

## ETHICAL ISSUES ON GENDER PREFERENCE AMONG CHRISTIAN COUPLES IN LAGOS ISLAND, LAGOS STATE, NIGERIA

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### ABSTRACT

The issue of gender preference has continued to be a major ethical and social issue that has influenced family life, the religious practice and gender relations in societies. Despite the availability of such existing studies on gender preference that are based on sociological and cultural approaches, there is little focus on the ethical nature of this approach between Christian couples in Nigeria. This paper will explore the ethical aspects of gender preference in Christian couples on the Lagos Island in terms of their awareness, interpretation of the biblical message and social and moral consequences thereof. Qualitative research design is adopted in the study, which involves a combination of biblical exegesis and in-depth interviews of ten purposely sampled Christian couples. Findings established that the awareness of the gender preference is high with a lot of the same being determined by culture and selective gender interpretation of the scripture. Although the biblical writings uphold the value of equality between men and women, gender bias can still exist because there exist the socio-cultural rules and patriarchal behavior. This paper finds that under cultural and social influence more than clear biblical prohibitions, gender preference in Christian couples is decided by factors affecting their marriages and suggests that contextual theological reflection and transitional preethical orientation in Christian societies.

**Keywords:** Biblical Injunctions, Christian Couple, Ethical Issues, Exegesis, Gender Preference.

## Introduction

Gender preference is also an important subject of both scholarly and popular interests, especially within the context of ethical, cultural, and religious discourse, as its consequences on the lives of families, social justice, and human dignity are dramatic. In most of the societies, there has been a history of favoritism towards a specific gender; in most of the cases, the male gender, which has been attributed to the inheritance system, continuity of a lineage, status, and economic benefits (Edwards and Mauthner, 1998; Payne, 2009; Sen, 2001). These preferences cannot be viewed only as personal options but they are embedded within the framework of socio-cultural organization that surrounds expectations towards marriage, reproduction, and gender roles, thus exerting influence on the family and the value of men and women of different generations in society. The African culture and extended family system have a strong influence on the gender preferences. The male children are perceived as members of a family lineage and even the family property, as compared to female children who might be considered as temporary members of the family because of the way they are married (Afolayan, 2011; Ohagwu et al., 2014). Such assumptions are at times supported by religion as certain interpretations of biblical teachings, supporting male superiority and female inferiority (Igwe and Akolokwu, 2015; Phiri, 2002). As a result, gender preference is rationalized both in the religious and the social world and is difficult to challenge even where it leads to the harmful effects. Nevertheless, Christianity upholds ethical values that facilitate love, justice and equality as well as the intrinsic value of human beings. The Bible validates the fact that both men and women are created equal before God in terms of spiritual worth and accountability of a person. Nonetheless, there is still gender favoritism among Christian couples and this presents an ethical conflict between beliefs and actions (Oduyoye, 2001; Mounce, 2000). Although the gender preference has been investigated in the context of demographic, population health, and sociology (i.e. with references to maternal health risks, population imbalance, and inequality) (Dey & Ramendra, 2009; Ohagwu et al., 2014; WHO, 2018), limited interests are placed on the ethical aspect of it in urban Nigerian Christian context due to the merging of the economic pressures, education, and cultural traditions. This paper evaluates ethical concerns on gender favoring in Christian couples within Lagos Island of Nigeria, with reference to the knowledge levels, understanding of the biblical teachings, and how these views translate to the matrimonial harmony and female welfare. The application of Christian ethics and socio-cultural analysis makes the study valuable as it adds to gender justice, religious responsibility, and ethical transformation debates in modern Nigerian families.

## Theoretical and Ethical Framework

This paper is based on Christian ethical theory and social constructionist approach to gender, which offer a supplementary approach to analyse gender preference among Christian couples. Some of the moral principles found in the Christian ethics include love (agape), justice, mutual respect and the natural dignity of all human beings. These values are based on the biblical teachings that recognize the creation of male and female as equal in the eyes of God (Genesis 1: 27, NIV). Modern Christian ethicists underline the importance of evaluating social practices based on the principles of equity, human flourishing, and inter-relation by recognizing ways to foster them in families and communities (Wells, 2020; Wright, 2021). It is based on this that gender preference brings about ethical issues when it compromises on fairness, encourages discrimination or goes against the Christian message of loving and caring for everyone. Simultaneously, social constructionism views gender as neither a pre-determined biological fate nor a pre-determined status, but rather a by-product of socialized norms, values, and expectations, which are conveyed

in the cultural, religious, and family institutions. The focus of recent scholarship is the fact that the cultures of preference towards either male or female children is often upheld by long-standing cultural discourse of lineage, inheritance, social status, and economic stability, rather than objective or theological needs (Connell, 2020; Kabeer, 2021). In the Christian environment, such cultural demands can be selectively reinforced via the religious interpretation, through which social norms can be disguised as the divine commands (Ademiluka, 2022; Phiri, 2019). This framework allows taking an analysis of gender preference as morality problem and socially constructed phenomenon using both the Christian ethical theory and social constructionist analysis. It enables the research to question the interaction of cultural activities, economic forces and religious expression to influence attitudes and behaviours in Christian couples. More to the point, it offers an ethical prism through which the need to question whether such practices are within the scope of the modern Christian teachings on equality, compassion, and justice (Oduyoye, 2020; Van der Walt, 2023). The integrated construct offers a foundation for understanding that, despite ethical concerns, gender preference in Christian families warrants careful theological analysis and can drive meaningful social change.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

This part covers the explanation/definition of the key variables of the paper, namely: ethics, gender, preference, Christian couple, and Lagos Island. The essence is to prepare a basis for the engagement of the various discourses of the paper.

#### **Ethics**

The concept of ethics is prominent across several disciplines. The word refers to moral principles that bring about certain behaviour. In general terminology, ethics is about what is right and wrong. According to Edwards & Mauthner (2002), ethics is a branch of philosophy that explores morality, considering how actions and decisions align with established values. Ethics furnishes us with a structure for understanding and assessing moral conduct.

Given the above, ethical issues revolve around conduct, actions and reactions, choices that a people, society or individual considers as appropriate or misconduct. (Scheyvens & Leslie, 2000). In every discipline, there are issues relating to ethics, what is good practice and bad practice. This is what guides humanity to do the right things and forego what is considered evil. It helps society to remain focused and not hurt itself. In every society, there are laid down rules or foundations which is meant to determine what is good or bad. The idea is to make individuals behave in different situations and circumstances. Actions, decisions must align with the moral standards of a particular community, family or society at large (Scheyvens & Leslie, 2000). It is important to note that ethics can differ depending on the location, culture, religion and gender. Gender is crucial to this study as it forms the crucial variable of this paper. Thus, ethical issues in gender-based studies look at the wrong and wrong behaviour, decisions, and preferences among genders.

#### **Gender**

Gender is a social creation that is derived by referring to the roles, behaviours, identities and expectations that societies impose on people in relation to sex differences that societies perceive. The modern gender studies also stress that instead of being biologically determined, gender is socially constructed through socialization, culture, religion, and institutional practices (Connell and Pearse, 2020; UN Women, 2022). These structures have the effects of shaping the way people perceive themselves and ways they are treated in the families and societies. Gender is

a social role, identity and expression. The issue of gender identity is associated with perception and definition of the person, whereas gender expression represents external manifestations like appearance, behaviour and communication (Butler, 2021). Social roles, however, dictate what is acceptable between men and women in particular cultural understanding, such as what is to be expected in terms of leadership, care giving, inheritance, and child bearing. According to the family system, the gender norms are transposed into the tradition and religion, and they are aligned in many African countries, such as Nigeria (Aina and Olayode, 2020; Ademiluka, 2022). Such norms tend to privilege masculinity and male authority influence the attitudes to childbearing and gender preference. The social construction of gender is vital to this study because it will be possible to observe critically the way Christian couples internalize and replicate gender expectations that can be inconsistent with ethical ideals such as equality and respect towards each other.

### **Preference**

Preference is described as the propensity of an individual or a group towards one thing over another based on personal ideology, the culture of a particular group and surroundings, economic considerabilities and community anticipations. Tastes are not neutral and are socially constructed and supported by family mechanisms, social norms, and institutionalized ideologies (Kabeer, 2021; Archak and Romy, 2019). Preferences in the gender context just tend to be the desire of children of a certain gender usually males thanks to the perceived advantages of inheritance, continuity of lineage, social status and economic stability. Gender preference becomes a moral one when it gives rise to discriminatory feelings or behaviours those that demean a religion and favour another. The continued selection has an impact on the reproductive choices, parental investment, and family ties, causing emotional and psychological strain among women (Bongaarts, 2020). These are not merely economic oriented preferences that are made and sustained by cultural discourses which perpetrates inequality (Ademola & Adebayo, 2023). The fact that preference is socially constructed is essential in the assessment of its moral consequences and even in the case of educated and religious people.

### **Christian Couples**

Christian couples, who are married or in the courtship phase of marriage, and declare themselves as Christianity as their guide towards family and personal living constituted this research. They affirm such conceptual truths as a belief in Christ, moral responsibility, and the authority of Scripture in the formation of behavior and relations (Wright, 2021). Marriage is regarded as a sacred covenant which is based on love, submission to one another, and joint accountability. Nevertheless, the social and cultural pressures impact Christian married couples; gender-related and family-related attitudes tend to be based on biblical instructions in combination with the dogmas of the different churches as well as the cultural standards (Van der Walt, 2023). Traditional beliefs in African societies regarding masculinity and femininity, as well as childbearing, collide with the religious beliefs and the views on the gender roles and gender preferences emerge. Examining Christian couples would shed light on how religion-based values are interplayed with socio-cultural forces, which would allow reflecting on whether their behaviors can be related to Christian postulates of equality, love, and justice.

### **Lagos Island**

Lagos Island is the oldest and most notable urban centre in Lagos State in Nigeria and it is a historical, commercial and administrative centre. It is that which is densely populated, active in

the economic life and with various religious and cultural establishments. Several churches, faith-based organisations, and educated professionals are present in the area, which predetermines the possibility of considering the ethical and religious issue there (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). Being an urban environment, Lagos Island represents the process of bringing the old determinants together in touch with contemporary factors like education, globalization, and access to gender-equality discourses. According to research, urban Christians communities usually exhibit a high level of awareness of ethical and gender issues, and still may have culturally engrained communities like gender preference (Akanle & Adejare, 2021; Okeke, 2024). The case of the Christian couples who study on the Lagos Island offers an idea about the continuation of the gender preference even among rather educated and economic active groups of people. The site presents a contextual uniqueness in the process of comprehending the co-existence and even clash of the ideals of the ethics, religious faiths, and socio-cultural pressures. Therefore, Lagos Island is an appropriate place to study ethical aspect of gender preference in marriage among Christian couples in the modern Nigerian culture.

### **Methodology**

The research design used in this study was the qualitative research design based on the integration between biblical exegesis and in-depth interviews with the objective of understanding the ethical concerns about gender preference among Christian couples in Lagos Island, Nigeria. The sample included ten Christian couples who were selected purposely according to their marital history and high involvement in church activities. This convenience sample was necessary to guarantee that those sampled had personal experience of faith-based and family-specific gender expectations, and would give them valuable information about faith and spirituality interplay with morals and social standards (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Flick, 2020). The semi-structured interviews were used to gather data where people were free to discuss their experiences and views on the issue of gender preference in marriage and areas related to the church. The transcription was done and thematic analysis was done to analyse the data, used to determine patterns and important themes in the narratives of the participants (Braun and Clarke, 2021). In order to establish the biblical part, contextual and hermeneutical approaches were used to read scripture without having to read literally and placing texts in the context of their historical, cultural, and theological realities (Moute, 2000; Phiri, 2019). Research ethics such as informed consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality were strictly adhered to such that their rights and privacy of participants were safeguarded. The integrated methodology offered both a more comprehensive viewpoint on gender preference, which incorporated religious, ethical, and social aspects in the Nigerian Christian setting (Van der Walt, 2023; Wright, 2021).

### **The Level of Awareness of Gender Preference among Christian Couples in Lagos Island**

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the awareness of gender preference among couples in Lagos Island. The essence of knowing the level of gender awareness is clarity, such that in discussing the subject matter, one can connect with the realities of the location of study. If, at the end of the day, the level of awareness is low, it could affect the discussion. Given the above, Christian couple C, during an In-depth Interview, stated thus:

In terms of awareness about gender issues, on the island, it is obvious that people have good knowledge of gender preference and are practising it in churches.

Preference in this context has to do with a fancy for a particular gender that leads to selection. Therefore, it is not out of place to say that awareness about gender

preference is high, especially among couples (*In-depth-Interview, Lagos Island, 2025*).

In addition to the above statement, Couple G observes thus:

Awareness about gender preference is high among Christian couples on the island. The reason is that it has been debated many times in many churches around the vicinity. And, also that many cases where such a trend has caused problems, leading to a Christian solution. Away from the Christian perspective now, the increasing feminist activities around the world have further emboldened the issue of gender and sexism. Thus, we can say that the awareness is as high as 70% on the island (*In-depth-Interview, Lagos Island, 2025*).

Again, a couple of H made a statement that:

It is noteworthy to observe that a good number of couples on the island must have heard of, or experienced gender preference at one point or the other. A good number of them have discussed it before getting married in anticipation of what to expect. On the whole, society has made it seem as though masculinity is a great achievement. This has reverberated in the minds of women to the point that they see feminine nature as a second fiddle, especially as the Bible has admonished that women are the weaker vessels (*In-depth-Interview, Lagos Island, 2025*).

### **Challenges of Gender Preference**

Answering questions on the challenges of gender preference, couple A, during the in-depth interview stated thus:

The issue of gender is known all over the world. It has crept into the church and has equally affected relationships in the church, even beyond scriptural injunctions. The church prefers to recognise men more than women in certain aspects of church activities, especially leadership. Although women are assigned roles in the church but it is imperative to note that men are often preferred over women in the aspect of leadership (*In-depth-Interview, Lagos Island, 2025*).

The above statement justifies the fact that awareness about gender preference is high among couples in Lagos Island. It also buttresses the point that men are preferred over women in certain circumstances in the church, especially in respect of leadership.

It affects the church in the sense that men take most of the leadership positions, creating a gender imbalance and deemphasising collective focus. Over time, women come to believe that they cannot hold top positions in the church or the body of Christ. Even when they stumble on one, their experience is usually to confirm that women are weaker vessels in actuality (*In-depth-Interview, Lagos Island, 2025*).

### **Biblical Injunctions on Gender Preference,**

There is no biblical texts that explicitly supports gender preference but only the equal value and dignity of men and women in the creation of God. The act of creation highlights the story of male and female having been created in the likeness of God (Genesis 1:27, NIV) which has placed a value of equality at its foundation. This equality is also supported with Genesis 1:28 as both genders are co-guided with the duty of taking care of the creation which implies that they have one authority and one purpose. Likewise, according to 1 Peter 3:7, husbands and wives are called as co-heirs of the grace of life, which shows an idea of spiritual equality and their equal contribution

to the redemptive process in terms of participation. Even with these affirmations, some Christian traditions have used some of the passages in the bible to support male headship especially Ephesians 5:22-33 and 1 Timothy 2: 11-14. The texts have been widely used to explain the need to have hierarchical gender roles in marriage and leadership in churches. Nevertheless, experts hold that those passages are not to be understood according to their eternal ethical dictums, but according to their historical, cultural and social-religious context (Mounce, 2000). Taken out of context and placed in their full communication with biblical bows like love, justice and mutual submission, these readings can be put into service of justifying patriarchal systems. According to Igwe and Akolokwu (2015), certain and literal explanations of scripture often support the status quo in terms of culture, thus perpetuating gender preference in the Christian circles.

To corroborate the above statement, Couple G succinctly said that:

Most families have had a crisis because of wives who have failed in this obligation. Submission is pertinent for a good relationship. The moment there is no submission, their house cannot experience peace. The man is naturally wired to be the head of the family as much as Christ is the head of the church. Wives must understand these biblical laws without contrary views. It is only when there is submission that the husband can truly love the wife (*In-depth-Interview, Lagos Island, 2025*).

### **Ethical Issues on Gender Preference and Implications**

There are serious ethical consequences of gender preference in terms of family life and on a greater social relation. In a matrimonial setting where a specific gender especially, the male children are favored highly, this has most times resulted in emotional stress, marital instability, and tension. Research has established that the son preference may promote unsafe sex, back-to-back pregnancy, rise in cases of abortion, and systematic devaluation of female children (Ohagwu et al., 2014). Not only do these outcomes threaten the physical and psychological health of women, but they also support the gender inequality process both in families and society. Morally, as a Christian, these practices mirror the fundamental principles of justice, love and respect and dignity of all human beings (Payne, 2009). The results of the research also show that the gender preference in the Christian couples is mostly created socially and maintained by the cultural conventions and family values instead of the very clear biblical principles. This fact brings up serious ethical issues regarding the isolation of religious authority to justify discriminative behaviour that deaminates equality, mutual respect and Christian concept of love in the marital and family life.

On the implication of gender preference among Christian couples in Lagos Island, an In-depth Interview with a Christian couple E stated thus:

The issue of gender preference has generated several debates and equally has severe implications on the harmony of many homes. I know of a couple that had three girls, and they were looking for a male child. The absence of a male child brought about pressure from extended families that almost broke the marriage, even though they are all Christian (*In-depth-Interview, Lagos Island, 2025*).

From the statement above, becoming a Christian will make an individual automatically subscribe to or obey the doctrines and canons of Christ Jesus. Other factors contribute to pressuring a Christian to have a gender preference. Such factors include: economy, culture, social pressure, traditions and family politics. Unconsciously, the environment in which an individual lives can mount pressure to the point of submission (Igwe & Akolokwu, 2015). The African setting carries several socio-cultural dynamics that people must comply with. The Yoruba extraction is a good

illustration of this scenario. In this clime, marriage is not only between the couple but with the extended families as well.

Furthermore, Couple F observed that:

A preference for a boy child has led to unwanted pregnancies. A case in Lagos Island is fresh in our minds. A couple with five female children kept trying to get a son. Once they get the doctor's confirmation of the sex of the pregnancy, they go for an abortion. That trend continued until they were advised not to take such steps again for the health of the woman (*In-depth-Interview, Lagos Island, 2025*).

This is one case, too many. The craze to have a male child can be severe to the point of infuriation. An increase in abortion rates can be attributed to the issue. The culture of having a child to take over the inheritance of a father has also contributed immensely to the sustenance of gender preference. In addition, most Christian families have had a second thought about giving proper education to their female children because they feel that a girl child will be married off, losing the family name, but a male child carries the name of the family forever. However, this cultural trend has greatly changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because of increased awareness, enlightenment and education.

It was further revealed by Couple J that:

This continuous enforcement of gender preference is uncalled for, especially in an era where that tradition is gradually falling out of fashion. Who cares about whether a child is male or female? Every sex comes from God and cannot be determined by couples. I think Christians could reject these teachings or cultural standards because it is not biblical and not worthy of emulation or attention (*In-depth-Interview, Lagos Island, 2025*).

From the statement above, it is deducible that the whole idea of gender preference in the church is not contributing to its growth, unity and stability. It is public knowledge that where there is no stability, unity of purpose and love, the tendency to achieve growth and development can be very slim.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The research examined indicated a strong dominance of the understanding of the gender preference among the Christian couples in Lagos Island with an overwhelming number accepting it as a social and marriage problem. Male couples said that they talked about gender preference during church programmes and in their families which shows that the issues are being openly discussed in faith communities (Mordi & Eze, 2021; Nwankwo, 2023). Nonetheless, awareness was not inherently associated with a refusal to prefer gender because there were those who understood that they were culturally inclined in favour of male children and perpetuated this anti-feminist behaviour despite the knowledge (Onwudiwe, 2022; Adeyemi and Omotoso, 2024). There were sophisticated interpretations of biblical texts: some stressed on the sense of equal dignity of both sexes (Genesis 1: 27; 1 3: 7) in line with egalitarian scholarship (Okorie, 2021; 2023), others appealed to such texts as Ephesians 5 and 1 Timothy 2 as defenses of the men (Amadi, 2022; 2023). Women also had to endure emotional strain, marital stress and reproductive pressure caused by gender preference (Ugwumadu and Ibikunle, 2021; WHO, 2022). Patriarchal norms could be strengthened through socio-cultural pressures and, at times, in church settings (Aina and Eze, 2020; Akande, 2022; Nnamdi and Okeke, 2024). Altogether, both religion and culture build ethical attitudes to gender simultaneously, which introduces the disparity between Christian principles of equality and its actual implementation (Adewale and Olaniyan, 2021; Oloruntoba, 2023).

## Conclusion

This research shows that gender preference in Christian couples in Lagos Island is still common since it is highly aware and religiously devotees. Despite the fact that Christian ethics has also made it clear that God treats people of both genders equally and as people of equal dignity, the tendencies toward gender preference remain strong due to the strong socio-cultural pressures and economic factors as well as selective bible interpretation. These influences usually prevail over the traditional Christian values of justice, love and mutual respect thus influencing the expectations of a marriage, as well as family relationships. The existence of gender preference shows how unattainable the religious ideals and the matters of religion being implemented within Christian communities are. This difficulty is more than a matter that needs to be evaluated by doctrinal instruction; it involves the application of contextual theology, which critically interprets scripture, ethical reorientation, which challenges discriminatory cultural conventions and the conscious use of pastoral interventions which aids couples to make informed and fair choices. Gender equity among Christian families is thus not only necessary to family harmony and emotional wellbeing, but also to maturing into spirituality, communal inclusiveness, and in social justice in the broader society.

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