs. Leadership	18.34	3	0.000	Reject H₀₂

The chi-square analysis reveals a statistically significant association between prevailing cultural norms and constraints on women's leadership ($\chi^2 = 18.34$, $df = 3$, $p = 0.000$). This result leads to the rejection of Hypothesis Two, confirming that traditional gender roles and patriarchal structures are not independent of women's access to formal leadership positions. The significant chi-square value indicates that restrictive cultural norms are systematically linked to the underrepresentation of women in community decision-making roles, highlighting these norms as a significant barrier rather than a neutral background condition.

Hypothesis Three: Women's economic empowerment is not significantly related to their level of participation in community development.

Table 3: Correlation between Economic Empowerment and Participation

Variables	N	Mean	SD	r	p-value	Decision
Economic Empowerment	300	3.78	0.71	0.76	0.000	Reject H₀₃
Community Participation	300	3.65	0.68			

The correlation analysis reveals a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between women's economic empowerment and their level of community participation ($r = 0.76$, $p = 0.000$). This result leads to the rejection of Hypothesis Three. The high positive correlation coefficient indicates that as women's access to financial resources, income, and economic autonomy increases, their active involvement in communal activities, decision-making, and project implementation also increases substantially. This demonstrates that economic empowerment is a powerful enabler and predictor of women's civic and developmental engagement.

Qualitative Findings:

Thematic analysis of interview and focus group data provided rich, contextual depth to the quantitative results, revealing the specific domains and persistent constraints shaping women's community roles in Esan West. The findings confirm that women's agency is most visibly and effectively exercised through structured, often informal, collectives and grassroots initiatives. Their participation is predominant in four key areas: first, in microfinance and cooperative societies (e.g., *esusu* and farming cooperatives), which serve as critical platforms for economic pooling, risk-sharing, and funding small-scale community projects; second, in health outreach and child welfare, where women organize immunization drives, nutritional programs, and care for the

vulnerable, directly impacting public health metrics; third, in spearheading education and scholarship programs, where they advocate for school enrollment, provide remedial lessons, and mobilize resources for needy students; and fourth, as pivotal actors in informal conflict resolution and the organization of social events, where they mediate disputes and foster social cohesion, thereby maintaining community harmony.

However, this agency operates within a framework of significant systemic challenges. Participants consistently highlighted structural barriers that limit their impact and formal recognition. The foremost challenges include persistently limited access to land and formal credit, which constrains economic scalability and asset ownership. Furthermore, there is a stark underrepresentation in the Edion (elders') councils, the traditional seats of decision-making and customary authority, which excludes women from high-level community governance. Compounding these issues is the dual burden of domestic responsibilities and community work, a time-poverty challenge that often goes unacknowledged and unsupported. Together, these themes illustrate a dynamic where women are the de facto engines of practical development yet remain marginalized from formal power structures and resource control, a tension that defines their complex role in community development.

Discussion of Findings

The finding for Hypothesis One confirms that women's participation has a significant relationship with project success ($\chi^2 = 24.67$, $p < 0.000$). This implies that when women are actively involved in the planning, execution, and monitoring of community development initiatives from health and sanitation projects to educational and infrastructural programs the likelihood of the project achieving its goals and being sustained increases substantially. Their engagement ensures that projects are more attuned to local needs and benefit from broader community buy-in. This aligns with Nwosu and Eze (2022), who found that communities with women in town union leadership executed and maintained public projects more successfully, and Ezeife and Onah (2018), who demonstrated that women's direct agency in environmental sanitation management led to higher compliance and better public health outcomes, collectively confirming that women's participation is a critical determinant of effective and sustainable community development.

The finding for Hypothesis Two confirms that cultural norms remain a significant barrier to women's leadership ($\chi^2 = 18.34$, $p < 0.000$). This implies that despite their demonstrated efficacy, patriarchal structures, restrictive gender roles, and traditional expectations continue to limit women's access to formal leadership positions and decision-making platforms within the community. These norms constrain women's ability to translate their grassroots influence into recognized authority. This aligns with studies that highlight systemic constraints, such as Suleiman and Ibrahim (2021), who documented how cultural and religious norms specifically challenge women's advocacy for girl-child education, and Okolo and Nwachukwu (2019), whose work on

peacebuilding noted that women's crucial mediating roles often remain informal and undervalued by traditional power structures, confirming that deep-seated cultural attitudes are a persistent impediment to formalizing women's community leadership.

The finding for Hypothesis Three confirms that women's economic empowerment has a strong positive correlation with their level of community participation ($r = 0.76$, $p < 0.000$). This implies that when women have access to financial resources, income-generating opportunities, and cooperative economic networks, their capacity and confidence to engage in civic and developmental activities are significantly enhanced. Economic independence provides the material foundation and social leverage necessary for sustained and influential participation. This aligns with Abdullahi and Shehu (2021), who found that women's cooperatives in Northern Nigeria not only boosted household income but also funded community development projects, and Akinboye and Iheanacho (2020), who established that women with economic agency in agriculture became pivotal knowledge brokers for community-wide food security, collectively confirming that economic empowerment is a powerful catalyst for expanding women's role in community development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that women in Esan West, Edo State, are active and effective agents of community development, contributing substantially to social, economic, and educational advancements. However, their potential is constrained by entrenched cultural norms, economic disadvantages, and limited representation in decision-making spaces. For sustainable development to be achieved in Esan West, women's roles must be formally acknowledged, and gender-inclusive policies must be implemented.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Local Government Authorities should ensure that women are actively included in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of community development projects since the study found that women's participation significantly contributes to the success and sustainability of such projects.
- ii. Traditional rulers and community councils should review cultural practices and encourage the inclusion of women in community leadership and decision-making bodies such as the *Edion*, in order to reduce the barriers created by restrictive cultural norms identified in the study.
- iii. The Edo State Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development should design programs that promote gender-inclusive community development policies and strengthen women's cooperative associations in order to enhance their contributions to local development initiatives.

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