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Faith, Gender, and Social Change: A Theological and Sociological Review of Women in Society and the Church

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Abstract

Women are active in Nigerian church life, yet little is known about how they experience and respond to overlapping religious and social expectations. Existing literature often treats biblical interpretation, women's rights and gender inequality separately, giving less attention to how doctrine, custom and social change together shape women's place in the church. This study examined these dynamics in the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC), guided by Feminist Theology, which critiques androcentric interpretation and recovers the tradition's affirmation of women's dignity, equality and agency. The study had four objectives: to examine the influence of theological teachings and religious traditions on women's roles and status in the church; to analyse gender constructions and societal expectations surrounding women's participation in religious activities; to assess the influence of social change on women's inclusion in leadership within the church and society; and to describe the contemporary realities of women in the church. A qualitative design was adopted. Twenty participants, comprising women pastors, deaconesses, fellowship leaders and male pastors drawn from Pentecostal and Protestant churches, were selected through purposive and snowball sampling and interviewed in depth. Responses were analysed thematically, with themes retained where participants' accounts converged. The findings point to a persistent gap between participation, recognition, authority and access to leadership, shaped by the interaction of theological interpretation, cultural custom and social change. The study recommends that the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and its member denominations adopt written bylaws opening deaconess, fellowship and council roles to appointed women leaders; and NGOs such as Women Aid Collective (WACOL) run yearly mentorship and leadership-training programmes for women; and that faith-based organisations track, publish and review women's leadership representation annually to ensure accountability.

Keywords: Faith, Social Change, Gender, Church, Women, Society.

Introduction

The relationship between faith, gender, and social change is now an important topic in both theology and sociology. As societies continue to face questions about inequality, inclusion, and human dignity, the place of women in religious and social institutions remains a key area of academic study. Women have long made major contributions to the spiritual, social, economic, and cultural growth of their communities. However, their access to leadership

and decision-making roles has often been limited by social customs, institutional practices, and certain readings of religious teaching (United Nations Women, 2024).

In the Christian tradition, the dignity of women rests on the biblical teaching that all people, male and female, are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27). Women form a large part of church membership in Nigeria and contribute widely through worship, teaching, evangelism, welfare work, and community projects, yet their standing in many churches remains shaped by inherited theological teaching and custom. Olajide and Oderinde (2024) found that in the Evangelical Church Winning All, women's numbers, giving, and organising work were central to the denomination's early growth, but their leadership stayed confined to women's groups and children's church, with ordination and higher offices largely closed to them.

A similar pattern appears in Idjesa and Ottuh's (2025) study of the Sapele Baptist Association in Delta State, which found a clear gap between the number of women in congregations and the number recognised as pastors, tied partly to church policy and partly to fixed assumptions about who can lead. Even where women are visibly active, such as in church music, Odusanya *et al*. (2025) found that women choral conductors in southwestern Nigeria still face resistance rooted in gender and tradition despite their skill. Such limits are often defended through selective reading of scripture, even though, as Obiefuna and Miller (2023) note, other passages are read as supporting women's leadership. At the same time, Nigerian women have gained ground in education, employment, and public life generally, based on national data showing improved labour force participation and financial inclusion between 2022 and 2025, though political representation has stayed low. This contrast, rising participation elsewhere against continued limits in church leadership, raises questions about how far theology, custom, and gender expectations still restrict women's roles in the church.

Statement of the Problem

It is still not well understood how women themselves experience and respond to overlapping religious and social expectations in Nigeria today. Much existing literature treats biblical interpretation, women's rights and gender inequality as separate topics, giving less attention to how doctrine, custom and social change work together to shape women's place in church life. Okodike (2022) found that most members surveyed at the Deeper Life Bible Church wanted women considered for leadership and did not see them as discriminated against, yet leadership in the same churches remained mostly male. That contradiction was left unexplained. This gap leaves open whether social change is producing real movement in who leads within Nigerian churches, or whether older expectations still hold that door shut regardless of change elsewhere. The problem is therefore not that women are absent from church activity, since they are clearly active, but that a gap remains between participation, recognition, authority and access to leadership.

This concern drives the present study, which examines how theological teaching and church tradition shape women's roles, how societal gender expectations affect their participation, how far social change has opened leadership to them, and what their situation looks like in

Nigerian churches today. To address the problem, the study is guided by the following research questions:

i. In what ways do theological teachings and religious traditions influence the roles and status of women in selected Pentecostal and Protestant churches in the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC)?
ii. How do gender constructions and societal expectations shape women's participation in religious activities in these churches?
iii. How has social change, such as women's education, professional advancement and changing family roles, influenced women's inclusion in leadership within the church and society in AMAC?
iv. What are the contemporary realities of women in these churches, including their opportunities, constraints and perceptions of their own leadership?

In line with these questions, the study sets out to achieve the following objectives:

i. To examine the influence of theological teachings and religious traditions on the roles and status of women in the church.
ii. To analyse gender constructions and societal expectations surrounding women's participation in religious activities.
iii. To assess the influence of social change on women's inclusion in leadership within the church and society.
iv. To describe the contemporary realities of women in the church.

Conceptual Clarifications:

Faith: Faith means belief in, trust in, and commitment to God, shown through religious teaching, practice, and values. In Christianity, faith guides the moral and spiritual life of individuals and communities. Graham (2002) explained that faith is also a social institution, because it shapes cultural norms, social relationships, and views about gender roles. In this paper, faith is therefore treated both as a theological belief and as a social force that affects how women are seen and treated.

Gender: Gender means the roles, expectations, and identities that society and culture attach to being male or female (Butler, 2004). Butler separated gender from biological sex and argued that gender is formed through socialization and institutional practices. Gender affects who has access to opportunities, power, and participation in religious and social life (Butler, 2004). This concept helps the paper examine why the roles of women differ in the church and in society.

Social Change: Social change means change over time in social structures, cultural values, institutions, and patterns of human interaction. Education, globalization, technological advancement, and human rights advocacy have changed how people view the roles and participation of women in society and in religious communities (World Economic Forum, 2024). This concept links the paper's focus on faith and gender to the wider shifts that are reshaping both.

Women in Society: Women in society refers to the roles, responsibilities, and contributions of women in social, economic, political, and cultural life. Women have contributed greatly to societal development, yet they often face barriers to full participation and leadership. Recent social development has created more opportunities for the empowerment and inclusion of women. This concept gives the paper its social context.

Women in Church: Women in the church refers to the participation and contributions of women in the life, mission, and ministry of Christian communities. Oduyoye (2001) argued that women's leadership has been limited in some church settings in the past, but current theological thinking gives more attention to the dignity, calling, and essential role of women in the church's mission. This concept connects the theological and sociological parts of the paper.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Feminist Theology as its main theoretical perspective. The theory emerged in the 1960s alongside the second-wave women's movement. Scholars have extended the approach to biblical interpretation and to non-Western contexts, where Oduyoye (2001) and other African women theologians treat women's lived experience as a legitimate source for theology. The theory holds that ideas about women's roles were shaped by patriarchal cultures as well as by divine revelation, and it therefore critiques androcentric interpretation and exclusively male images of God. It does not reject the Christian faith. It seeks to recover the strands of the tradition that affirm the dignity, equality and agency of women. The framework has also drawn criticism. Piper and Grudem (2015) maintain that feminist theology distorts the divine design for masculinity and femininity and that removing male headship harms families, churches and society. The framework nevertheless suits this study for three reasons: it explains how faith traditions shape women's participation, it links the theological and sociological concerns of the paper, and it responds to calls for gender justice. Presenting the complementarian view alongside it keeps the discussion balanced.

Applied to the reviewed literature, the framework yields several interpretations, which the evidence supports as consistent patterns rather than proof. First, the change documented by Ojo and Ajani (2024) shows that restrictions track institutional and cultural conditions as much as doctrine, since ordination followed education, theological training and women's organised agitation. This supports the feminist claim that exclusion is partly socially constructed. Second, the feminist emphasis on women's distinctive experience raises the question of whether the service-oriented, auxiliary roles that dominate women's ministries reflect free vocation or inherited expectations of self-giving. The complementarian view offers a different interpretation. It holds that role distinctions reflect scriptural teaching and are not oppression, and the sociological evidence cannot settle that theological question. The framework therefore guides the interviews in Abuja in two ways. It directs attention to how women and male pastors in the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC) explain their roles, and it treats women's own accounts as primary evidence, while remaining open to participants who hold the traditional position.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research design, using in-depth, semi-structured interviews to examine the leadership experiences of women in selected churches in Abuja. A qualitative approach was considered suitable because the study sought to understand meanings, lived experiences and institutional practices that numerical data cannot adequately capture. Four objectives guided the inquiry: to examine the influence of theological teachings and religious traditions on the roles and status of women in the church; to analyse gender constructions and societal expectations surrounding women's participation in religious activities; to assess the influence of social change on women's inclusion in leadership within the church and society; and to describe the contemporary realities of women in the church. The study was conducted in the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC), one of the six area councils of the Federal Capital Territory. AMAC was selected because it contains the Central Business District, Garki, Wuse, Maitama, Asokoro, Gwarinpa, Jabi and Kubwa, and therefore hosts a dense and denominationally varied concentration of churches. Respondents were selected according to their availability, their willingness to participate and their capacity to contribute informed views on church leadership.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Purposive and snowball sampling were combined because the subject is sensitive and requires respondents who hold senior positions and are directly involved in church growth and administration. Initial respondents referred other eligible leaders, which was necessary because such persons are not easily reached through open recruitment. A total of 20 participants were interviewed: eight women pastors or ministers, six deaconesses and fellowship leaders, and six male pastors. Pentecostal churches formed the larger share of the sample because of their higher involvement in church activities and the more visible participation of women in pastoral and ministry roles. Protestant (mainline) churches, including Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian congregations, were also included to allow comparison across traditions. Eligible participants held a recognised leadership position, had served for at least five years, and worked in a church within AMAC, while ordinary members without leadership responsibility were excluded. Recruitment began with Family Worship Center, Abuja, and extended through referrals to other churches. Networks such as Mothers Circle, a fellowship of about 20 women pastors, frontline women leaders and pastors' wives drawn from 15 churches, offered a practical entry point for snowball referrals. Participating churches were coded (for example, Church A and Church B) to protect confidentiality.

Analysis

The interviews conducted were audio-recorded and supplemented by field notes. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically in six phases:

familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and reporting. Themes were retained on the basis of highly similar responses across participants, which indicated convergence, and each theme was linked to a research objective. Illustrative responses were reported using anonymised codes, for example WP3 for woman pastor 3 and MP2 for male pastor 2.

Empirical Reviews

Theological Teachings and Religious Traditional Influence of the Roles and Status of Women in the Church

Peppiatt (2015) used exegesis of 1 Corinthians 11–14 to examine what Paul taught about women in public worship. She argued that Paul was answering the male leaders of Corinth, who forced women to wear head coverings and told married women to keep silent, and that he did not endorse these practices. This reading challenges the common view that the passages restrict women's speech in church, and it gives the debate a firm textual base. However, the argument depends on a picture of the Corinthian leaders' position that the text does not state directly, so scholars who read the same verses as Paul's own instruction can still dispute it. The study also rests on the text alone. It does not show how churches teach or apply these verses today, which limits its use for explaining the status of women in local congregations.

Iheanacho (2016) used a phenomenological design with in-depth interviews to study women's ministry in neo-Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. The study found that women gained most from the open, gender-neutral ministry practice of these churches, and that many founded and led their own ministries, which was rare in orthodox churches before the 1990s. The work is useful because it records women's own accounts and does not rely on church doctrine alone. Its weakness is that it gives more attention to women who succeeded than to those who stayed under restrictive teaching. Also, women who lead ministries they founded may have been kept out of existing church offices, and this does not prove that theological restrictions have ended. The article does not test this possibility.

Ademiluka (2021) combined descriptive and exegetical methods to study how patriarchy causes marital disharmony among Nigerian Christians. He found that customs such as bride price give husbands a sense of ownership over their wives, and that this can lead to withdrawal and wife beating. He then read Ephesians 5:22–33 as a corrective that redefines submission and leadership in marriage. The study connects a church text to family life in Nigeria, but the method described does not include data collected from couples, so claims about how the text is heard in churches are argued rather than measured.

Ojo and Ajani (2024) used a historical method, drawing on primary documents, interviews and secondary publications, to trace changes in the roles and status of women in the Nigerian Baptist Convention from 1914 to 2021. They found that access to formal education, the Women's Missionary Union, the employment of women as seminary teachers in the 1980s and the ordination of women in the late 1990s moved women from domestic and supportive roles into public leadership. The century-long coverage gives the study a depth that short surveys lack. Even so, changes at convention level do not show

what happens in each congregation, since Baptist churches govern themselves. The factors named are mostly institutional and social, and the study does not show that the church's teaching on women's calling was itself revised. It is therefore unclear whether doctrine or outside pressure drove the change.

Jacobs (2026) used qualitative interviews with senior leaders of the Assemblies of God – Back to God movement in South Africa, together with a study of Miriam, Deborah and Esther, to examine barriers to women's ordination and governance in African Pentecostal churches. The study found that patriarchal structures, selective scriptural interpretation and male self-preservation limit women's agency. This agrees with Barr (2021), a historian who argues that "biblical womanhood" came from identifiable historical moments and not from divine order. Jacobs adds interview evidence from an African setting, which Barr's North American work does not supply. Two limits remain. The data come from one denomination in South Africa, so the findings cannot be applied to Nigerian churches without caution. Also, "male self-preservation" is a claim about motive, and interview answers from church leaders can hardly prove it.

Gender Constructions and Societal Expectations of Women Participation in Religious activities

Rwafa (2016) used a conceptual and textual analysis to examine how culture and religion sustain gender inequality among women in Africa. He argued that biblical notions of creation, polygamy, and cultural beliefs about spirit mediums are treated as fixed and unchangeable, and that these ideas are used to justify keeping women out of full participation in community life. His central claim is that gender roles built on culture and religion are social constructions and can therefore be challenged. The paper covers a wide geographic area, which allows it to draw broad patterns across African societies. This same width is a weakness, since the article treats "Africa" as one setting and does not test whether the pattern holds equally in Christian, Muslim, or traditional communities, or whether Zimbabwe, where the author works, resembles West African contexts such as Nigeria.

Nasir and Noor (2023) used a qualitative approach, combining secondary sources with in-depth interviews, to study the religious authority of Malama Zainab Ja'afar, a female preacher in the Izala movement in northern Nigeria. The study found that she brought women into mosque spaces and other settings that had been closed to them, and that her preaching, spread partly through social media, reached male audiences as well as female ones. A central finding is that the historical exclusion of women from these spaces rested on cultural and traditional interpretation rather than on clear religious prohibition, a distinction that separates custom from doctrine. The case study method gives depth on one woman's experience, but the focus on a single figure who gained unusual standing makes it hard to judge whether her case reflects the situation of ordinary women in the same movement.

The Impact of Social Change on Women's Inclusion in Leadership within the Church and Society

Le (2017) used documentary research, participant observation, and in-depth interviews with five male leaders and seventeen female ordained pastors to study leadership change in the Toraja Church in Indonesia. Drawing on Sewell's theory of structural transformation and Ortner's theory of agency, she found that external forces had unsettled the church's patriarchal structure, and that Torajan women and some men worked from inside the church to push it toward gender equality. A strength of the study is its attention to men's agency alongside women's, since most work on church leadership change looks at women alone. The two months of fieldwork behind the study give it depth, but the small number of interviewees and the focus on one denomination in one region make it hard to say whether the pattern of change found in Toraja applies to churches elsewhere in Asia or Africa.

Obijole (2018) examined how Christianity has changed the status of Nigerian women in the church over time. Working from published church records and denominational history, he traced the shift from women's confinement to auxiliary roles toward growing acceptance of women in more visible church functions. The paper places the discussion inside a broader study collection on religion, ethnicity, and change, which situates women's inclusion as one part of wider institutional change in Nigerian Christianity rather than as an isolated issue. Because the paper works mainly from documentary and historical material, it does not include first-hand accounts from women themselves, so it cannot show how the changes it records were experienced by women inside congregations, or whether formal change in church policy matched actual practice at the local level.

Bako and Syed (2018), as cited within later Nigerian scholarship, argued that the marginalisation of women is not confined to one country but is a global pattern that touches the economic, political, and religious spheres alike. Their claim, that women's exclusion from religious leadership mirrors exclusion in other social domains, gives later Nigerian researchers a wider frame for interpreting local church findings, since it suggests that change inside the church cannot be separated from change in society generally. This breadth is also a limitation, since the claim of a worldwide pattern does not explain why the pace and shape of women's inclusion differs so much from one denomination or country to the next, a difference that later, more focused studies were left to explain.

Okodike (2022) used a descriptive survey, administered to seventy-one respondents across three branches of the Deeper Life Bible Church in Nigeria, to study gender discrimination in ministry. The study found that men made up the larger share of respondents and that culture, church tradition, and readings of scripture combined to keep women out of leadership office, despite their acknowledged work as homemakers and nation builders. The strength of this study lies in its direct data collection from church members rather than reliance on doctrine or history alone. Its weakness is the small and uneven sample, split unevenly across three local congregations, which limits how far the findings can be extended to the Deeper Life denomination as a whole, let alone to Nigerian Christianity more broadly.

Obiefuna and Miller (2023) used a qualitative approach based on reviewed literature, guided by Social Construction Theory, to argue for what they called a re-ordering of women's participation in Christian leadership in Nigeria. They found that gaps in leadership opportunity between men and women persist even where women are formally permitted to serve, and they called for change driven by women themselves, carried out with what they described as caution and responsibility rather than confrontation. This framing treats social change as something that must be managed carefully by women advocates, which is a distinctive position compared with studies that treat change as driven mainly by outside social pressure. The paper does not draw on interviews or survey data, so its account of how change should happen is argued rather than tested against the experience of women already serving in Nigerian churches.

Akahome and Oputa (2025) used a qualitative grounded theory and narrative inquiry approach, based on in-depth interviews with eighteen women leaders from public institutions across four Nigerian regions, to study how women navigate institutional constraints. Although their focus is public institutions rather than the church specifically, their finding of what they termed quiet institutional change, a slow shift driven by everyday relationship-building and mentoring rather than open confrontation, offers a useful comparison for church settings, where similar patterns of gradual, informal change have been observed. The study's grounding in interviews gives it strong first-hand evidence, but because it centres on public administration, applying its findings directly to church leadership requires care, since religious institutions carry theological constraints that government bodies do not.

Olajide (2026) used intercultural interpretation of the Gospel accounts, combined with a review of Nigerian church practice, to study the implications of Jesus's treatment of women for churches in Nigeria today. He found that women held essential positions in Jesus's ministry and in the early church as disciples, supporters, and witnesses to the resurrection, and argued that this pattern challenges the cultural customs and patriarchal readings of scripture that still limit women's leadership in many Nigerian churches. His method gives the study a strong theological base, but the paper does not report field data from Nigerian congregations, so it cannot show whether Nigerian church leaders and members have accepted or resisted the theological argument it presents, leaving the practical extent of change in local churches an open question.

Contemporary Realities of Women in Church

Cohick (2020) holds that the story of Christianity cannot be told fully without recognising how much women shaped it from the earliest days, contributing to its growth and to the shaping of its beliefs, even where official church records have downplayed, contested, or left out their part. This claim frames the discussion that follows, which traces women's involvement from the biblical period through the early church, the medieval era, the Reformation, and into the present. The strength of this framing is that it treats the erasure of women's contribution as itself a historical process worth studying, rather than assuming

the biblical and early record was always silent on women. A weakness is that such broad claims about "erasure" can be hard to test directly, since they depend on comparing what happened against records that, by the same argument, may be incomplete.

Gupta (2023), working from close reading of the New Testament alongside first-century social context, argues that the Gospels present a picture of women's involvement in ministry that later church tradition muted. He points out that Jesus spoke openly with women on matters of doctrine, as in the conversation with the Samaritan woman and in his visit to Martha and Mary, and that he counted women, including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna, among those who followed and supported him. After the resurrection, Mary Magdalene was the one who first told the other disciples that Jesus had risen, which later writers came to call her the Apostle to the Apostles. Gupta's method, built on textual and historical analysis rather than field data, makes a persuasive literary case, but it cannot show how far this pattern shaped the actual practice of congregations across different regions of the early Christian world, since practice likely varied from place to place.

Jibromah, Bademosi, and Akinmameji (2025) used a literary-historical and contextual theological method, supported by feminist reading and attention to the rhetorical style of Paul's letters, to study Paul's picture of women's leadership and what it means for Nigerian churches today. They found that texts such as Romans 16, Galatians 3:28, and Philippians 4:2–3 show Paul naming and praising women, among them Phoebe, Junia, and Priscilla, as people who carried real weight in the early Christian movement. Phoebe is named a deacon of the church at Cenchreae in Romans 16:1, and Junia is called outstanding among the apostles in Romans 16:7, a description the study reads as proof that leadership among the earliest believers was not closed to women. This reading stands in tension with 1 Timothy 2:11–12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, verses that restrict women's public speech in worship, and the study argues that Nigerian churches have often read the restrictive verses while passing over the verses that commend women leaders. Because the study rests on interpretation of text rather than data from congregations, it cannot show whether Nigerian church leaders who hold the restrictive reading would accept this counter-argument, or why the tension between these passages has lasted so long.

Posternak (2023) reviewed English, French, and German scholarship on women's ministry in the early church, focusing on deaconesses, widows, and consecrated virgins. The study found that Western historical writing on this subject has grown steadily, moving from short mentions of these offices toward closer study of what deaconesses actually did and how the church defined their standing. This review method is useful because it shows how the scholarly conversation on women's early ministry has itself changed direction over time, rather than simply restating what earlier writers already knew about the office of deaconess. Its limitation is that a review of existing scholarship, by its nature, adds no new evidence of its own, so its conclusions depend entirely on the reliability and coverage of the works it surveys, and non-Western scholarship on the same office receives little attention.

Debate over women in church leadership rests on two broad theological readings. Traditionalist readings treat male headship as a scriptural and historical norm, relying on Pauline passages such as 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 and understanding the

distinction as one of role rather than worth. Egalitarian readings stress the Spirit's non-gendered gifting and the biblical record of women as prophets, workers and leaders. Nigerian scholarship also shows change over time. Ojo and Ajani (2024) show that women's movement into public leadership among Nigerian Baptists followed access to education, the Women's Missionary Union, theological training and ordination from the late 1990s.

Two points emerge from this review. First, social change, particularly women's education, professional advancement and Pentecostal spirituality, has widened women's opportunities, although theological conviction and cultural expectation still shape how far those opportunities extend, and sincere believers disagree about whether such limits are a defect or a faithful reading of scripture. Second, most studies examine single denominations or southern cities, and few examine Abuja. This gap justifies the present qualitative study of women leaders, deaconesses and male pastors in the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC).

Discussions of Findings

The first objective concerns how theological teachings and religious traditions shape the roles and status of women in the church. The reviewed literature shows that biblical interpretation remains central to this discussion. Peppiatt (2015), Gupta (2023), Jibromah et al. (2025), and Jacobs (2026) demonstrate that scripture does not carry one fixed meaning regarding women's place in church life; rather, different readings of the same passages have produced different conclusions about what women may or may not do in worship and leadership. This variation in interpretation is closely tied to tradition, since Ademiluka (2021), Rwafa (2016), Okodike (2022), and Jacobs (2026) trace the restrictions placed on women back to patriarchal church structures that have been sustained over generations. These findings suggest that theology, as it is taught and practised, cannot be separated from the traditions that carry it forward, and that both continue to influence how women's roles are defined within the church today.

The second objective examines gender constructions and societal expectations surrounding women's participation in religious activities. Rwafa (2016) shows that gender roles in the church are not fixed by biology but are built through culture, religion, and institutional norms. This means that expectations placed on women in worship settings often mirror wider societal attitudes about what women should or should not do, rather than being drawn solely from doctrine. When patriarchal traditions and socially constructed gender roles reinforce one another, women's participation in religious life becomes shaped as much by cultural custom as by theological instruction, making it difficult to separate religious expectation from social expectation in practice.

The third objective assesses the influence of social change on women's inclusion in leadership within the church and society. Le (2017), Ojo and Ajani (2024), Obijole (2018), and Akahome and Oputa (2025) indicate that developments such as education, employment opportunities, social movements, and institutional reform have gradually opened space for women in leadership. Similarly, Iheanacho (2016), Ojo and Ajani (2024),

Obijole (2018), and Obiefuna and Miller (2023) note a shift from women occupying only supportive or auxiliary roles toward greater involvement in ministry, reflecting broader changes taking place outside the church. However, this movement has been slow and uneven, and formal recognition of women's involvement has not always been matched by real growth in their leadership standing, which points to the limits of social change alone in altering established church structures.

The fourth objective looks at the contemporary realities faced by women in the church. Okodike (2022), Obiefuna and Miller (2023), Akahome and Oputa (2025), and Olajide (2026) reveal a consistent pattern in which women are visibly present and active in church activities yet remain largely absent from positions of real authority and decision-making. This gap between participation and power illustrates that being allowed into ministry does not automatically carry with it access to senior leadership. It also reflects how theological interpretation, cultural tradition, and social change, discussed across the earlier objectives, continue to interact in ways that shape, and at times restrict, the extent to which women can rise within church hierarchies in the present day.

Conclusion

This review has shown that the roles and status of women in the church are shaped by a combination of interconnected factors rather than any single cause. Theological teaching and church tradition work together to sustain particular readings of scripture, and these readings continue to define what women are permitted to do within worship and leadership. At the same time, gender roles in religious settings are not rooted in biology alone but are constructed through culture, socialisation, and institutional practice, which often blend religious expectation with wider societal attitudes toward women. Broader social developments, including education, employment, and institutional reform, have gradually created more room for women's involvement in leadership, yet this progress has been gradual and inconsistent rather than transformative. Most notably, a clear gap persists between women's visible participation in church life and their actual access to positions of authority and decision-making. Being present and active in ministry does not automatically translate into real leadership power.

Recommendations

1. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and member denominations should adopt written bylaws opening deaconess, women's fellowship and council roles to appointed women leaders.
2. Local chiefs, the Council of Traditional Rulers and pastors should hold annual dialogues separating cultural custom from doctrine, using biblical scholars as facilitators.
3. NGOs such as Women Aid Collective (WACOL) should run yearly mentorship and leadership-training programmes preparing women for senior church governance and decision-making positions.

Faith-based organisations should track women's leadership representation annually, publish the results, and have church councils review them to enforce accountability.

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