DOI: https://doi.org/10.52968/15067018
ISSN: 2805-3346

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Colonial Land Policies in Lagos and their Implications for Gender Equality

Mistura Eniola Bello

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Tai Solarin University of Education

Received: 16 October 2024

Revised: 14 June 2025

Accepted: 10 July 2025

Published: 6 November 2025

Cite article as: Bello, M. E. (2025). Colonial Land Policies in Lagos and their Implications for Gender Equality. *African Journal of Housing and Sustainable Development, 6(*1), pp. 50-62.

Corresponding author:
bellome@tasued.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

This study historicizes the colonial land policies enacted by the British in Lagos and examines their implications for gender equality, focusing specifically on women's access to land. The research highlights significant shifts in legal frameworks and property rights by tracing the evolution of land ownership from precolonial to colonial times. The imposition of British land laws often disrupted traditional practices, marginalizing women who previously held substantial land rights under customary law. Through detailed case studies and historical analysis, the study explores the mechanisms by which women navigated and resisted these colonial legal constraints. Additionally, it investigates the broader socioeconomic impacts of restricted land rights on women's economic empowerment and social standing. The findings reveal that colonial land policies entrenched gender inequalities, significantly altering the landscape of property ownership and economic opportunities for women in Lagos. The study concludes by reflecting on the enduring legacy of these policies in contemporary land-rights issues and gender dynamics in Lagos.

Keywords: Colonial, Customary law, Gender equality, Land policies, Lagos

1.0 Introduction

Land is a vital resource, essential not only for habitation and agriculture but also as a diverse environmental asset encompassing forests, rivers and minerals. This natural wealth is central to societal progress, shaping economies, social structures and governance systems. As Ozigbo (2012) observes, land has consistently attracted strong interest and regulation because of its universal significance. The complexities of land ownership and access have led to ongoing tensions and negotiations involving legal frameworks, policies, cultural norms and customary conventions. In Africa, land remains a cornerstone of household livelihood and poverty reduction efforts. However, despite persistent advocacy for women's land rights, property ownership remains deeply unequal across ethnic and religious contexts (Oguamanam & Obah, 2024). Land-tenure systems are shaped by a combination of precolonial traditions, colonial legal interventions and contemporary constitutional frameworks, whose contradictions often create loopholes that weaken women's inheritance and property rights. As a result, women continue to face discriminatory customs and legal structures that hinder their ability to own and control land (Oguamanam & Obah, 2024).

The case of Lagos provides a compelling lens through which to examine these dynamics. Precolonial Lagos had a distinct land-tenure system

based on communal ownership, where extended families and lineage heads, as well as the *Idejo* chiefs (White Cap chiefs), primarily controlled land (Animashaun, 2015). Still, women actively participated in land management and economic activities. Unlike many other African societies where women's land rights were significantly restricted, the commercial prominence and complex social structures of Lagos afforded women notable agency in land transactions, primarily through inheritance from parents, market associations and elite family networks.

However, British colonial rule imposed a new legal framework that redefined land ownership, replacing indigenous practices with Western tenure systems that prioritized individual ownership and largely excluded women. Colonial land policies systematically dismantled the mechanisms through which women accessed and controlled land, embedding gender inequalities that favoured male-dominated structures (Mann, 1991). This shift not only eroded women's rights to land but also disrupted the socioeconomic structures that had previously enabled their economic participation and social influence.

In that light, this study historicizes the transformation of land-tenure from precolonial to colonial Lagos, focusing on how colonial land policies limited women's rights to land ownership and access. It examines how women navigated, resisted or adapted to these limitations, using case studies to illustrate individual and collective responses to colonial legal constraints. Furthermore, the research explores the socioeconomic impact of restricted land rights on women's livelihoods, economic engagement and social standing. By integrating historical analysis with targeted case studies, this study sheds light on the enduring legacies of colonial land policies and their implications for contemporary women's access to land and economic opportunities in Lagos.

2.0 Materials and Methods

This research utilizes a historical methodology, integrating both primary and secondary sources, to examine the evolution of land policies and their gendered implications in colonial Lagos. It spans from the late 19th to the early 20th century, covering the precolonial period and the introduction of British colonial rule, as well as subsequent changes. Primary sources include colonial government records, legal documents and case law – sources which help us to understand shifts in land policies and their impact on gender dynamics. Specifically, archival research was conducted at the Nigerian National Archives, Ibadan. Key data from 1880 onwards came from colonial land reports, land registers, memoranda from the Commissioner of Land and official correspondence between the Commissioner of Land and the Honourable Administrator of the Colony. These documents provide crucial insights into policy enactment and enforcement, revealing the role of colonial authorities in reshaping land-tenure systems.

The case-study selection follows a purposive sampling approach, focusing on women landholders who were directly affected by colonial land policies. The selection criteria included availability of documented legal land disputes and petitions involving women, thus ensuring a diverse representation of experiences. The chosen cases illustrate both compliance with and resistance to colonial legal frameworks, thereby shedding light on women's agency in negotiating land rights. Additionally, the findings were contextualized based on historical literature, scholarly articles and books on the land-tenure systems in Lagos, women's rights under customary law and colonial-era property transformations.

Acknowledging the limitations of historical methodology, this study critically engages with potential biases in colonial records, such as the underrepresentation of women's voices and the framing of customary practices through colonial legal interpretations. By triangulating multiple sources, it seeks to mitigate these biases and offer a comprehensive understanding of women's land rights in colonial Lagos.

3.0 Findings and Discussion

Evolution of Land Ownership in Pre-colonial Lagos

During the precolonial era, the predominant land-tenure system in Yorubaland was characterized by customary land tenancy, where land was collectively owned by families, villages, towns and

communities rather than individuals. As noted by Omuojine (1999), land was considered a communal asset, held in trust for all family members. Adeniyi (2013) adds that during this period, land was managed according to the customs and traditions of the various ethnic groups within the region. Traditional rulers and family heads held the authority to oversee land management, adhering to the political, socioeconomic, cultural and traditional norms of the time. Community members possessed heritable rights, with both male and female children sharing in the inheritance. Notably, women had legitimate claims to land. For instance, if a daughter inherited property from her father, her rights were recognized and respected. Even when a married woman owned land, her husband, regardless of his origin, could never claim ownership, as the land remained the woman's property, transferring to her children upon her death (Ajisafe, 1924). This was also the situation in precolonial Lagos.

The historical roots of Lagos date back to the fourteenth century, when Olofin Ogunfunminire migrated from Ile-Ife to establish a settlement that was later occupied by the Awori people, a Yoruba-speaking subgroup residing in Lagos and Ogun states in today's southwestern Nigeria (Ajetunmobi, 2003). By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the expansion of the Bini Kingdom had reshaped Lagos into a significant hub for the West African transatlantic trade (Mann, 2007; Muritala, 2011; Danmole, 2017). Despite the influences of Benin and European traders, land rights largely remained with Ogunfunminire's descendants, i.e. the *Idejo* chiefs, who were responsible for land distribution and urban planning. This included the allocation of land to families, including women and influential newcomers, thus allowing women to maintain their land rights. Even amid external influences, the customary laws that recognized women's contributions to the economy persisted, granting them access to land for farming, trade and residential purposes, a practice that continued until the onset of the British colonial era (Mann, 2007; Animashaun, 2015).

In landowning families, both men and women had the right to use and contribute to the management of communal property, although they were generally unable to sell or transfer it (Elias, 1962). Landowners were also responsible for providing accommodation for enslaved individuals, sometimes allowing them to cultivate plots for personal use. Additionally, lineage heads could grant land-use rights to newcomers, subject to the approval of the larger family group (Coker, 1958).

In the nineteenth century, Lagos underwent significant transformation driven by various factors, particularly changes in land ownership and economic conditions. A fierce competition for political power and economic gains among elite families, especially those from royal backgrounds, ignited conflicts, notably during the 1830s and 1840s (Lawal, 1994). This period of instability occurred alongside Britain's push for "legitimate commerce" as an alternative to the slave trade, ultimately leading to a British naval bombardment of Lagos in 1851. Such disruptions destabilized the existing land tenure system, resulting in some land falling under new, often non-traditional, ownership.

The end of the slave trade brought new challenges and opportunities regarding land access. Freed slaves and returnees from the Americas, Europe, and Sierra Leone began arriving in Lagos during the 19th century, adding to the population pressures. Also, merchants drawn to the burgeoning "legitimate trade" flocked to Lagos, intensifying the competition for land (Mabogunje, 1968). Many newcomers from the Yoruba hinterland sought alliances with local chiefs for land allocations, while foreign merchants, including Europeans, Brazilians, and the Saro, requested land grants from the *Oba*, frequently regarding these grants as private ownership (Lloyd, 1962). Although some of these land deals involved consultations with the *Idejo* families, larger tracts required the *Oba's* approval (Mann, 1991). King Dosunmu, who reigned from 1854 to 1882, issued numerous documented land grants, often conferring full ownership rights and indicating a shift towards individual land ownership (Cole, 1975).

As freed slaves and new migrants established themselves in Lagos, a real-estate market emerged, transforming land from communal to private ownership. Economic pressures due to the lower profitability of legitimate trade compelled chiefs to sell off land parcels to mitigate financial difficulties (NAI Government Gazette, 1886). Following the annexation of Lagos by Britain in 1861, the British

government recognized these land grants as private property (Aderibigbe, 1975). This shift further intertwined land with economic activities, as merchants began using land as collateral for credit (NAI Memorandum from the Commissioner of Land, 1946). By the 1860s, the practice of mortgaging land for financial loans had become common, enabling traders to expand their businesses but also leading to forfeiture of land when debts were unpaid, thus resulting in ownership transfers to creditors. This situation stimulated a burgeoning rental market wherein desirable locations yielded significant returns – a scenario that ignited disputes over forfeited lands, with colonial authorities intervening in conflicts between traders and creditors over land rights (Aderibigbe, 1975).

The British annexation of Lagos in 1861 marked a turning point, complicating the previously straightforward land tenure system. The influx of immigrants and economic changes heightened land values, leading to the introduction of "customary tenure" and the issuance of numerous crown grants, which exacerbated land insecurity, an issue that has persisted into modern times (Smith, 2004). In precolonial Lagos, land practices were fluid, allowing various groups, including women and even enslaved individuals, to access land (Mann, 1991). However, as economic demands and population pressures increased throughout the 19th century, the value of land intensified, altering these traditional practices.

The precolonial land-tenure system in Lagos was characterized by overlapping claims and multiple authorities, creating a flexible structure that facilitated the integration of new settlers. This adaptability was evident in the land allocations managed by the *Idejo* chiefs, who played a central role in distributing land to both indigenous groups and migrants. The fluid nature of property rights mirrored broader Yoruba and West African settlement patterns and was deeply rooted in the region's migratory history, particularly linked to the Olofin migration. Historian Carola Lentz (2006) argued that studying precolonial land rights revealed how colonial and postcolonial reinterpretations of these systems often led to disputes and conflicts. While gender distinctions in land ownership were less rigid in the precolonial period, the colonial administration introduced formal legal frameworks that restructured access to land. These new regulations, particularly after 1861, reinforced systemic inequalities by privileging certain groups, making land ownership increasingly politicized and exclusionary.

Colonial Land Policies and Gender Inequality in Lagos

During the colonial era, the British administration reshaped land governance in Lagos, introducing numerous policies that gradually replaced traditional land tenure practices. Following the annexation of Lagos in 1861 and the Treaty of Cession, the British gained control over the port and island of Lagos, securing legal authority to manage land and transfer sovereign rights to the colonial regime (Elias, 1971). These changes had far-reaching economic and social consequences, particularly for gender equality in land ownership.

Land, a key resource for economic and administrative purposes, was essential to the colonial government's economic, social, and political ambitions. Driven by commercial interests, British traders sought land to establish their ventures, while entities like the National African Company (later the Royal Niger Company) expanded their land holdings to support business operations across Nigeria (Gheru & Okumo, 2016). Colonial authorities also required land for public and administrative functions. Given that land ownership in precolonial Lagos was communal, the British colonial administration implemented new laws and policies to regulate land use, ownership and development, facilitating the transfer of land titles for commercial and governmental activities (Udoekanem, Adoga & Onwumere, 2014). This transition commodified land, reinforcing property-based hierarchies and marginalising groups that traditionally had access through kinship structures.

In the colonial era, the government prioritized international trade by creating an environment where merchants felt secure regarding property rights and debt protection. Officials promoted private land ownership, viewing indigenous communal land systems as outdated. They created a workforce of landless labourers available for wage employment by encouraging the privatization of

land. The British administration thus upheld grants of land by the *Oba* as establishing individual ownership, aligning with European notions of "progress" and essential for economic growth (Mann, 1991; Olukoju, 2002).

Following the annexation of Lagos, Crown land grants were rapidly issued, with the first Governor authorizing over 3,200 grants by 1880 (Simpson, 1957). Colonial authorities instituted mandatory registration for conveyances and mortgages to formalize land transactions, beginning with Ordinance No. 9 of 1863. This ordinance established a commission to investigate and validate land titles; and between 1863 and 1914, more than 4,000 Crown grants were recorded. The indigenous system saw these grants as void, yet the British used them to establish possessory rights and clarify land ownership amid growing competition for property (Davies, 2009). Similarly, the enactment of Ordinance No. 8 in 1883 introduced a formal process for recording land transactions, a system later revised in Ordinance No. 5 of 1901 (Aniyom, 1983). However, registration alone did not resolve all title issues or validate defective instruments. Colonial land policy, rooted in administrative decisions, served as a tool of imperial control rather than a guarantee of legal rights for colonial subjects (Adewoye, 1977).

As the economic centre of Lagos expanded, real-estate investment became increasingly profitable, especially after trade declined in the 1880s. Land and capital ownership emerged as key markers of social inequality, widening economic disparities. The introduction of new credit systems transformed lands into a commodity, leading to frequent legal battles over ownership (Olukoju, 2014). These changes disproportionately disadvantaged women, who had traditionally accessed land through communal and kinship ties. As land-tenure systems became formalized, male elites gained greater control, restricting women's ability to own property and accumulate wealth. Shifts in labour dynamics and immigration created new networks of power and influence, but these primarily benefited wealthy men. Personalities like Taiwo Olowo used these economic shifts to build immense wealth and social status (Hopkins, 1964), while women faced increasing financial exclusion, limiting their economic independence and long-term opportunities.

In 1917, the colonial government implemented the Public Lands Acquisition Act, which granted the Governor the authority to claim land for public use. This law applied across Nigeria's colonies and protectorates, allowing the government to expropriate both occupied and unoccupied lands without obligation to compensate for unoccupied territories (Smith, 2003). The Native Lands Acquisition Act of 1917 was enacted to regulate land acquisitions by foreigners in southern Nigeria. According to Udoekanem et al. (2014), Section 3 of the Act stated that no foreigner could acquire an interest or right over lands within the protectorate from a native unless it was formalized through an instrument approved in writing by the Governor. Any agreement lacking such approval was deemed null and void.

Additionally, Section 3A stipulated that any interest or right granted to a foreigner with the Governor's approval could not be transferred to another foreigner without written consent. Section 4 further prohibited foreigners from occupying land owned by a native unless authorized by a Governor-approved document, with violations punishable by fines, imprisonment or both (Udoekanem et al., 2014). Consequently, the Public Lands Acquisition Act of 1917 allowed the government to expropriate unoccupied land without compensation, thus disproportionately affecting women who accessed land through customary rights rather than formal ownership. Similarly, the Native Lands Acquisition Act restricted foreign land acquisitions but also increased bureaucratic control over land transactions, further marginalizing women with limited access to legal and financial resources.

Furthermore, the State Lands Act, introduced in 1918, was established to govern the use, occupation and development of Crown (state) lands, representing resources in which the general public held a stake. According to Section 2 of the Act, "State land" encompassed all public lands across the Federation vested in the Governor-General (at that time) on behalf of the state. It included land previously or subsequently acquired by any federal authority for public purposes or other benefits, under any Act of Parliament, although it specifically

excluded lands under the Lands and Native Rights Act (Udoekanem et al., 2014). This legislation placed restrictions on the subleasing rights of individuals occupying state lands.

While these laws initially aimed to ensure land availability for colonial government use, they also facilitated the replacement of the precolonial land-tenure system in Lagos, thereby encouraging private land ownership, but with women being mostly side-lined. With the advent of colonial rule, as well as commerce and commercialization of land, only influential individuals were increasingly able to own land and exercise control over its use (Omuojine, 1999), leading to practices like selling, leasing and mortgaging land to specific individuals or groups (Bardi, 1998).

Gendered Impacts of Colonial Land Policies in Lagos

The colonial land policies in Lagos and across Nigeria significantly influenced gender dynamics, especially impacting women's access to land. Before British intervention, traditional land-tenure systems allowed for more equitable gender participation in land ownership and usage. Women have historically had access to land, yet the nature of their claims has rarely, if ever, been identical to those of men. This discrepancy was largely due to the distinct roles and positions men and women occupied within kinship systems, which was the primary structure governing land access (Moore & Vaughan, 1994; Rocheleau & Edmunds, 1997). There was no formal recognition or specific category that defined the unique characteristics of women's access to land. However, following their establishment of control over Lagos in the mid-19th century, the British colonial administration introduced policies, including the Public Lands Ordinance of 1876 and the Land Registration Ordinance of 1891, which restructured land ownership to align with English common law principles (Dosumu, 1977). These laws formalized property rights, mandating land title registration, which gradually replaced the customary landholding systems. This shift favoured individual ownership, largely privileging men and thereby diminishing the communal and family-based rights that previously enabled women's access to land.

The institutionalization of private land ownership marginalized women and also entrenched gender disparities in property accumulation. Fewer women acquired individually owned land compared to men, mainly due to social and economic barriers. Crown land grants were allocated to individuals rather than families or kinship groups, reflecting a shift towards privatized land ownership. While some women navigated the new system to acquire land, their numbers were few compared to male landowners (George et al., 2015). For instance, only four out of seventy-two documented land grants issued by King Dosunmu in the 1850s were awarded to women. British Crown grants did not typically specify the gender of recipients and the unisex nature of some Yoruba names further complicates gender identification (Lagos Land Registry, 1857).

Land acquisition in colonial Lagos was deeply gendered, with men disproportionately benefiting from the emerging legal frameworks and economic opportunities. While colonial records show that a few women obtained land through purchases, their representation in formal land transactions remained minimal compared to their male counterparts (Mann, 1991). Women rarely amassed large personal estates, a situation that reflected structural inequalities limiting their property and capital access. Male members of the elite like Taiwo Olowo and Sunmonu Animasaun, capitalized on colonial land policies to amass vast estates. Olowo leveraged Crown grants to formalize the ownership of 44 land parcels and purchased 21 additional properties between 1870 and 1892, using land as collateral for financial gains. Similarly, Animasaun, a wealthy Muslim trader of enslaved descent, expanded his estate through grants and transactions, securing 37 plots between 1868 and 1893, including valuable agricultural land.

In contrast, women lacked access to the financial and legal mechanisms that facilitated such wealth accumulation, as the colonial system formalized land ownership in ways that were advantageous to men with economic and political influence. The inability of women to secure significant landholdings not only reinforced economic inequality but also limited their capacity for financial independence and long-term wealth-building, deepening gender disparities in colonial Lagos. Similarly, patriarchal structures were

reinforced, limiting women's access to land ownership. Land grants from the King and the British government were disproportionately awarded to repatriates from Sierra Leone and Brazil, who typically allocated these grants to male household members. Male applicants usually represented the family for land grants, influenced by the patriarchal norms these repatriates had adopted abroad.

Thus, in Lagos, only a limited number of educated women accessed land independently (Mann, 1985). Examples include Fanny Barber and Rebecca Phillips-Johnson, two of the wealthiest women in 19th-century Lagos, who each owned fewer than ten plots of land. Barber secured a Crown grant for one plot and purchased eight more, while Phillips-Johnson received a Crown grant, purchased two plots and inherited three others – one from her grandmother and two from her uncles. Both women were former slaves repatriated from Sierra Leone, with Phillips Johnson having received some Western education (Hay & Wright, 1982). Their backgrounds likely helped them appreciate the value of personal land ownership and the knowledge needed to acquire it. Nevertheless, their holdings were quite modest compared to those of Taiwo Olowo, a successful but uneducated local trader (Mann, 1991).

In colonial Lagos, discriminatory practices among colonial officials further skewed land ownership in favour of men. British administrators and European merchants frequently developed close relationships with select local men, offering them advice on business and other strategic matters. John Hawley Glover, a prominent colonial administrator, notably encouraged his African male associates to acquire land individually, either through official Crown grants or outright purchases (Turner to Glover, January 23, 1871). Lagos women, by contrast, had limited access to such influential relationships with European patrons. Glover's extensive correspondence from his time in Lagos in the 1860s and 1870s involved only a few African women, thus highlighting the disparity. As a result, women lagged in securing individually owned land partly because they lacked access to crucial information about land acquisition and its benefits. In some instances, men even used their connections with colonial officials to prevent land grants to female relatives. Additionally, women had fewer financial resources than men, further limiting their ability to purchase land directly.

Women had to remain constantly vigilant to avoid losing their inheritance and to safeguard their property rights from being overshadowed by male relatives (Barnes, 1990). A notable case involves a Brazilian couple who acquired a Crown grant for a piece of land on which they resided with their son and daughter. Nearing his death, the husband transferred the land grant to his son. Later, the wife instructed both children to inherit the house equally. However, after her passing, the son forced his sister out, claiming the property solely for himself. The daughter then sought the colonial court's intervention in Lagos, requesting that the property be divided so she could also retain her share (Maria Theresa v. Pedro Feliciano, 1897). Despite her appeal, the judge dismissed her claim, leaving her to defend her rights without court support. This instance reflects just one of many untold cases where women were denied their rightful ownership of property, unable to pursue justice due to lack of resources, courage or the legal recourse to withstand a trial.

Furthermore, in colonial Lagos, far fewer women than men were able to enjoy rental income, a situation that placed them at a distinct economic disadvantage. This gap worsened as land values increased significantly in the latter half of the 19th century, making real estate an increasingly profitable venture (Gobo & Iboroma, 2022). The limited success women had in acquiring or retaining individually owned property had lasting, negative effects on their financial stability. With the advent of commercialization and privatization, women held a small share of a rapidly appreciating asset that was fast becoming a primary vehicle for wealth accumulation (Mann, 1985; Lewis, 1976).

By the latter part of the century, rental property markets had taken root, enabling some male landowners to earn substantial annual profits by leasing plots and homes to Europeans and affluent Africans. While women theoretically had rights to a portion of rental income from family-owned properties, male relatives often withheld these earnings (Aluko, 2015). In the 1880s, as Lagos entered a prolonged trade downturn, investing in

and leasing property became among the most profitable economic pursuits, perhaps rivalled only by money lending. However, women were disproportionately disadvantaged in benefiting from the rising value of real estate because of their limited property ownership compared to men.

Owing to significant barriers preventing women from owning land individually, they were also restricted in their ability to access credit, which was essential for obtaining the capital needed to engage in emerging global trade markets (Lewis, 1976). Women without personal land assets to secure loans often missed out on the lucrative prospects of the expanding agricultural export and manufactured goods trade. Instead, they relied on alternative financing sources, such as gifts, personal savings, or pooled funds from rotating credit associations (*Ajo* or *Esusu*), where small, regular contributions granted them periodic access to cash. However, this form of capital was minimal, restricting women's ventures to small-scale trade in local goods and crafts (McIntosh, 2009). Those few women who owned land could use it as collateral for commercial loans, positioning them better economically than landless men, although they still could not match the financial resources of male landowners like Taiwo Olowo, J. P. L. Davies and P. J. C. Thomas, whose credit access allowed large-scale operations (Mann, 1991).

In addition, many women obtained loans without collateral from individuals with whom they held social or political ties, such as family members, friends and patrons. These unsecured loans were typically extended by husbands, relatives or influential acquaintances, and were rarely purely economic. In some cases, women relied on extramarital affairs with powerful men for financial support, and access to credit sometimes drove women to form or maintain such relationships (White, 1983). This reliance on socially backed credit limited their economic flexibility and market responsiveness, often restricting their choice of business partners. Moreover, these arrangements could come with obligations for labour or services, creating a dependence on creditors that some women found burdensome but necessary to secure capital. To preserve these essential credit relationships, women invested time and resources into them, potentially diverting effort from more profitable opportunities.

By the late 1800s, individuals striving for upward mobility actively sought to acquire land through a newly established land-tenure system, while maintaining connections to family-owned properties. However, women faced significant disadvantages compared to men in accessing both collectively and individually owned land (Barnes, 1990). This inequity severely restricted their ability to control their labour and resources and limited their access to those of others. Even though the new land-tenure framework created opportunities for women to secure land and establish independent households, the influx of adult male immigrants to Lagos intensified the gender imbalance by depleting the number of women available.

Likewise, the advent of Christian missions and colonial judicial systems added another layer of complexity (Hinderer, 1872). Although these entities provided new avenues for women to seek support in disputes with husbands and relatives, they simultaneously propagated a domestic ideology that championed the patriarchal nuclear family as the standard (Mann, 1985). This ideology framed men as the primary breadwinners and decision-makers, while women were relegated to the roles of mothers and homemakers, effectively undermining their contributions beyond the domestic sphere. Consequently, male authorities leveraged this ideology to restrict women's independence.

Court records from Lagos reveal clear evidence of gender-based conflict over labour and resources. These documents illustrate how women's reliance on men for land, housing and financial resources served as a means for men to maintain control, thus curtailing women's opportunities for autonomy. A notable case is that of Aina, who lived with her husband Idowu for 22 years. Upon his death, Idowu's younger brother asserted his customary right to inherit both the house and Aina. Following Idowu's passing, Aina left the household with the Crown grant for the property, while the younger brother moved in and pressured her to return as his wife. After months of refusal, the brother sought recourse through the Supreme Court to reclaim the Crown grant. The court ultimately ordered Aina to

surrender the document, meaning that she was forced to return to the property and live with her husband's brother (Brimah Ajogbami v. Aina, 1894).

On one level, this dispute revolved around ownership of Idowu's Crown grant, which conferred title to the house and could facilitate credit acquisition. Retaining that document might have empowered Aina to secure the resources needed for independent living and to claim ownership of her husband's property. More fundamentally, the conflict questioned whether the younger brother could assume Idowu's status as Aina's husband, along with the associated privileges. In the end, control over Idowu's house enabled the brother to compel Aina into accepting him as her new husband. This case further highlights how women were marginalized and pressured into making critical decisions against their will, often as a matter of survival, with little choice but to comply due to a lack of alternatives.

The foregoing discussion shows that the encroachment of European merchant capital in early colonial Lagos significantly altered land-tenure and property rights, negatively impacting women. After the annexation, fewer women than men acquired individually owned, transferable land and housing, which was a critical loss as land became increasingly scarce and valuable. This lack of ownership severely restricted women's access to credit and capital for trading, further disadvantaging them by limiting their ability to control their labour and resources, as well as to mobilize the labour of dependents. As a result, women without land found it difficult to deploy large numbers of workers in trade, leading to hindering their economic empowerment. The marginalization of women's land rights under colonial rule had extensive socioeconomic consequences, undermining their social standing and reducing their influence within their communities. The enforcement of British land laws exacerbated existing gender inequalities, restricting women's access to economic opportunities and perpetuating cycles of poverty and dependence. These developments reshaped the social fabric of Lagos, profoundly impacting gender dynamics in the city through the legal and economic marginalization of women.

Women's Resistance and Adaptation to Colonial Land Policies in Lagos

To counter colonial restrictions on land ownership and economic participation, women in Lagos actively leveraged their traditional societal roles and influence, using their authority within markets, family systems and community leadership as platforms to advocate their rights. Despite colonial attempts to marginalize women in economic and political affairs, these women strategically navigated existing power structures to resist and adapt to oppressive policies. They challenged colonial injustices with various forms of advocacy, including market protests, petitions and alliances with influential community figures. This strategic use of social spaces enabled them to pressure colonial officials to address the negative socioeconomic impacts of restrictive policies.

A prime example of organized women's resistance was the Lagos Market Women's Association (LMWA), which emerged as the first large-scale women's group dedicated to defending and advancing women's rights under colonial rule. The LMWA's activities, which date back to the mid-1920s, were instrumental in challenging discriminatory policies that disproportionately affected female traders. Led by Madam Alimotu Pelewura, a highly respected Lagos market leader, the association vehemently opposed colonial taxation policies and land ordinances that threatened women's economic autonomy (Johnson, 1981). Pelewura and her contemporaries, including notable figures such as Madam Comfort Ige, Madam Egberongbe, Madam Bilikisu, Madam Rabi Alaso Oke and Madam Memunatu, played significant roles in mobilizing market women against colonial economic oppression. They organized boycotts, held rallies and submitted petitions to colonial administrators, making their grievances known through collective action. The LMWA's activism was particularly effective in resisting measures such as the imposition of direct taxation on women traders and market closures that disrupted their businesses (Jacobs, 1997).

Beyond grassroots mobilization, educated women in Lagos also played a crucial role in resisting colonial land policies through political organization and advocacy. Women like Oyinkan Abayomi and

Charlotte Olajumoke Obasa sought to bridge traditional structures with Western organizational methods, leading to the formation of groups such as the Nigerian Women's Party (NWP) and the Lagos Women's League (LWL) (Muritala, 2022). Unlike the LMWA, which primarily consisted of market women and grassroots activists, these organizations drew from a more elite class of women who had access to Western education and political networks. Their advocacy extended beyond economic concerns, as they championed broader sociopolitical reforms, including women's suffrage, access to education and equitable land rights. The NWP and LWL utilized strategies such as lobbying colonial officials, publishing articles in newspapers and organizing public demonstrations to voice their opposition to colonial policies (Johnson, 1982).

Furthermore, Lagosian women's resistance to colonial land policies was not limited to confrontation; they also engaged in adaptive strategies that allowed them to navigate the colonial legal and economic framework. Women formed informal networks to share resources and information about land rights, with such cooperation enabling them to navigate the new legal landscape effectively. Many women turned to informal land transactions, leveraging indigenous systems of land-tenure that operated outside colonial jurisdiction. Through family networks and community alliances, they secured access to land, often using male relatives or trusted intermediaries to formalize property ownership while maintaining control over the land's use and the profits therefrom. This demonstrated their resilience and capacity to circumvent colonial restrictions without direct legal challenges.

In sum, the agency of women in resisting and adapting to colonial land policies in Lagos was multifaceted, combining grassroots activism, elite political organization and strategic adaptation to counter the encroachments of colonial rule. The collective efforts of market leaders, political activists and everyday women ensured that, despite colonial restrictions, women continued to assert their rights and maintain a significant presence in the economic and social landscape of Lagos. Their activism laid the groundwork for future women's movements in Nigeria, influencing postcolonial struggles for gender equality and economic justice.

4.0 Conclusion

This study reveals the deep and enduring influence of colonial land policies on women's access to land in Lagos. The introduction of the British legal system disrupted traditional land-tenure practices that had previously empowered women, replacing them with a patriarchal legal framework that marginalized the gender. While some women resisted these changes, colonial land policies ultimately reinforced gender inequalities, significantly limiting women's economic empowerment and social mobility.

The legacy of these colonial policies continues to shape contemporary land rights and gender dynamics in Lagos. No doubt, land laws in postcolonial Lagos still exhibit many of the exclusions and biases established during the colonial era, resulting in substantial barriers to land ownership for women. This historical exclusion contributes to unequal urban development, as women's needs and perspectives are often overlooked in urban planning and policy-making processes. Consequently, there is inadequate support for initiatives focused on women in housing, infrastructure and community services.

Moreover, women face significant challenges when attempting to purchase land or construct buildings, as land vendors (*Omo-Onile*) usually exploit their vulnerability, hence women's need for male figures in facilitating transactions. This gender disparity extends to the housing market, where landlords frequently refuse to lease apartments to single women – a situation that highlights unrelenting inequality in access to housing and land in Lagos.

5.0 Recommendations

Addressing these historical injustices stemming from colonial land policies and reducing the gender gap in contemporary Lagos requires a multifaceted approach involving legal, social and economic strategies. First, it is essential to reform existing land laws to ensure equal rights for women in land ownership and inheritance. Legal reforms should dismantle discriminatory practices and align with international human rights standards, recognizing women's rights to inherit land and access credit. Awareness and education campaigns are crucial in this regard; this is because implementing outreach programmes to educate women about their land

rights and the legal frameworks protecting them can empower them to assert their rights confidently.

Promoting the formation of women's cooperatives focused on collective land ownership and resource management can also enhance economic empowerment. These cooperatives can provide women with a platform to access land, share resources and collaborate on agricultural or business ventures. Also, vital would be establishing targeted financial programmes to provide women with access to credit and loans for land acquisition and development. Microfinance initiatives and grants specifically designed for women can help them invest in land and economic activities. Again, offering training programmes that enhance women's skills in agriculture, business management and negotiation will further empower them to effectively manage land and engage in economic activities, thus fostering greater independence and self-sufficiency.

Equally, engaging men as allies in gender equality initiatives is another important step; this is because promoting discussions around the importance of women's rights and land ownership can help shift cultural norms and challenge patriarchal attitudes. Moreover, integrating gender perspectives in urban planning ensures that development initiatives consider the needs and perspectives of women, thereby creating safe and accessible public spaces, housing projects and community services that support women's economic participation. It should also be noted that collaborating with civil-society organizations and advocacy groups to push for policies promoting gender equality in land ownership is essential for raising awareness among policymakers and influencing legislative changes.

Furthermore, establishing mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the impact of gender-focused policies and programmes is also crucial. Collecting data on women's land ownership and economic participation will help identify gaps and measure progress over time. Likewise, promoting cultural change initiatives that challenge traditional norms around gender and land ownership, such as campaigns that celebrate successful women landowners and highlight their contributions to the economy, can shift public perceptions and inspire change. By implementing these strategies, stakeholders can address the historical injustices stemming from colonial land policies, reduce gender disparities and promote greater equality for women in contemporary Lagos.

References

Adeniyi, P. (2013). 'Improving land sector, governance in Nigeria- Implementation of the land governance assessment framework'. *Synthesis Report*, Lagos, Nigeria, http:siteresources.worldbank.org/INTLGA/Resources/ LGAF Nigeria Final Report.

Aderibigbe, A. B. (1975). *Lagos: The development of an African city.* Lagos: Longman.

Adewoye, O. (1977). *The judicial system in southern Nigeria 1854–1954: Law and justice in a dependency*. London: Longman, 331.

Ajetunmobi, R. (2003). *The evolution and development of Lagos State*. Lagos: A-triad Associates Press.

Ajisafe, A. K. (1924). *The laws and customs of the Yoruba people*. London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd.

Aluko, B. T. (2005). 'Transformation of customary tenures into English system of landholding: How it was achieved', An unpublished LLB (Hons) seminar paper presented in respect of JPL602 – Land Law and Land Development, Faculty of Law, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

Aluko, B. T. & Amidu, A. (2006). 'Women and land rights reforms in Nigeria'. *5th FIG Regional Conference: Promoting Land Administration and Good Governance*. Accra, Ghana, March 8-11, 2006.

Aluko, Y. (2020). 'Patriarchy and proper rights among Yoruba women in Nigeria'. *Feminist Economics, 21* (3), 56–81.

Animashaun, B. O. (2015). 'The *Idejo* chiefs and land politics in Lagos'. An unpublished PhD thesis submitted to the Department of History, University of Ibadan.

Aniyom, D. A. (1983). 'An appraisal of the land use decree and its effects in its first five years (29th March 1978 to 29th March 1983)'. *The Map Maker*. 9(1), 17-26.

Bardi, M. C. (1998). 'Geographic information system as a tool for successful implementation of the land use decree'. *The Quantity Surveyor.* 29 (1): 17-22.

Barnes, S. T. (1900). 'Women, property, and power'. In P. R. Sanday and R. G. Goodenough (eds.) *Beyond the Second Sex*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 255-80.

Brimah Ajogbami v. Aina, (June 29, 1894). *JNCC*, 5, 69-70.

Coker, G. B. A. (1958). *Family property among the Yorubas*. London: Sweet & Maxwell.

Cole, P. D. (1975). 'Lagos society in the nineteenth century'. In A. B. Aderibigbe (ed.), *Lagos: the development of an African city*. London, Longman, 38.

Danmole, H. O. (2017). *Lagos: Yesterday, today and tomorrow*. Lagos: Connel Publication, 8.

Davies, G. O. (2009). 'A study of the interconnections between colonial land policies and urbanization in Lagos, 1861-1960'. A PhD Thesis, University of Lagos.

Dosumu, O. A. (1977). 'Land tenure system in Nigeria and its effects on land administration'. *The Map Maker*. 4(1), 23-25.

Elias, T. O. (1956). *The nature of African customary law*. England: Manchester University Press, 104.

Elias, T. O. (1962). *Nigerian land law and custom*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Gheru, H. & Okumo, A. (2016). 'Land administration service delivery and its challenges in case study of eight states'. *Nigeria Strategy Support Program (NSSP) Working: -Paper 39*. Abuja: International Food Policy Research Institute.

Gobo, P. A. & Iboroma, A. (2022). 'Women and African land tenure'. *Journal of Gender and Power*, 18(2), 105-118.

Hay, M. J. & Wright, M. (1982). 'African women and the law: Historical perspectives'. *Boston University Papers on Africa*, 7. Boston: Boston University.

Hinderer, A. (1872). *Seventeen years in Yoruba country*. London: Seeley, Jackson & Halliday, 83.

Hopkins, A. G. (1964). 'An economic history of Lagos, 1880–1914'. A PhD Thesis, University of London.

Jacobs, J. (1997). *Market woman of substance: A biography of Alhaja Abibat Mogaji - president general of Association of Nigerian Market Women and Men.* Lagos: Mercantile Press Associates.

Johnson, C. (1981). 'Madam Alimotu Pelewura and the Lagos Market Women: grassroots leadership in colonial West Africa', *Tarikh*, 7.

Johnson, C. (1982). 'Grassroots organizing: Women in anti-colonial activity in southwestern Nigeria', *African Studies Review*, 25 (2/3): 137–157.

Lagos Land Registry. (1857). *Conveyances, British crown grants, and Dosunmu's land grants*. Lagos, Nigeria.

Lawal, K. (1994). *Urban transition in Africa: Aspects of urbanization and change in Lagos*. Nigeria: Pumark, 62.

Lentz, C. (2006). *Ethnicity and the making of history in Northern Ghana*. Edinburgh and London: Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute, 384.

Letters from Turton, I. H. Willoughby, Forsythe, and Goldsworthy to Glover. (1873). Royal Commonwealth Society, London, 6.

Lewis, B.C. (1976). 'The limitations of group action among entrepreneurs: The market women of Abidjan, Ivory Coast'. In N. J. Hafkin & E. G. Bay (eds.), *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 135-56.

Lloyd, P. C. (1962). *Yoruba land law*. London: Oxford University Press, 67.

Mabogunje, A. (1968). *Urbanization in Nigeria*. New York: Africana Publishing Corporation.

Mann, K. (1991a). 'The rise of Taiwo Olowo: Law, accumulation, and mobility in early colonial Lagos'. In Richard Roberts & Kristin Mann (eds.), *Law in colonial Africa*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 85–102.

Mann, K. (1991b). 'Women, landed property, and the accumulation of wealth in early colonial Lagos'. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 16(4), 682-706.

Mann, K. (2007). 'Slavery and the birth of an African city: Lagos, 1750-1900', Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 93.

Maria Therisa v. Pedro Feliciano, (Apr. 19, 1897). *JNCC* 18, 350.

McIntosh, M. K. (2009). *Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change*. Indiana: University Press, in https://iupress.org/9780253220547/yoruba-women-work-and-social-change/ Accessed on 13 October 2024.

Moore, H. & Vaughan, M. (1993). *Cutting down trees: Gender, nutrition and agricultural change in the northern province of Zambia, 1890 – 1990*. London: James Curry, Heinemann.

Muritala, M. (2011). 'Urban livelihood in Lagos 1861-1960', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 8, 20.

Muritala, M. (2022). 'Women and urban experience in colonial Lagos'. *Afrika Zamani, (22-23),* 1-17.

National Archives Ibadan, Government Gazette, Colony of Lagos, Saturday 27 February 1886, 35.

National Archives Ibadan. (1946). Memorandum from the Commissioner of Land.

Oguamanam, G. O. & Obah, A. I. (2024). 'The cultural factors affecting women's rights to property inheritance: A study of the Njikoka Local Government Area of Anambra State'. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Education, Social Sciences and Arts (JIRESSA), 1*(2), 13-27.

George, T. O., Olokoyo, F. O., Osabuohien, E. S., Efobi, U., & Beecroft, I. (2015). 'Women's access to land and economic empowerment in selected Nigerian communities'. In: N. Andrews, N. Khalema and N. Assié-Lumumba (eds.) *Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in retrospect. Social Indicators Research Series, 58*. Cham: Springer.

Olukoju, A. (2002). 'The impact of British colonialism on the development of African business in colonial Nigeria'. In Alusine Jalloh and Toyin Falola (eds.)

Black business and economic power. Rochester, NY: Rochester University Press, 176–98.

Olukoju, A. (2014). 'Accumulation and conspicuous consumption: the poverty of entrepreneurship in western Nigeria, ca. 1850–1930'. In E. Akyeampong, R. H. Bates, N. Nunn and J. Robinson (eds.), *Africa's development in historical perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 208–230.

Omuojine, E.O. (1999). 'The land use act and the English doctrine of estate'. *Journal of the Nigerian Institution of Estate Surveyors and Valuers.* 22(3): 54-56.

Ozigbo, I. W. J. (2012). 'Alien property ownership in Nigeria and the land use act of 1978: an exploratory analysis'. An unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Nigeria, Enugu, Nigeria.

Rocheleau, D. & Edmunds, D. (1997), 'Men, women and trees: gender, power and property in forest and agrarian landscapes'. *World Development*, 25(8): 1351 – 1371.

Simpson, S. R. (1957). *A report on the registration of title to land in the Federal Territory of Lagos*. Lagos: Federal Government Printer, 36-38.

Smith, I. O. (2003), 'The Land Use Act – Twenty-five years after'. Lagos: Department of Private and Property Law, University of Lagos.

Smith, I. O. (2004), 'Title to land in the former Federal Capital Territory of Lagos upon creation of Lagos State: Matters arising' *JPPL*, Vol. 25, 21.

Udoekanem, N. B., Adoga, D. O., & Onwumere, V. O. (2014). Land ownership in Nigeria: historical development, current issues and future expectations, *Journal of Environment Science, 4*(21), 182-188.

White, L. (1983). 'A colonial state and an African petty bourgeoisie: prostitution, property, and class struggle in Nairobi, 1936-40'. In F. Cooper (ed.) *Struggle for the city: Migrant labour, capital, and the state in urban Africa*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 167-94.