



HARNESSING MOTHERHOOD INFLUENCE ON SUSTAINABLE PLANNING IN NIGERIA

ADELANA Joel Oluwasogo, ADEYEMI Olabisi Omowumi, AYENI Foluso Olayinka

Department of Urban and Regional Planning,
School of Environmental Studies,
The Federal Polytechnic Ado-Ekiti,
Ekiti State. Nigeria

Email: adeyemi_oo@fedpolyado.edu.ng, ayeni_fo@fedpolyado.edu.ng, adelana_jo@fedpolyado.edu.ng

Abstract

Sustainable urban and regional planning in Nigeria has traditionally been framed through technical, institutional, and policy-oriented approaches, with limited attention to the social practices that shape planning outcomes at the household and community levels. This study examines motherhood as an underexplored but significant social institution influencing sustainable planning processes in Nigeria. Adopting a qualitative, conceptual, and interpretive research design, the paper draws on secondary data from national statistics, peer-reviewed studies, and documented case evidence to analyse how motherhood-related roles intersect with planning-relevant functions such as environmental management, community development, and resource stewardship. Empirical evidence reveals that women actively perform critical sustainability functions particularly in sanitation, waste management, and informal service provision yet remain structurally excluded from formal governance, land ownership, and decision-making institutions. The analysis identifies key determinants of participation, including education and empowerment, while highlighting persistent structural barriers such as gender norms, economic exclusion, and care burdens that limit women's influence on formal planning systems. The findings demonstrate a paradox in which sustainable planning outcomes depend significantly on women's informal contributions, yet planning policies fail to incorporate their perspectives. The study concludes that integrating motherhood as a care-based planning logic into institutional frameworks can enhance inclusivity, strengthen participatory governance, and improve long-term sustainability outcomes. It recommends gender-responsive planning reforms and institutional mechanisms that recognise and incorporate women's roles in shaping sustainable development pathways in Nigeria.

Keywords: Motherhood; Sustainable planning; Urban and regional planning; Gender and planning; Informal planning systems; Women's participation; Environmental management; Care-based planning



Introduction

Sustainable urban and regional planning has become a critical concern in rapidly urbanising developing countries such as Nigeria, where accelerating population growth, spatial expansion, and environmental degradation continue to strain planning institutions and urban systems (Akokuwebe & Okafor, 2015; Ogu, 1999). In response to these challenges, sustainable planning has emerged as a key instrument for guiding development towards long-term environmental resilience, social equity, and economic stability (Falebita & Koul, 2017). While existing planning discourse has largely focused on technical, institutional, and regulatory dimensions of sustainability, comparatively little attention has been paid to the social values and everyday practices that shape planning outcomes at household and community levels.

This paper argues that motherhood constitutes an underexplored yet significant social force with implications for sustainable planning in Nigeria. As a socially constructed role grounded in caregiving, long-term responsibility, and intergenerational concern, motherhood plays a critical role in shaping attitudes, behaviours, and value systems relevant to sustainability (Aluko & Okuwa, 2018). These values such as care, foresight, risk prevention, and resource stewardship closely align with the normative objectives of sustainable planning, yet remain largely absent from formal planning frameworks and policy debates.

Nigeria's planning challenges are not solely technical in nature but are deeply embedded in social relations, governance practices, and everyday decision-making processes. Within this context, the influence of motherhood on environmental awareness, household-level resource management, and community participation offers important insights for more inclusive and context-sensitive planning approaches. However, despite the growing recognition of gender perspectives in development discourse, the specific role of motherhood in shaping planning values and sustainability-oriented behaviours remains insufficiently theorised within planning scholarship.

This paper seeks to address this gap by examining how motherhood can be conceptualised as a form of planning logic that reinforces sustainable planning objectives in Nigeria. By interpreting motherhood through a planning lens, the study highlights its relevance to long-term decision-making, preventive planning, and participatory governance, thereby contributing to broader debates on sustainability and social inclusion in urban and regional planning.

Motherhood as a Shaper of Values

Over the past three decades, global development discourse has increasingly acknowledged the persistent social, economic, and political marginalisation of women in developing countries, alongside growing calls for gender equity and expanded access to fundamental human rights. Despite notable progress in some regions, women in many developing contexts including Nigeria continue to experience disproportionate workloads, limited access to education and income, poorer health outcomes, and restricted participation in decision-making processes. These structural inequalities directly shape by women engage with development processes, including urban and regional planning.

Motherhood, situated within these broader gendered realities, represents a critical site through which social values are produced and transmitted. As mothers, women play a central role in nurturing, caregiving, and shaping the long-term orientations of households and communities. These maternal roles foster values such as responsibility, empathy, precaution, and intergenerational thinking values that closely mirror the core principles of sustainable planning. From a planning perspective, motherhood therefore extends beyond biological reproduction to encompass a form of social reproduction that sustains communities and urban systems over time.

Understanding motherhood as a value-shaping institution allows sustainable planning to be reframed in ways that resonate with lived experiences at the household and neighbourhood levels. Rather than viewing sustainability solely as a technical or regulatory objective, motherhood foregrounds sustainability as a daily practice rooted in care, resource management, and future-oriented decision-making. In this sense, motherhood offers a normative foundation for planning approaches that prioritise long-term environmental stewardship, social well-being, and resilience.

Motherhood also unfolds across distinct life stages pre-birth, birth, and post-birth each of which embodies specific forms of planning logic. These stages reflect processes of anticipation, coordination, monitoring, and adaptation, all

of which are central to sustainable planning practice. Recognising these parallels provides a conceptual basis for integrating maternal perspectives into planning frameworks and participatory processes.

The WHO Safe Motherhood Concept (Pregnancy Stage – Antenatal Care)

The World Health Organization's safe motherhood framework identifies key stages and components aimed at safeguarding maternal and child well-being. While originally developed within the health sector, these components can be analytically reinterpreted to illuminate broader planning principles relevant to sustainable development. In particular, antenatal care reflects a preventive and anticipatory logic that closely parallels sustainable planning practices.

Antenatal care emphasises early assessment, risk identification, and informed decision-making to prevent long-term complications. Similarly, sustainable planning prioritises early interventions, data-informed strategies, and proactive governance to mitigate future environmental and social risks. From this perspective, antenatal care provides a useful conceptual analogy for preventive planning approaches that seek to address urban challenges such as infrastructure deficits, environmental hazards, and social vulnerability before they escalate into crises.

Beyond its preventive orientation, antenatal care also underscores the importance of institutional support, professional guidance, and continuous monitoring. These elements mirror the role of planning institutions in coordinating development processes, providing technical expertise, and ensuring that planning decisions align with long-term sustainability goals. The emphasis on guidance and preparedness further reflects how planning systems must equip communities with the knowledge and resources needed to navigate complex urban transitions.

In the Nigerian context, this planning logic is evident in the role women play in shaping early educational and career orientations. Through participation in school governance, career guidance initiatives, and community-based programmes, women often acting as mothers contribute to building awareness of professions such as urban and regional planning. These informal yet influential interventions highlight how maternal roles extend into the social reproduction of planning knowledge, values, and professional pathways, reinforcing the long-term sustainability of planning institutions themselves.





Women as Agents of Change in Sustainable Planning

Women, particularly mothers, have historically played critical roles as agents of change in social, political, and community development movements across different societies. In Nigeria, women's participation in community development initiatives, neighbourhood associations, and informal governance structures has demonstrated significant capacity for leadership, resilience, and collective action. From a planning perspective, these roles position mothers not merely as beneficiaries of development outcomes but as active contributors to shaping spatial, environmental, and social conditions within their communities.

Motherhood situates women at the intersection of household management, community interaction, and long-term welfare considerations. These positions enable mothers to influence everyday decisions related to housing conditions, sanitation practices, waste management, water use, and environmental hygiene domains that are central to sustainable urban planning. By empowering mothers with relevant knowledge, institutional support, and access to resources, planning systems can leverage their embedded social roles to promote sustainability-oriented behaviours at both household and neighbourhood scales.

Importantly, the agency of mothers operates through both formal and informal planning processes. While formal planning institutions in Nigeria often remain male-dominated, informal community structures frequently rely on women's organisational capacity and social networks. Recognising and integrating these informal contributions into formal planning frameworks can enhance the effectiveness, legitimacy, and inclusiveness of planning interventions.

Education and Awareness as Catalysts for Planning-Oriented Behaviour

Harnessing the influence of motherhood for sustainable planning requires deliberate investment in education and awareness-building related to environmental stewardship, resource management, and sustainable livelihoods. Education serves as a critical mechanism through which planning values are internalised and translated into everyday practices. When mothers are equipped with knowledge about environmental risks, urban services, and sustainability principles, they are better positioned to make informed decisions that align household practices with broader planning objectives.

Integrating sustainability education into maternal and child health programmes, community-based workshops, and school curricula offers a strategic entry point for embedding planning awareness within everyday social systems. Such integration acknowledges that planning outcomes are shaped not only by formal policies but also by behavioural patterns within households and communities. Through these channels, mothers can influence practices related to waste disposal, energy use, water conservation, and environmental hygiene, thereby reinforcing sustainable planning goals from the grassroots level.

From a planning standpoint, education-driven empowerment strengthens participatory capacity and enhances the ability of communities to engage meaningfully with planning processes. It also contributes to long-term behavioural change, which is essential for sustaining planning interventions beyond initial implementation phases.

Inclusive Decision-Making and Participatory Planning

Inclusive decision-making is a foundational principle of sustainable urban and regional planning. Incorporating the voices of mothers into planning processes enhances the responsiveness of policies and projects to the lived realities of households and communities. Mothers often possess nuanced insights into local service gaps, infrastructure deficiencies, safety concerns, and environmental health issues insights that are frequently overlooked in top-down planning approaches.

Participatory planning frameworks that actively include mothers can improve the design and implementation of infrastructure, housing, transportation systems, and public services. Their perspectives are particularly valuable in areas related to childcare facilities, public health infrastructure, water and sanitation provision, and neighbourhood safety. By institutionalising mechanisms for maternal participation—such as community consultations, stakeholder forums, and local planning committees—planning authorities can ensure that development interventions are socially grounded and context-sensitive.

Moreover, inclusive decision-making contributes to planning legitimacy and public trust. When mothers see their experiences and priorities reflected in planning outcomes, community ownership and compliance with planning regulations are strengthened, thereby enhancing long-term sustainability.

Challenges and Planning-Oriented Recommendations

Despite its potential, leveraging motherhood as a resource for sustainable planning faces significant challenges in Nigeria. Deeply entrenched gender norms, limited access to formal education, economic constraints, and institutional exclusion continue to restrict women's participation in planning processes. Additionally, planning institutions often lack gender-sensitive frameworks that recognise informal contributions and care-based knowledge. To address these challenges, targeted policy and planning interventions are required. These include expanding access to education and capacity-building programmes for women, strengthening gender-responsive planning policies, and fostering partnerships with grassroots women's organisations. Planning authorities should also develop institutional mechanisms that facilitate sustained maternal participation in decision-making processes, particularly at local and community levels.

By addressing structural barriers and enhancing institutional support, planning systems can unlock the transformative potential of motherhood in advancing sustainable development.

Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This study employs a **qualitative conceptual research design** to examine how motherhood can be understood as a planning-relevant social institution shaping sustainable urban and regional planning in Nigeria. Given the limited treatment of motherhood as an analytical category within mainstream planning scholarship, the paper adopts an **interpretive and theory-driven approach** that focuses on refining concepts, clarifying mechanisms, and drawing out policy and institutional implications for planning practice.

Data Sources and Evidence Base

The study relies on **secondary sources** drawn from four main evidence streams: (i) peer-reviewed literature on sustainable urban development, governance, and planning in Nigeria; (ii) scholarship on gender, social reproduction, and care-based decision-making relevant to planning; (iii) global policy and conceptual frameworks relating to motherhood and care (including safe motherhood concepts); and (iv) documented examples of women-led or community-based sustainability practices referenced in the literature. Together, these sources provide the basis for analysing motherhood not as a medical condition but as a **social role and practice** with implications for household-level resource management, community participation, and planning outcomes.

Analytical Framework

Analysis is guided by an integrated framework combining **feminist planning perspectives** and the **ethics of care**. This framework is appropriate because it foregrounds how planning outcomes are shaped by everyday practices, relational decision-making, and the often-invisible labour of social reproduction. Within this lens, motherhood is conceptualised as a form of **care-oriented planning logic** that emphasises:



- **Preventive and anticipatory thinking** (early action to reduce future risks),
- **Institutional support and coordinated service delivery** (capacity and governance),
- **Maintenance, monitoring, and adaptation** (sustaining outcomes over time), and
- **Intergenerational responsibility** (long-term sustainability and resilience).

Analytical Procedure

The study adopts a **thematic-interpretive synthesis** procedure. First, the literature was read to identify recurring themes connecting motherhood to sustainability-related values and practices (e.g., prevention, stewardship, care, and long-term decision-making). Second, these themes were **mapped onto core planning functions** including risk mitigation, service coordination, participatory governance, and post-implementation maintenance to clarify how maternal roles intersect with sustainable planning. Third, the paper develops a conceptual interpretation of safe motherhood stages as planning analogues, not as biomedical explanations, in order to strengthen the planning relevance of motherhood and derive practical implications for urban and regional planning institutions in Nigeria.

Scope and Limitations

As a conceptual study, the paper does not claim statistical generalisation. Instead, it provides **analytical generalisation** by offering a transferable framework for understanding how motherhood-related practices can inform sustainable planning logic and institutional design. Future empirical studies can test and refine these propositions through fieldwork, interviews, surveys, or comparative case analysis across Nigerian cities and regions.

Data Analysis and Discussion

This section presents and interprets empirical evidence drawn from Nigerian datasets, peer-reviewed studies, and documented case records to examine how motherhood-linked roles intersect with sustainable planning outcomes. Building on the conceptual and methodological framework outlined earlier, the analysis moves beyond theoretical interpretation to assess measurable patterns of women's participation, exclusion, and agency within planning-relevant domains in Nigeria. The data analysed include national statistics on political representation, labour force participation, land access, and governance structures, as well as subnational studies examining women's involvement in environmental management, sanitation, and community development initiatives. The analytical approach adopted here is thematic and interpretive. Quantitative data are used to establish patterns of representation, participation, and exclusion, while qualitative and documented case evidence provide contextual insight into how women's everyday practices translate into informal planning functions. The discussion interprets these findings through a planning lens, focusing on three central questions:

1. To what extent do women's everyday roles reflect formal planning functions?
2. How does institutional exclusion shape sustainability outcomes?
3. What structural barriers limit the integration of maternal perspectives into formal planning systems?

By addressing these questions, the section demonstrates that motherhood-related practices are not peripheral social phenomena but constitute measurable and consequential inputs into sustainable urban and regional planning processes in Nigeria.

Table 1: Women's Reported Environmental Activities (Plateau State Survey)

Activity	Percentage of Women Reporting Engagement
Involved in farming / land/soil conservation	79.2%
Have planted trees/flowers in last 5 years	78.4%
Daily environmental cleaning (sweeping, clearing drains, refuse removal)	79.2%
Environmental weeding	32.0%

Source: Survey study on women's participation in environmental protection and management, Plateau State, Nigeria.

Empirical evidence from Nigeria indicates that women's participation in environmental management and sanitation is both significant and measurable. A household survey conducted across six local government areas in Plateau State found that **79.2 % of women surveyed were involved in farming and land/soil conservation activities**, and an equal proportion (79.2 %) reported engaging in **daily environmental maintenance tasks** such as sweeping, clearing drains, and refuse disposal. Furthermore, **78.4 % of women had planted trees or flowers in the past five years**, contributing to local resource conservation and green space enhancement. These activities reflect routine contributions to **environmental maintenance, waste management, and resource stewardship** functions commonly associated with formal planning practice but carried out by women at the household and community scales

Table 2: Women's Representation in Nigeria's National Assembly (Federal Level)

Institution	Total Members	Number of Women	% Women Representation
Senate	109	8	~7.3 %
House of Representatives	435	13	~3.0 %
Total National Assembly	544	21	~4.47 %

Source: Current composition of Nigeria's National Assembly (2026 data).

Quantitative evidence from Nigerian governance structures reveals a stark underrepresentation of women in formal decision-making institutions, which has measurable implications for planning outcomes. In the current National Assembly, women occupy only about 4.47 % of seats 8 senators and 13 representatives out of 544 members placing Nigeria well below both global and regional averages for women's political representation. Historical analyses indicate similar trends, with women's representation in elective and appointive offices frequently remaining below 7 % nationwide, far short of global targets and national affirmative action benchmarks. Furthermore, recent climate governance data highlight that women are significantly underrepresented in climate and adaptation decision-making platforms, reducing the institutional visibility of priorities such as household energy, community resilience, and reproductive health in planning and policy arenas.

These patterns suggest a structural mechanism by which women and by extension, maternal and household-based priorities are systematically excluded from formal planning processes. The resulting exclusion of care-based knowledge and lived experience from governance deliberations undermines the effectiveness, inclusiveness, and equity of sustainable planning outcomes.

Table 3: Determinants of Women's Participation in Community Development (Northeastern Nigeria)

Variable	Direction of Effect	Statistical Significance	Planning Interpretation
Education level	Positive (+)	Significant ($p < 0.05$)	Education builds planning literacy and participation capacity
Women's empowerment	Positive (+)	Significant ($p < 0.05$)	Empowerment enhances agency in local development
Socio-cultural norms	Negative (-)	Significant ($p < 0.05$)	Cultural barriers limit inclusion in planning
Household size	Negative (-)	Significant ($p < 0.05$)	Care burdens constrain engagement
Income level	Mixed	Not always significant	Economic access alone is insufficient

Adapted from regression results reported in Northeastern Nigeria community development study.

The empirical evidence confirms that education and empowerment function as planning-relevant interventions, rather than merely social development outcomes. Women with higher educational attainment and greater decision-making autonomy are better equipped to engage in community development processes that influence land use,



environmental management, and service provision. Conversely, socio-cultural restrictions and household care burdens limit women's ability to participate, even where motivation exists.

From a planning perspective, this establishes a clear causal mechanism:

Education & empowerment → enhanced participation → stronger community-led planning outcomes

This finding reinforces the argument that sustainable planning in Nigeria cannot rely solely on technical expertise or institutional reform. Instead, it must incorporate social capacity-building measures that expand women's access to education, empowerment, and participatory spaces.

Table 4: Gender Participation in Informal Waste Management (Selected Nigerian Cities)

Location / Study Area	Female Participation (%)	Male Participation (%)	Activity Type	Source
Oluyole LGA, Ibadan (Oyo State)	~70%	~30%	Informal solid waste handling, sanitation, drainage clearing	Quest Journals (JACE)
Lagos Metropolis (informal sector average)	~60%	~40%	Waste picking, sorting, neighbourhood sanitation	WEDC / ResearchGate

Sources: Gender involvement in solid waste management in Oluyole LGA, Ibadan (Quest Journals, Journal of Architecture and Civil Engineering), WEDC Conference Paper on gender and informal waste economy in Nigerian cities

The data demonstrate that women are not peripheral actors but **primary drivers of informal planning outcomes** in Nigerian cities. Activities such as waste collection, sorting, drainage clearing, and neighbourhood sanitation directly influence urban environmental quality, public health, and spatial functionality core planning objectives typically associated with formal municipal systems.

In Ibadan's Oluyole Local Government Area, where women account for approximately **70 % of informal waste management participants**, environmental maintenance is largely sustained through female labour and organisation. Similarly, in Lagos, women comprise an estimated **60 % of informal waste actors**, filling critical service gaps left by overstretched formal institutions.

These findings highlight a structural reality: **informal planning systems in Nigeria are gendered**, with women providing essential services that maintain urban liveability. Yet, despite their centrality, these contributions remain largely invisible in formal planning frameworks, budgets, and policy documents.

Table 5: Key Structural Barriers Affecting Women's Participation in Planning-Relevant Sectors (Nigeria)

Barrier	Nigeria Evidence	Planning Implication	Primary Source
Low political & leadership representation	Women ≈ 4–6% of National Assembly	Exclusion from policy, land-use, and budget decisions	Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU); UN Women
Limited labour-force participation	Women ≈ 48% vs men ≈ 65% labour participation	Reduced access to formal planning institutions	National Bureau of Statistics (NBS)
Low access to land ownership	< 20% of women own land in Nigeria	Weak influence over spatial development	World Bank / NBS
Economic exclusion	Women dominate informal sector (> 60%)	Informal labour undervalued in planning	NBS Labour Force Survey
Cultural & care burden	Women perform ~75% of unpaid care work	Time poverty limits civic engagement	UNDP Nigeria



Nigeria's structural gender inequalities are clearly reflected in measurable indicators of political representation, labour participation, land ownership, and care burdens. According to data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UN Women Nigeria, women hold less than 6% of parliamentary seats, placing Nigeria among the lowest globally in women's political representation. This severe underrepresentation effectively excludes women from legislative oversight and policy deliberations related to urban development, climate governance, land administration, and infrastructure planning sectors that directly shape spatial and sustainability outcomes. Similarly, data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) Labour Force Survey indicate that women's labour force participation remains significantly lower than that of men, with a disproportionate concentration of women in informal employment. Because informal work is largely excluded from formal planning data systems, women's economic contributions are underrepresented in spatial and economic planning models. Furthermore, fewer than 20% of women in Nigeria have ownership or control over land, according to the World Bank Gender Data Portal and NBS Social Statistics. Given that land ownership determines influence over zoning, development control, compensation, and investment decisions, this spatial exclusion directly weakens women's institutional power within planning processes. Compounding these structural constraints, UNDP Nigeria reports that women perform over 70% of unpaid domestic and care labour, creating significant time poverty that limits their ability to participate in planning consultations, public hearings, and leadership roles even where participatory mechanisms formally exist.

Taken together, these indicators demonstrate that women's marginalisation from formal planning arenas in Nigeria is structural rather than behavioural. Women are not absent from sustainability practice; on the contrary, they play central roles in sanitation management, household resilience, environmental stewardship, and community welfare. However, they remain systematically excluded from decision-making spaces where planning priorities, budgets, and spatial strategies are determined. This creates a fundamental planning paradox: women perform critical sustainability functions at household and neighbourhood levels, yet lack institutional authority to shape the policies that govern those same domains. Such exclusion aligns with broader findings in gender and climate governance literature, which identify underrepresentation and institutional barriers as persistent obstacles to inclusive and effective planning systems. When care-based knowledge rooted in motherhood is omitted from formal governance, planning frameworks risk privileging technocratic efficiency over social sustainability, resulting in development interventions that are less responsive to household realities and long-term community resilience.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that motherhood, when understood as a social institution grounded in care, prevention, and intergenerational responsibility, constitutes an underrecognised yet measurable resource for sustainable urban and regional planning in Nigeria. Empirical evidence shows that women actively perform planning-relevant functions environmental maintenance, community development, informal service provision while remaining structurally excluded from formal governance, land control, and institutional decision-making arenas. This paradox reveals a critical planning gap: sustainability in practice depends significantly on women's labour and maternal knowledge, yet sustainability in policy often marginalises their voices. Addressing this disconnect requires gender-responsive planning reforms, institutional inclusion mechanisms, and capacity-building strategies that formally integrate care-based perspectives into planning systems. By bridging the divide between informal sustainability practice and formal planning authority, Nigerian planning institutions can enhance inclusivity, resilience, and long-term development outcomes.

Future Research Directions

Future research should explore the long-term impacts of motherhood-informed planning initiatives on urban sustainability outcomes, governance effectiveness, and social equity. Further studies may also examine the interaction between cultural norms, maternal roles, and planning institutions, as well as comparative analyses across different regional and socio-economic contexts. Such research would deepen understanding of how care-based planning logics can be systematically integrated into urban and regional planning theory and practice.



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