

RELIGION AND GENDER EQUALITY: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is the impact of Christian teachings and practices on gender equality in Nigeria. It reviews recent research, policy documents, and national and international data to assess how religious interpretations interact with social, economic, and political systems that impact women's education, employment, and public participation. The study employs feminist and womanist theological frameworks to examine how Christian institutions both perpetuate and challenge gender inequality. Data reveal patterns in girls' school enrollment, women's workforce participation, and their representation in political leadership. The findings reveal gaps in girls' schooling, the strong involvement of women in informal work, limited access to formal employment and leadership roles for women, and a decline in political representation. It also shows that churches support women through welfare programmes while maintaining internal structures that restrict access to leadership. The study argues that these mixed outcomes stem from cultural interpretations of scripture and inconsistent application of gender-inclusive teachings. It recommends that churches establish clear policies on women's roles, invest in theological training focused on gender, and support education and skills programmes for girls and women. It also suggests that government and civic groups strengthen anti-discrimination laws, widen opportunities in the formal sector, and improve support for women seeking political office. All these aim at furthering the goals of Sustainable Development Goal 5 in Nigerian Christian contexts.

Keywords: religion, gender, gender inequality, Nigeria, Christian theology, SDG 5

Introduction

A look at the relationship between religion and gender equality in Nigeria does not present a clear-cut picture. In the southern and central parts of the country, where Christianity has a strong presence, a blend of Christian and local traditions influences the people's expectations of gender roles. On the one hand, some faith interpretations and practices support women's welfare, rights, and education. Here, women are seen as vital in areas such as motherhood, organisation, production, and management. On the other hand, some traditional and religious interpretations and structures restrict women's roles in public and ecclesial life. For example, women are excluded from speaking in land disputes, property sharing and inheritance; application of harsher penalties for moral offences like adultery, and exclusion from providing leadership services in the church, etc. (Udo et al., 2020; Okorie et al., 2020; Enyongndi et al., 2024; Odiike, 2024; Egbuniwe et al., 2025).

This paper examines the impact of the interpretation and practice of Christianity in Nigeria on gender equality. It focuses on four areas, namely education, economy, politics, and religion/culture. It inquires about the relationship between what the church teaches and what it actually does, and how its theological frameworks can help explain these connections. The aim is to provide recommendations, based on evidence, for church leaders, policy makers, and researchers.

Research Objectives

1. To explain in some detail how the understanding and practice of the Christian faith in Nigeria affects women in education, economic opportunities, and participation in government.
2. To examine data on the education of women and female children, their participation in the labour force and politics in Nigeria.
3. To use relevant frameworks (feminist and womanist) to know the extent to which religious institutions support or challenge gender inequality.
4. To proffer concrete recommendations and strategies to relevant religious and public authorities.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods, specifically a systematic literature review and content analysis of secondary sources. These include journal articles, books, church documents, national and international data, and policy documents. The choice of sources focused on current authoritative data (2019 to 2025) to support statistical claims. Peer-reviewed sources are used for theological and historical claims.

Conceptual Clarifications

Religion

Religion is a complex cultural system of beliefs, practices, and worldviews that relates humanity to spirituality and moral values (Okpe, 2014). It influences socio-political practices and the cultural life of society, thereby shaping people's way of life and behaviour. In Nigeria, the interpretation of religious texts often establishes hierarchical positions, which can either reinforce or challenge existing gender norms. According to Oduyoye (1995), patriarchal readings of scripture have limited women's roles in church leadership. In contrast, Pentecostal interpretations have presented women as spiritual leaders and prophets (Kalu, 2008).

Gender

From a purely sociological perspective, gender refers to socially constructed characteristics of persons identified as male or female. This includes the norms, behaviour, roles, and expectations that come with being a man, woman, boy, or girl, as well as how they relate with each other (World Health Organisation, 2023).

Equality

Equality is a fundamental principle that ensures every individual or group has a level playing field of rights, opportunities, and treatment, regardless of their origin, circumstances, or social standing. It is the belief that no one should be deprived of any chance at a better life simply because the person is born poor, disabled, or for any such reason. It implies that everyone has the same rights and opportunities in all aspects of life (Vivacqua & Diab, 2020).

Gender Equality

Gender equality means that men and women, as well as boys and girls, have the same rights, responsibilities, opportunities, entitlements, and liberties in all aspects of life, including political, economic, social, and personal spheres. Gender equality does not assume that men and women will become identical, but instead that men's and women's rights, responsibilities, and

opportunities will not be determined by whether they are born male or female (United Nations Population Fund, 2025).

Theoretical Frameworks

The study uses two complementary frameworks to analyse the Nigerian context, namely feminist theory and womanist theory. These frameworks demonstrate how religion at once hinders and promotes gender equality in Nigeria.

Feminist Theory

One of the core themes of Reuther's (1983) feminist theological thought is a critique of patriarchy, a social system in which men hold primacy in political leadership, religious and moral authority, social privilege, and control over property, often leading to a systematic dominance of men over women. She argued that the portrayal of God, salvation, and leadership in masculine terms and the patriarchal interpretations of scripture have long been used to sustain male authority in church and society. This has led to the subordination of women throughout history and perpetuated gender inequality. She observed that the Bible includes both patriarchal and liberating texts. The task of feminist theology is to emphasize the liberating aspects, such as the equality found in Ephesians 3:28; thus promoting egalitarian readings of the texts and inclusive church practices.

Womanist Theory

Williams' (1993) womanist theological thought is a critique of the exclusion of the Black woman's experiences from both traditional Christian theology and mainstream feminist theology. She argued that both White feminist theology and Black theology were faulty. While the former emphasized sexism and ignored racism, the latter focused on racism and ignored sexism. Womanist theology, therefore, addresses the experiences of Black women at the intersection of race and gender. This theory is particularly relevant in Nigerian contexts, where ethnicity, culture, and religion intersect.

Gender Inequality in Nigeria

Education

Education is one critical area where gender inequality manifests in Nigeria. This inequality is partly rooted in the colonial education system, which prioritized the training of men for administrative and clerical roles. At the same time, girls and women were limited to acquiring skills that would prepare them for domestic roles. This gender-based style of education limited women's access to educational and economic opportunities, thereby institutionalizing gender inequality (Amaechi & Ikwuoma, 2024; Muonwe & Lebechi, 2024).

The story is no better today. UNICEF Nigeria (2022) reported that millions of Nigerian girls were out of school. The number of out-of-school children in Nigeria was estimated at 18.5 million, out of which 60% were girls (Agence France-Presse, 2022). Factors such as child marriage and poverty continue to reduce girls' access to and attainment of education. The figure shows that gender related barriers to schooling remain a pressing national concern.

Economy and Work

Following Nigeria's population, the potential labour force of women is 50% but the actual value is 29.7% (Nwokoye et al., 2017). According to the National Bureau of Statistics

(2024), the labour force participation rate for women (aged 15 and above) in Nigeria was 79.1%, compared to a rate of 79.9% for men. The high participation rate includes informal work, self-employment, and agriculture. In the formal sector, women hold roughly one-third (33%) of entry-level positions (Alli, 2025). This indicates that, although women's labour force participation is high, their presence in formal sector employment remains low. These findings (significant difference between labour force participation and formal sector presence) suggest that women in Nigeria face barriers to entering stable, formal employment. This points to structural inequalities.

Politics and Representation

The Nigerian political scene shows a comparatively minimal female participation and representation. Analyses of the 2023 elections and the subsequent legislature reveal a decline in the number of female lawmakers in both the national and state assemblies, resulting in under-representation of women in public leadership (Nkereuwem, 2023; PLAC, 2024). The reviews highlighted several key factors that negatively impact the successful participation of women in elective positions in Nigeria. These include political party gatekeeping, campaign finance, and conservative norms and culture, among others. The findings reveal that macro-level and systemic factors, in combination with individual factors, hinder women's access to elected offices in Nigeria.

Religion and Culture

Certain religious and cultural interpretations in Nigeria create expectations of gender roles in family life, leadership, and social honour systems. Some biblical passages (such as 1 Cor. 14:33b-36 and Eph. 5:21-33) are presented in such a manner as to restrict women's roles in ministry and public decision-making (Ademiluka, 2017; Uwaegbute, 2023). Similarly, religiously infused traditional laws strengthen and sustain socio-cultural practices, such as inheritance rules, bride price dynamics, and harsher penalties for women who violate gender norms (Mordi, 2019; Onaseso, 2025)

Views of Religious Scholars and Theological Positions on Gender Equality

Three theological positions structure contemporary debates in the church and family, and wider society: egalitarianism, complementarianism, and biblical patriarchy.

Egalitarianism

Egalitarian theologians emphasize that all are equal in Christ. They reference passages such as Galatians 3:28 and historical patterns of women's leadership in the early church to argue that the distinction between men and women should not lead to dominant or submissive roles in family or church leadership. They argue that restrictions on women result from misinterpretations (Stagg & Stagg, 1978; Fiorenza, 1983).

Complementarianism

Complementarians, on the other hand, argue that the creation of man before woman establishes his authority (headship) over her, and thus requires him to hold leadership positions in the church and the family (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:22-23). They maintain that while it is true that Galatians 3:28 affirms spiritual equality, it also upholds distinct, complementary roles for men and women: men to lead and provide, and women to support and nurture (Piper & Grudem, 1991;

Moo, 1991). They argue that this distinction preserves equal worth and dignity without eliminating role differences (Dever, 2006).

Biblical Patriarchy

This occupies a minority position in the debate and extends the complementarian logic by arguing that the male leadership role goes beyond the church and family into the wider civil society. According to Grudem (2004), biblical patriarchy represents a stricter interpretation of complementarian theology. It extends male authority beyond church and family contexts into political and civic life, interpreting scripture as prescribing male authority across all social spheres. Critics, especially feminist theologians, argue that biblical patriarchy institutionalizes gender inequality by elevating male authority to a divine norm (Fiorenza, 1983; Ruether, 1985).

Application of Frameworks to Nigerian Realities

Examining religious texts through the lenses of feminist and womanist theology reveals how culture shapes their interpretation and meaning. Feminist perspectives challenge interpretations that favour men and offer fresh ways to understand these writings. Womanist theology explores how gender connects with ethnicity, historical marginalization, and colonial heritage in Nigerian practice. These frameworks help explain why some churches promote women's education and other welfare programmes, and yet restrict women's leadership positions within church communities.

The Church's Dual Role: Welfare and Restriction

Nigerian churches operate welfare programmes and agencies (pastoral care, legal aid units, and development commissions) that assist women who have faced or are facing violence, poverty, and social exclusion. Catholic agencies such as the Justice, Development, and Peace Commission (JDPC) and various other denominational programmes have provided shelters, counselling, empowerment, and legal support to women (Justice, Development, and Peace Commission Onitsha, 2020; Caritas Nigeria, 2023; Ecumenical Commission for Empowerment, Environmental & Community Development, n.d.). Church documents, such as *Mulieris Dignitatem* (John Paul II, 1988), affirm the dignity of women.

However, the duality remains: churches provide services that improve women's welfare and empowerment, while there are still internal structures and practices that reflect societal gender biases. There remains the challenge of culturally reinforced Biblical interpretations and inconsistent implementation of gender equality teachings. For instance, Alawode (2024) reports that some male missionaries in Nigeria contend that the Bible endorses women to play supportive roles in the field and would not recommend female missionaries to take up frontier positions. They can serve alongside their husbands or male colleagues. Again, how churches handle abuse and gender-based violence can sometimes be inadequate or even discriminatory. This tends to rubbish the principle of equality that the church teaches. In this regard, Ezeh (2024) has lamented that in many patriarchal communities in southeastern Nigeria, gender inequality and injustice against women have continued to grow because church authorities are diplomatic or too afraid to speak out or act in such sensitive areas as women accused of adultery.

Discussion: Tensions and Ways Forward

Tension 1: High female labour participation versus low formal power

Despite the large number of women in Nigeria's workforce, few hold formal leadership roles in the economy and politics. This suggests that active participation in economic activities does not necessarily translate into institutional power or influence over decisions. To address this, both church and government policymakers should work to remove barriers in the formal sector, increase financial support for female workers, and strengthen laws that protect women in the workplace.

Tension 2: Education gaps and regional variation

National averages can mask the actual situation and how things vary across regions. In northern Nigeria, for instance, girls are more likely to struggle with going to school and have a higher rate of being out of school than girls in the southern part of the country. This problem is worsened by poverty and early marriage. Efforts by religious groups and government initiatives that focus on the affected areas are practical when they make education more affordable and communities safer for families.

Tension 3: Theological interpretation and institutional practice

How a church interprets scripture has real effects. Churches that adopt egalitarian theology are more likely to have female lay leaders in pastoral care and catechesis. When leadership is concentrated in men's hands, women often find themselves relegated to behind-the-scenes roles, taking informal or supporting positions, even in areas where they are more suited.

Policy and Ecclesial Recommendations

For churches:

1. Make straightforward policies on women's leadership roles. These policies must be grounded in scripture and pastoral considerations.
2. Promote training in gender theology for both existing and future church leaders, which should include insights from feminist and womanist scholars.
3. Create programmes that provide access to school for girls and skills acquisition for women, especially in the areas that are mostly affected. Studies show that such initiatives increase the likelihood of girls attending school (World Bank, 2023).

For government and civil society

4. Strengthen existing rules against discrimination, and make it easier for women to run for political offices, which can be achieved by boosting campaign finance support and training candidates. Evidence suggests that involvement in politics remains a significant challenge for many women (Nkereuwem, 2023).
5. Implement changes in the labour market that will help women get high-profile jobs in the formal sector and also extend social security benefits to them in line with the objectives of the World Bank gender strategy to provide opportunities for everyone (World Bank, 2023).

For researchers

6. Study local churches to see how they put theology into practice concerning gender roles, which also includes the study of seminary curricula and policies of the local churches.
7. Examine how faith-based educational and economic initiatives affect women's lives over time.

Conclusion

Christianity in Nigeria plays a dual role. On the one hand, it serves as a source of social services and moral guidance, working towards the improvement of the status and welfare of

women. On the other hand, it sustains old power structures and religious interpretations that restrict women's opportunities to advance, especially in leadership roles. Data indicate that there are still shortfalls in education, political representation, and formal economic power, despite the large number of women in the workforce. Feminist and womanist theories provide pathways to a clearer understanding of the situation and towards change and transformation. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) objectives among Nigerian Christians, there is a need for policies grounded in evidence, informed theological reflection, and institutional reforms that reflect authentic Christian teachings.

Implications

The research implies that religion remains crucial when advocating for equal rights for men and women across Nigeria. Because church leaders hold significant influence and have established networks, they can promote education for girls, assist women in gaining financial independence, or change perceptions of female leadership. Still, fully utilizing this opportunity requires rethinking traditional religious teachings and a genuine commitment from institutions to effect change.

Limitations

This study relies on secondary sources instead of new fieldwork. The synthesis is based on current global and national data up to 2025; however, changing population trends and political developments necessitate continuous updates.

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