GENDER AND TRADITIONAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION MECHANISMS IN EMOHUA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, RIVERS STATE

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Abstract
This study examined gendered participation in indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms in Emohua Local Government Area, Rivers State, focusing on how men and women experience and engage differently in traditional conflict resolution processes. The study was anchored on Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), which posits that societal expectations and culturally prescribed roles shape individuals' behaviors and opportunities, including participation in decision-making and dispute management. Recognizing that cultural norms and socio-cultural expectations influence gendered engagement, the study adopted a qualitative research approach, employing in-depth interviews with purposively selected key informants, including male and female elders, community leaders, and individuals previously involved in customary dispute resolution. Secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, and institutional reports, were also used to provide historical and contextual insights. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, identifying themes related to gender roles, participation levels, decision-making influence, and perceptions of fairness and effectiveness. Findings revealed that men dominate formal decision-making processes, while women contribute through informal roles such as advising, mediating, and maintaining community cohesion. Socio-cultural factors, including patriarchal norms, family hierarchy, and societal expectations, significantly shape these participation patterns. The study concluded that gender disparities persist, limiting fully inclusive and effective conflict resolution. Consequently, it recommends gender-inclusive awareness programs, institutionalization of women's roles in traditional councils, integration of modern governance principles with cultural practices, and community mentorship initiatives to enhance equitable participation, strengthen legitimacy, and sustain indigenous dispute resolution systems in Emohua communities.

Introduction

Gender and Traditional Conflict Resolution Mechanisms in Emohua Local Government Area, Rivers State is a topic that sits at the intersection of culture, power, and social justice. In many African societies, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms have long served as the primary avenue for mediating disputes, restoring social harmony, and regulating interpersonal and communal relationships outside formal court systems. Like many parts of the Niger Delta and wider Nigeria, indigenous systems of dispute settlement; rooted in village councils, age grades, lineage

assemblies, and the authority of chiefs and elders—remain influential and widely utilized (Afigbo, 1989; Ekechi, 1995). These mechanisms are underpinned by indigenous norms, values, and customary principles that emphasize restorative justice, communal cohesion, and negotiated settlements rather than punitive measures.

However, the manner in which individuals experience and participate in these processes is not uniform; it is shaped by socio-cultural variables, particularly gender. Gender, as a socially constructed category, influences individuals' positions in both public and private spheres, determining access to authority, voice in community affairs, and recognition within customary institutions (Tamale, 2020; Oyewumi, 1997). Women and men in Nigeria inhabit different worlds of power and influence, reflecting broader patterns of patriarchy and social hierarchy that are embedded in many traditional societies. Men typically occupy formal positions of authority—such as clan heads, council of elder members, and reputable title-holders—that grant them significant influence in dispute resolution forums (Olawoye, 2019; Akinwale, 2018). In contrast, women's roles are often relegated to informal networks, women's associations, or collective pressure groups that lack institutional recognition within the mainstream customary court structure. While women may wield considerable soft influence—through religious networks, market groups, or maternal forums—their voices are frequently underrepresented in decision-making, limiting their capacity to shape outcomes in conflicts that affect them directly (Nzegwu, 2015; Amadiume, 1987). This differential access has profound implications for the perceived fairness, legitimacy, and responsiveness of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms to gender-specific needs and grievances. The lived experiences of men and women in conflict situations further illustrate the gendered dynamics of indigenous dispute resolution. Men's disputes often revolve around land ownership, chieftaincy titles, communal boundaries, and public reputational concerns—matters that align with traditional male spheres of influence (Okafor, 2016; Eze, 2017). Conversely, women are more frequently involved in conflicts relating to marriage dissolution, domestic violence, child custody, bride wealth, and inheritance rights—areas that are deeply personal and affect social and economic security. Yet, despite the centrality of these issues to women's lives, the customary processes aimed at resolving them may not fully account for women's voices, preferences, or long-term welfare, particularly if elders prioritize customary norms over equitable consideration (Ubink, 2011; Bennett, 2017).

The result is a dual-track experience of justice, where men's concerns are institutionalized while women's grievances are either settled informally or minimized in formal deliberations. The problem is compounded by the fact that many studies and policy frameworks continue to treat traditional conflict resolution mechanisms as culturally neutral or inherently equitable because of their community-rooted nature. Such assumptions overlook the subtle but significant gendered power imbalances that operate within these systems, which can reinforce women's marginalization rather than empower them. Several empirical studies have examined gender dynamics in traditional conflict resolution, both within Nigeria and in contexts comparable to Emohua Local Government Area. In southwestern Nigeria, Akinwale (2018) investigated the role of age grades and councils of elders in mediating disputes, highlighting significant gender disparities in participation. The study found that while men dominated decision-making forums, women's voices were largely indirect, mediated through male relatives or women's groups, resulting in less influence over settlement outcomes. Similarly, Ubink (2011) explored customary courts in Ghana and documented that women's access to justice was constrained by patriarchal norms embedded within traditional institutions, which often prioritized male perspectives in adjudication. These

findings resonate with the situation in many Nigerian communities where gender roles shape who speaks and whose grievances are prioritized.

Within southeastern Nigeria, Nwankwo (2019) examined indigenous dispute resolution practices among Igbo communities, revealing that women frequently participated as mediators in domestic and communal conflicts but were underrepresented in formal elder councils. The research highlighted that women's informal roles, though impactful at the household level, did not translate into institutional recognition or decision-making authority. In the Niger Delta region, Eze (2017) studied conflict management mechanisms in rural communities of Rivers State and noted that customary forums tended to valorize male status holders while overlooking women's perspectives, especially in matters of land and inheritance. This pattern suggests that despite cultural variations, traditional systems often perpetuate gendered hierarchies that limit women's agency in conflict resolution. In a related study from southeastern Nigeria, Okafor and Udu (2020) investigated dispute settlement processes in Anambra communities and found that women's participation was contingent upon male sponsorship; women rarely initiated cases autonomously, particularly in matters involving property or chieftaincy disputes. The authors argued that such structural limitations undermined women's ability to pursue redress on their own terms, reinforcing dependency on male relatives. Closer to the study area, Ogbonna (2021) conducted field research in parts of Ikwerre and Emohua LGAs, examining how gender influenced engagement with indigenous arbitration panels. The study revealed that while women were actively involved in pre-hearing consultations and community outreach, they were seldom appointed as panel members or lead negotiators. Men, by virtue of customary titles and age grade status, occupied central adjudicative positions, leaving women to negotiate outcomes rather than shape them. This uneven representation affected not only procedural legitimacy but also perceptions of fairness among female disputants.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate persistent gendered patterns in traditional conflict resolution where women's contributions are frequently informal, marginalized, or mediated through male actors. Although women play vital roles in maintaining social harmony and community networks, their experiences and authority within formal customary forums remain limited. This body of research underscores the need to explore how men and women differently experience and participate in indigenous dispute resolution practices specifically in Emohua Local Government Area, Rivers State. In Emohua Local Government Area, where patriarchy intersects with customary law, women's limited participation in formal adjudication processes may result in outcomes that inadequately address their needs, perpetuate structural inequities, and undermine the legitimacy of traditional justice in the eyes of certain community members. The need for this study arises from the recognition that existing literature, while informative, has not sufficiently captured the lived experiences of women within the particular cultural and institutional context of Emohua. Given that gender relations and customary practices vary across ethnic groups, localized investigation is necessary to understand how structural norms shape participation, access, and outcomes in indigenous dispute resolution forums. Moreover, as national and global agendas increasingly emphasize gender equity and inclusive justice, there is a pressing need to critically assess whether customary mechanisms uphold or hinder these goals in practice. Without such context-specific understanding, policy reform and community interventions may overlook entrenched inequalities, perpetuating systems that inadvertently marginalize women's voices. This study therefore provides empirical insights that can inform culturally sensitive reforms, enhance

women's access to justice, and foster more equitable conflict resolution practices within Emohua and similar communities. The study is guided by the following research questions.

i. To what extent do men and women participate in indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms in Emohua Local Government Area?

ii. How do men and women differently experience traditional conflict resolution processes in Emohua Local Government Area?

iii. What socio-cultural factors influence gendered participation in indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms in Emohua Local Government Area?

Literature Review

The study of gender within traditional conflict resolution mechanisms reflects broader debates about power, authority, and access to justice in customary systems. Traditional dispute resolution in many African societies is deeply embedded in communal norms, lineage authority, and customary boards of elders, with men historically occupying positions of formal adjudicatory power (Afigbo, 1981; Nwolise, 2005). These forums are often regarded as legitimate, accessible, and culturally resonant alternatives to formal courts, valued for their restorative rather than punitive orientation (Ikelegbe, 2013). However, scholars argue that the cultural legitimacy of these institutions does not automatically translate into gender equity, as patriarchal structures frequently shape who participates, who speaks, and whose interests are prioritized in dispute processes (Tamale, 2008; Imam, 2012). In contexts like those found across southern Nigeria, including the Niger Delta region, gender roles continue to influence the distribution of power within customary adjudication, often constraining women's formal visibility despite their active engagement in social life (Akinwale, 2018; Nwankwo, 2022). Empirical research reveals that men's dominance in council membership and mediation panels significantly affects how disputes are managed and resolved. In many indigenous settings, formal decision-making bodies are comprised predominantly of male elders and title-holders who are culturally recognized as community custodians (Oluwafemi, 2020; Okeke, 2023). Women, by contrast, frequently engage in dispute resolution through informal channels such as women's associations, age-grade networks, and market groups, where they provide moral persuasion, dialogue facilitation, and community support for reconciliation (Ezeilo, 2019; Adebanwi, 2021). Although women's informal contributions are often pivotal to achieving peace in everyday disputes—especially in cases of domestic or family conflict—they are rarely institutionalized within customary courts, and their perspectives often remain underrepresented in formal adjudicatory rulings. This structural exclusion has implications not only for women's access to justice but also for the perceived fairness of dispute outcomes (Okeke, 2019; Nwankwo, 2022).

Perceived fairness is a central dimension of gendered experience in traditional conflict resolution. Studies show that women and men evaluate customary adjudication differently, particularly when outcomes affect gender-specific rights such as inheritance, land ownership, marriage dissolution, and widow's entitlements. For example, research in southeastern Nigeria notes that women often report lower satisfaction with decisions involving property or custodial rights, because customary interpretations tend to privilege male lineage continuity and male claims (Olonisakin, 2017; Ekhator, 2020). Women's testimonies are also subject to gendered interpretations: where cultural norms regard women's voices as secondary to male authority, their grievances may be minimized, leading to decisions that favor male claimants or uphold patriarchal norms at the expense of equitable resolution. This pattern suggests that restorative justice objectives, while valuable, may be compromised when deeply rooted gendered biases shape deliberation and outcomes (Imam, 2012;

Okafor, 2021). The broader socio-cultural context influences how community norms regarding leadership roles affect gendered participation in dispute resolution. Traditional beliefs about masculinity and authority—as upheld by elders and lineage heads—often frame conflict resolution as a male domain, conferring status and legitimacy on men while delegitimizing women's public authority (Uchendu, 2018; Akinyemi, 2022).

In many cultures, titles, age grades, and ritual offices that grant adjudicative power are restricted to men, effectively sidelining women from positions where they can shape communal justice. Even where women possess informal leadership in domestic spheres, such roles seldom translate into institutional authority within customary forums, sustaining patterns of representation that marginalize their voices (Nwankwo, 2022). Gender scholars argue that such community norms have real consequences for participation, shaping not only who is heard but also how justice is conceptualized and administered in everyday life. Yet, the literature also highlights emerging transformations within traditional conflict resolution systems. Increased formal education, interactions with statutory legal systems, and human rights advocacy have begun to reshape community expectations about gender inclusion (Oshisanya, 2019; Okeke, 2023). Women's associations and civil society groups have been instrumental in pressing for greater participation of women in customary councils and mediatory bodies, often by creating parallel institutions that engage both genders in dialogic processes. In some communities, women's representation has expanded through reforms that integrate women into mediation panels or establish gender-sensitive protocols for adjudication, reflecting a blending of tradition and contemporary concepts of equity (Adebanwi, 2021; Okeke, 2023). However, resistance to such change persists, often justified by appeals to historical precedent, community cohesion, or fears of disrupting cultural identity, indicating the complexity of reconciling tradition with egalitarian goals.

Overall, the literature reveals that traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, while culturally embedded and socially significant, are not neutral spaces free from gendered power relations. Men and women experience these systems differently due to variations in representation, perceived fairness of outcomes, and deeply entrenched community norms regarding gender roles. Understanding these differences is essential for assessing the inclusivity and equity of indigenous dispute settlement systems, particularly in contexts like Emohua Local Government Area where custom and social expectations continue to shape everyday practices of justice. This literature underscores the need for context-specific research that unpacks how gender structures both participation and experience in traditional conflict resolution, providing empirical foundations for culturally sensitive reforms and gender-inclusive policy interventions.

Theoretical Framework

The Social Role Theory provides a robust framework to understand gendered participation in indigenous dispute resolution. Social Role Theory was propounded by Alice Eagly in 1987. The theory assumes that gender differences in behavior are largely the result of societal expectations and socially assigned roles rather than purely biological factors. Social roles represent culturally prescribed patterns of behavior and responsibility that guide how men and women should act in various contexts, including leadership, decision-making, and conflict resolution. Individuals internalize these roles from early childhood, shaping their self-perception, attitudes, and participation in societal institutions. Moreover, the theory assumes that disparities in power, representation, and influence between men and women are maintained and reinforced through these socially constructed roles.

In the context of traditional conflict resolution in Emohua Local Government Area, Social Role Theory helps explain why men often dominate formal decision-making positions in councils of elders or other customary forums, while women tend to participate more indirectly through informal mediation and support networks (Ezeilo, 2019; Adebanwi, 2021). Societal expectations of masculinity and femininity influence perceptions of authority and legitimacy, which may result in women's inputs being undervalued or overlooked in formal adjudication processes (Nwankwo, 2022). This framework also helps clarify how the division of roles contributes to differences in experiences, responsibilities, and influence between genders during conflict resolution.

Furthermore, the theory provides practical applications for reform and intervention. By recognizing the influence of socially assigned roles, it becomes possible to develop strategies that create formal spaces for women's participation, foster gender-inclusive practices, and challenge cultural norms that limit equitable involvement. Social Role Theory, therefore, not only explains observed patterns of gendered participation in indigenous dispute resolution but also offers a foundation for promoting reforms that enhance fairness and inclusivity. This approach makes Social Role Theory particularly suitable for your study, as it directly addresses the intersection of gender, social expectations, and societal structures, offering both explanatory and practical value in understanding men's and women's experiences in traditional conflict resolution mechanisms.

Materials and Methods

The study employed a qualitative research approach to explore how men and women experience and participate in traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in Emohua Local Government Area. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with purposively selected 30 key informants, including elders, community leaders, and participants in customary dispute resolution. These interviews captured participants' perceptions, roles, and experiences, guided by the study's research objectives. Secondary sources, such as scholarly articles, books, and institutional reports, were used to provide contextual and historical insights and to triangulate primary data. All data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, identifying patterns and themes related to gender roles, participation, and decision-making, ensuring a comprehensive and reliable understanding of indigenous conflict resolution practices.

In-depth Interview Report:
Coded into themes, sub-themes, and indicators for qualitative analysis.
Question One: Extent men and women participate in indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms.
Theme 1: Extent of Participation by Men: (Indicator: Leadership in formal deliberations)
- Interview 1: Men take the lead in settling conflicts.
- Interview 3: Men chair meetings and pronounce judgments.
- Interview 5: Men dominate traditional dispute resolution forums.
- Interview 7: Men handle land, inheritance, and inter-family disputes.
- Interview 9: Men dominate the forums; women participate mainly as witnesses or advisors.

Observation: Men consistently lead the formal dispute resolution process, controlling the direction and final outcomes of decisions.

Theme 2: Extent of Participation by Women: (Indicator: Advisory and supportive roles)
- Interview 1: Women advise on social or emotional impacts of disputes.
- Interview 2: Women counsel disputing parties, especially in domestic matters.
- Interview 4: Women mediate informally, gather information, and provide insights.

- Interview 6: Women guide the process with moral reasoning, influencing final decisions.
- Interview 10: Women prepare background facts and inform male elders' decisions.

Observation: Women participate primarily in advisory roles and informal mediation. Their contributions are essential, though indirect in formal proceedings.

Theme 3: Gendered Domain of Influence: (Indicator: Types of disputes men and women engage with)
- Interview 1: Women more involved in domestic issues or inheritance.
- Interview 2: Women handle marital disagreements and community welfare.
- Interview 7: Men deal with land and inter-family conflicts; women handle domestic and communal welfare.
- Interview 6: Women are active in family disputes.
- Interview 8: Women provide guidance in cases affecting children, widows, or vulnerable members.

Observation: Men dominate public and property-related disputes, while women participate more in family, welfare, and domestic conflicts.

Theme 4: Gradual Increase in Women's Direct Participation: (Indicator: Women's voice in formal deliberations)
- Interview 8: Women are increasingly vocal in meetings and openly provide guidance.
- Interview 9: Some women now actively question and suggest solutions.
- Interview 4: Women are respected when addressing childcare, inheritance, or property disputes.

Observation: Cultural norms are slowly evolving, allowing more women to speak directly during formal conflict resolution processes.

Theme 5: Indirect Influence of Women: (Indicator: Behind-the-scenes impact).
- Interview 5: Women influence outcomes indirectly by advising male elders.
- Interview 10: Women's preparatory input informs male elders' decisions.
- Interview 2: Women's input shapes outcomes quietly.

Observation: Women continue to wield significant influence indirectly, shaping outcomes even when not leading the discussion.

Question Two: Your view on Men and women different experience on traditional conflict resolution processes

Theme 1: Emotional Experience of Participation: (Indicator: Feelings of empowerment or marginalization).
- Interview 1: Men feel respected and authoritative during proceedings.
- Interview 2: Women often feel sidelined in formal meetings but valued for their advice.
- Interview 3: Men express pride in leading dispute settlements.
- Interview 4: Women feel their contributions are not always recognized publicly.
- Interview 5: Men enjoy decision-making authority; women sometimes experience frustration for limited voice.

Observation: Men generally feel empowered in formal roles, whereas women experience both influence and marginalization, reflecting gendered power dynamics.

Theme 2: Perception of Fairness: (Indicator: Satisfaction with dispute outcomes)
- Interview 2: Men believe outcomes favor social order and tradition.
- Interview 3: Women sometimes feel outcomes overlook their perspectives, especially in domestic disputes.
- Interview 6: Men perceive the system as fair and just; they enjoy a sense of procedural control.
- Interview 7: Women appreciate outcomes when they have advisory input but feel excluded otherwise.
- Interview 10: Women perceive fairness differently, often linked to the inclusion of emotional and moral considerations.

Observation: Men associate fairness with authority and adherence to tradition; women associate fairness with inclusion and emotional justice.

Theme 3: Level of Engagement: (Indicator: Participation intensity).
- Interview 1: Men actively speak, lead decisions, and implement outcomes.
- Interview 2: Women participate mainly in side discussions or informal mediation.
- Interview 4: Men dominate the conversation; women provide input quietly.
- Interview 5: Women are more engaged in follow-up or post-resolution care of parties involved.
- Interview 8: Men are highly engaged during formal meetings; women's engagement is continuous but mostly indirect.

Observation: Men experience high-intensity engagement in formal settings; women experience participation more through continuous, indirect involvement.

Theme 4: Social Recognition: (Indicator: Public acknowledgment of contributions).
- Interview 3: Men are publicly recognized and respected as decision-makers.
- Interview 4: Women are rarely acknowledged publicly despite significant contributions.
- Interview 6: Men's leadership is celebrated in community gatherings.
- Interview 9: Women receive recognition mainly through private appreciation by family or elders.
- Interview 10: Men experience prestige; women experience quiet acknowledgment or social approval within networks.

Observation: Men experience status and visibility, while women experience recognition more privately, highlighting gendered social dynamics.

Theme 5: Cognitive and Cultural Experience: (Indicator: Learning and internalization of norms)
- Interview 1: Men report learning strategic negotiation and leadership skills.
- Interview 2: Women report deep understanding of social cohesion and moral reasoning.
- Interview 5: Men focus on procedural knowledge; women focus on relational and emotional knowledge.
- Interview 7: Both genders internalize cultural values but in gendered ways – men in decision-making, women in mediation and nurturing roles.
- Interview 8: Women report awareness of their influence even when indirect.

Observation: Experiences differ cognitively and culturally; men internalize authority and leadership, women internalize relational and moral guidance.

Question 3: Socio-cultural factors influencing gendered participation in indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms

Theme 1: Cultural Norms and Traditions: (Indicator: Prescribed gender roles)
- Interview 1: Men are culturally expected to lead in dispute resolution; women provide advice behind the scenes.
- Interview 2: Elder women emphasize that cultural traditions limit women from speaking in public sessions.
- Interview 3: Men cite tradition as justification for their dominant roles in gatherings.
- Interview 4: Women follow customary expectations, focusing on nurturing, mediation, and reconciliation.
- Interview 5: Men perceive traditions as ensuring order; women perceive them as restricting active participation.

Observation: Gendered participation is strongly shaped by culturally prescribed roles that favor men in leadership and women in supportive or advisory capacities.

Theme 2: Family and Household Responsibilities: (Indicator: Domestic obligations)
- Interview 2: Women report household responsibilities limit their availability for long dispute resolution sessions.
- Interview 6: Men are less burdened by domestic work, allowing full engagement in traditional processes.
- Interview 7: Women balance caregiving duties with participation, often contributing informally.
- Interview 8: Men indicate that freedom from domestic obligations enables active leadership.
- Interview 9: Women rely on informal networks to influence decisions due to limited presence in formal meetings.

Observation: Family and domestic responsibilities restrict women's direct participation while men's participation is less constrained, reinforcing gender disparities.

Theme 3: Community Perception and Social Acceptance: (Indicator: Social approval of participation).
- Interview 1: Men feel socially validated when performing visible roles in conflict resolution.
- Interview 3: Women's contributions are appreciated but often recognized informally rather than publicly.
- Interview 5: Some men expect women to maintain decorum by not challenging authority publicly.
- Interview 6: Women note that speaking out publicly may attract criticism or gossip.
- Interview 10: Men experience prestige and social recognition; women navigate social norms carefully to maintain respect.

Observation: Community perceptions shape participation, with men enjoying public validation and women practicing socially mediated participation.

Theme 4: Educational and Knowledge Access: (Indicator: Awareness of conflict resolution procedures).
- Interview 2: Men with formal or informal training in dispute resolution participate more confidently.
- Interview 4: Women with limited access to procedural knowledge defer to male leaders.
- Interview 7: Educated women attempt to navigate cultural restrictions to contribute effectively.
- Interview 8: Men often mentor younger men in conflict practices; women mentor each other informally.

● Interview 9: Access to knowledge impacts confidence and the ability to influence outcomes.
Observation: Socio-cultural emphasis on male authority limits women's formal access to knowledge, affecting gendered participation.

Theme 5: Religion and Spiritual Beliefs: (Indicator: Spiritual or ritual roles).
● Interview 1: Men dominate ritual and formal roles in dispute settlement ceremonies.
● Interview 3: Women participate in prayer, blessing, or mediation roles but rarely lead rituals.
● Interview 5: Religious beliefs reinforce male authority and women's supportive functions.
● Interview 6: Women see spiritual roles as culturally sanctioned influence, albeit indirect.
● Interview 10: Men associate spiritual authority with leadership legitimacy, influencing the gendered hierarchy in participation.
Observation: Spiritual and religious beliefs reinforce traditional male authority while allowing women indirect influence, shaping socio-cultural participation patterns.

Theme 6: Peer Influence and Community Networks: (Indicator: Support from social networks).
● Interview 2: Men benefit from strong male networks that support leadership roles.
● Interview 4: Women rely on peer groups or senior women to advise or influence decisions.
● Interview 7: Men often consult with fellow male elders before acting in conflicts.
● Interview 8: Women's influence is often mediated through social relationships rather than direct decision-making.
● Interview 9: Peer support affects confidence and the scope of participation for both genders.
Observation: Networks and social support structures mediate participation, privileging men in formal authority roles while women influence outcomes through relational channels.

Discussion of Findings
Men and women participation in indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms in Emohua Local Government Area

The findings from the in-depth interviews indicate that participation in indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms in Emohua Local Government Area is heavily gendered, with men dominating formal and decision-making roles, while women primarily occupy supportive and advisory positions. Across the ten interviews conducted, male participants consistently reported being the main actors in dispute resolution forums, serving as mediators, adjudicators, or representatives of their families or clans. For instance, one male elder stated, "It is our duty as men to speak, decide, and guide the community when conflicts arise. Women advise us quietly, but they do not speak in public sessions." This observation aligns with secondary literature, which highlights that in many Nigerian communities, male dominance in customary conflict resolution is sustained by cultural norms that valorize male authority in public decision-making (Okafor & Nwosu, 2019; Nwankwo, 2022).

In contrast, female participants described their engagement as largely informal or behind-the-scenes, often influencing outcomes through consultation, advice, or mediation within private or women-only spaces. For example, a female participant noted, "We do not speak in the main gathering, but we advise our sons, husbands, or daughters on how to approach the matter. Sometimes, our input changes the decision." This finding corroborates the work of Iroanya and Maduka (2024), who emphasized that women in indigenous dispute resolution systems in Rivers State exert influence indirectly, relying on relational networks and advisory roles rather than public leadership positions.

The extent of participation is also shaped by socio-cultural norms and expectations. Interviews revealed that community traditions explicitly prescribe that men take the lead in public dispute resolution arenas, while women are expected to maintain decorum and defer to male authority. This dynamic reflects assumptions of the Gender Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), which suggests that societal expectations regarding male and female behavior influence the roles they occupy in communal institutions. In Emohua, men's extensive participation is further reinforced by their public visibility and the social prestige associated with leading dispute resolution, whereas women's influence, though significant, remains largely invisible in official records or formal community recognition. Examples from the field illustrate these patterns clearly. During one dispute over land ownership in Ibaa Community, male elders convened the main mediation session, deliberating over evidence, witness accounts, and customary laws. Women present at the gathering offered advice only to family members before or after the session, demonstrating their indirect participation. Secondary sources confirm this pattern; Adeyemi and Omoruyi (2020) note that in many Nigerian communities, women's involvement in indigenous conflict mechanisms is often limited to supportive functions such as negotiation behind closed doors, moral guidance, or emotional support to disputants.

However, some interviews conducted at Ogbakiri and Rumuji communities, suggest that women's participation is gradually expanding. Educated and socially assertive women reported instances where their insights were sought by male leaders due to their knowledge of family dynamics or community relations. This observation aligns with findings by Ibe and Okafor (2022), which highlight that socio-economic changes, such as increased education and exposure, can empower women to contribute more substantively in indigenous dispute resolution processes, albeit still within constraints set by cultural norms.

Overall, the study demonstrates that men dominate formal participation and decision-making in indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms, while women's engagement is complementary, advisory, and relational. The gendered nature of participation reflects broader socio-cultural structures, where tradition, social expectations, and power hierarchies limit women's formal roles but allow them to exercise influence in less visible ways. The findings suggest that any effort to enhance inclusivity in indigenous dispute resolution in Emohua Local Government Area must address these structural and cultural barriers, recognizing both men's and women's contributions to effective conflict management.

Men and women different experiences on traditional conflict resolution processes

The findings from the in-depth interviews reveal that men and women experience traditional conflict resolution processes in Emohua Local Government Area differently, shaped largely by social expectations, gender roles, and cultural norms. Male participants often described their experiences as active, authoritative, and public, reflecting their central role in mediating, judging, and enforcing decisions. Two male elders in Oduoha-Emuoha and Rumouche communities explained, "We preside over the sessions, listen to all sides, and make the decisions. The weight of responsibility is on us, and everyone looks up to us." This experience aligns with secondary literature emphasizing that men in indigenous dispute resolution systems often occupy positions of power and are socially recognized as leaders and decision-makers (Okafor & Nwosu, 2019; Nwankwo, 2022). The public nature of men's engagement also means they face greater scrutiny, responsibility for ensuring fairness, and sometimes exposure to conflict-related tensions, which shapes a unique experiential perspective tied to accountability and leadership.

In contrast, female participants reported a more nuanced and relational experience. Women described participating indirectly through advisory roles, emotional support, or mediation within private spaces. One female respondent remarked, "We do not speak in the gathering, but we guide our children and husbands on how to handle the dispute.

Sometimes, we counsel those affected to calm their anger." This reflects a qualitative difference in experience, where women's engagement is often relational rather than procedural. Secondary sources support this, noting that women's experiences are shaped by their ability to influence outcomes indirectly, often through negotiation and persuasion rather than formal decision-making (Iroanya & Maduka, 2024; Adeyemi & Omoruyi, 2020). Consequently, while women experience the conflict resolution process as collaborative and supportive, men experience it as directive and authoritative. The interviews also highlighted that emotional and psychological dimensions of experience differ by gender. Men reported feeling pressure to maintain community cohesion and uphold traditional norms, sometimes facing stress when mediating disputes between families or clans. In contrast, women expressed concern for fairness, emotional reconciliation, and the well-being of affected parties, demonstrating a more empathetic and care-oriented engagement. For example, a female participant described helping disputants reconcile their differences quietly, stating, "We comfort them, help them understand each other, and ensure no family is hurt unnecessarily." This finding echoes Silva, Costa, and Almeida (2020), who emphasize that women often experience conflict resolution processes through the lens of social care and community cohesion rather than authority or procedural control. Education and socio-economic factors also mediate these experiences. Some women indicated that higher education or social status allowed them to participate more assertively, occasionally being consulted in public sessions or influencing decisions more directly. This aligns with observations by Ibe and Okafor (2022) that socio-cultural evolution, including access to education and exposure to broader societal norms, enables women to engage more confidently in traditional systems, though still within culturally sanctioned boundaries. Overall, the study indicates that men and women experience indigenous dispute resolution in Emohua differently along lines of power, visibility, emotional engagement, and relational influence. Men encounter the process as formal, authoritative, and responsibility-laden, whereas women navigate it as relational, supportive, and empathetic. These differences underscore the gendered nature of indigenous dispute mechanisms and highlight the need for culturally sensitive interventions that recognize and value the diverse experiences of both men and women in promoting effective and inclusive conflict resolution.

Socio-cultural factors influencing gendered participation in indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms

The in-depth interviews revealed that several socio-cultural factors significantly shape how men and women participate in indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms in Emohua Local Government Area. One major factor is patriarchal norms and cultural expectations, which prescribe distinct roles for men and women. Male respondents consistently emphasized that men are traditionally seen as the official mediators and decision-makers in disputes. One male elder stated, "It is our duty to speak for the family, ensure justice, and maintain respect in the community. Women are helpers, not speakers." This aligns with findings from Okafor and Nwosu (2019), who note that in many Nigerian communities, traditional dispute resolution is structured to privilege male authority, limiting women's formal participation. Consequently, these cultural prescriptions dictate that men dominate public deliberations, while women often participate in private or

advisory capacities, reinforcing gendered participation patterns. Another socio-cultural factor identified is age and status hierarchies. Both male and female participants indicated that older individuals, particularly men, have more authority and are more likely to be consulted or chosen as mediators. A female participant commented, "We respect our elders; their word carries weight. Even if a woman knows what is right, it is the elder men who decide publicly." This observation is supported by Nwankwo (2022), who emphasizes that in indigenous conflict resolution, age and social status intersect with gender to influence participation and decision-making power. As a result, younger women, despite understanding the disputes deeply, often experience limited influence due to both their gender and age. Religious and moral norms were also highlighted as factors influencing participation. Many participants noted that cultural and religious expectations dictate what is considered appropriate behavior for men and women during conflict resolution. Men are expected to act decisively and publicly, while women are expected to promote harmony and counsel disputants privately. For example, one male respondent stated, "Our culture teaches us that men must enforce justice, while women guide the hearts of those in conflict." This aligns with Afolabi and Iyoha (2022), who observed that moral and religious codes in Nigerian communities reinforce gender-specific roles in dispute resolution processes.

Furthermore, socialization and upbringing emerged as critical factors. Participants explained that from childhood, men are socialized to speak publicly, assert authority, and resolve conflicts, whereas women are socialized to nurture, mediate quietly, and maintain social cohesion. A female participant noted, "We learn from our mothers how to calm tempers, settle small quarrels, and advise our families. This prepares us for indirect involvement in disputes." This finding mirrors Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which posits that behavior is learned through observation and modeling within a cultural context. In Emohua, these gendered socialization patterns are deeply embedded, shaping participation in indigenous conflict resolution.

Finally, education and exposure to modern governance practices were mentioned as factors enabling women to participate more assertively. Some educated women noted that they are occasionally invited to public deliberations or consulted in private sessions due to their knowledge, social standing, or communication skills. This indicates a gradual shift in traditional norms, where socio-cultural constraints are moderated by individual capacities and social evolution (Iroanya & Maduka, 2024). In summary, gendered participation in indigenous dispute resolution in Emohua Local Government Area is heavily influenced by patriarchal norms, age and status hierarchies, religious and moral expectations, socialization patterns, and education. These socio-cultural factors interact to shape men's authoritative and public experiences versus women's supportive and relational engagement, highlighting the complex interplay between culture, gender, and conflict resolution practices. Recognizing these factors is critical for developing culturally sensitive interventions that promote inclusive and equitable participation in indigenous dispute resolution mechanisms.

Conclusion

The study examined gendered participation in traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in Emohua Local Government Area, Rivers State, with particular focus on how men and women experience, engage, and are influenced by socio-cultural factors in indigenous dispute resolution practices. Findings from in-depth interviews, triangulated with secondary literature, revealed that men continue to dominate public dispute resolution processes due to deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, age and status hierarchies, and cultural expectations that position them as

decision-makers and arbiters of justice. Women, on the other hand, participate more indirectly, often providing guidance, mediation, and moral support within private or advisory spaces. Socio-cultural factors such as upbringing, socialization, moral codes, and religious norms were found to significantly influence these patterns of participation. Women are socialized to maintain harmony and promote consensus, while men are socialized to assert authority and make binding decisions. Although education and exposure to modern governance practices have begun to create opportunities for women's inclusion, traditional norms still largely constrain their formal involvement. The study further found that while both genders possess knowledge and insight into resolving disputes, men's public authority and women's private advisory roles continue to reflect a gendered division of labor in indigenous conflict resolution.

Overall, the findings highlight the complex interplay between gender, culture, and social structures in shaping participation in traditional dispute resolution. The study underscores the need to recognize and address socio-cultural barriers to women's meaningful engagement, while appreciating the cultural context that sustains these practices. Enhancing women's visibility, voice, and decision-making capacity in indigenous mechanisms, without undermining cultural legitimacy, can contribute to more equitable, inclusive, and effective conflict resolution within Emohua communities.

Recommendations

- Promote Gender-Inclusive Training and Awareness Programs: Local government and community organizations should organize workshops and sensitization programs that educate both men and women about the importance of equitable participation in indigenous dispute resolution. These programs should emphasize the value of women's perspectives in conflict management and encourage communities to recognize women as equal stakeholders in dispute resolution processes.

- Institutionalize Women's Roles in Traditional Councils: Community leaders and traditional institutions should formalize mechanisms that allow women to hold advisory or decision-making positions in customary dispute resolution committees. Creating official roles or seats for women will legitimize their contributions and ensure their voices are systematically included in the resolution of conflicts.

- Integrate Modern Governance Practices with Cultural Norms: Efforts should be made to harmonize indigenous conflict resolution practices with modern governance and legal frameworks that promote gender equity. By blending traditional authority structures with contemporary principles of inclusivity, communities can reduce gender-based disparities in participation while maintaining cultural legitimacy.

- Encourage Community Dialogue and Mentorship Programs: Men and women elders should engage in structured dialogues and mentorship programs that guide younger generations on collaborative and inclusive approaches to dispute resolution. Such initiatives can gradually shift socio-cultural perceptions that limit women's participation and foster intergenerational appreciation for equitable engagement in traditional conflict mechanisms.

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