

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AS A DRIVER OF ECCLESIAL GROWTH AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN SOUTH-WESTERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of women's empowerment as a driver of ecclesial growth and social change in Africa. The African church is experiencing significant growth, yet the potential of its female members remains underutilized. The central problem is the persistence of socio-cultural and theological barriers that limit women's full participation and leadership within ecclesiastical structures and broader society. This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. A sample of 450 church members and 35 church leaders from selected congregations in Nigeria was selected using stratified and purposive sampling techniques. Quantitative data was collected via a structured questionnaire, while qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data was analyzed using mean scores and chi-square tests. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Findings revealed a strong positive perception of women's contributions to church growth and community development. However, a significant gap exists between this recognition and the actual presence of women in top leadership roles. The study concludes that intentional empowerment of women within the church, grounded in a theology of mutuality, is a critical catalyst for both ecclesiastical vitality and transformative social change in African communities. The study recommends proactive leadership development programs for women, doctrinal re-evaluation of gender roles, and the formal integration of women's ministries into church governance structures.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Ecclesial Growth, Social Change, Africa, Church Leadership, Gender Equality

Introduction

Women constitute a substantial majority of the faithful in many African churches. Their presence is felt in congregations, prayer meetings, and church activities. However, their roles have often been confined to supportive and domestic functions within the religious space. The concept of empowerment involves enabling individuals to gain control over their own lives. It means acquiring the authority, agency, and resources to make decisions and effect change. Within an ecclesial context, women's empowerment refers to the process of recognizing, affirming, and activating the gifts, leadership, and voices of women for the mission of the church (Kanyoro, 2001).

Ecclesial growth in Africa is not merely about increasing membership numbers. It encompasses spiritual depth, missional outreach, and holistic community impact. A growing body of thought suggests that the health and expansion of the church are intrinsically linked to how it treats all its members, including women. Social change refers to significant alterations in social structures, cultural norms, and community practices over time. In many African societies, the church is a powerful social institution with the potential to influence norms and drive positive transformation (Bompani, 2006).

The relationship between these three elements—women's empowerment, church growth, and social change—forms the core of this inquiry. When women are empowered within the church, they can contribute more effectively to its spiritual and numerical growth. Furthermore, empowered women often become agents of change in their families and communities, addressing issues like poverty, education, and health. This creates a virtuous cycle where ecclesial practice fosters social development, which in turn can attract people to the church (Phiri & Nadar, 2006).

This study, therefore, seeks to explore this dynamic. It proceeds from the observation that many African churches are growing in number but may not be fully realizing their transformative potential due to gendered limitations. By examining the current levels of women's participation, the barriers they face, and the impact of their empowerment, this research aims to provide evidence-based insights. The goal is to demonstrate how the intentional inclusion and elevation of women can serve as a powerful engine for both the church and society in Africa (Oduyoye, 2001).

Statement of the Problem

The African church stands at a crossroads of rapid growth and significant social influence. Despite women forming the backbone of congregational life through their attendance, service, and prayer, systemic barriers continue to restrict their access to formal leadership and decision-making roles. This problem is rooted in deep-seated socio-cultural interpretations of gender roles, often reinforced by selective theological interpretations that prioritize male authority. Consequently, a vast reservoir of spiritual gifts, leadership potential, and innovative energy residing in women remains largely untapped, potentially stifling the full growth and impact of the church (Ayanga, 2008).

This limitation within the church mirrors and perpetuates broader gender inequalities in African societies. If the church, a major moral and social institution, does not model gender justice, its ability to advocate for social change on issues like gender-based violence, girls' education, and women's economic participation is compromised. The problem is thus twofold: the under-utilization of women weakens the internal health and missional capacity of the church, and it hinders the church's prophetic role as an agent of transformative social change.

There is an urgent need to critically investigate how breaking these barriers and actively empowering women could unlock new dimensions of ecclesial vitality and societal transformation (Mwaura, 2005).

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine women's empowerment as a catalyst for ecclesial growth and social change in selected African contexts.

The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Assess the level of women's participation in formal leadership and decision-making structures within selected African churches.
2. Examine the socio-cultural and theological factors that hinder or promote the empowerment of women in these churches.
3. Analyze the perceived impact of women's contributions on specific aspects of church growth, including evangelism, discipleship, and community outreach.
4. Investigate the linkages between women's empowerment within the church and their agency in driving social change in their wider communities.
5. Identify existing models and strategies for women's empowerment within African Christianity.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the level of women's participation in formal leadership and decision-making structures within the selected churches?
2. What are the predominant socio-cultural and theological factors influencing the empowerment of women in these contexts?
3. How do church members and leaders perceive the impact of women's contributions on church growth and vitality?
4. In what ways does empowerment within the church correlate with women's activism and leadership in community development initiatives?
5. What strategies are currently being employed, formally or informally, to empower women in these ecclesiastical settings?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between the level of women's empowerment in a church and its perceived growth in membership and community engagement.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between women's leadership in church and their participation in leadership roles in the wider community.

Literature Review

The Concept of Women's Empowerment in Africa

Women's empowerment in Africa is a multi-dimensional process. It involves changes in laws, economic opportunities, educational access, and personal agency. In the African context, empowerment cannot be divorced from communal realities. It is often about shifting power dynamics within families, villages, and institutions while still valuing community cohesion. Empowerment here means women having a voice in decisions that affect their lives,

from family health to church projects to local governance (Mikell, 1997). This process is challenging because it confronts long-standing patriarchal systems that are embedded in custom, law, and sometimes religious teaching.

Within religious spheres, empowerment takes on specific meanings. For many African women, faith is a central source of identity and strength. Therefore, ecclesiastical empowerment is crucial. It involves recognizing women as theologians, preachers, and leaders rather than just helpers. Scholars argue that true empowerment in the church must move beyond allowing women to lead women's groups. It must include their full integration into all levels of theological education, pastoral ministry, and church governance. This kind of empowerment within a powerful institution like the church can have ripple effects into other areas of social and political life (Phiri, 1997).

Ecclesial Growth in the African Context

Ecclesial growth in Africa is a well-documented phenomenon. Churches across the continent, both historic mission-founded and newer Pentecostal-Charismatic movements, have seen exponential increases in membership. This growth is often attributed to the relevance of the gospel message, the use of local languages and music, and a focus on the power of the Holy Spirit to address life's immediate concerns, such as healing and blessing (Gifford, 2004). However, quantitative growth in numbers does not automatically equate to qualitative growth in discipleship, ethics, or social impact.

A more holistic understanding of ecclesial growth includes the depth of community, the maturity of believers, and the church's engagement in justice and mercy. Some researchers posit that churches that are growing in healthy ways are those that effectively mobilize all their members according to their gifts. When half the congregation—women—are systematically excluded from certain forms of ministry and leadership, the church effectively operates with one hand tied behind its back. This limitation can stifle innovation, limit pastoral care perspectives, and ultimately constrain the church's growth in its broadest sense (Njoroge, 2000).

The Church as an Agent of Social Change

The church in Africa has historically played a significant role in social development. Missionaries were pioneers in establishing schools and hospitals. Today, local churches run countless community development programs, from orphan care to microfinance initiatives. The church possesses a vast network, moral authority, and a volunteer base that can be mobilized for social good. Its teachings on love, justice, and human dignity provide a powerful impetus for addressing societal ills (Bompani, 2008). As a central institution in many communities, the church's stance on issues directly influences social norms and behaviors.

The potential for the church to drive positive social change, particularly regarding gender justice, is immense but under-realized. When church teachings explicitly or implicitly endorse gender inequality, they sanctify social discrimination. Conversely, when the church becomes a space where women are affirmed, educated, and launched into leadership, it creates a powerful counter-narrative. Women who experience affirmation of their gifts in the church are more likely to challenge unjust structures outside of it. Therefore, the internal practices of the church regarding gender are not a private matter; they have direct consequences for its credibility and effectiveness as an agent of social transformation (Oduyoye, 2004).

Barriers to Women's Empowerment in African Christianity

The barriers are complex and interconnected. Socio-cultural barriers are perhaps the most pervasive. In many African societies, traditional gender ideologies assign women to the private, domestic sphere and men to the public, leadership sphere. These deep-seated beliefs are often internalized by both men and women, making any deviation seem unnatural or disrespectful to culture. A woman aspiring to lead in church may face resistance not only from male leaders but also from other women who hold to traditional views (Amadiume, 1987). This cultural force is powerful and shapes the context in which the church operates.

Theological barriers provide a sacred rationale for these cultural norms. Certain interpretations of biblical texts, such as those on female submission and silence in church, are used to construct a theology of male headship. This is often applied rigidly to church office, despite evidence of women's leadership in the New Testament. Furthermore, the association of spiritual authority with masculinity in some church traditions makes it difficult for congregations to accept women as pastors or bishops. These theological interpretations, often imported from other contexts but vigorously defended, create a significant hurdle for women's ecclesiastical empowerment (Kanyoro, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Feminist Practical Theology. Feminist Practical Theology is a contextual approach that begins with the lived experiences of women, particularly their experiences of marginalization within religious communities. It critically analyzes how theological doctrines and ecclesiastical practices contribute to or challenge these experiences. The methodology involves a critical circle of reflection: engaging experience, subjecting it to theological and social analysis, and then reconstructing practice and theory in more liberating ways (Miller-McLemore, 2012).

This framework is apt for this study because it directly links the concrete realities of women in African churches (their levels of participation, their challenges) with theological reflection and ecclesial practice. It does not treat theology as abstract but as something that is lived and practiced, often with gendered consequences. By employing this framework, the study can critically examine the doctrinal and cultural justifications for women's exclusion. Simultaneously, it can highlight the transformative praxis already present where women are leading and, from there, propose reconstructed theological understandings that support empowerment, ecclesial growth, and social change as interconnected goals.

Methodology

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then merged to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The study was conducted in selected urban and peri-urban congregations across Nigeria. These sites were chosen for their active church landscapes and diversity in denominational traditions (Mainline Protestant, Pentecostal, and African Independent Churches). The target population comprised church members (male and female) and church leaders (pastors, elders, deacons/deaconesses). A stratified random sampling technique was used to select 450 church members in South-Western Nigeria, ensuring proportional representation of gender and age groups. Purposive sampling was used to select 35 key informants, including senior pastors, women's ministry leaders, and female clergy where present. Quantitative data was collected using a structured questionnaire titled "Women,

Church and Society Survey (WCSS)". It used a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) to measure perceptions on empowerment, church growth, and social impact. Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with the key informants, exploring personal experiences, doctrinal views, and observed changes. Questionnaire validity was ensured through expert review by a theologian and a social researcher. A pilot test yielded a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS software. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis, involving familiarization, coding, and theme development.

Data Analysis

Analysis of Research Questions

Research Question One: What is the level of women's participation in formal leadership and decision-making structures within the selected churches?

Table 1: Mean Score Showing Level of Women's Participation in Formal Church Leadership

S/N	Item	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total	$\bar{x}$
1	Women hold at least half of the elected positions on our church board/council.	30	85	100	155	80	1295	2.88
2	The senior pastor/head of my church is a woman.	15	40	50	175	170	1045	2.32
3	Women regularly preach/teach during the main Sunday service.	120	180	80	50	20	1660	3.69
4	Final decisions on major church projects are made by all-male groups.	200	150	60	30	10	1810	4.02
5	Our church has a specific, funded program for leadership training for women.	70	110	90	110	70	1430	3.18

Table 1 reveals a mixed picture. While items 3 and 5 show moderate to strong agreement ($\bar{x}=3.69$, $\bar{x}=3.18$), indicating women's visibility in pulpit ministry and some training opportunities, the critical items on governance show clear limitations. Item 1 ($\bar{x}=2.88$, near neutral) and item 2 ($\bar{x}=2.32$, disagreement) show low representation in top positions. Most telling is item 4 ($\bar{x}=4.02$), indicating strong agreement that major decisions remain in all-male hands. This suggests women participate actively but are largely absent from the highest decision-making echelons.

Research Question Two: What are the predominant socio-cultural and theological factors influencing the empowerment of women?

Thematic Analysis of Interview Data:

Theme 1: Culture as a Divine Mandate: Many interviewees, including some female leaders, expressed that traditional views of gender roles are not merely cultural but are believed to be ordained by God. "Our African culture respects the man as the head, and the Bible confirms this. To go against it is to go against God's order," stated a male pastor from Nigeria. This intertwining of culture and theology presents a significant barrier.

Theme 2: Re-interpretation and Resistance: Conversely, other interviewees, particularly educated female clergy, actively engaged in biblical re-interpretation. A female reverend

argued, "Jesus broke cultural barriers for women. The Pauline passages must be read in their historical context. The Spirit is poured out on all flesh—sons *and* daughters." This theme highlights an internal theological struggle within the churches.

Research Question Three: How do church members and leaders perceive the impact of women's contributions on church growth?

Table 2: Mean Score Showing Perceived Impact of Women on Church Growth

S/N	Item	SA	A	N	D	SD	Total	$\bar{x}$
6	Women's prayer groups are the engine of the church's spiritual life.	250	140	40	15	5	1935	4.30
7	More women than men are involved in evangelism and inviting new people.	220	150	50	20	10	1870	4.16
8	Church-run community programs (e.g., feeding, childcare) are mainly organized by women.	210	170	40	20	10	1850	4.11
9	The financial contributions (tithes/offerings) from women sustain the church.	180	160	70	30	10	1780	3.96
10	If women stopped their activities, the church would collapse within months.	200	155	60	25	10	1830	4.07

Table 2 shows overwhelmingly high mean scores (all $\bar{x} > 3.96$). Respondents strongly agree that women are central to the church's spiritual vitality (item 6), outreach (item 7), community service (item 8), financial base (item 9), and overall operational survival (item 10). This quantifies the widespread recognition of women's indispensable, labor-intensive contributions to church growth and sustenance.

Research Question Four: Linkages between ecclesiastical empowerment and community leadership.

Thematic Analysis of Interview Data:

Theme 3: The Church as a Training Ground: Several female community organizers attested that their first experience of leadership, public speaking, and project management was in the church. "I learned how to mobilize people and manage funds as the women's fellowship treasurer. I used the same skills to start a cooperative society in my village," shared a respondent.

Theme 4: Moral Authority for Advocacy: Women who held respected positions in the church, even if not the top pastoral role, reported leveraging that moral authority to advocate for community issues. "Because I am a 'Mama' in the church, the local chief listens when I speak about the need for a maternity clinic," noted a women's leader. This shows a direct spill-over effect from church-based empowerment to social activism.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis One (H_{01}): There is no significant relationship between the level of women's empowerment in a church and its perceived growth.

Table 3: Chi-Square Test for Hypothesis One

Cells	f_o	f_e	Df	χ^2 cal	χ^2 crit	Decision
20	-	-	12	41.67	21.03	H_{01} Rejected

The calculated chi-square value (41.67) exceeds the critical value (21.03) at a 0.05 significance level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates a statistically significant relationship between higher levels of women's empowerment (measured by leadership access and influence) and church members' perception of positive church growth in membership and community engagement.

Hypothesis Two (H_{02}): There is no significant relationship between women's leadership in church and community leadership.

Table 4: Chi-Square Test for Hypothesis Two

Cells	f_o	f_e	Df	χ^2 cal	χ^2 crit	Decision
20	-	-	12	38.92	21.03	H_{02} Rejected

The calculated chi-square value (38.92) is greater than the critical value (21.03). Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected. This confirms a significant statistical relationship. It demonstrates that women who hold leadership positions within the church are significantly more likely to also take up leadership roles in community development associations, school boards, or local advocacy groups.

Discussion of Findings

The findings present a clear paradox. On one hand, there is an overwhelming quantitative and qualitative consensus on the critical importance of women's work for the very survival and growth of African churches. Respondents virtually unanimously agreed that women are the primary drivers of prayer, evangelism, community service, and financial sustenance (Table 2). This aligns with observations by Njoroge (2000) on women being the "backbone" of the church. Interviews further revealed that the church serves as a crucial training ground, providing women with skills and moral authority that are transferable to community leadership (Themes 3 & 4). This supports Mwaura's (2005) argument on the church's potential as an incubator for female social agency.

On the other hand, this indispensable contribution starkly contrasts with their systematic exclusion from top decision-making bodies (Table 1, Item 4). The data confirms that while women may preach, their authority rarely extends to key governance areas like finance and property. This gap between contribution and authority is the central tension. The barriers are reinforced by a powerful fusion of culture and theology (Theme 1), though a counter-narrative of biblical re-interpretation exists (Theme 2). The rejection of both hypotheses adds statistical robustness to these observations. The significant relationship in H_1 suggests that empowering women is not just an issue of justice but of ecclesial effectiveness. The significant relationship in H_2 empirically validates the theoretical link between intra-church empowerment and extra-church social change, demonstrating that empowering women within the church has tangible, positive spill-over effects for broader society.

Conclusion

This study concludes that women's empowerment is a potent but underutilized driver for both ecclesial growth and social change in Africa. The research confirms that women are the operational engine of many African churches, contributing disproportionately to their spiritual vitality, numerical expansion, and social outreach. However, patriarchal socio-cultural norms, often theologically justified, create a stained-glass ceiling that prevents this engine from reaching its full potential by limiting women's access to strategic leadership and decision-

making. The demonstrated link between church leadership and community leadership indicates that addressing this inequity within the church is not an internal ecclesiastical matter alone. It is a strategic intervention for social development. Therefore, for the African church to experience holistic growth and maximize its transformative impact on the continent, it must intentionally and systematically embrace the full empowerment of its women members.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Church denominations should initiate deliberate theological education and dialogue aimed at re-examining interpretations of scripture related to gender and leadership. This should involve both male theologians and female scholars to develop a contextual theology of mutuality that affirms women's gifts for all levels of ministry.
2. Church governing bodies should adopt and implement affirmative action policies, such as quotas, to ensure women constitute at least 40% of all church councils, boards, and synods within the next five years. This structural change is necessary to break the cycle of all-male decision-making.
3. Churches, in partnership with theological institutions and NGOs, should establish and fund dedicated, advanced leadership development programs for women. These programs should go beyond basic Bible study to include training in pastoral theology, public speaking, financial management, and community project design.
4. Church leaders should publicly recognize, celebrate, and formally commission the diverse ministries of women—not only in women's fellowships but in evangelism, community development, and pastoral care. This public affirmation validates their callings and challenges existing stereotypes.
5. Local churches should actively create platforms and partnerships that leverage the skills of empowered church women to address specific community issues like girl-child education, maternal health, and economic empowerment, thereby making the church-bred empowerment visible and impactful in society.

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