

Performing Gendered Injustice: A Comparative Feminist Dramatic Study of Women's Land Rights in Nigeria and South Sudan

Bazugba, A. M.¹, Eluzai E.I.², Ekevere O.F.^{3*}

¹Associate Professor, Women, Peace and Security Expert and Practitioner - School of Social and Economic Studies/ and National Transformation Leadership Institute (NTLI), University of Juba, South Sudan

²Gender expert and Practitioner- Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare, Lecturer, University of Juba, College of Social and Economic Studies-Department of Sociology and Anthropology/Facilitator- National Transformational Leadership Institute

³Department of Theatre Art, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36348/sjhss.2026.v11i05.002>

| Received: 11.03.2026 | Accepted: 07.05.2026 | Published: 11.05.2026

*Corresponding author: Ekevere O.F

Department of Theatre Art, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper examines the persistent gap between formal recognition and substantive realization of women's land rights in Nigeria and South Sudan, where legal guarantees remain undermined by patriarchal norms, weak enforcement, and customary authority. In South Sudan, despite progressive frameworks such as the Transitional Constitution (2011), the Land Act (2009), the Local Government Act (2009), and the National Gender Policy (2013), women's land tenure security remains precarious. Bazugba (2024a) demonstrates that statutory protections are often disconnected from lived realities, with approximately 80% of women lacking effective access to land ownership (IGAD, 2020). Building on this evidence, the paper advances a comparative argument that women's land exclusion is not merely a legal or economic issue but a performative system of gendered injustice, reproduced through entrenched social scripts within families, customary institutions, and state practices. Employing a comparative feminist dramatic framework, the study analyzes how land governance in Nigeria and South Sudan emerges from the dynamic interplay between statutory law, customary norms, and political power. It integrates feminist theory, gender performativity, and political theory with interpretive insights drawn from Aristotle's dramatic structure, Brechtian epic theatre, and Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. The paper argues that women's dispossession persists because exclusion is continuously enacted and normalized as part of the social order. Through comparative analysis, it demonstrates that differing political and legal contexts can reproduce similar patterns of inequality when legal reform is not accompanied by effective enforcement and cultural transformation. It concludes by positioning theatre not only as metaphor but as a rigorous critical methodology for exposing systems of domination and reimagining participatory pathways toward feminist social justice.

Keywords: Women's land rights, Gendered injustice, Legal pluralism, Patriarchy, Performative governance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Women's land rights in Nigeria and South Sudan are often discussed as separate national problems, yet they reveal a single comparative pattern of gendered injustice. In both countries, women's exclusion from land is sustained not by the absence of law but by the persistence of patriarchal authority within customary systems, family structures, and state practice. This is why a comparative approach matters: it shows that legal recognition does not guarantee substantive justice when the social and political order continues to stage women as secondary claimants rather than full rights-bearing subjects.

The comparison is especially revealing because Nigeria and South Sudan represent different political contexts that nonetheless reproduce similar outcomes. Nigeria demonstrates how legal pluralism allows statutory equality to coexist with discriminatory inheritance and land practices. South Sudan demonstrates how post-conflict fragility, weak enforcement, and entrenched patriarchy intensify the same exclusionary logic. In both cases, women are expected to produce agricultural labor, sustain households, and absorb economic shocks

Women's access to land is a foundational issue of justice, survival, and citizenship in Africa. Land is not only a material resource; it is also a basis for livelihood, inheritance, family continuity, and social belonging.

When women are denied secure access to land, they are not simply excluded from property. They are also denied economic autonomy, political recognition, and intergenerational security. This is evident in South Sudan, where Bazugba (2024a) shows that women remain vulnerable because they are heavily concentrated in informal livelihoods, own few assets, and face deep social and institutional barriers to land ownership. She notes that South Sudan has made notable normative progress in advancing women's land rights, although significant implementation gaps remain. The draft National Land Policy signals an important policy shift by committing the state to enact mandatory joint spousal consent for land transactions across all tenure systems, a reform that would strengthen women's control over marital property and reduce unilateral dispossession. This is a substantial step toward aligning land governance with human rights principles of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination, particularly the right of women to equal access to property and livelihood resources.

The Land Act 2009 also reflects partial but meaningful recognition of women's land rights by affirming customary land tenure while simultaneously protecting women's rights to own and inherit land. In doing so, it places legal limits on discriminatory practices by authorities and communities that seek to deny access on the basis of sex alone. From a feminist perspective, this legal recognition is significant because it challenges patriarchal control over land, which remains one of the primary mechanisms through which gender hierarchy is reproduced and sustained.

Further progress is evident in the constitutional and statutory quota provisions embedded in the Constitution, the Land Act, and the Local Government Act, which require women's participation in land administration and management bodies at county, payam, customary, and traditional authority levels. These provisions are important not only for inclusion but also for transforming decision-making structures that have historically excluded women from authority over land. In human rights terms, they operationalize substantive equality by moving beyond formal recognition toward meaningful participation in governance.

This reform agenda is reinforced by South Sudan's Women Land Rights Agenda 2021–2030, which provides a strategic framework for implementing quotas and improving coordination among relevant institutions. The agenda is particularly valuable because it connects legal reform to institutional accountability, capacity-building, and collaborative action.

The Gender analysis of the land sector demonstrate that all the enacted legal and policy frameworks of South Sudan largely fulfill the

international requirements related to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which all call for non-discrimination based on sex. The provisions in the statutory frameworks of South Sudan also relate to Priority 17 of the African Union Agenda 2063, which focuses on attaining full gender equality in all spheres of life, and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which focuses on achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls by 2030. Viewed through feminist theory, the analysis represents an effort to move from symbolic inclusion to structural transformation by confronting the social and institutional arrangements that sustain women's marginalization in land governance.

Despite that, South Sudan's legal architecture reveals a foundational gap in the regulation of family property because it lacks a codified Family or Marriage Act (Bazugba 2024b: p.39). Even though, women are allowed to use land for production, they remain structurally disadvantaged in ownership, inheritance, and control of the benefits. Specifically customary land right- access, inheritance, and succession are largely based on patriarchal marriage. In the absence of a clear statute, the property consequences of marriage remain uncertain, and there is no automatic rule of joint ownership between spouses during marriage. This gap is particularly significant for women's human rights because it leaves marital property vulnerable to patriarchal control and undermines the principle of equality within family relations. The legal ambiguity surrounding common-law unions, polygamous marriages, and other marital forms further weakens women's protection, as inheritance and property rights in these relationships remain insufficiently regulated (Tai 2025).

A second major gap appears in the land tenure framework. The Land Act 2009 does not require joint titling for land acquired and used by married couples, even where land is jointly managed in practice. Although the draft National Land Policy 2023 identifies joint spousal registration as a policy priority, it does not establish mandatory titling requirements or concrete enforcement measures. This creates a contradiction between policy aspiration and legal obligation. From a women's rights perspective, the absence of compulsory joint registration reinforces male-dominated ownership patterns and leaves women exposed to exclusion, especially when land is registered only in a husband's name.

The legal framework also remains silent on spousal consent for land transactions. Neither the existing land law nor the unsettled marriage law provides

a clear rule requiring the consent of both spouses before the sale, lease, or transfer of land, including customary land (Bazugba 2024a). This omission is incompatible with women's rights standards that require equal participation in decisions affecting family assets and livelihoods. In practice, it permits unilateral decision-making by men and weakens women's capacity to protect household land from dispossession. The gap is therefore not merely technical; it reflects a broader failure to translate formal equality into substantive control over property.

Inheritance law presents another unresolved contradiction. South Sudan does not yet have a comprehensive inheritance statute that applies consistently to all heirs. Although the Child Act 2008 recognizes equal inheritance rights for daughters, it does not guarantee equal shares for all children regardless of gender. In addition, the Constitution, Land Act 2009, and Local Government Act 2009 recognize the surviving wife's right to inherit, but this right remains weaker than that of primary heirs. The result is a stratified inheritance system that preserves women's secondary status and conflicts with the broader human rights principle of non-discrimination in succession and family property.

There is also a significant implementation gap in the policy instruments intended to advance women's economic empowerment. The Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan 2018 encourages women's entrepreneurship, but it does not include specific measures to increase women's land ownership or access to land-based resources. Similarly, the National Gender Policy 2013 outlines strategies for women's empowerment in agriculture, yet it lacks clear budgetary commitments or affirmative financing mechanisms. Without material support, policy language remains symbolic and unable to alter structural inequalities. This gap shows that women's land rights

cannot be secured by aspirational policy statements alone; they require funded, enforceable interventions.

A further contradiction lies in the treatment of customary law. The Constitution recognizes customary law and customary land tenure, but it does not explicitly subject them to the principle of gender equality (TCSS 2011). This leaves open a legal space in which discriminatory customs can continue to govern land access, inheritance, and dispute resolution. For feminist legal analysis, this is a critical weakness because it allows patriarchal norms to survive under the protection of legal pluralism. International human rights commitments require states to confront harmful customs, not merely recognize them, and the absence of explicit equality safeguards means that women's rights remain vulnerable in customary forums.

Furthermore, the Land Act 2009 fails to impose a clear duty on land administrators, customary leaders, and community decision-makers to actively respect women's land rights during registration, allocation, management, and dispute resolution. This omission matters because rights without duties are difficult to enforce. Where decision-makers are not legally bound to uphold women's rights, discriminatory practices can persist unchecked at the local level. The framework therefore reproduces a familiar pattern in which women are formally acknowledged as rights holders but are denied effective institutional protection. For example, the IGAD (2020) Gender Assessment of the Land sector in South Sudan identified key issues impeding the realization of women's rights to land ownership. It analyzed the land-related legal and policy frameworks that enable South Sudanese citizens to access and own land regardless of gender. The key priority issues identified for women's land rights in South Sudan include:

Structural exclusion of women from land-sector policy formulation and implementation processes.
 Persistent gender disparities in access to land within South Sudan's plural legal system and diverse socio-cultural context.
 Limited platforms for women to advocate for equitable land rights.
 Restricted access to justice for women through both formal and informal dispute-resolution mechanisms.
 Limited access to information, awareness, and resources on women's land rights.
 Weak implementation of policies and laws that promote women's land rights.
 Poor coordination and collaboration among land governance institutions and key stakeholders on women's land rights.
 Limited institutional capacity among key land-sector actors, including shortages in human resources and technical expertise.

Source: Gender Assessment of the land sector in South Sudan, 2020

Together, these gaps demonstrate that South Sudan's land regime remains marked by a persistent disconnect between women's human rights commitments and the legal instruments meant to secure them. The framework contains elements of recognition, but not yet the binding obligations, enforcement mechanisms, and equality safeguards necessary to

transform women's land rights from formal promises into lived realities (Bazugba 2024a).

This contradiction is not incidental; it is the core mechanism through which gendered land injustice survives. It requires transforming social norms, customs and traditions particularly where bridewealth is paid, and

a woman moves to values that are discriminatory to women gaining rights from her husband's patrilineage. Deconstructing patriarchal barriers is significantly vital to positively alter the tradition Philosophy of patriarchy meant to preserve land as a usual way of doing things. However, the sustainability for socio-cultural values and the bottom line is centered on improving the livelihoods heritage attached to land, but it appears without any of their own families, although women make half of regard to its economic value. Along this line of thinking, the country's population are genuine partners in the land was successively transferred from one the development of their communities and the entire generation to another through the male bloodline (IGAD, 2021). This social arrangement did not envisage the dynamism in the family structures with increasing trends to deconstruct and transform patriarchy in female-headed households which were previously barriers to women's land rights appear possible. They male-headed require a holistic approach in understanding the social systems and their relation to the ideologies (Akolith, 2021)

In Nigeria, similar patterns persist through customary inheritance systems and patriarchal family structures that restrict women's claims to land.

In Nigeria, women's land rights are influenced by a multifaceted system of legal pluralism, where statutory law, customary law, and religious norms coexist, frequently in conflict (Alden Wily, 2018; Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003). The Nigerian Constitution guarantees non-discrimination, but the Land Use Act of 1978 mostly controls land use. This law provides state governors control over land but leaves everyday access and inheritance practices heavily influenced by customary authority (Olujimi, 2019). In many ethnic groups, especially those with a patrilineal system, land is passed down through male lineage. This means that daughters and widows cannot own or inherit land (Agarwal, 1994; Doss *et al.*, 2015).

Research indicates that Nigerian women, although comprising a substantial segment of the agricultural workforce, infrequently hold formal land titles and typically obtain land solely through male relatives, including husbands, fathers, or sons (Chikwendu & Arokoyo, (2023). This reliance exacerbates economic vulnerability, particularly in instances of widowhood, divorce, or marital discord, resulting in women potentially losing complete access to land. The ongoing nature of these practices shows that just having legal equality isn't enough to change deeply ingrained patriarchal norms. Instead, traditional systems still determine who is entitled to own land, making women secondary users instead of primary rights holders (Jacob, 2024).

The Nigerian case exemplifies how institutional frameworks can sustain inequality, even within

relatively stable political contexts (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). The presence of formal rights alongside informal exclusion engenders a structural contradiction akin to that seen in South Sudan, where legal frameworks exist but do not effectively protect women's rights to land ownership. Consequently, women's land insecurity in Nigeria is not merely a residual cultural issue but a systemic consequence of legal pluralism intertwined with patriarchal social structures (Yesufu, 2018; Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003).

The background to this problem lies in the persistence of gender inequality within legal, customary, and political systems. In many communities, land is governed through patrilineal inheritance, male family authority, and social norms that position men as rightful owners and women as dependents or secondary claimants (Turay, & Omirin, 2023). Bazugba (2024b) demonstrates that in South Sudan these patterns are reinforced by conflicting statutory and customary laws, weak enforcement, and limited women's representation in land administration and decision-making. This pattern affects widows, daughters, divorced women, rural women, and displaced women in especially severe ways. Even where women work the land, manage households, and sustain agricultural production, they may remain unable to claim ownership or secure tenure.

The core problem addressed in this paper is that patriarchy persists despite laws. Statutory guarantees of equality often coexist with customary practices that continue to shape actual land allocation and inheritance. Bazugba (2024a) shows that South Sudan's legal framework appears equitable on paper, yet the gap between rights and practice remains wide because enforcement is weak and patriarchal customs dominate family and community decision-making. In Nigeria, legal pluralism creates a similar situation in which statutory law and customary norms coexist uneasily, often with local patriarchal authority determining outcomes. In both settings, women's rights are formally recognized but materially restricted.

This paper argues that women's land rights should be understood not only as a legal issue but also as a performative political drama. Patriarchy functions as a script that repeatedly casts men as owners, decision-makers, and legitimate heirs, while casting women as subordinate, silent, or temporary members of the land-owning community. Bazugba's (2024a) findings show that even leadership training and awareness-building only become transformative when they alter women's confidence, collective agency, and engagement with institutions. Feminist theory helps explain the structure of this inequality, while dramatic theory helps explain how it is enacted, normalized, and contested. The paper therefore treats women's land struggles as scenes of social performance in which law, custom, and resistance collide.

This paper therefore argues that women's land rights must be understood as a comparative problem of gendered governance. The issue is not simply whether laws exist, but whether patriarchal systems continue to perform women's exclusion across different state forms. Feminist theory explains the structure of that exclusion, while dramatic theory explains how it is enacted as social script. By reading Nigeria and South Sudan together, the paper shows that gendered land injustice is not a local anomaly but a transnational pattern of patriarchal performance that survives across legal systems, political histories, socio-cultural diversities, institutional arrangements, limited platforms for women's popular demand and exclusion of women in policy formulation and implementation structures.

This paper is organized into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the issue and the central problem of patriarchy persisting despite law. Chapter Two reviews feminist theory and dramatic theories, including Aristotle, Brecht, and Boal, alongside the empirical contribution of Bazugba (2024a). Chapter Three presents the combined theoretical framework. Chapter Four analyzes the findings as theatrical texts, drawing especially on the South Sudan study as a text of gendered performance, institutional contradiction, and resistance. Chapter Five concludes that theatre can serve as a tool for feminist social transformation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Feminism

Feminist theory provides the most important foundation for this study because it explains women's land exclusion as a structural form of gendered power rather than an individual or cultural accident. Feminism argues that women's inequality is produced through institutions, norms, and social expectations that systematically privilege men. In the context of land, this means that ownership is not simply a private property issue but a gendered political issue tied to family structure, inheritance, and authority.

Bell hooks (1984) argues that feminism must confront domination in both private and public life because patriarchy operates across the ordinary spaces of everyday existence. This is crucial for understanding land rights, since exclusion often begins in the family and is reinforced by customary forums and formal institutions. Bazugba (2024b) shows this clearly in South Sudan, where women's rights are blocked not just by law but by the patriarchal family order, male-dominated land administration, and the social expectation that women remain subordinate. Women may contribute labor, nurture households, and sustain rural economies while still being denied land ownership or inheritance. Feminist theory exposes this contradiction by showing that labor and rights are not equally distributed. For example, South Sudan operates a plural legal system comprising: Statutory law: Derived from the Transitional

Constitution and subsequent legislation; Customary law: Traditional norms applied by chiefs and community leaders, especially in rural areas; and international law: Treaties and conventions ratified by South Sudan, particularly human rights instruments. Customary law plays a dominant role in everyday life, but many customary practices raise significant gender-related concerns. Gender issues in the Legal System include the bride price (dowry) system, which can reinforce perceptions of women as property to be bought and controlled by husbands and in-laws (Tai 2025). While some families view bride price as a symbolic gesture of respect, high bride price has been linked to forced marriages, domestic violence, and conflict when disputes arise over payments. Although deeply embedded in cultural identity, these practices often undermine women's rights and autonomy (UNFPA 2025, Bazugba 2024b).

Intersectional feminism further strengthens this analysis. Crenshaw (1991) demonstrates that women's oppression cannot be understood through gender alone because race, class, location, and other forms of power shape vulnerability. In Nigeria and South Sudan, women's land insecurity is compounded by poverty, displacement, widowhood, rural marginalization, and conflict. Bazugba (2024a) adds to this by showing that South Sudanese women are especially vulnerable because many are employed in informal sectors, have few assets, and are heavily affected by instability and displacement. The consequence is that women do not experience land injustice in a uniform way. Rather, they encounter overlapping structures of exclusion that intensify one another.

Political feminist theory also shows that legal recognition is not enough. Fraser (2013) argues that justice requires both recognition and redistribution. Women may be recognized symbolically as equal citizens while remaining materially excluded from land, inheritance, and economic resources. This insight is central to the present study because both Nigeria and South Sudan have legal texts that affirm equality, yet women continue to face substantive inequality in practice. Bazugba (2024a; IGAD 2021) demonstrates that this gap is particularly visible in South Sudan where the Transitional Constitution and Land Act promise equality, but customary patriarchy and weak enforcement prevent actual access. Feminism therefore reveals that land rights are not only about access to property but also about whose voice counts in the public order.

Feminist research on Nigeria supports the notion that both the legal and social systems embed women's lack of land rights. Agarwal (1994) posits that land ownership is a pivotal factor influencing women's bargaining power, economic autonomy, and social standing. Her analysis is particularly relevant to the

Nigerian context, where women's absence of land rights significantly constrains their agency, limiting their ability to make independent economic decisions and participate fully in community life. Whitehead and Tsikata (2003) also stress that customary land tenure systems in Africa, including Nigeria, are not fixed traditions but rather dynamic institutions that frequently evolve in ways that maintain male authority.

Onuoha and Owuanghalo (2016) illustrates that in Nigeria, women's land rights are often influenced by kinship systems that favour male inheritance, thereby entrenching gender inequality within family structures. This corresponds with extensive feminist critiques that identify women's subordination at the nexus of domestic dynamics and the overarching political economy. Zougouri & Zoungrana, (2025) demonstrate that the lack of secure ownership, despite women possessing use rights, hampers long-term investment, productivity, and economic security.

Intersectionality is also crucial in Nigeria. Rural women, widows, and women in northern areas governed in part by Islamic law frequently encounter exacerbated disadvantages (Olujimi, 2019; FAO, 2011). These intersecting vulnerabilities exemplify Crenshaw's (1991) assertion that gender oppression interrelates with other forms of marginalisation. Consequently, feminist literature regarding Nigeria affirms that land inequality is not incidental but systematically generated through complex power structures that function across legal, cultural, and economic spheres.

2.2 Dramatic Theories

Dramatic theory provides a second layer of analysis by showing how domination is staged and repeated in social life. Aristotle's *Poetics* offers the classical premise that human action can be organized as plot, conflict, and resolution (Aristotle, 1996). Although Aristotle's model is limited for critical social analysis, it establishes the basic insight that social life can be read as structured action. In this paper, that insight is useful because women's land struggles are not random; they unfold as patterned conflicts between law, custom, and resistance.

Brecht's epic theatre offers a more critical dramatic framework. Brecht (1964) rejected theatre that encouraged passive emotional absorption and instead sought to expose the social contradictions underlying human action. His alienation effect makes familiar realities appear strange so that audiences can think critically rather than merely feel. This is highly relevant to women's land rights because patriarchal custom often appears natural, timeless, and unquestionable. A Brechtian lens reveals that such customs are historical arrangements, not immutable truths.

Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed takes the critique further by making theatre participatory. Boal (1979) argued that theatre should not simply represent oppression; it should help oppressed people rehearse resistance and intervention. His approach is especially useful for this paper because women's land struggles require collective voice, public dialogue, and strategic agency. Bazugba's (2024) findings on transformational leadership training in South Sudan are consistent with this perspective: women's participation in leadership training, networking, and advocacy changed confidence levels, improved awareness of rights, and strengthened collective action. In Boalian terms, women are not passive spectators of their own dispossession. They can become actors who intervene in the social script and imagine alternatives.

The value of dramatic theory in this study is that it turns social inequality into something visible, analyzable, and contestable. It helps explain not only what patriarchy does but how it operates through performance, repetition, and audience acceptance. This is why dramatic theory belongs in the literature review alongside feminism: together they provide the conceptual tools for understanding land injustice as both structure and spectacle. Bazugba (2024) demonstrates that when women are given leadership training and collective platforms, their capacity to challenge patriarchy increases. That finding reinforces the dramatic insight that roles can be rehearsed differently and social scripts can be rewritten.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study uses a combined feminist and dramatic theoretical framework. Feminist theory explains how patriarchal power structures women's access to land, inheritance, and recognition. Dramatic theory explains how those structures are performed, repeated, and normalized through social scripts. Political theory deepens the analysis by showing that land rights are always tied to legitimacy, authority, and power.

Butler's (1990) theory of performativity is central to this framework. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed essence but a repeated set of acts that create the illusion of natural identity. Applied to land rights, this means that men's authority over land is not merely inherited but continuously performed through family meetings, customary decisions, inheritance rules, and public expectations. Women's subordinate position is likewise performed through repeated social expectations that cast them as dependents rather than full land-rights holders. Bazugba's (2024) discussion of women's reluctance, fear, and low representation in South Sudanese land governance can be read through this lens: the problem is not only material exclusion but the repeated performance of social inferiority.

Brecht's epic theatre contributes the logic of critical exposure. His method helps reveal the contradiction between the official language of equality and the lived reality of exclusion. In this framework, customary law is not treated as neutral tradition but as a socially produced script that can be interrogated and challenged. Brecht (1964) is useful because he insists that social arrangements should be made visible as historical and changeable rather than inevitable. This is highly relevant to South Sudan, where Bazugba (2024) shows that constitutional equality coexists with the practical dominance of patriarchal custom.

Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed adds the logic of intervention and participation. Boal (1979) insists that oppressed people should rehearse freedom by actively reworking scenes of domination. In relation to women's land rights, this means that advocacy, collective organizing, legal mobilization, and community dialogue are not separate from theatre but can be understood as theatrical forms of political action. Bazugba's (2024) emphasis on transformational leadership, networking, dialogue, and role models aligns with this participatory logic because it shows that women's empowerment depends on collective rehearsal of agency. Boal's framework makes it possible to think of resistance as performance that transforms the conditions of visibility and agency.

Politically, the framework draws on the idea that injustice persists when institutions reproduce unequal power. Mouffe (2013) argues that conflict is a normal part of politics and must be acknowledged rather than denied. Fraser (2013) adds that justice requires both symbolic recognition and material redistribution. These ideas strengthen the argument that women's land rights depend not only on legal reform but also on institutional transformation and cultural change. Bazugba (2024) shows that when women are trained, organized, and supported through networks, they become more capable of challenging the contradiction between legal rights and actual exclusion. The combined framework therefore allows the paper to interpret women's land struggles as simultaneously legal, political, and theatrical.

2.4 Critical Synthesis and Theoretical Gaps in Women's Land Rights Literature

A thorough examination of the current literature indicates that feminist, legal, and development studies have markedly enhanced comprehension of women's land dispossession; however, significant analytical deficiencies persist. A significant portion of the literature characterises women's land inequality as either a legal deficiency or a cultural issue, frequently segregating these aspects instead of analysing their interplay as a dynamic system of power reproduction. For example, important studies like Agarwal (1994) and Whitehead and Tsikata (2003) shed light on how gender affects access to land and how customary tenure systems have

changed over time. But they don't always explain how these systems keep going even though there have been formal legal changes and promises of gender equality around the world, often perpetuated by entrenched social norms and economic interests that resist change.

Recent academic efforts seek to address this deficiency by focusing on structural and political-economic analyses. For instance, Levien (2017) places land dispossession within the larger contexts of capitalist growth and state power, showing that gendered land inequality is not just a cultural issue but also a political economy issue. Chigbu (2019) also talks about how women's lack of land is caused by patrilineal systems and suggests ways to change the rules, such as advocating for legal reforms and community-based initiatives that empower women in land ownership. Even these analyses, however, often regard inequality as a state rather than a process—an entity that exists rather than one that is perpetually generated.

This is the precise theoretical contribution of the current study. By merging feminist theory with performativity and dramatic analysis, it reconceptualises women's land dispossession as a continuous social performance instead of a fixed result. Utilising Butler's (1990) notion of performativity, the research posits that gendered land relations are perpetuated through recurrent actions—*inherited choices, familial negotiations, and customary adjudications*—that collectively reinforce male supremacy. This viewpoint transcends mere descriptive narratives of inequality to elucidate its persistence.

Another limitation in the literature is the inadequate exploration of agency and resistance. Many studies indicate that women are left out, but fewer look at how women actively negotiate, resist, and change land governance systems. Development-orientated frameworks, like McDougall *et al.* (2021), stress the importance of gender integration and intersectionality, but they usually see women as beneficiaries of policy instead of political actors. Feminist theatre scholarship, exemplified by Owokotomo (2021), emphasises the significance of performance in effecting social change, yet it fails to explicitly link its findings to tangible issues such as land rights.

This study fills that gap by showing that women are not only victims of dispossession but also people who fight back. Through a Boalian lens, actions like advocacy, leadership, and collective organising are seen as types of political theatre where women practice and act out different ways of having power. This methodology enhances the literature by connecting symbolic performance to material transformation, illustrating how changes in discourse, visibility, and participation can affect access to land and resources.

Moreover, the comparative aspect of this study contests the prevalent inclination in current research to regard African nations as singular case studies. The study illustrates that gendered land injustice is not confined to specific contexts but is structurally perpetuated across various political and legal systems through the analysis of Nigeria and South Sudan in tandem. This corroborates extensive assertions within feminist political theory, notably Fraser (2013), that inequality endures in the absence of recognition, redistribution, and institutional reform.

In conclusion, the literature offers a robust basis for comprehending women's land rights; however, it frequently lacks a cohesive framework that integrates law, culture, performance, and agency. This study helps to fill that gap by using an integrated analytical approach that sees gendered land dispossession as structural, performative, and political all at once. This action not only enhances theoretical comprehension but also creates new avenues for interpreting resistance and transformation within contexts of entrenched patriarchy, such as understanding how women mobilise legal frameworks and cultural practices to assert their land rights.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology to analyse women's land rights in Nigeria and South Sudan as manifestations of gendered and performative injustice. A qualitative methodology is suitable as the study focuses not only on formal legal frameworks but also on the meanings, practices, and lived experiences that generate and perpetuate gendered power. Qualitative research facilitates a comprehensive examination of the interplay between law, custom, and social norms in influencing women's access to land, aspects inadequately represented by quantitative metrics (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The research is based on a comparative case study approach, concentrating on Nigeria and South Sudan as analytically distinct but structurally analogous contexts. Comparative qualitative analysis facilitates the discernment of both similarities and differences among cases, thereby uncovering overarching patterns of gendered inequality that surpass national boundaries (Bryman, 2016; Yin, 2018). Nigeria exemplifies a comparatively stable legal system defined by legal pluralism, whereas South Sudan illustrates a post-conflict environment characterised by institutional fragility. The comparison is not meant to apply to everyone but to show how different political and legal systems can lead to the same result of women being left out of land ownership.

The study primarily employs documentary analysis as its method of data collection. Important sources are academic literature, legal frameworks, policy

documents, and the empirical study by Bazugba (2024), which gives a lot of information about women's land rights and leadership in South Sudan. Documentary analysis is particularly appropriate for this research, as it facilitates the examination of both formal legal texts and academic interpretations of customary practices and gender relations (Bowen, 2009; Flick, 2022). In the Nigerian context, secondary literature regarding land tenure, gender inequality, and customary law is utilised to formulate an analytically robust narrative of women's land experiences.

The study utilises a thematic and interpretive analytical framework. We find themes like legal contradiction, customary authority, exclusion, silence, and resistance in the chosen texts. We look at these themes through the lens of both feminist and dramatic theory. Thematic analysis facilitates the systematic identification of recurring patterns while maintaining the flexibility to address complex social phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Simultaneously, interpretation is informed by feminist theory, which contextualises women's land exclusion within overarching patriarchal structures, and by performative theory, which conceptualises these structures as socially enacted and perpetually reproduced.

A significant methodological contribution of this study is the employment of dramatic analysis as an interpretive framework. Instead of viewing the data as merely descriptive, the study interprets legal frameworks, customary practices, and empirical findings as "texts" that delineate specific roles, scripts, and power dynamics. This methodology is grounded in interpretive social science, which acknowledges that social reality is shaped by meaning and performance (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). In this framework, institutions are perceived not merely as formal structures but as arenas of recurrent action where gender roles are performed and challenged. The dramatic lens does not supplant empirical analysis; rather, it enhances it by elucidating how inequality is normalised through repetition and how it can be challenged through acts of resistance.

The study stresses credibility, coherence, and transparency to make sure that the analysis is strong. Credibility is attained through interaction with recognised academic sources and the application of robust theoretical frameworks. To keep things coherent, the research design, theoretical framework, and analytical strategy must all work together. It is clear where the data comes from and how the conclusions are reached (Nowell *et al.*, 2017), which makes things more open. Although the study lacks primary fieldwork, its dependence on peer-reviewed literature and documented empirical research establishes a robust foundation for analysis.

The study also recognises some of its own flaws. Being a qualitative and document-based analysis, it doesn't show real-life experiences or make statistical generalisations. But its goal is not to make broad statements; rather, it is to find deep, contextually based insights into how gendered land injustice is created and maintained. The methodology integrates comparative analysis with feminist and dramatic interpretation, facilitating a nuanced comprehension of both structure and agency in women's land struggles.

In conclusion, this methodological approach enhances the study by offering a definitive and stringent framework for examining women's land rights as a multifaceted interaction of law, tradition, and practice. It makes sure that the analysis stays based on theory, based on facts, and critically involved with the bigger issue of gendered injustice.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 Reading the findings as texts

The findings from the comparative study can be read as a set of theatrical texts. Rather than treating them as simple empirical facts, this section interprets them as scenes that reveal how gendered injustice is staged in everyday life. In this reading, legal contradiction, customary authority, silence, resistance, and leadership become dramatic texts that expose the performance of patriarchy. Bazugba's (2024) South Sudan study is especially valuable here because it provides concrete examples of how women's rights, leadership, and land access are negotiated in practice through public, institutional, and interpersonal performances.

The first text is the contradiction between law and practice. In both Nigeria and South Sudan, the law may recognize women's rights, but the actual performance of land governance often excludes women. Republic of South Sudan is committed to empowering women through affirmative action of women's participation at all levels of government by 35%. It is one of the positive moves towards inclusive governance but largely remains at national levels. There is limited specific attention to improving women's participation in land sector institutions at national and sub-national levels (South Sudan Women Land Rights Ageda, 2021). The complexities of the dual legal frameworks that provided for women to gain rights in land limits the understanding with which to approach social transformation towards the elimination of laws that are contradicted by the same law which recognizes those negative customs and traditions. (IGAD, 2021). This situation consequently affects translation of good statutory laws into practice. The reasons for this are limited understanding of the recognition of customs and traditions as sources of legislation, the oral application of customary laws that are seldom codified and the decision of cases

This is a classic dramatic tension between the official script and the enacted reality. Brecht's framework is useful here because it exposes the contradiction instead of allowing it to pass as normal. The audience is compelled to see that equality in law does not automatically become equality in life. Bazugba (2024) shows precisely this in South Sudan: the constitution, Land Act, and National Gender Policy support women's rights, yet customary law and weak implementation continue to undermine them.

The second text is the performance of exclusion through custom. Customary institutions often cast men as rightful owners and women as secondary participants. These roles are not merely administrative; they are socially rehearsed performances. Butler's theory helps explain why this matters. Repetition turns exclusion into common sense. What is performed often enough begins to look natural, even when it is deeply political. In South Sudan, Bazugba (2024) describes how land and property decisions are usually made by male family members, thereby reinforcing women's subordinate position. This is not just social prejudice; it is a repeatable script of exclusion.

The third text is silence, hesitation, and fear. Women's reluctance to challenge land authority should not be read as weakness. It is a response to repeated social punishment, intimidation, and the expectation of obedience. In dramatic terms, women are often assigned subordinate roles within a script they did not write. Their struggle to speak becomes an act of interruption. Their silence, then, is not emptiness; it is a sign of the pressures that shape the performance of gender. Bazugba (2024) directly captures this dynamic through the "I fear syndrome," women's lack of assertiveness, and the social mockery directed at women who move into public leadership.

The fourth text is collective resistance. When women organize, petition, speak with leaders, or form advocacy groups, they shift from passive figures to active performers in the drama of justice. This is where Boal becomes especially relevant. His theatre insists that oppressed people must rehearse alternatives to domination. Women's organizing around land rights can therefore be read as a form of political rehearsal in which the script of patriarchy is challenged through collective action. Bazugba (2024) provides several examples: women forming networks, joining political parties after leadership training, petitioning leaders when quotas are ignored, and engaging traditional leaders in dialogue to defend their rights. These are all performative acts of resistance.

The fifth text is leadership as performance. Women's leadership in land advocacy often requires them to act against gendered expectations of silence and submission. Feminist theory shows that such

expectations are structurally produced, while dramatic theory shows that leadership is itself performative. Women who occupy public space, speak with authority, or challenge local power do more than represent themselves. They disrupt the social script that seeks to keep them outside the center of decision-making. Bazugba (2024) shows that transformational leadership training increased women's confidence, political participation, and capacity to engage with institutions, suggesting that leadership can be learned as a performative practice of social change. This advocacy led to the development of the women's land rights agenda in South Sudan (IGAD, 2021). The Women's Land Rights Agenda provides a rationale for the development of the country-level women's land rights programming in the short, medium, and long term. Land governance across borders examines rulemaking, standard setting, and institutions building across the borders, which requires country-level interventions by member states on a deeper understanding and analysis of the factors shaping land governance systems and how it impacts the implementation of transnational laws, policies, and programmes (IGAD, 2020)

4.2 Nigeria as a dramatic scene

The Nigerian case can be read as a scene in which constitutional rights, customary authority, and social expectation clash. Formal equality exists, but local inheritance practices often continue to privilege male descendants. Women's claims are frequently mediated by male kin or rejected through customary reasoning. This creates a theatrical contradiction between the public script of equality and the private performance of exclusion.

From a Brechtian perspective, this contradiction should not be hidden. It must be exposed as a social arrangement that benefits from appearing natural. Women's resistance in Nigeria, whether through legal challenge, advocacy, or community negotiation, functions as an interruption of this script. It forces the audience to confront the distance between law and lived reality. In this sense, Nigerian women's land struggles are not isolated disputes but performative scenes of political contestation.

The Nigerian case can be read as a complex drama in which statutory guarantees of equality coexist with deeply entrenched customary practices that continue to marginalise women. While the Constitution and formal legal frameworks promote non-discrimination, the actual performance of land governance is often dictated by patriarchal norms embedded in kinship systems and community authority structures (Alden Wily, 2018; Olujimi, 2019). This creates a layered contradiction between official legal narratives and lived social realities.

From a dramatic perspective, customary inheritance practices function as a script that consistently assigns men the role of rightful landowners while positioning women as dependents or temporary users. This is particularly evident in patrilineal communities where daughters are excluded from inheritance and widows may only retain access to land conditionally through male relatives (Amaechi & Muoh, (2018). These practices are not merely legal anomalies; they are repeated performances that normalise exclusion through everyday social interactions.

A Brechtian reading exposes this contradiction by revealing that what appears as "tradition" is in fact a socially constructed system that benefits from its perceived naturalness. The normalisation of male dominance in landownership discourages critical questioning and reinforces compliance. However, moments of disruption occur when women challenge these norms through legal action, advocacy, or collective organising. For instance, court cases and grassroots movements advocating for women's inheritance rights represent performative interruptions that challenge the legitimacy of patriarchal authority (Chigbu, 2019; Levien, 2017).

At the same time, Nigerian women's resistance often operates within constrained spaces. Social expectations, fear of ostracism, and economic dependency limit the extent to which women can openly contest land rights. This reflects Butler's notion of performativity, where repeated acts sustain gender hierarchies while also providing opportunities for subversion. Women who assert claims to land disrupt the expected script, thereby exposing its fragility.

In Boalian terms, Nigerian women's advocacy efforts can be understood as forms of participatory theatre in which marginalised actors attempt to rewrite the script of land ownership (Owokotomo, (2021). Civil society organisations, legal aid initiatives, and community dialogues provide opportunities for rehearsing and enacting alternative narratives of gender equality. These interventions demonstrate that while patriarchal systems are deeply embedded, they are not immutable. Instead, they remain open to transformation through sustained collective action (McDougall *et al.*, 2021).

4.3 South Sudan as a dramatic scene

The South Sudanese case presents a more severe version of the same dynamic because conflict and displacement intensify women's vulnerability. Women contribute significantly to agricultural life, but land ownership and control remain concentrated in male hands. Conflict weakens institutions, displaces communities, and deepens dependence on customary authority. The result is a fragile system in which women's rights are even harder to enforce.

Bazugba (2024) makes this especially clear by showing that women in South Sudan are marginalized not only through law but through socioeconomic conditions, limited representation in decision-making, conflict displacement, and fear of reprisal. Her findings on transformational leadership also show that women's empowerment requires more than legal language; it requires confidence, networks, male allies, mentors, and institutional support. This context can therefore be read theatrically as a stage where legal promises, customary authority, and post-conflict insecurity collide. The drama is not one of isolated legal claims but of structural survival.

Boal's framework is especially relevant because it insists that people must not remain spectators to their own oppression. In South Sudan, women's resistance through advocacy, networking, political participation, and leadership training can be understood as an effort to rewrite the scene. Bazugba (2024) demonstrates that training and collective engagement created shifts in awareness, confidence, and political action. These developments align strongly with the Boalian idea that political transformation begins when the oppressed rehearse alternative futures.

4.4 Comparative theatrical reading

The comparative value of the analysis lies in showing that different political contexts can produce similar forms of gendered injustice. Nigeria illustrates how legal equality can be undermined by persistent customary authority. South Sudan illustrates how conflict and institutional fragility magnify the same dynamics. Both cases reveal that patriarchy works through performance: it assigns roles, repeats them, and makes them appear inevitable.

Despite these laws, customary law—which governs roughly 65-90% of land—often overrides formal statutes in South Sudan. In many communities: Women's access to land is mediated entirely through male relatives (fathers or husbands). Widows and daughters are frequently expelled from family land by male relatives upon the death of a husband or father. Cultural norms often view women as "property" themselves rather than rights-holding individuals. This presents a comparative reading of how customary laws in practice supersede statutory laws on women's land rights

A theatrical reading makes these patterns visible. It shows that women's exclusion is not merely a policy failure but a social drama sustained by repeated acts. It also shows that resistance is not only legal but performative. Women's collective action, leadership, and advocacy are forms of social staging that challenge the legitimacy of patriarchal power. This is why dramatic theory is not ancillary to feminist analysis; it is central to understanding how injustice is reproduced and how it

can be interrupted. Bazugba's (2024) study reinforces this by demonstrating that when women receive transformational leadership opportunities, they become better able to challenge social norms and institutional barriers.

5. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of Nigeria and South Sudan leads to one central conclusion: women's land dispossession is sustained less by the absence of legal rights than by the durability of patriarchal performance. In both contexts, the state may formally recognize women's equality, but the lived reality of land governance remains shaped by customary authority, male-dominated inheritance systems, and institutional weakness. The comparison therefore confirms that legal reform without social transformation cannot produce substantive land justice.

What makes the comparison analytically powerful is that it reveals both continuity and variation. Nigeria shows how discriminatory land practices can persist inside a more established legal order through the authority of custom and family structure. South Sudan shows how conflict, displacement, and fragile governance intensify the same logic of exclusion. Despite these differences, the underlying pattern remains the same: patriarchy continues to script women as subordinate participants in land relations while reserving ownership and decision-making for men. This is why the problem must be understood as structural and comparative, not isolated or accidental.

Bazugba's (2024) South Sudan study strengthens this conclusion by showing that women's land rights are linked to leadership, confidence, networking, and the ability to challenge entrenched norms. Her findings demonstrate that empowerment is not only legal but performative: women must acquire the social capacity to speak, organize, and intervene in systems that routinely marginalize them. That insight supports the broader argument of this paper that theatre is not a decorative metaphor but a method of political transformation. It reveals the mechanisms through which injustice is staged and the possibilities through which it can be interrupted.

The broader implication is clear. If patriarchy is performed through repeated social scripts, then feminist transformation must also be performed through counter-scripts of resistance, visibility, and collective action. Brecht helps expose the contradiction, Boal helps rehearse intervention, and feminist theory helps identify the structure of domination. Together, they show that women's land rights cannot be secured by law alone; they require a change in the social drama of power itself. Theatre, in this sense, becomes a method for rewriting the terms of citizenship, land, and justice. It allows women not only to claim a place in the story but to

change the script entirely. Creating platforms for women popular demands on their land rights are among some best practices to engage in.

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