Barriers, Legal Frameworks and Grassroots Agency: Rethinking Women's Inclusion in Peacebuilding in Rivers State, Nigeria

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https://doi.org/10.56201/ijssmr.vol.12no9.2026.pg717.726

Abstract
This research examines the barriers to women's participation in peacebuilding in Rivers State, Nigeria, the effectiveness of current legal and regulatory frameworks, and how women-led grassroots organisations function locally. It is anchored in feminist peace and security theory, which attributes women's exclusion from formal peace processes not to personal capacity deficit, but to systemic failure of institutional architecture, political will, and structural design. The methodology is guided by qualitative research design. It integrates primary data from standard interviews, key informant interviews and focus group discussions, conducted in Emohua, Tai, and Degema Local Government Areas of Rivers State, with secondary data from documents such as books and journals, among others. To identify recurring barriers, and the effectiveness of the frameworks meant to address them, data are subjected to thematic analysis. Findings show that patriarchal norms operate through the discounting of women's authority once they speak rather than outright exclusion; that economic constraints function through unpaid time burdens more than resource scarcity; that elite gatekeeping and an institutional memory gap sustain token representation in place of established women's networks; and that legal frameworks and community development agreements exist on paper without any named, accountable monitoring mechanism. The study concludes that closing Rivers State's participation gap requires deliberate institutional reform, not merely cultural change, since the mechanisms sustaining exclusion are specific and addressable. It recommends a named accountability body to monitor women's participation, compensation for the unpaid time costs of engagement, mandatory engagement of established women's networks over token representatives, integration mechanisms that accommodate organisational diversity, and stronger security protections for women in visible peace advocacy.

Key words: *Barriers, Legal Frameworks, Women-led Organizations, Grassroots Peacebuilding,*

Rivers State

Introduction

Two arguments, mostly, have carried the case for including women in peace and security processes. One is about rights: women are entitled, as a matter of basic equity, to a say in decisions that shape their own societies. The other is about results. Cross-national evidence suggests that greater gender equality goes together with a significantly lower likelihood of armed conflict, and a greater capacity to hold onto peace once it has been achieved (Bjarnegård & Melander, 2013; Caprioli, 2005). Since UNSCR 1325 was adopted in 2000, a large body of international and domestic policy has tried to turn these arguments into formal commitments, and Nigeria's own National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security exists for exactly that reason: to give the commitment some domestic institutional weight. But a commitment on paper is not the same as enforcement in practice, and a growing body of scholarship has started documenting a specific, persistent gap between what these frameworks promise and what they actually deliver (Akinyemi, 2021; Anaba, 2021; Ibrahim, 2023).

Feminist peace and security theory gives us a way to make sense of that gap. It holds that women are, more often than not, active and effective participants in peacebuilding at the community level, even in places where they are structurally and institutionally excluded from the formal processes that would turn that effectiveness into policy (Tickner, 2004; Ní Aoláin, 2016). The exclusion from peacebuilding processes in Nigeria, as the theory suggests, is sustained by existing patriarchal social norms, insufficient or ineffective legal mechanisms, and institutions that have traditionally been designed without input from women (True, 2013; Sjoberg, 2013). The combination of these two issues is especially evident in Nigeria. Nigeria is a highly patriarchal society and has many laws and customs that limit the extent to which women may participate in public life (Ekhator, 2018). This is ironic because while Nigeria adopts the international legal frameworks like the NSCR 1325, and adopting it through the National Action Plan, implementations of the relevant frameworks have proven difficult as it has existed only on paper. This situation is not exclusive to Nigeria. Research examining comparative implementations of Women, Peace and Security agendas throughout the world found similar patterns exist. In general, there appears to be a pattern whereby countries will pass legislation and create a national action plan based upon UNSCR 1325, ratify UN resolutions including Resolution 1325, create quotas for gender representation within their armed forces or police departments etc., yet fail to adequately monitor and fund the actual implementation of those commitments (Shepherd, 2020; Gizelis & Olsson, 2019). Shepherd (2021) argues that the Women, Peace and Security agenda keeps stumbling at this exact point, the move from declared commitment at the international level to practice where implementation actually happens, at the national and sub-national level. Sisulu (2019), writing from direct policy experience, makes a related point: women's exclusion from the actual machinery of conflict resolution persists even where their inclusion has been formally endorsed, because the institutions doing the resolving were never restructured to make room for them. Set against this pattern, commitment on one side, shortfall on the other, is a separate body of evidence about what women's organisations are actually doing at the community level, mostly independent of, and unrecognized by, the frameworks that are supposed to include them. Anderlini (2007) and Aggestam and Svensson (2018) both argue that women's most consistent and best-documented contribution to peace processes happens at the informal, community-facing level, not at the formal table. Agbese (2021) traces this same pattern specifically to the Niger Delta, where women's informal peace

roles have carried on through decades of resource conflict without ever turning into a formal role to match. Anderson and Eskandari (2023) place this within a longer history of feminist peace activism, arguing that women's organizing around conflict has rarely waited for a formal invitation, and has instead continued, adapted, and often outlasted the very processes meant to address the conflicts in question. This article treats three things, the barriers keeping women out of formal negotiation, how the legal and policy frameworks meant to include them actually perform, and the largely unrecognized work of women-led grassroots organisations, as facets of one underlying problem in Rivers State, rather than as separate issues to be handled in turn. It asks what, specifically, keeps women out of formal peace negotiations; how effective existing legal and policy frameworks have actually been in practice; and what role organizations like the Ogbakiri Women Peace Forum and the Rumuekpe Women Accord already play, and could play more formally, in sustaining peace at the community level. There are compelling reasons to analyze these three variables together, as opposed to separately. Each, when studied individually, has the potential for the same type of error. If we study barriers in isolation from institutional frameworks, our analysis will likely overemphasize cultural factors relative to those which could have been legally mandated or enforced. If we study frameworks in isolation from grassroots organizations and their practices, there is a danger that we will assume compliance with established policies is enough to accomplish sustainable peace. Conversely, if we study grassroots organizations as individual entities separate from both frameworks and barriers, we run the risk of giving rhetorical praise for what they are doing, but ultimately allowing them to continue functioning independently of formal peace architectures as they did prior to being identified by others.

Statement of The Problem

There has been some progress made in terms of implementing global commitments around women's participation in peace and security in Nigeria with its ratification and incorporation of this commitment into national law. However, the delivery of these commitments from the national to local levels of governance are haphazard and poorly monitored. The issues of barriers, the effectiveness of frameworks to address them are rarely examined in the research conducted on the Niger Delta region in general, and Rivers State in particular. Where they have been examined, studies assume a connection between them. That patriarchal barriers exist, for instance, does not necessarily establish that the formal frameworks in place counteract them; similarly, that formal frameworks are being implemented ineffectively does not automatically reveal what will fill the void left behind. In Rivers State, it appears that little is known about the actual barriers to women's participation, what community members believe will address these barriers, and their implementation status. These are the gaps which this study intends to fill.

Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored in feminist peace and security theory which views the exclusion of women from peace and security processes as a product of the way they are structured, rather than as gaps that can simply be addressed with good intentions or increased awareness. Tickner (2004), points out that traditional security studies have been constructed upon the basis of state-based, primarily male, institutions (militaries, foreign ministries, negotiation delegations etc.), and that these institutional beginnings shape what types of issues conventional security studies accounts will recognize. Sjoberg (2013), further develops the idea by stating that gender is not an additional factor in conflict analysis but a foundational component of it, shaping who has access

to arms, who performs labor that supports a community during times of violence, and whose voices are viewed as authoritative when a settlement is reached. The cost of conflict (displacement, loss of employment opportunities and caregiving responsibilities) falls most heavily on women, while the organizations responsible for resolving conflicts continue to be primarily comprised of men (True, 2013). A second area of feminist peace and security theory is focused on implementation. Both Gizelis and Olsson (2019) and Ní Aoláin (2016) argue that the gap between formal Women Peace and Security commitments and actual practices are primarily due to the structure of institutional design (i.e., national action plans and international agreements lack monitoring architectures, funding mechanisms and enforcement measures that provide "teeth" to other aspects of public policy). Shepherd (2021) frames this as a translation problem, the gap between declaratory commitment at the international level and binding practice at the level where implementation actually has to occur. This study treats Rivers State's experience as a sub-national instance of exactly this translation problem, one playing out simultaneously across three interconnected domains: the everyday barriers women encounter, the frameworks that exist on paper to address those barriers, and the grassroots organisations operating, largely unassisted, in the space those frameworks were meant to fill. A third element concerns what the theory implies about where evidence of women's peacebuilding capacity is actually found. Anderlini (2007) and Aggestam and Svensson (2018) argue that this evidence is concentrated overwhelmingly at the informal, community level, precisely the level institutional design tends to overlook when allocating formal recognition. Agbese's (2021) and Anderson and Eskandari's (2023) work on the Niger Delta and on the broader continuum of feminist peace activism, respectively, both support this claim empirically. Taken together, these three theoretical strands, institutional design as the source of exclusion, implementation as a translation problem, and grassroots practice as the site where women's peacebuilding capacity is actually demonstrated, structure the analysis that follows. They imply, in particular, that a study of barriers, frameworks, and grassroots organisations should not treat these as three unrelated topics but as three points of observation on a single underlying institutional pattern, which is the approach this article takes.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design. It combined primary data from standard interviews, key informant interviews and focus group discussions, held in Emohua, Tai, and Degema Local Government Areas of Rivers State, and secondary data from documents such as books and journals, among others. Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring barriers, and how effective the frameworks were perceived to be, and the patterns in which the grassroots organizations actually operate. The three Local Government Areas were purposively selected for their documented history of resource-related conflicts; particularly oil, alongside active, ongoing peacebuilding effort at the community level. Within each Local Government Area, respondents were drawn through a combination of purposive and random sampling designed to capture a cross-section of women directly connected to peace and conflict issues, alongside male respondents and community leaders whose perceptions of women's participation and of framework effectiveness were equally of interest. Key informants were selected specifically for direct, sustained involvement in peace negotiation, mediation, or advocacy, so that their assessment of barriers and framework effectiveness would reflect first-hand experience rather than general impression. Data strands were integrated at the analysis stage rather than kept fully separate. Where interview data identified a barrier as prominent, the corresponding key

informant and focus group material was examined specifically for the mechanisms underlying that barrier. Standard ethical protections applied throughout: participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and identifying details beyond organisational affiliation have been withheld in line with the confidentiality pledges made by the researchers.

Discussion of Findings

Respondents pointed to a fairly consistent cluster of barriers to women's participation in peace negotiations, spanning socio-cultural, economic, and political ground. Table 1 lays out the main barriers identified, alongside the strategies that respondents and key informants believed were actually necessary to address them.

Table 1: Barriers to Women's Participation and Corresponding Strategies

Barrier	Manifestation	Corresponding Strategy
Patriarchal norms	Cultural assumptions that women are less capable negotiators	Sustained community sensitization and public education
Elite gatekeeping	Token representation substituted for established women's networks	Formal documentation and attribution of informal mediation
Economic constraints	Limited access to resources needed to sustain participation	Targeted economic empowerment programmes
Weak institutional enforcement	Frameworks exist on paper but lack accountability mechanisms	Legally backed quotas with monitoring provisions
Security concerns	Risk of intimidation or retaliation for visible involvement	Protection and safeguarding measures for women peacebuilders

Source: Field survey and key informant interview data, 2026.

Patriarchal norms and the politics of who is heard

In addition to identifying patriarchal norms as the one obstacle most cited in the information collected, key informants consistently distinguished between women being physically present at a community gathering, which was rarely outrightly contested, and women being treated as authoritative once they spoke, which was contested far more often. This distinction is important because we find that the barrier does not necessarily exist at the point of access but at the point of uptake: Even though Rivers State women are frequently not excluded from the room, their contributions inside it are discounted compared to men's. Similar patterns can be found in the research conducted by Ekhator (2018), who notes that although there exists no national law prohibiting Nigeria women from taking part in public life, women are still excluded from participating in public affairs, primarily through informal processes and the data collected for this study corroborates this view.

Economic constraints and the cost of participation

Respondents further identified economic constraints as a more salient barrier as it was less of a physical barrier and more of a structural limitation that measures how long female participation can be sustained once it began. Peace negotiations, mediations, even the community forums that

precede them are never one-off events; they carry on for several weeks and months of unending meetings, follow-up consultations, lobbying; this sustained time commitment usually carries an opportunity cost most women cannot pay as once again, women disproportionately carry more household responsibilities and domestic labour which also demands their attention. Several key informants noted that women who began a peace process as active participants dropped out partway through, not from loss of interest but because the unpaid time commitment became unsustainable alongside farming, trading, or other income-generating work. This finding qualifies the more common framing of economic barriers as simply about resource access; the Rivers State data suggests the more precise problem is about the distribution of unpaid time, and about who is expected to absorb its cost.

Security concerns and the gendered calculus of visibility

Security concerns were raised specifically in relation to visibility: women who took on prominent, publicly identifiable roles in peace advocacy described facing forms of intimidation, ranging from social pressure within their own households to more direct threats, that male peace advocates in similar positions did not report at comparable rates. This gendered visibility risk offers a further explanation for the pattern, discussed later in this article, whereby women's peacebuilding work tends to remain informal and diffuse rather than concentrated in a small number of publicly identified leaders: diffusing visibility across a wider network of women may function, whether by design or by necessity, as a form of protection against the specific risks that come with being individually identifiable as a woman advocating publicly on contested resource issues. Beyond the general categories in Table 1, two more specific mechanisms stood out, ones that have not had much attention before. The first is a pattern where government and industry actors, once finally forced to engage with a community, pick a single compliant or token female representative instead of the informal women's network that actually generated the pressure or the knowledge behind the issue. This showed up in the Presidential Committee on the Modalities for the Involvement of Host Communities in the Ownership of Petroleum Assets, and again in the 2025-2026 gas seepage crisis in Bille community. There is also a lack of institutional knowledge. Because women's mediation takes place informally, there is no formal documentation or record to which formal negotiating parties can refer to later; this was identified by the Rumuekpe Women Accord as a specific reason why they were excluded from participation in future negotiations. These two types of gaps represent the implementation gap described by Gizelis and Olsson (2019), at a higher-level, between the formal commitments made within Women, Peace and Security frameworks and the institutional practices that implement those commitments. These barriers seldom appear in written policies in such explicit terms; however, they function in exactly the same way as formal exclusion does because there are no accountability mechanisms built to catch them when they occur. This pattern observed in Rivers State is consistent across different scenarios that has no connection to one another; a national petroleum policy issue on the one hand and a local environmental issue on the other, over more than a decade. This type of consistency suggests there may be something structurally related rather than incidental. Respondents and key-informants consistently reported a disparity between what was formally documented or agreed upon in paper form and what occurred institutionally. Frameworks like UNSCR 1325 and Nigeria's National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security were widely seen as important in principle, but poorly enforced at the state and local level, held back by weak funding, thin institutional capacity, and no real consequence for non-compliance (Akinyemi, 2021; Anaba, 2021). That matches Ibrahim's (2023) assessment

that legal frameworks for gender equality in Nigeria remain stuck on persistent implementation gaps, and Shepherd's (2021) broader point that the Women, Peace and Security agenda has struggled to turn international declaration into binding practice at the sub-national level.

Table 2 summarizes how key informants assessed the implementation status of the frameworks most frequently raised in the interviews and focus group discussions, set against what each framework formally commits to.

Table 2: Legal and Policy Frameworks and their Assessed Implementation Status

Framework	Formal Commitment	Assessed Implementation Status
UNSCR 1325 (2000)	Women's inclusion in conflict prevention, resolution, and reconstruction	Widely known in principle; no local enforcement mechanism identified
Nigeria's National Action Plan on WPS	Domestic institutional framework translating UNSCR 1325 into national policy	Limited state-level funding or monitoring reported by informants
State-level gender policy provisions	Commitments to gender-responsive governance and inclusion	Inconsistently applied; no dedicated accountability body identified
Community development agreements (GMoU/MoU)	Negotiated benefit-sharing between oil companies and host communities	Women's formal representation in negotiation infrequent despite provisions

Source: Key informant interviews and focus group discussion data, 2026.

What Table 2 makes visible is a consistent gap between the scope of formal commitment and the scope of what informants could point to as evidence of implementation. In no case did informants identify a specific, named accountability mechanism, an office, a reporting requirement, a sanction, responsible for ensuring that a framework's commitment to women's inclusion was actually met. The picture looks very different for women-led grassroots organisations, which the study found to be consistently effective and just as consistently invisible to any formal process. Most women fora, such as Ogbakiri Women Peace Forum and Rumuekpe Women Accord, described themselves as the first to respond to local disputes, resolving disagreements over land, resources, and family conflict long before any formal body gets involved. Members of the Rumuekpe Women Accord described running community prayer sessions and visiting households they considered at risk of violence, not as formal peacebuilding work in their own telling, but simply as things the women of the community do. Neither organization reported ever being formally consulted, or credited, once a dispute escalated far enough to draw in government or state-level attention, which fits Agbese's (2021) finding that women's peace roles in the Niger Delta stay predominantly informal, and the broader pattern of under-recognized feminist peace activism that Anderson and Eskandari (2023) describe.

The Ogbakiri Women Peace Forum illustrates the same pattern in a distinct community context. Members described a structured, regular meeting schedule, in contrast to the more crisis-triggered mobilization described by the Rumuekpe Women Accord, focused on early identification and de-escalation of land and boundary disputes before they could develop into the kind of protracted violence Rumuekpe experienced. This preventive orientation was explained by members as a direct lesson drawn from watching the consequences of unresolved disputes in

neighbouring communities; the Forum functions, in effect, as a standing early-warning structure, meeting whether or not a specific dispute is currently active. Despite this more institutionalized internal structure, relative to the more organically emergent Rumuekpe Women Accord, the Ogbakiri Women Peace Forum reported an identical relationship to formal recognition: regular, substantive engagement with community-level disputes, and no record of ever being formally consulted by local government or oil company representatives once a dispute reached a scale that attracted their attention. The two organisations differ in how they organize internally and in what triggered their formation, yet converge precisely on the dimension this article is most concerned with, formal invisibility, which suggests the pattern is a function of the surrounding institutional environment rather than of any particular organisation's internal characteristics.

Implications for Theory And Policy

For feminist peace and security theory, the Rivers State evidence reinforces the claim that exclusion is a matter of institutional design rather than of capacity or willingness. Every barrier examined here, discounted authority despite physical presence, unpaid time burdens, visibility-linked security risk, operates without requiring any deliberate decision to exclude women; each is simply a byproduct of institutions, negotiation timelines, security protocols, community engagement procedures, that were designed without women's specific circumstances in view. This supports Ní Aoláin's (2016) and Gizelis and Olsson's (2019) broader argument that closing participation gaps requires redesigning institutional procedure, not only shifting cultural attitudes, since attitudes alone do not explain why even sympathetic, well-intentioned processes continue to produce exclusionary outcomes. The implications of policy include; Accountability Mechanisms. Table 2, indicated that all frameworks reviewed in this research have identified accountability mechanisms in place in Rivers state. The most direct policy implication from this, is that there needs to be a clearly defined monitoring agency that will provide ongoing tracking of the women's role within Community Development Agreements and Peace Processes, which will allow for the identification of where efforts need to be directed in order to improve their inclusion. Further to this, the fact that unpaid time burdens represent the majority of economic barriers to participation also has significant policy implications. These findings in particular, suggest that while cash transfers may help to mitigate some of the costs associated with participating in long-term negotiation processes, they do not provide the complete solution. Specifically, other forms of formal and informal compensation and logistical supports that decrease the "opportunity" cost of prolonged participation will need to be developed. Finally, the fact that both the Ogbakiri Women Peace Forum and the Rumuekpe Women Accord, organizations with different histories and organizational structures, have used similar methods to achieve grassroots integration into formal recognition suggests that design of grassroots organization integration policies must recognize and accommodate organizational diversity among women led organizations. A "one size fits all", certification, funding or registration process may fit either organization poorly due to their existing differences.

Limitations of The Study

The findings made in this study regarding the experience with peacebuilding in Rivers State are based on the experiences of three local government areas and therefore cannot be generalized to all of Rivers State or to the larger Niger Delta Region. Because participants were drawn from three local government areas, they do not provide an adequate representation of the total population of Rivers State. In addition, while both key informants and focus groups provided

detailed information about the mechanisms used by women and community actors involved in peacebuilding activities, they did not represent the number of women who are no longer engaged in peace building activities, and the omission of these individuals may result in an underestimate of the degree to which barriers exist to peacebuilding. Lastly, the implementation status of the conflict resolution framework (Table 2) is based solely upon informant perceptions. While using informant perception is a reasonable method of determining how a framework has been implemented in practice, it does not equate to conducting an institutional compliance review.

Conclusion

This study has addressed the barriers to women's participation in peacebuilding; the extent to which existing legal and policy frameworks provide for the inclusion of women; and what women-led organizations in Rivers State are doing. The evidence gathered from the data presented within this article highlights the institutional and cultural barriers that hinders the meaningful participation of women in peacebuilding in Rivers State. There is little recognition given to women's informal participation therefore, making it difficult to find documented evidence of the impact of their role and the existing frameworks, though important, do not mitigate this gap sufficiently without an established enforcement mechanism. Women grassroot organizations in various communities within Rivers State have overtime served and made up the informal peacebuilding architecture, however, their contributions toward the peacebuilding processes remain overlooked. In order to close the participation gap in Rivers State, this study insists that institutional reform is required to formalize the involvement of grassroot women's structures into the state's peace structure instead of relying on cultural change or policy commitment.

Recommendations

Stemming from the findings of this research, the recommendations are as follows:

Firstly, government and Oil Company Community-Relations Offices in Rivers State should create an identified, responsible monitoring body responsible for recording the involvement of women in all aspects of peacebuilding and peace negotiations. Secondly, seeing that economic barriers exists primarily through unpaid domestic burdens rather than just scarcity of resources, policy responses should include compensation or logistical support structures, transport, childcare provision, or stipends, designed specifically to offset the opportunity cost of sustained participation in lengthy negotiation processes, rather than one-off economic empowerment programmes alone. Thirdly, Industry/Government actors should develop a standard practice of engaging established, women-led networks as part of their community consultation practices, rather than nominating individual representatives to act as tokens when communities must formally be consulted. Fourthly, Mechanisms for integrating grassroots women's organizations into larger systems must be developed in a manner which addresses organizational diversity. This would allow grassroot organizations maintain the unique characteristics that make each organization effective in its own right; it would also prohibit governments/industry from imposing a generic certification or registration template that may not suit either effectively.

Fifth, security protections for women engaged in visible peace advocacy should be strengthened specifically in recognition of the gendered visibility risk this study identified, so that women are not structurally pushed toward diffuse, informal engagement as a safety strategy in place of more prominent, formally recognized roles.

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