

Proximity is Not Power: Decentralised Governance and Gender-Responsive Outcomes of Climate Interventions in Busia County, Kenya

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Abstract

Kenya's devolved climate governance architecture positions county governments as the operational sphere for translating climate and gender commitments into gender-responsive climate action. Yet a persistent gap remains between formal policy and substantive equity outcomes. This article asks why decentralised governance structures shape gender-responsiveness as a governance principle to produce equitable outcomes of climate interventions in Busia County, Kenya. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design integrated data from, 435 survey respondents across seven sub-counties, eight key informant interviews, four focus group discussions and documentary analysis of 14 policy instruments. Two regression models examined the institutional determinants of gender mainstreaming and gender-equitable climate outcomes. Institutional capacity was the strongest determinant of gender mainstreaming ($\beta = 0.570$), exceeding the influence of socio-cultural factors ($\beta = 0.244$), with the model explaining 57.2% of the variation. Implementation strategy exerted a stronger influence on gender-equitable outcomes ($\beta = 0.403$) than resource access ($\beta = 0.267$), with the model explaining 44.3% of the variation. Qualitative and documentary evidence identified four interrelated mechanisms mediating these relationships: weak fiscal and monitoring instrumentation, access to resources without corresponding control, procedural inclusion without substantive influence, and reliance on civil society for accountability. The article argues that decentralization in Kenya has achieved negative subsidiarity, without positive subsidiarity: that devolution has enabled the downward transfer of climate governance functions without consistently transferring the institutional capacity, fiscal instruments, authority, and accountability necessary to make gender responsiveness durable and effective. Its central contribution is to demonstrate that institutionalizing gender responsiveness requires moving beyond formal inclusion towards implementation systems capable of converting policy commitments into decision-making power, equitable resource access, and demonstrable protection from gendered climate vulnerability.

Keywords: Subsidiarity, Decentralisation, Gender Mainstreaming, Gender Responsiveness, Climate Governance, Locally Led Adaptation, Local Government, Busia County, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Africa loses an estimated 2–5% of its gross domestic product annually to climate impacts, and several sub-Saharan economies divert up to 9% of their national budgets to climate-related shocks (South African Institute of International Affairs [SAIIA] 2025). These costs are not gender neutral. Across the continent, women bear disproportionate burdens of subsistence agriculture, water collection, caregiving, and post-shock household reconstitution, while structurally facing insecure land tenure, restricted decision-making authority and constrained access to climate finance (Agarwal 1994; Kabeer 1999; Kameri-Mbote 2006; Niemann et al. 2024). The international policy response has crystallised around two overlapping shifts: the gender turn within multilateral climate governance, most recently the nine-year Belém Gender Action Plan adopted at COP 30 (UNFCCC 2025); and the Locally Led Adaptation (LLA) movement, codified in principles endorsed by more than 40 governments and institutions at the January 2021 Climate Adaptation Summit and operationalised in flagship initiatives such as Kenya's Financing Locally Led Climate Action programme (FLLoCA) (World Bank 2021).

Both shifts rest on the principle of subsidiarity, the proposition that governance functions should be performed at the lowest level capable of executing them effectively, with higher levels providing the support (Latin: *subsidium*) that enables lower levels to act (Pius XI 1931; Føllesdal 1998; Francis 2015). Kenya's devolved climate governance architecture is, on the surface, a textbook application of the principle. The 2010 Constitution decentralised substantial functions to 47 county governments (Government of Kenya 2010; Kanyinga 2016); the Climate Change Act 2016, as amended in 2023, mandates the integration of climate considerations into national and county planning (Government of Kenya 2016, 2023); and the National Policy on Gender and Development extends the normative architecture into operational territory (Government of Kenya 2019). At the financing layer, FLLoCA, launched in 2021 with USD 295 million from the World Bank, bilateral partners and the Government of Kenya, channels resources through county climate change funds under explicit social-inclusion safeguards, and by late 2024 had disbursed KES 12.68 billion to 45 counties and 1,418 wards (World Bank 2021; Standard Media 2024).

Yet the lived experience of climate stress at county level remains profoundly gendered. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded with high confidence that climate impacts in sub-Saharan Africa are gender-differentiated in ways that compound existing inequalities (IPCC 2022), and Kenyan evidence consistently demonstrates that women's participation in climate governance has increased nominally without commensurate improvements in decision-making authority or control over resources (UN Women 2022; Brisebois et al. 2022; Niemann et al. 2024). Kenya's own April 2024 submission to UNFCCC acknowledged “a disconnect between the [Gender Action Plan] and its potential to trigger significant and visible grassroots/local action” (Government of Kenya 2024, p. 1). The gap between progressive policy text and gendered outcomes is therefore not a peripheral irregularity but the central governance puzzle of devolved climate action in Kenya.

This article interrogates that puzzle through a focused research question: why do decentralised governance structures shape gender-mainstreaming outcomes of climate interventions in Busia County, Kenya? The question operationalises a doctoral research objective, to assess the outcome of the implementation of climate change policies towards the protection of gendered vulnerability in Busia County and is framed deliberately as one of mechanism rather than effect. That decentralised governance affects gender mainstreaming is empirically uncontroversial; the analytically productive question is how, and through which mediating channels, formal devolution interacts with gendered institutions, fiscal architecture, and socio-cultural norms to produce the equity outcomes observed on the ground. The article's central thesis is that Kenya has achieved negative subsidiarity (transferring functions downward) without achieving

positive subsidiarity (providing the institutional capacity, fiscal instrumentation and accountability architecture that make devolved action effective). Proximity, in short, is not power.

Busia County, in western Kenya on the international border with Uganda, provides a strategically positioned case. It exhibits persistent, multidimensional climate vulnerabilities, recurrent flooding in Budalang'i, erratic rainfall, soil, and ecosystem degradation, intersecting with gendered livelihood structures in which women are over-represented in subsistence farming, small-scale fishing, and household provisioning (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS] 2019). The county has constituted the full devolved climate governance architecture, a County Climate Change Coordination Unit, a County Climate Change Action Plan 2023–2027, a County Climate Change Fund and ward climate change committees across all 35 wards, and is a priority recipient of FLLoCA financing, enabling examination of how programme-level safeguards interact with county institutional capacity at the point of implementation.

The article makes four contributions. First, it integrates subsidiarity, typically deployed as a normative justification for decentralisation without further analytical specification, into a rigorous empirical investigation of gender-responsive climate governance. Second, it presents the first systematic mixed-methods evidence base on gender-responsive climate governance in Busia County. Third, two regression analyses specify a clear hierarchy of governance determinants: institutional capacity dominates socio-cultural factors, and implementation strategy dominates resource access. Fourth, it advances an integrated subsidiarity–implementation–feminist analytical model that explains why decentralisation's equity effects are contingent rather than automatic and identifies positive subsidiarity as the most powerful leverage point for substantive reform.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Subsidiarity: Negative And Positive Dimensions

The modern formulation of subsidiarity belongs to Pius XI's 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, in which two principles operate simultaneously. Negative subsidiarity prohibits the higher level from doing what the lower can do: "*it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do*" (Pius XI 1931, para. 79). Positive subsidiarity, often missed in contemporary citations, obliges the higher level to provide the support that enables the lower to act: "*every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help [subsidium] to the members of the body social*" (para. 79). Pope Francis explicitly extended the principle to ecological governance, coupling "*freedom to develop the capabilities present at every level of society*" with "*a greater sense of responsibility for the common good from those who wield greater power*" (Francis 2015, para. 196). African communitarian theology finds an indigenous analogue in *palaver* (community deliberation) traditions, in which decision-making is properly seated in the community capable of deliberation, with larger structures providing recognition and reinforcement rather than substitution (Bujo 1998, 2001). African feminist scholarship complicates this picture by interrogating which community counts as the lowest subsidiary unit, the household, the lineage, the village or the individual, and how patriarchal authority within these units may absorb women's agency (Oyěwùmí 1997; Nnaemeka 2004; Mama 2011).

The principle has migrated into secular decentralisation theory. Føllesdal (1998) specifies four conditions under which subsidiarity-based devolution is defensible: lower-level competence, higher-level coordination, genuine participatory legitimacy, and accountability at both levels. Faguet (2014) concludes that decentralisation improves responsiveness only when accompanied by accountability architecture, fiscal autonomy, and political competition; in their absence, devolution may simply relocate authority closer to communities without redistributing power within them. African scholarship demonstrates that

devolved governance is mediated by existing socio-cultural hierarchies, patronage networks and patriarchal property regimes (Crook and Manor 1998; Ribot 2002; Boone 2014), and Kanyinga (2016) warns that Kenya's devolution settlement depends on the construction of effective accountability institutions at both national and county levels. Ostrom's (2010) polycentric governance theory converges with subsidiarity: governance across multiple scales is effective only where each scale possesses the institutional capacity to perform its assigned functions (Morrison et al. 2017; Jordan et al. 2018). The dual structure of subsidiarity therefore provides this article's primary analytical frame. Authentic subsidiarity requires not only the transfer of functions downward but the deliberate construction of capacity, fiscal instrumentation, and accountability at each level. Where the negative dimension is satisfied but the positive is neglected, the result is inauthentic subsidiarity, a formal architecture of devolution that lacks the operational machinery to make local authority effective.

Implementation Theory: The Operational Test

Implementation theory specifies the operational tests by which subsidiarity is realised or betrayed in practice. Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) established that policy goals requiring distributive change rarely survive the journey from statute to street unless they are translated into specific operational tasks, enforceable administrative routines, and accountable instruments. Hill and Hupe (2009) characterise implementation as a multi-actor, multi-level process in which slippage accumulates at every transfer point. Devolution multiplies the decision points along the implementation chain, from national framework to county plan, from plan to budget, from budget to ward-level implementation, and gender commitments, which face the additional headwinds of contested legitimacy and competing institutional logics, are particularly exposed. Implementation theory thereby clarifies what positive subsidiarity requires in operational terms: budget tagging that makes resource flows traceable, sex-disaggregated indicators that make outcomes measurable, performance routines that survive personnel changes and accountability triggers that operate across scales. The absence of these instruments, termed here an instrumentation deficit, constitutes a failure of positive subsidiarity even where the negative architecture of devolution is fully constituted.

Feminist Political Ecology And The Household Scale

Feminist political ecology extends the analysis to the most intimate scale at which devolved interventions are converted into outcomes: the household. Resource flows in agrarian contexts are mediated by gendered relations of property, labour, and authority (Rocheleau et al. 1996; Elmhirst 2011). Kabeer (1999) distinguishes access, the receipt of inputs, training, or finance, from agency, the capacity to act on one's own behalf without sanction, and from achievement, observable improvement in wellbeing. Agarwal (1994) locates the structural foundation of this conversion problem in property regimes that exclude women from independent control over productive assets, and Crenshaw (1991) specifies that gendered constraints intersect with other axes of disadvantage. Recent East African evidence confirms the pattern: women's access to adaptation resources is consistently mediated by household-level authority structures (Niemann et al. 2024); women's limited control over land and labour constrains the adoption of longer-term adaptation practices even where access is formally equitable (Brisebois et al. 2022); and Kenyan land regimes leave women's rights *de facto* contingent on male relatives despite formal legal guarantees (Kameri-Mbote 2006, 2009). Subsidiarity must therefore be theorised at the household scale: where patriarchal household authority absorbs women's decision capacity, the lowest effective unit of subsidiarity becomes the male household head rather than the individual woman, and devolution to the ward will not, by itself, produce substantive equity.

An Integrated Model And Propositions

Synthesising these traditions yields four analytical pathways through which decentralised governance shapes gender-mainstreaming outcomes: the normative architecture of subsidiarity (negative and positive); institutional capacity as the operational machinery of positive subsidiarity; fiscal instrumentation as its traceability; and household-scale safeguards as its most intimate extension. The model generates three propositions tested empirically below. P1: institutional capacity will outperform socio-cultural factors in predicting gender mainstreaming, because capacity constitutes the dominant near-term lever while cultural transformation operates over longer horizons. P2: implementation strategy will outperform resource access in predicting equitable outcomes, because the instrumentation through which resources are deployed determines whether positive subsidiarity is realised. P3: qualitative and documentary evidence will reveal procedural inclusion coexisting with substantive exclusion, indicating that negative but not positive subsidiarity has been achieved within Busia's devolved climate governance system.

METHODS

Study Setting

Busia County in western Kenya has a population of 893,681 residing in approximately 198,152 households across seven sub-counties and 35 administrative wards (KNBS 2019). A tropical humid climate supports agriculture and fishing as dominant livelihood systems while exposing the population to recurrent flooding, particularly in low-lying Budalang'i, erratic rainfall and ecosystem degradation. Ethnic plurality, with Luhya, Teso and Luo communities predominating, shapes gendered social organisation, land tenure practices and participation in local governance. The county is analytically productive because it combines pronounced gendered climate vulnerability with the fully constituted devolved climate architecture and priority FLLoCA financing and is geographically and economically representative of western Kenya's agrarian counties, supporting analytical generalisation within Kenya's devolved system.

Design, Sampling, And Data Collection

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design under a pragmatic philosophical orientation (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018; Saunders et al. 2019): quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analysed independently, and integrated at the interpretation stage through triangulation and narrative synthesis. The quantitative sample size was determined using a standard formula for finite populations applied to the 198,152-household sampling frame, yielding a planned sample of 440 and a realised sample of 435 valid responses (response rate 98.9%), allocated proportionately to sub-county household share and selected through multi-stage sampling combining ward stratification with systematic random selection. Qualitative data were generated through eight key informant interviews (KIIs) with county officials, gender focal persons, climate officers and civil society organisation representatives, and four focus group discussions (FGDs) drawn purposively from community leaders, smallholder farmers and women's groups across the sub-counties, each comprising eight to twelve participants stratified by gender and age.

Documentary analysis covered 14 policy instruments across three tiers. At the national level these included the Constitution of Kenya, the Climate Change Act 2016 (as amended 2023), the National Climate Change Action Plan (NCCAP III) 2023–2027 and the National Policy on Gender and Development (Government of Kenya 2010, 2016, 2019, 2023). At the county level they included the Busia County Climate Change Action Plan 2023–2027, the County Integrated Development Plan 2023–2027 and the Approved First Supplementary Budget Estimates FY 2025/2026. At the programme level they included the FLLoCA technical assessment (World Bank 2021), the FLLoCA gender assessment

(CRAWN Trust 2025) and Kenya's 2024 UNFCCC submission (Government of Kenya 2024). Non-participant observation at selected public participation forums supplemented these instruments.

Measurement And Analysis

Key variables were operationalised as composite indices measured on five-point Likert scales: an institutional capacity index (administrative effectiveness, leadership commitment, accountability mechanisms and technical gender expertise); a culture and traditions index (socio-cultural norms, community attitudes towards women's authority and the influence of traditions on participation); an implementation strategy index (the integration of gender considerations across project design, targeting, adaptation technology choice, participation in planning, monitoring and evaluation); a resource access index; and dependent indices for the level of gender mainstreaming and gender-equitable climate outcomes. Reliability of all key indices exceeded the conventional 0.70 Cronbach's alpha threshold, and the instrument was piloted in two non-sampled wards. Quantitative analysis proceeded through descriptive statistics, bivariate correlation and multiple regression using SPSS v28; two regression models specified the substantive analysis, with normality, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity assumptions assessed through residual diagnostics. Qualitative data were analysed thematically through inductive coding and constant comparison. Documentary data were analysed using a framework approach mapping each instrument against five dimensions: participation and representation; institutional mandates; financing and gender-responsive budgeting; implementation mechanisms; and accountability and monitoring capacity. The study received ethical approval from the relevant institutional review board and a research licence from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI); informed consent was obtained from all respondents and identifying information was anonymised.

FINDINGS

A Landscape Of Neutral Perceptions

Descriptive analysis revealed a striking and consistent pattern: respondents expressed predominantly neutral perceptions across implementation and resource governance indicators, with mean scores clustering around the midpoint of the five-point scale. Items measuring the substantive integration of gender considerations consistently fell below the agreement threshold: women's participation in planning committees influencing project priorities ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.19$); gender-responsive monitoring of climate projects ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.14$); equitable access to capacity-building and training ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.13$); a fair proportion of climate funds reaching women-led or community-based initiatives ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.11$); and gender considerations influencing the choice of adaptation technologies ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.10$). Outcome items followed the same pattern: women and men benefiting equally from climate adaptation initiatives ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.29$) and equitable benefit distribution ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.21$). This clustering should not be read as the absence of opinion. It signals a zone of institutional friction, constraints that are widely recognised within the county system but insufficiently confronted through formal governance mechanisms. Read through the subsidiarity frame, it is the predictable empirical signature of negative-but-not-positive subsidiarity: functions have been devolved, but the operational capacity to perform them effectively has not been built.

The Hierarchy Of Governance Determinants

Two multiple regression models specified the substantive quantitative analysis; both satisfied the standard assumptions of linear regression (residual normality, homoscedasticity, and variance inflation factors well below conventional thresholds).

Model 1 regressed the gender-equitable climate outcomes index on implementation strategy, resource

access and perceived project sustainability. The model was strongly significant, $F(3, 427) = 113.02$, $p < 0.001$, with an adjusted R^2 of 0.439, indicating that approximately 44% of the variance in gender-equitable outcomes was explained by the three predictors (Table 1). Implementation strategy emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.403$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the institutionalised integration of gender considerations across project design, targeting, monitoring and evaluation exerts the strongest independent effect on equitable outcomes. Resource access was statistically significant but secondary ($\beta = 0.267$, $p < 0.001$), while sustainability perceptions did not reach conventional significance ($\beta = 0.081$, $p = 0.052$). The substantive implication is analytically sharp: how climate programmes are designed, delivered, and governed has a larger equity payoff than how much is nominally made available. In subsidiarity terms, the volume of subsidium transferred matters less than its instrumentation, the operational tools through which higher-level support is converted into effective local action.

Table 1: Multiple Regression Coefficients: Predictors Of Gender-Equitable Climate Outcomes In Busia County

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	0.820	0.119	–	6.908	< 0.001
Implementation strategy index	0.391	0.054	0.403	7.249	< 0.001
Resource access index	0.253	0.049	0.267	5.154	< 0.001
Project sustainability	0.057	0.029	0.081	1.946	0.052

Note: dependent variable: gender-equitable climate outcomes index. β = standardised regression coefficient. $F(3, 427) = 113.02$, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.443$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.439$. Source: author's survey (2025); analysis using SPSS v28.

Model 2 regressed the level of gender mainstreaming on institutional capacity and culture and traditions. The model achieved an exceptionally strong fit, $F(2, 432) = 288.20$, $p < 0.001$, with $R^2 = 0.572$, indicating that 57.2% of the variance in gender mainstreaming was explained by the two predictors, a substantial explanatory contribution in governance research (Table 2). Both predictors were positive and statistically significant, but institutional capacity dominated ($\beta = 0.570$, $p < 0.001$), exerting more than twice the standardised effect of culture and traditions ($\beta = 0.244$, $p < 0.001$). The predictive equation, gender mainstreaming = $0.486 + 0.637$ (institutional capacity) + 0.218 (culture and traditions), indicates that marginal gains in institutional capacity yield substantially larger expected improvements than comparable shifts in socio-cultural conditions. Together, the two models support the integrated framework's prediction that institutional capacity, the operational machinery of positive subsidiarity, is the dominant lever for gender-responsive climate governance in decentralised systems.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Coefficients: Institutional Capacity, Culture And Traditions, And The Level Of Gender Mainstreaming In Climate Policy Implementation

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	0.486	0.116	–	4.174	< 0.001
Institutional capacity	0.637	0.048	0.570	13.361	< 0.001
Culture and traditions	0.218	0.038	0.244	5.721	< 0.001

Note: dependent variable: level of gender mainstreaming index. β = standardised regression coefficient. F

(2, 432) = 288.20, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.572$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.570$. Source: author's survey (2025); analysis using SPSS v28.

Qualitative Mechanisms: Procedural Inclusion, Substantive Exclusion

The qualitative data specify the mechanisms behind the statistical patterns. Busia County has established an extensive governance architecture intended to integrate gender considerations into climate action: a County Climate Change Coordination Unit, steering and planning committees, and ward climate change committees across all 35 wards. As the county director explained:

We have what is called the County Climate Change Coordination Unit... composed of three committees, with ward-level structures that include youth representation, women representation and of course the elder. (KII-3, county director)

These arrangements reflect formal compliance with constitutional principles on inclusion, national climate frameworks and the participatory requirements embedded within FLLoCA. They constitute, in subsidiarity terms, the negative dimension of devolution: functions have been transferred to ward-level bodies that include women among formally constituted members. Yet the evidence reveals a persistent disjuncture between institutional design and substantive participation. While women are formally represented, their participation is frequently described as limited, muted, or symbolic. As the same senior informant acknowledged:

Even if we have put them into these committees, their contribution... you find that women are not coming out strongly... Simply sensitization. We have not done enough sensitization. (KII-3)

This admission, made from within the institution itself, signals two distinct mechanisms: inclusion has not translated into effective voice or authority, and informants attribute women's limited participation not to deficits of interest or capacity but to institutional and social failures of preparation, support and empowerment, a precise diagnostic of failed positive subsidiarity. Civil society perspectives reinforced this reading:

Although the FLOCCA framework stipulates participation of women and young people, not just being heard but being seen, and not just participation but involvement, decision-making remains largely male-dominated. (KII-4, CSO lead)

Institutional barriers intersect with socio-cultural norms to constrain women's substantive agency. Cultural expectations around deference, consultation and land-based authority mean that women may attend meetings but feel constrained to consult or defer before taking positions; ward-level nominations into climate committees were described as contested and unstable, with women facing intimidation and limited political support when seeking leadership positions (KII-3; KII-4). The FGDs documented women's limited control over land, household resources and strategic adaptation decisions even where they accessed training, inputs, or membership of planning forums, and described backlash dynamics, social sanction, household conflict and, in some cases, displacement, where women's programme-linked gains were perceived as threatening established gender hierarchies. These findings, consistent with regional patterns (Niemann et al. 2024), clarify why resource access is a weaker predictor than implementation strategy in the quantitative model and identify the household as the site at which devolved benefits are converted, or absorbed, into substantive outcomes.

Documentary Evidence: The Instrumentation Deficit

The documentary analysis exposed a persistent gap between normative intent and implementation verifiability. County instruments such as the Participatory Climate Risk Assessment and the Busia County Climate Change Action Plan 2023–2027 formally recognise women as priority vulnerable groups, and budget documents demonstrate that climate-relevant programmes are funded. However, gender-tagged budget lines were either absent or weakly applied; measurable gender-specific output targets were rare; and systematic sex-disaggregated beneficiary projections and reporting were inconsistent across the reviewed instruments. The Approved First Supplementary Budget Estimates FY 2025/2026, the most authoritative recent fiscal document for evaluating commitment-to-action conversion, illustrate the pattern: climate-relevant allocations are visible at programme level, but disaggregation by gender beneficiary, output indicator and ward is uneven. In implementation-theory terms this is a classic instrumentation deficit; in subsidiarity terms it is a structural failure of the positive dimension, higher levels have not constructed the operational instruments that would enable ward committees, women’s groups, and gender focal points to perform their devolved functions with traceable accountability.

These county-level findings mirror national and regional patterns. Kenya’s UNFCCC submission attributed the gap between the Gender Action Plan and grassroots action principally to inadequacies in the means of implementing gender-responsive climate action at grassroots level (Government of Kenya 2024), and a rapid analysis of 31 African nationally determined contributions, reported in a recent review of locally led adaptation, found that only seven incorporated sex-disaggregated data and indicators, with fewer still integrating gender-responsive budgeting (SAIIA 2025). Civil society respondents reinforced the documentary finding: gender-responsive budgeting in Busia remains “*not formally*” institutionalised, sustained largely through advocacy and budget memoranda rather than routine administrative practice, while FLLoCA was described as having been “*used for politics*” with opaque leadership selection (KII-4). The FLLoCA gender assessment corroborates this reading: explicit gender safeguards exist on paper, but their operationalisation at county and ward level depends substantially on county institutional capacity and the strength of local civil society pressure (CRAWN Trust 2025).

Synthesis: Four Failures Of Authentic Subsidiarity

Table 3 synthesises the four mechanisms through which decentralised governance structures shape gender-mainstreaming outcomes in Busia County, framing each as a specific failure of authentic subsidiarity and integrating the quantitative, qualitative, and documentary evidence.

Table 3: Mechanisms Through Which Decentralised Governance Shapes Gender-Mainstreaming Outcomes In Busia County, Framed As Failures Of Authentic Subsidiarity

Mechanism	Empirical signal	Subsidiarity dimension implicated	Governance implication
Instrumentation deficit	Weak gender-tagged budget lines; vague output targets; limited sex-disaggregated reporting; neutral perceptions on monitoring (M = 2.94).	Failure of positive subsidiarity in fiscal architecture: higher levels have not provided the operational tools that enable local action.	County fiscal architecture documents commitment without enabling verification.

Access without control	Resource access ($\beta = 0.267$) secondary to implementation strategy ($\beta = 0.403$); qualitative evidence on land tenure and household authority.	Failure of subsidiarity at the household scale: patriarchal authority absorbs women's agency.	Resources delivered into unequal authority structures are neutralised or redirected.
Procedural inclusion, substantive exclusion	Women formally represented across 35 ward committees; informants report women " <i>not coming out strongly</i> " and decision-making " <i>largely male-dominated</i> ".	Inauthentic subsidiarity: negative dimension satisfied (functions transferred), positive dimension unfulfilled (capacity to participate substantively).	Decentralisation expands spaces of participation without redistributing power within them.
Civil-society-dependent accountability	Gender-responsive budgeting " <i>not formally</i> " institutionalised; sustained through CSO advocacy; FLLoCA described as " <i>used for politics</i> ".	Subsidiarity outsourced: the state has shifted its positive duty of subsidium onto non-state actors.	Accountability rests on external pressure rather than internalised norms; gains fragile across political cycles.

Note: synthesis derived from regression models 1 and 2, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and documentary analysis of national, county and programme-level instruments. Subsidiarity dimensions derived from Pius XI (1931, para. 79), Francis (2015, para. 196) and Føllesdal (1998). CSO = civil society organisation. Source: author's analysis (2025).

DISCUSSION

The findings converge on a coherent answer to the article's animating question. Decentralised governance structures shape gender-mainstreaming outcomes of climate interventions in Busia County through four interacting mechanisms, instrumentation deficit, access without control, procedural inclusion masking substantive exclusion, and civil-society-dependent accountability, each of which can be specified as a particular failure of authentic subsidiarity. Kenya has achieved negative subsidiarity without positive subsidiarity: proximity is necessary but insufficient for the protection of gendered vulnerability.

Implementation As The Operational Test Of Subsidiarity

The dominance of implementation strategy ($\beta = 0.403$) over resource access ($\beta = 0.267$) in predicting gender-equitable outcomes is the most policy-actionable finding of the study. It refutes a common framing in climate finance discourse in which equity is treated as a function of allocation volume, the assumption that more resources, channelled through decentralised structures, will yield more equitable outcomes. The Busia evidence suggests the reverse: resources delivered without operational instruments that hardwire gender targeting, monitoring and accountability into routine practice are absorbed by existing inequities rather than transforming them. This aligns with implementation scholarship's central insight that

distributive goals require operational specification (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Hill and Hupe 2009) and with the most recent locally led adaptation research emphasising the role of design, not merely volume, in determining gender outcomes (Tye et al. 2023; Ntezi Mbabazi and Pinnington 2024). The finding speaks directly to FLLoCA, whose theory of change invests in county and ward-level capacity but whose gender-equity outcomes depend on the operational specificity of implementation tools rather than the magnitude of resources transferred (World Bank 2021; CRAWN Trust 2025).

The Access–Agency Gap As A Household-Scale Subsidiarity Problem

That resource access remained statistically significant but secondary is consistent with Kabeer's (1999) distinction between access and agency. The qualitative evidence on land tenure, household authority and backlash dynamics specifies the structural mechanism: where women do not control productive assets, project inputs can improve participation statistics without producing durable control over adaptation pathways (Agarwal 1994; Kameri-Mbote 2006, 2009; Brisebois et al. 2022; Niemann et al. 2024). A faithful application of subsidiarity must therefore ask whether the household functions as a unit of subsidium for women's adaptive agency or as an absorbing structure that extracts the value of devolved benefits (Pius XI 1931; Bujo 2001). In Busia, as in much of agrarian Kenya, the evidence is that patriarchal household authority frequently functions as an absorbing structure: the de facto lowest unit of subsidiarity becomes the male household head rather than the individual woman. Authentic subsidiarity at this scale requires explicit safeguards, secure and individually held land rights, decision authority recognised by formal governance institutions and protection from social sanction, and African feminist scholarship specifies that women's substantive agency must be actively constituted through institutional design rather than presumed from communitarian arrangements (Oyěwùmí 1997; Nnaemeka 2004; Mama 2011).

The Institutional Capacity Premium

The institutional capacity coefficient ($\beta = 0.570$), more than double that of culture and traditions ($\beta = 0.244$), qualifies an influential strand of gender-and-development scholarship that locates the primary obstacles to women's empowerment in deep cultural norms and patriarchal social structures. The Busia evidence does not contest the importance of culture, culture matters, significantly, but it specifies that the dominant near-term leverage point lies in formal institutional capacity. Reforms that build administrative competence, leadership commitment, accountability frameworks, coordination mechanisms and technical gender expertise can produce measurable gains in gender mainstreaming even where socio-cultural transformation remains a longer-term project. From a subsidiarity perspective, this is the empirical confirmation that the positive dimension, the duty of higher levels to provide capacity to lower levels, is the most powerful policy instrument available within decentralised systems. It is also an empirical test of polycentric theory's proposition that the equity outcomes of multi-scale governance depend on the institutional capacity present at each scale rather than on the architecture of scale-allocation alone (Ostrom 2010; Jordan et al. 2018). Decentralisation without capacity-building produces formal polycentricity but substantive monocentricity because real decisions migrate back to the levels that possess the machinery to execute them.

Procedural Inclusion And Fragile Accountability

The gap between formal representation in ward climate change committees and effective decision-making influence specifies the third mechanism: representation without redistribution or recognition (Fraser 2009), in which the labour through which women sustain household and communal resilience remains institutionally invisible (Bujo 2001; Mama 2011). The negative dimension of subsidiarity is satisfied, committees have been constituted with formal gender representation, but the capacity-building,

sensitisation, leadership development and protection from informal absorption that would make participation substantively effective have not been provided. The locally led adaptation literature increasingly recognises this pattern: devolved frameworks reference gender, but the deeper enabling factors, capacity-building, voice in design and sustained accompaniment, are inconsistently delivered (Owen 2020; Tye et al. 2023; SAIIA 2025). The fourth mechanism, accountability sustained primarily through civil society advocacy rather than internalised governance norms, identifies a structural fragility: advocacy-driven gains are real but contingent on continuous external pressure, and vulnerable to political turnover, donor priority shifts and the cyclical politicisation of programme governance. In subsidiarity terms, the state has shifted its positive duty onto non-state actors, not absorption upward, the classical negative failure, but abandonment downward. Comparable analyses report that women's rights organisations sustain gender-responsive programming within locally led adaptation initiatives despite, rather than through, formal donor and administrative systems (Ntezi Mbabazi and Pinnington 2024) and emphasise that funders and implementers must deliberately secure decision-making power for women and women-led organisations throughout design and implementation (Tye et al. 2023).

Limitations

Three limitations bound the inferences drawn here. First, the cross-sectional design supports correlational rather than causal claims; the coefficients describe associations under stated controls. Second, the study is geographically bounded to Busia County; the four mechanisms are likely to generalise within Kenya's devolved system and the broader East African locally led adaptation landscape, but contextual variation across counties merits comparative investigation. Third, the perceptual measurement of mainstreaming outcomes, while standard in governance research, would benefit from triangulation with administrative data on disaggregated programme beneficiaries and expenditure traces. Longitudinal designs and explicit comparative analysis across FLLoCA-recipient counties would deepen causal understanding.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Decentralised governance structures shape gender-mainstreaming outcomes of climate interventions in Busia County through four interacting mechanisms, each constituting a failure of authentic subsidiarity. Institutional capacity is the dominant statistical predictor of gender mainstreaming ($\beta = 0.570$), and implementation strategy ($\beta = 0.403$) outperforms resource access ($\beta = 0.267$) as a predictor of gender-equitable outcomes. The principle of subsidiarity, properly understood, requires not only the transfer of functions downward but the active construction of capacity at each scale of governance. Decentralisation that satisfies only the negative dimension, transferring functions without providing capacity, constitutes inauthentic subsidiarity, and that inauthenticity is empirically visible: in neutral perceptions across implementation indicators, in procedural inclusion without substantive equity and in accountability outsourced to civil society.

Five reform clusters follow, each addressing a specific dimension of authentic subsidiarity and, ultimately, the protection of gendered vulnerability. First, institutionalise gender-responsive budgeting through formally adopted county budget tags, gender-specific output targets and mandatory sex-disaggregated beneficiary reporting embedded in the programme-based budget; the Council of Governors and the National Treasury should jointly develop a binding gender-responsive climate budgeting standard applicable across all FLLoCA-recipient counties. Second, develop a county monitoring, reporting, verification and learning system equipped with sex-disaggregated indicators across the full project cycle, aligned with the Belém Gender Action Plan's emphasis on monitoring and reporting at all levels (UNFCCC 2025). Third, advance land tenure reform dialogue and administrative recognition of women's land and decision-making rights, joint registration, recognition of co-management arrangements and

gender-disaggregated tenure documentation, to extend subsidiarity incrementally to the household scale (Kameri-Mbote 2009). Fourth, establish structured community dialogue platforms that engage men as partners in gender-responsive climate action, drawing on indigenous knowledge systems and relational justice principles (Bujo 2001; Nnaemeka 2004); male engagement is a structural requirement for managing the backlash dynamics that otherwise neutralise women-targeted interventions (International Development Research Centre [IDRC] n.d.; Tye et al. 2023). Fifth, establish a county gender-and-climate oversight committee with a formal mandate, dedicated secretariat support and reporting authority to the county executive and assembly, institutionalising the accountability functions currently carried by civil society.

The broader implication for decentralisation theory and the locally led climate finance movement is that proximity is not power. Bringing decision-making closer to communities expands the spaces of participation but does not redistribute power within them. As the Belém Gender Action Plan enters its implementation phase and locally led adaptation finance scales across Kenya and sub-Saharan Africa, the analytical and policy challenge is no longer whether to devolve climate finance but how to ensure that devolution produces authentic subsidiarity. Properly applied, the principle is not a justification for state retreat from devolved governance but a demand for sustained state investment in the operational machinery that makes devolved governance effective. Authentic subsidiarity is, in this sense, the architecture of equity within decentralised systems.

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