Theology of Empowerment: Biblical Foundations for Women's Participation in Nigerian Politics

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Abstract
In many countries, including Nigeria, cultural, religious, and social conventions continue to limit women's roles in governance, making their political participation a contested issue. These systemic barriers have contributed to theological and societal narratives that reinforce exclusion and undermine the contributions of women in leadership. This paper explores a theology of empowerment that affirms women's active involvement in political leadership, grounded in biblical principles. Drawing on scriptural examples such as Deborah (Judges 4–5), Esther, and the woman described in Proverbs 31, the study presents a biblical vision of gender inclusion and highlights the historical presence of women in roles of authority and decision-making. This adopts a qualitative textual analysis of biblical passages and existing theological literature that relate to gender, justice, and leadership, while employing contextual theology to engage Nigeria's sociopolitical realities. The analysis demonstrates that empowering women in political spaces is consistent with biblical values such as stewardship, justice, and service. It critiques theological misinterpretations that have historically excluded women and calls for a Christ-centered model of leadership that promotes justice and equity for all. The paper ultimately advocates for a theologically transformative perspective that empowers women to serve in government as a faithful expression of their Christian identity and a practical response to current cultural and political challenges.

Keywords: *Theology of empowerment; Women in leadership; Biblical justice; Gender inclusion; Nigerian politics.*

Introduction

Women's involvement in Nigerian politics has seen both slight improvements and enduring restrictions in recent decades. Nigerian women are still disproportionately underrepresented in political leadership roles, notwithstanding international agreements like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and constitutional requirements. In sharp contrast to Nigeria, where women make up nearly half of the population, women occupied less than 10% of elective positions at the federal and state levels as of the general elections in 2023 (Adele, 2023; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). The reality reflects a greater pattern of exclusion rooted in a complex interaction of cultural, religious, and socioeconomic restrictions that continue to limit female political success.

Culturally, patriarchal traditions in many Nigerian communities reduce women to inferior roles, discouraging political ambition and limiting access to leadership structures (Okeke-Ihejirika & Franceschet, 2002). Religious interpretations, especially in conservative Christian and Islamic groups, reinforce these gendered norms by portraying female leadership as abnormal or disruptive and male leadership as divinely appointed (Salihu & Gbadamosi, 2018).

These difficulties are exacerbated by societal factors like as insufficient educational opportunities, financial limitations, and political violence, which foster an environment where women are routinely disadvantaged and at risk of political involvement (Akiyode-Afolabi & Arogundade, 2020).

By providing a biblical basis for women's empowerment in leadership, this essay aims to provide a theological answer to these facts. The Bible provides numerous examples of women leaders who fulfilled divine mandates and made significant contributions to the political, social, and spiritual advancement of their communities, such as Deborah (Judges 4–5), Esther, and Priscilla (Acts 18:26). These examples are far from endorsing the silence of women. The dignity, calling, and ability of women as co-bearers of the Imago Dei (Genesis 1:27), entrusted with caring for God's creation and promoting good governance, are reclaimed by a biblically based approach.

This article makes the case that a strong biblical theology opposes damaging cultural interpretations that have been abused to excuse exclusion in addition to advocating for women's full participation in leadership roles. By offering theological and practical justifications for breaking down barriers and recognizing the God-given capacity of women in leadership, it seeks to encourage a paradigm shift among Christian communities and the Nigerian geopolitical environment.

Biblical Underpinnings for Female Leaders

The Imago Dei teaching and the lives of significant women in both the Old and New Testaments provide a strong theological foundation for women's leadership in the Bible. This foundation acknowledges the God-given ability of women to lead in the social, political, and spiritual domains while challenging patriarchal interpretations (Payne, 2009). The equal creation of men and women in God's image is established by the statement, "So God created mankind in his own image male and female he formed them," found in Genesis 1:27. Scholars have interpreted this verse to emphasize the equality and intrinsic dignity of both sexes. Theologian Lisa Stephenson (2015) also highlighted that a biblical foundation for gender equality is supported by this fundamental reality.

According to Salihu et. al., (2018), Deborah was a prophetess and judge over Israel, Deborah is one of the most notable female leaders in the Old Testament. She is portrayed in Judges 4:4–5 as a brave and sage leader who led Israel through a time of persecution. Deborah's simultaneous responsibilities in the civic and spiritual domains highlight the validity of women in leadership positions in ancient Israel.

The story of Queen Esther serves as an example of the effectiveness of lobbying and strategic influence. Despite having little official power, Esther showed bravery and wisdom by using her position to speak up for her people. Her experience serves as an example of how women may significantly alter governmental systems. A woman with an entrepreneurial spirit is described in Proverbs 31:10–31 as running the home and conducting business. By presenting her as an example of hard work and leadership, this paragraph emphasizes the importance of women's contributions to the social and economic spheres (Salihu et. al., 2018).

Women were included and elevated during Jesus' ministry. Women, who actively participated in Jesus' ministry, including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna, are mentioned as supporters of his work in Luke 8:1–3. Jesus breaks societal conventions and affirms the

Samaritan woman's worth in John 4 by having a theological discussion with her. Jesus' dedication to empowering and acknowledging women is evident in these stories.

Cultural and Theological Obstacles to Women's Political Engagement

In addition to being a direct result of structural injustice, the marginalization of women in Nigerian politics has its roots in cultural customs and theological misunderstandings that have been propagated within Christian communities. This section examines the ways in which patriarchal Christian traditions, misinterpretations of Scripture, and the Church's ambiguous role all contribute to women's exclusion from political leadership in Nigeria.

The exclusion of women from leadership positions in the church and in society has historically been justified by biblical passages like 1 Timothy 2:12, which states, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet," and 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, which states, "Women should remain silent in the churches." But according to modern biblical research, these verses need to be interpreted in light of their language, cultural, and historical backgrounds. Instead of providing general prohibitions against female leadership, scholars such as Payne (2009) and Belleville (2010) argue that Paul's instructions were situational, addressing particular church concerns in Ephesus and Corinth. Furthermore, Scripture itself offers a wealth of counterexamples of strong women in prophetic and leadership positions. In the religious and social life of Israel and the early Church, Deborah (Judges 4–5), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14–20), Phoebe (Romans 16:1), and Priscilla (Acts 18:26) are all shown as powerful figures. Instead of severe gender-based limitations, the Bible provides a path of freedom, dignity, and collaboration for all sexes when read holistically (Galatians 3:28).

Both colonial missionary paradigms and indigenous patriarchal conventions, which together oppose gender equality, have frequently influenced Christianity in Nigeria. Despite playing a significant role in the dissemination of knowledge, the colonial missionary enterprise frequently perpetuated Victorian ideas of female domesticity and male control (Okure, 2002). The belief that men should be the only ones in positions of leadership, whether in the home, church, or country, was strengthened by these principles' smooth integration with native patriarchal systems. Church systems that maintain male supremacy as divinely approved and limit women's positions to supporting or auxiliary roles are still influenced by this theological and cultural fusion. According to Oduyoye (2001), traditional culture and male-centered conceptions of Christianity both marginalize African women.

The Nigerian Church is at a turning point in its theology. On the one hand, it has enormous moral power and social impact that can change public perception and break down boundaries based on gender. However, it frequently becomes complicit in the exclusion of women from leadership roles due to its silence or passive acceptance of patriarchal norms. Many churches still uphold antiquated beliefs that restrict women's potential, even if several denominations and Christian organizations have started to push for women's participation in political leadership with an emphasis on justice, equity, and biblical integrity. Depending on its doctrinal position, the Church can be both an instrument of repression and an agent of emancipation, as noted by Amadiume (2015).

In order to advance, the Church needs to practise critical theological reflection that uplifts the entire counsel of Scripture, acknowledges the roles played by women in redemptive history, and is consistent with the biblical ethic of mutuality and justice. As an outgrowth of God's

demand for justice and stewardship in public life, this entails reeducating congregations, ordaining women into leadership roles, and vigorously encouraging female political participation.

Arguments from Theology in Support of Women's Political Empowerment

Scripture-based theological frameworks provide strong arguments in favor of women holding political leadership positions. A biblically informed theology affirms the equality, talent, and divine mandate of women as stewards of justice and agents of transformation, despite the pervasive institutional, cultural, and religious biases that still marginalize women in Nigeria and much of the global South. God's concern for equity and justice in social and political life is repeatedly affirmed in Scripture. The ethical standards required for public leadership are in line with Micah 6:8, which exhort God's people to "act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God." This passage emphasizes justice as a divine expectation rather than just a human ideal, and it opposes the exclusion of women from political processes. Paul declares in Galatians 3:28 that "you are all one in Christ Jesus; therefore there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female." Social hierarchies are destroyed by this radical declaration, which also asserts the social and spiritual equality of all Christians (Keener, 2019). This egalitarian view of God's kingdom is incompatible with denying women a say in politics.

A common interpretation of the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14–30) in leadership and theological studies is that it calls for the prudent management of power, opportunities, and gifts. One way to exercise stewardship over the collective life of a community or country is through political participation, which includes leadership. While the servant who buried his talent was chastised for idleness rather than failure, the others who increased their abilities were commended. Like males, women who possess the capacity for leadership and moral clarity are called to use their skills for the benefit of society. Limiting women in leadership roles impedes both the national polity and the Body of Christ from fully flourishing (Hybels, 2009; Onah & Okwori, 2019). Women have shown themselves to be prophetic leaders and social change agents throughout the biblical story.

Deborah exercised both governmental and spiritual authority over Israel as a judge and prophetess (Judges 4–5). Esther's leadership was both political and profoundly theological, based on prayer, fasting, and fearless advocacy. Her valiant intervention in the Persian kingdom prevented her people from being exterminated (Esther 4:14). Women like Phoebe, Junia, and Priscilla were important church leaders in the New Testament (Romans 16:1–7), defying expectations and exemplifying God's call for women to be civic and ecclesial leaders (Belleville, 2005; Spencer, 2009). These stories highlight the fact that God grants authority based on divine purpose rather than gender. With social support and biblical conviction, women in Nigeria and around the world may play the role of Deborah in the modern era, restoring integrity, justice, and peace to a dysfunctional political system.

Actions to Increase Women's Participation in Politics

Nigeria's and the Global South's underrepresentation of women in political leadership is a religious and moral imperative that necessitates an integrated response, making it more than just a sociopolitical issue. Civic initiatives and legislative quotas are crucial, but real change necessitates tackling more fundamental structural and ideological problems. Therefore,

increasing women's political participation requires a multifaceted approach based on systemic policy reform, clerical lobbying, religious reformation, and education.

The misreading of biblical scriptures, which is frequently used to cast women in supporting positions, is one of the most enduring obstacles to women's leadership in Christian contexts. Throughout history, verses like 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34 have been taken out of their socio-historical settings and used to support patriarchal standards (Grenz & Kjesbo, 2006; Spencer, 2009). It is crucial to have a theological reformation based on strict biblical hermeneutics. Women have always played a role in God's redemptive and leadership plan, as demonstrated by the leadership of Deborah (Judges 4–5), the prophetic ministry of Huldah (2 Kings 22:14–20), and the apostolic cooperation of Priscilla (Acts 18:26). In order to promote an egalitarian theology that embraces the Imago Dei in both men and women (Genesis 1:27) and acknowledges Galatians 3:28 as a theological cornerstone for inclusivity, faith-based educational institutions and seminaries must incorporate gender justice into their curricula. Reform initiatives will not address systemic causes; instead, they will only treat symptoms in the absence of this fundamental re-education (Coleman, 2011).

Churches are in a unique position to lead cultural change because they are moral gatekeepers and social influencers. The Church can develop political leaders by launching mentorship and advocacy programs that value women's abilities and offer venues for leadership development. For prospective female politicians, programs should offer support groups, leadership courses, pulpit-sharing opportunities, and mentorship networks (Agbiji & Swart, 2015). Furthermore, religious members should utilize their power to openly support women's political engagement by portraying it as both a civic duty and a spiritual calling. The Church fights cultural preconceptions and upholds a biblical vision of justice and partnership when it normalizes women in leadership roles (Mojola, 2020).

Policy contexts that are favorable are necessary for structural change. International gender equity treaties like CEDAW have been ratified by Nigeria; however implementation is still lacking (Akiyode-Afolabi & Arogundade, 2020). To guarantee safe and fair political participation, governments must enact enforceable quotas, provide campaign funds to female candidates, and uphold anti-discrimination legislation. By interacting with legislators, taking part in the creation of policies, and establishing partnerships with civil society organizations that prioritize gender equity, faith communities and Christian organizations can play a strategic advocacy role (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012). Since electoral violence disproportionately discourages women from participating in politics, it should also be addressed in these initiatives (Ezeilo, 2018).

Conclusion

When viewed through the prism of Scripture, the theology of empowerment provides a strong argument for women's full participation in political leadership, even in Nigeria. Biblical women were not marginalized; rather, God frequently gave them the ability to lead, prophesy, defend, and judge countries. Deborah (Judges 4–5), Esther, Huldah (2 Kings 22:14–20), and Priscilla (Acts 18:26) are just a few instances. These stories challenge patriarchal interpretations that have historically been employed to restrict or stifle women's leadership positions in the public sphere. The idea of Imago Dei (Genesis 1:27), which holds that men and women are equally valuable, dignified, and called by God because they were made in his image, is fundamental to the theology of empowerment. Additionally, the distinctions that were formerly made on the basis of gender are no longer relevant in Christ: "There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). The sociocultural, religious, and institutional barriers

that prevent Nigerian women from participating in politics must be rejected in light of this fundamental reality.

Women's sociopolitical marginalization is a religious injustice rather than just a result of ineffective leadership or inequity. Society suppresses divine gifts and impedes the full manifestation of God's justice, wisdom, and creativity in public life by preventing women from assuming leadership roles (Kanyoro, 2001; Nwaoga, 2016). Giving women leadership roles is in line with God's redemptive objectives throughout history, not a capitulation to modernity.

Recommendation

In order to combat cultural misinterpretations of biblical texts and to emphasize the numerous instances of female leadership found in Scripture, Christian organizations must consciously educate and model biblical gender equality (Oduyoye, 2012; Bolarinwa, 2020). Training in hermeneutics that enables both men and women to interact with Scripture in a contextually and theologically sound manner should be part of this. Nigerian churches and Christian groups ought to be politically involved, supporting laws that support affirmative action, gender inclusiveness, and legal protections for female candidates. Religious speakers have moral authority and have the power to change public perceptions (Chitando & Mateveke, 2017).

Programs for leadership development and mentoring that equip women for public service should be established by churches. Giving young Christian women opportunities to gain knowledge from seasoned leaders can boost their self-esteem and prepare them to operate honorably in political institutions (Kassa, 2015). Efforts to promote inclusive government can be strengthened by cooperation between state agencies, NGOs, and Christian groups. Priority should be given to collaborative efforts on voter mobilization, civic education, and support for female candidates (Akiyode-Afolabi & Arogundade, 2020). In addition to providing theological assistance, the Church needs to establish systems that assist women in pursuing leadership positions on an emotional, spiritual, financial, and logistical level. According to Nwaoga (2016), these consist of prayer networks, financing sources, and secure areas for political participation.

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