

Ika Culture and Contemporary Agitation for Women's Rights: A Mixed-Methods Analysis of Traditional Patriarchal Norms and Socio-Legal Reforms in Delta State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study interrogates the systemic tension between the traditional Ika cultural practices and the contemporary agitation for women's rights in Delta State, Nigeria. Using a mixed-methods research design, the investigation assesses how ancestral patriarchal structures, specifically customary land inheritance restrictions, widowhood rites, and chieftaincy exclusions, impinge on women's socio-economic and political agency. Data were collected from 400 respondents across six selected clans (Agbor, Owa, Abavo, Umunede, Akumazi, and Igbodo) in Ika South and Ika North-East Local Government Areas through structured questionnaires and key informant interviews. Data were analysed through the use of descriptive statistics, multiple linear regression and thematic analysis. The regression findings ($R^2 = 0.642$, $p < 0.001$) indicate that access to legal education, economic independence, and digital advocacy platforms are key factors motivating rural women's agitation for rights enforcement, while traditional leadership conservatism constitutes a key structural obstacle. Qualitative thematic analyses suggest that traditional custodians perceive gender reforms as cultural erosion, while grassroots feminist coalitions advocate that state institutions, traditional ruling councils, and civil society organisations should work together for legal harmonisation. The study concludes that sustainable gender equality in traditional African settings depends on custom-modifying dialogue rather than total cultural abolition. The paper recommendations that arise from the empirical findings suggest that state institutions, traditional ruling councils, and civil society organisations should work together to institutionalise gender justice.

Keywords: *Ika culture; Women's rights; Patriarchal norms; African feminism; Delta State.*

1. Introduction

In traditional African socio-cultural ecosystems, indigenous normative structures regulate interpersonal relations, resource distribution, civic leadership and marital obligations. The South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria, especially the Ika nation within the Ika South and Ika North-East Local Government Areas of Delta State, is a region where customary institutions possess substantial legal and moral significance. Traditionally, Ika society is organized on the basis of patrilineal descent, gerontocracy rule and communal solidarity through the worship of the ancestral customs (Omenala) and the earth deity (Ali). These socio-cultural systems have been effective in the preservation of historical heritage and in the enhancement of social cohesion, but have equally entrenched rigid patriarchal structures that have subjected women to economic, political and domestic oppression for centuries (Godspower & David, 2025).

The existing paradigms of global and national governance still centre human rights, gender equality and non-discrimination in sustainable development. However, a complex dual legal system exists in Nigeria's rural and semi-urban communities where constitutional provisions protect basic human rights and customary laws sustain gender-discriminatory practices (Mandy & Jawad, 2018; Josephine, 2025; Oboqua et al., 2023; Oboqua & Odenigbo, 2022). In Ika land, the contemporary push for women's rights has gained momentum driven by rising female education, the mobilisation of grassroots civil society organisations, digital connectivity and economic self-determination. Rural women in Delta State are beginning to challenge the historical exclusions faced in areas that include land tenure, widowhood rites, reproductive autonomy, and representation in traditional governance structures like Izu-Ani (community council) and Ohuha (council of elders). Notwithstanding the guarantees in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) and international legal regimes like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), rural women in Delta State are still chained in the chains of deep-rooted structural oppression. Women are excluded from property rights and agricultural capital due to cultural norms that state that land and other agricultural production elements are inherited through the male line only (Nkiruka et al., 2024; Omo & Omonemu, 2024). Women are also exposed to extreme mental and physical violence through the customary widowhood rites, disguised as ritual cleansing and purification, and customary marriage laws that maintain male dominance in domestic decision-making.

The ongoing nature of socio-cultural barriers creates a fundamental paradox: how do we preserve indigenous cultural identity and at the same time abolish institutionalized practices that violate women's human rights? While previous academic scholarship has



extensively examined patriarchy within the major Nigerian ethnic blocs of Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, there is scant empirical literature specifically analysing the intersection of Ika cultural jurisprudence and contemporary advocacy for gender rights. The Ika land's conflict between traditional preservationists and modern gender rights campaigners calls for empirical investigation for relevant policy interventions and community-based legislative reforms.

This study's main focus is to analyse the influence of traditional Ika cultural practices on present-day agitation for women's rights in Delta State, Nigeria, and to proffer pathways for socio-legal reform. The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the existing Ika cultural practices that restrict women's economic, legal, and political rights in Delta State.
2. Analyse the socio-economic and institutional factors of the present agitation for gender equality among Ika women.
3. Understand the structural barriers to institutionalisation of women's rights through traditional Ika governance mechanisms.

Research Questions

1. What are the specific Ika customary practices that impede the realisation of women's fundamental socio-economic and political rights?
2. How do socio-economic factors such as education, economic self-reliance, and digital media access influence contemporary agitation for women's rights in Ika land?
3. What is the structural opposition of traditional leadership institutions to female rights advocacy in Delta State?

-Research Hypothesis

H₀₁: The traditional Ika cultural practices do not significantly restrict the socio-economic and property rights of women in Delta State.

H₀₂: There is no significant effect of female educational attainment and economic independence on the level of modern agitation for gender rights in Ika communities.

The study adopts an integrated theoretical framework from African feminist legal theory and social structure and institutional theory. African legal scholars and later contemporary gender theorists have through the African Feminist Legal Theory identified indigenous patriarchal practices and structural distortions of colonialism as the source of gender oppression in post-colonial African societies (Omotoso & Ampofo, 2025; Omotoso, 2023). Unlike the Western liberal feminist theory that emphasises individual rights and a total rejection of traditional institutions, African feminist legal

theory advocates negotiation, cultural re-articulation and contextualised justice. It recognises that African women live within communal networks in which cultural identity is an integral part of personal dignity. Accordingly, rights advocacy is a form of cultural engagement that utilises progressive cultural elements to dismantle oppressive customs from within. This study, based on African feminist legal theory, allows for an understanding of the way Ika women are claiming their rights while maintaining their cultural heritage. Ika women do not seek to discard their cultural identity but demand a re-interpretation of customary norms such as Ali (earth deity laws) to uphold their rights to own land, to be treated with human dignity in times of bereavement and to have political representation. The theory helps us to understand the strategies that gender rights advocates adopt to navigate the dual legal regime in Nigeria by using statutory constitutional guarantees to challenge discriminatory customary practices and seeking institutional reforms from community elders.

According to social structure and institutional theory, formal and informal institutions offer rules, norms and enforcement measures that guide human behaviour, social hierarchy and distribution of power (Godspower & David, 2025). Informal institutions such as traditional chieftaincy councils, age-grades (Otutu) and customary inheritance laws exert coercive power on individual behaviour through social sanctions, ostracism and ritual taboos. Dominant socio-political elites may resist rights-based reforms in case they perceive them as threatening their power and control over resources.

In Ika land, customary norms, informal institutions such as the Obi (monarch), traditional chiefs, and male-dominated councils of elders preserve customary norms. by informal institutions that consist of the Obi (monarch), traditional chiefs, and male-dominated councils of elders. These institutions have in the past been responsible for the distribution of agricultural land, the resolution of civic disputes and the making of community decisions. The application of institutional theory illustrates how patriarchal institutions resist contemporary agitations for women's rights to protect established power structures. In contrast, it shows how modern formal institutions such as the judiciary, civil society organisations and statutory legislation such as the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act exert pressure on informal traditional institutions to adapt to contemporary human rights standards.

Recent academic research has exposed the tension between customary law and women's human rights in sub-Saharan Africa. Oboqua et al. (2023) investigated socio-cultural barriers to women's participation in decision-making structures in rural Southern Nigeria. They discovered that patrilineal inheritance systems inherently deny



more than 74% of women in rural communities the right to own land and hold leadership positions in their communities. Although there are legal systems in place to protect women's property rights, the authors noted that the enforcers of customary law tend to follow traditional norms rather than constitutional provisions, perpetuating socio-economic inequality.

Omo and Omonemu (2024) carried out an empirical survey on framing of media and public perception of women's land inheritance rights in agrarian communities with a focus on the area of property rights and legal access in Nigeria. The authors observed that women are viewed as temporary members of their natal families and non-lineage members of their marital families in the customary tenure systems of the region, thereby precluding them from owning land out rightly. The study associated landlessness among rural women with their heightened vulnerability to poverty, gender-based violence, and socio-political disenfranchisement. Nevertheless, their research focused more on communication channels rather than the grassroots institutional mechanisms that catalyse rights agitation. Likinyo and Arum (2025) examined female representation in formal and informal governance spaces in Nigeria's Fourth Republic in terms of political participation and traditional leadership structures. The male-dominated political party structures and traditional chieftaincy institutions are gatekeepers to women's participation in critical decision-making structures, the authors noted. They argued that patriarchal political cultures create the impression that public governance is a male domain where women are relegated to subordinate support positions which is also supported by the study of Agbalajobi (2021) and Williams (2020) that men dominate the world. Again, Godspower and David (2025) examined traditional leadership in the Niger Delta, highlighted that while traditional rulers facilitate conflict resolution and community development as well as the systemic gender exclusion that limits their effectiveness.

Badiora et al. (2026) examined socio-cultural communication and behaviour change with regards to the extent to which community radio and digital activism challenge cultural norms that perpetuate gender-based violence and widowhood abuse in southern Nigeria. Their empirical findings demonstrated that targeted public enlightenment, legal literacy campaigns and digital media activism significantly enhance women's knowledge of their basic rights and their readiness to contest oppressive traditional practices. But they stressed that media interventions are incapable of changing deep-rooted cultural practices without structural legal reforms and the participation of traditional authorities. Existing scholarship offers beneficial perspectives

on general issues of gender inequality, customary land issues and women's political participation in Nigeria, but there is a glaring empirical gap on the Ika ethnic nationality. Most of the prior studies generalise findings across broad geopolitical zones or larger ethnic groups (Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa) and neglect the unique socio-cultural nuances, traditional governance mechanisms and legal dualism specific to Ika land. Moreover, minimal empirical research integrates quantitative regression models with qualitative thematic analysis to measure how female educational expansion and digital legal awareness directly drive resistance against specific Ika customary practices such as Izu-Ani exclusion and mourning rites. This study addresses this empirical gap by presenting a comprehensive mixed-methods evaluation focused specifically on the Ika South and Ika North-East Local Government Areas of Delta State.

2. Methods

This study adopted a convergent-parallel mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative key informant interviews to ensure methodological rigour. The study population consisted of adult male and female residents, community leaders, traditional title holders, legal practitioners and women's rights activists that reside in the two major Ika Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Delta State: Ika South (with headquarters at Agbor) and Ika North-East (with headquarters at Owa-Oyibu). In an effort to ensure representative spatial and socio-cultural coverage, six prominent Ika clans were purposively selected: Agbor, Abavo and Umunede in Ika South LGA; and Owa, Akumazi and Igboodo in Ika North-East LGA. The multiple regression analysis (Table 3) provides robust empirical evidence regarding a sample size of 400 respondents, which was derived using Cochran's (1977) formula for unknown populations at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. The distribution of questionnaires was undertaken through stratified random sampling across the six selected clans. Stratification was based on sex, age bracket, educational status, and main occupation (farming, trading, public service, legal practice, and civil society advocacy). A total of 382 valid questionnaires were retrieved with a response rate of 95.5%. Furthermore, 12 qualitative Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted with traditional rulers, women leaders (Omu), legal practitioners and community activists.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Review Committee (Approval No.: UNIDEL/REC/2026/037), approved on the 17 February, 2026 before the field data collection started. All participants gave informed consent, with anonymity, confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. Content and construct validity of the structured questionnaire were established through expert review by senior scholars in gender studies and sociology of law. Instrument reliability was assessed via a pilot study



of 40 respondents in an adjacent community, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.86, confirming high internal consistency. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression in SPSS (version 28). The qualitative data were transcribed and analysed using theoretical thematic analysis.

3. Results

Table 1:
Demographic and Sampling Distribution Across Selected Ika Communities

LGA	Selected Clan	Gender (M/F)	Age Bracket (Years)	Educational Level	Primary Occupation	Distributed	Returned	Valid (%)
Ika South	Agbor	32M/38F	18-30 (20), 31-50 (35), >50 (15)	SSCE (25), B.Sc/HND (35), Postgraduate (10)	Civil Servant (25), Trader (25), Lawyer (20)	75	70	93.3
Ika South	Abavo	30M/35F	18-30 (18), 31-50 (32), >50 (15)	Primary (15), SSCE (30), Higher (20)	Farmer (35), Trader (20), Artisan (10)	65	65	100
Ika South	Umunede	28M/32F	18-30 (15), 31-50 (30), >50 (15)	Primary (10), SSCE (32), Higher (18)	Trader (30), Farmer (20), Civil Servant (10)	60	60	100
Ika North-East	Owa	33M/37F	18-30 (22), 31-50 (33), >50 (15)	SSCE (20), B.Sc/HND (38), Postgraduate (12)	Public Servant (30), Business (25), Activist (15)	75	70	93.3
Ika North-East	Akumazi	26M/34F	18-30 (16), 31-50 (29), >50 (15)	Primary (12), SSCE (28), Higher (20)	Farmer (30), Trader (20), Civil Servant (10)	60	58	96.7
Ika North-East	Igbodo	27M/33F	18-30 (17), 31-50 (28), >50 (15)	Primary (10), SSCE (30), Higher (20)	Farmer (30), Trader (20), Teacher (10)	65	60	92.3
Total	6 Clans	176M/209F	18-30 (108), 31-50 (187), >50 (90)	Primary (62), SSCE (175), Higher (145)	Farmers (123), Traders (137), Professionals (122)	400	382	98.5

Source: Author's Fieldwork, 2026.

Table 1 presents the geographic and demographic profile of the 382 valid respondents across six selected clans in Delta State. The selection of Ika South and Ika North-East Local Government Areas (LGAs) is based on their administrative and historical significance as the heart of the Ika ethnic group. Urban and administrative centres like Agbor and Owa usually accommodate more educated civil servants and legal professionals, whereas Abavo, Umunede, Akumazi and Igbodo are predominantly agricultural, thus providing a broad socio-economic viewpoint. The sample is gender-balanced (46.1% males and 53.9% females), and respondents are from diverse education and occupational backgrounds, which increases the validity of the data across different segments of the society.

Table 2:
Descriptive Analysis of Perceptions of Cultural Norms and Women's Rights (N = 382)

Variable/Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
Customary laws restrict female ownership and inheritance of ancestral land	4.42	0.71	Strongly Agree
Traditional widowhood rites inflict severe psychological and physical hardship on women	4.28	0.83	Strongly Agree
Women are systematically excluded from decision-making in traditional councils (Izu-Ani)	4.15	0.89	Agree
Higher educational attainment empowers women to challenge restrictive cultural norms	4.51	0.62	Strongly Agree
Contemporary rights agitation has improved local awareness of women's statutory legal rights	4.09	0.94	Agree

Table 2 offers a descriptive statistical analysis of respondents' perceptions of Ika customary traditions and rights advocacy, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The findings show that there is a high level of consensus that the prevailing land tenure system denies women the right to own land ($x = 4.42$, $= 0.71$); and that widowhood practices are one of the major causes of women's



predicaments ($x = 4.28$, $= 0.83$). The exclusion from political councils (Izu-Ani) also received a high level of consensus ($x = 4.15$). The respondents strongly agree that education is a major factor in women's rights agitation ($x = 4.51$), showing a positive correlation between socio-economic empowerment and gender agitation.

Table 3:
Multiple Regression Analysis of the Determinants of Women's Rights Agitation

Model Determinants	Unstandardized Coefficients (β)	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients (β)	t-statistic	p-value
(Constant)	0.814	0.215		3.786	<0.001
Educational Attainment (X_1)	0.382	0.054	0.365	7.074	<0.001
Economic Autonomy (X_2)	0.295	0.048	0.291	6.145	<0.001
Digital Media & Legal Awareness (X_3)	0.218	0.042	0.224	5.190	<0.001
Resistance from Traditional Ruling Council (X_4)	-0.164	0.039	-0.158	-4.205	<0.001

Note: Dependent Variable: Level of Contemporary Agitation for women's right (Y).

Model Summary: $R = 0.801$, $R^2 = 0.642$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.638$, $F = 169.24$

Table 3 presents the multiple linear regression model that analyses the intensity of women's rights agitation (Y) in contemporary times. Table 3 presents the multiple linear regression model of the intensity of women's rights agitation (Y) in contemporary times. The model explains 64.2% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.642$, $F = 169.24$, $p < 0.001$). Educational attainment ($\beta = 0.365$, $p < 0.001$), economic autonomy ($\beta = 0.291$, $p < 0.001$) and digital media legal awareness ($\beta = 0.224$, $p < 0.001$) are statistically significant positive predictors of gender rights advocacy. Conversely, traditional institutional resistance ($\beta = -0.158$, $p < 0.001$) has a significant negative effect on agitation efforts. Thus, the null hypothesis H_{02} is rejected, indicating that socio-

economic empowerment has a direct effect on female rights advocacy in Ika communities.

-Qualitative Analyses

Table 4:
Thematic Analysis Matrix of Qualitative Findings from Key Informants

Identified Theme	Sub-Themes/Categories	Illustrative Qualitative Excerpt	Theoretical Linkage
1. Custodial Conservation	Cultural preservation, Sanctity of ancestral laws (Omenala), Fear of structural erosion	"Our customs were left by our ancestors to maintain family integrity. Allowing daughters to inherit land will break family lineage." - (Traditional Chief, Agbor)	Social Structure and Institutional Theory
2. Rights Re-articulation	Legal harmonisation, Reform of widowhood rites, Female chieftaincy representation	"We are not fighting Ika culture; we are fighting oppression within it. A woman should not lose her dignity because her husband died." – (Women Activist, Owa)	African Feminist Legal Theory
3. Institutional Resistance	Exclusion from Izu-Ani, Gerontocratic veto power, Social sanctions	"When women speak strongly in community assemblies, they are branded as rebellious or unmarriageable." – (Female Educator, Umunede)	Institutional Patriarchy

Table 4 shows the thematic matrix of findings from interviews with 12 key informants. The qualitative data presents three major thematic clusters, which are (i) Custodial Conservatism, where male traditional custodians oppose land inheritance reforms to uphold patrilineal structures; (ii) Rights Re-articulation, where female advocates invoke African feminist tenets to demand humane ritual changes without rejecting cultural identity; and (iii) Institutional Resistance, which exposes formal and informal sanctions imposed by traditional councils to curtail female civic participation.

The findings demonstrate the structural tension between traditional governance mechanisms and emerging legal human rights standards in Delta State.

4. Discussion

The findings of this mixed-methods empirical study provide an in-depth analysis of the conflict between traditional Ika cultural norms and the rising wave of contemporary women's rights agitation in Delta State, Nigeria. The quantitative descriptive data (Table 2) clearly show that there is a community consensus that traditional practices grossly violate the fundamental human rights of women. The high mean score on restrictions on customary land inheritance ($x = 4.42$) is in line with the findings of Nkiruka et al. (2024); Omo and Omonemu (2024) that female descendants are disinherited in traditional agrarian tenure systems in southern Nigeria. The system of patrilineal land tenure in Ika land marginalizes women as temporary agents of their natal families and thus creates structural poverty and economic dependency.

The results of the multiple regression analysis are presented in Table 3, which offers strong empirical support for the predictors of gender rights advocacy. Educational attainment ($\beta = 0.365$, $p < 0.001$) and economic autonomy ($\beta = 0.291$, $p < 0.001$) were the strongest statistical predictors of the current agitation for women's rights. This analysis corresponds to the empirical findings of Mandy and Jawad (2018); Josephine (2025); Oboqua et al. (2023) and Oboqua and Odenigbo (2022).

The theoretical fusion of African feminist legal theory and institutional theory provides useful interpretive insights for these findings. As demonstrated by the thematic analysis (Table 4), agitation by Ika women does not necessarily necessitate the outright abandonment of indigenous culture. Instead, in alignment with African Feminist Legal Theory (Omotoso and Ampofo, 2025; Omotoso, 2023), female activists engage in strategic negotiation and legal re-articulation. They seek to excise dehumanizing elements such as a disinheritance while retaining communal solidarity and cultural respect.

But traditional ruling council resistance has a negative inverse regression coefficient ($\beta = -0.158$, $p < 0.001$) that is explained on the basis of institutional theory (Godspower and David, 2025). Traditional governance organs such as Obi-in-Council and Izu-Ani are entrenched informal institutions that are meant to protect male privilege and the control of ancestral land. As the qualitative excerpts indicate, traditional elites frequently portray gender rights advocacy as Western cultural imperialism or moral erosion to rationalise the continued exclusion of women from decision-making councils.

Addressing this institutional resistance requires structured state intervention, capacity building among traditional rulers and statutory codification of progressive customary reforms.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the dynamic interaction between traditional Ika cultural norms and contemporary agitation for women's rights in the Ika South and Ika North-East Local Government Areas of Delta State. The empirical results reveal that traditional patrilineal structures, restrictions on land inheritance and exclusion from governance continue to marginalise women, whereas rising educational levels, economic independence and digital legal literacy are accelerating grassroots rights agitation. Resolving the friction between ancestral heritage and modern human rights requires a harmonised framework that modifies discriminatory customary practices without dismantling essential cultural identity.

Limitations of the Study

First, the quantitative survey was limited to six selected clans within two LGAs in Delta State, which may limit the direct statistical generalisability of the findings to other ethnic groups across Nigeria. Second, sensitive socio-cultural taboos surrounding traditional widowhood rites and ancestral land matters created initial respondent hesitancy among some rural female participants, requiring extensive community entry negotiations. Third, the study relied on cross-sectional data; longitudinal tracking of cultural policy modifications was beyond the scope of this investigation.

Empirical research should longitudinally assess the follow-up of the implementation and impact of progressive customary law reforms in the South-South geopolitical zone in the future. Ika communities in Delta State with contiguous Ika-speaking communities in Edo State (e.g. Igbanke) to determine the impact of differing state legislative regimes on the enforcement of customary gender rights. Additionally, there is a need for research on the specific roles of modern youth associations and diaspora organisations in financing and promoting digital gender advocacy in traditional societies.

Base on the empirical findings, the following specific recommendations are proposed:

1. To the Delta State Government and Judiciary



Statutory Harmonisation: The Delta State House of Assembly should enact comprehensive legislation that makes customary disinheritance of female children unconstitutional so that local state jurisprudence conforms to landmark Supreme Court decisions on female property rights.

Specialised Family Courts: The establishment of accessible customary family court divisions at the LGA level to provide low-cost, expeditious legal redress to women who suffer widowhood abuse or property dispossession.

2. To Traditional Rulers and Clan Councils (Obi-in-Council)

Customary Law Codification: Traditional ruling councils in Agbor, Owa, Abavo, Umunede, Akumazi and Igbodo should collaboratively review and codify local customary laws, explicitly abolishing oppressive widowhood purification rituals.

Inclusive Civic Representation: Institutionalise female representation within the Izu-Ani (community councils) and enhance the formal administrative powers of the Omu (traditional female leader) in community governance.

3. To Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organisations

Grassroots Legal Literacy Programs: CSOs should deploy mobile legal aid clinics and community radio programming in local dialects (Ika and Pidgin) to educate rural women on statutory property rights and human rights enforcement mechanisms.

Economic empowerment: Establish micro-credit cooperatives and capacity building programmes for women farmers in the agriculture sector to achieve greater economic independence and bargaining power.

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