

Religion, Service, and Humility in Perspective: Women's Involvement and Challenges in the 21st Century Nigerian Religious Landscape

Egbuniwe, Godson Ikechukwu; Babatunde Olusola Solomon & Odei Moses Adeiza PhD

Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Oyo State, Nigeria

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*Corresponding Author: Egbuniwe, Godson Ikechukwu

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Abstract

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This paper critically examines the gendered dynamics of "service" and "humility" within Nigerian Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR), exploring their impact on women's participation and leadership in the 21st century. Aiming to demonstrate how patriarchal interpretations of these virtues constrain women's agency, the study is justified by the imperative for gender justice essential to the holistic flourishing of religious communities and society. The core problem is that despite women's vital historical and contemporary contributions as evangelists, ATR priestesses, caregivers, and backbone of religious service dominant interpretations of service and humility, mediated through patriarchy, limit women's leadership and theological voice. This creates a "humility paradox" where exemplary practice reinforces marginalization. While previous studies note women's roles and patriarchal constraints, a significant gap exists in comprehensively analyzing the specific mechanisms of this paradox across both major traditions and recovering women's agency within it. The theoretical framework employs Mercy Oduyoye's African feminist theology, critiquing dual patriarchies and advocating women's agency ("Talitha cum!"), and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion (interrogating patriarchal texts/traditions) and remembrance (recovering women's contributions), enabling a critical deconstruction and liberative reimagining. Methodologically, it utilizes historical analysis and theological critique. The scope focuses on 21st-century Nigerian Christianity (major denominations) and ATR, justified as the dominant traditions sharing patriarchal frameworks yet offering distinct contexts for analysis. The significance lies in demonstrating that authentic religious and societal flourishing necessitates women's full participation. Key findings reveal the pervasive "humility paradox," the circumscription of women's agency despite extensive service, and the need for theological reinterpretation. The study recommends, redefining service and humility through feminist theology as empowering virtues; actively supporting women's leadership; reforming religious education; and recovering women's historical contributions. The conclusion asserts that Nigeria's religious vitality depends on dismantling patriarchal barriers and transforming service and humility into tools for inclusive community building, not female subservience.

Keywords: Nigerian Women, Service, Humility, African Feminist Theology, Gender Paradox.

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INTRODUCTION

Religion is a powerful and ever-present force shaping life in Nigeria, influencing its culture, values, and politics. Across the country's diverse religious landscape including many Christian groups (like Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, and Aladura churches) and African Traditional Religion (ATR) virtues like "service" (helping others in God's name) and "humility" (modesty, lack of pride) are seen as fundamental to a good spiritual life and a strong community.

However, there's a significant problem: how these

important virtues are understood and practiced is deeply shaped by gender. Within Nigerian religious spaces, the ideas of service and humility are often filtered through a male-dominated perspective (patriarchy). This has historically limited women's roles, their ability to make choices, and their access to positions of formal leadership. Even though women are usually the most active participants in religious life, the main caregivers, and the driving force behind community service projects, their potential for leadership, their theological insights, and their overall contributions are frequently restricted or ignored.



The structures of these religions often define "service" for women as supportive work done under male direction, and "humility" for women as unquestioning obedience to male authority. While past research has acknowledged women's roles and the barriers of patriarchy, a crucial gap remains. We lack a detailed analysis of *exactly how* the concepts of service and humility are defined and used to maintain male dominance within both major Nigerian religious traditions (Christianity and ATR) today. We also need to explore the contradiction (paradox) where women are praised for their humble service yet kept from real power, and we need to better understand the different ways women find agency despite these constraints.

Therefore, this paper aims to critically examine how religion, service, and humility work together in relation to Nigerian women's experiences in both Christianity and ATR. This investigation is vital because understanding and changing the dynamics that hold women back is essential for Nigerian religious communities and society as a whole to truly thrive. Using insights from African feminist theology and methods that question traditional interpretations while recovering women's stories, this study will:

1. Analyze how "service" and "humility" are understood and applied differently to men and women in Nigerian Christianity and ATR.
2. Highlight historical and present-day examples of women's service and their active roles.
3. Identify and assess the key challenges Nigerian women of faith face today.
4. Suggest ways to rethink service and humility as empowering virtues for women.

The research focuses specifically on Nigerian women in Christianity (across its main branches) and African Traditional Religion (ATR) during the 21st century. This focus is important because these are Nigeria's dominant religions, both operate within significant patriarchal systems that affect gender roles, yet they offer distinct contexts for studying how service, humility, and women's agency interact. This study matters because by critically examining limiting interpretations, showcasing women's agency, and proposing positive redefinitions of core virtues, it can help promote gender justice within these influential institutions. Supporting women's full participation is fundamental for genuine religious and societal well-being.

Theoretical Framework:

This study is grounded in the powerful synergy of African feminist theology and hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance. Mercy Amba Oduyoye's African feminist theology provides the essential lens, centering the unique experiences of African women to critically examine how Nigerian cultural contexts and entrenched patriarchal power structures actively shape religious interpretations of core virtues like service and humility. Alongside this, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutical methods offer crucial analytical tools. The *hermeneutic of suspicion* drives us to rigorously question

and challenge patriarchal interpretations embedded within religious scriptures, traditions, and practices interpretations that marginalize women and restrict their roles.

Conversely, the *hermeneutic of remembrance* compels us to actively seek out, recover, and illuminate the often-suppressed history and contemporary reality of women's agency, leadership, and vital contributions within both Nigerian Christianity and African Traditional Religion. Together, this integrated framework empowers the study to critically dissect the gendered construction and application of "service" and "humility" within these religious traditions; uncover and foreground Nigerian women's diverse expressions of agency and contribution, countering narratives of passivity; and inform the vital work of reimagining these virtues as sources of liberation and empowerment for women.

Conceptual Clarification

Understanding the gendered dynamics of service and humility within Nigerian religion requires defining these concepts contextually and applying critical feminist lenses. Service (*Iṣẹ Ọlórún / Ijere Uka / Orue Chukwu*) is rooted theologically in Christianity through Jesus Christ's example of servanthood (e.g., John 13:1-17, Mark 10:45), linked to *diakonia* and *agape* love (1 Corinthians 13). In African Traditional Religion (ATR), service encompasses devotion to deities (*òrìṣà, àmú mmúò*), ancestors (*àwọn ànà*), and fulfilling communal obligations vital for cosmic and social balance (*ìwà pelú iwà*) (Idowu, 1973; Olupona, 2011).

It is fundamentally communal, expressing faith through caring for the vulnerable (James 1:27), communal labor, and upholding rituals. However, gendered expectations often confine women's service to nurturing, hospitality, supporting male leaders, and maintaining domestic/ritual spaces (Oduyoye, 2001; Olajubu, 2003), limiting formal recognition. Humility (*Itelórùn / Idi Umeala n'Obi*) is extolled in Christian scripture (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5) and modeled in Christ's *kenosis* (Philippians 2:5-8).

In ATR, it involves respect (*isẹ́ṣẹ́*) for elders, deities, ancestors, and authority, knowing one's place, avoiding arrogance (*igberaga*), and demonstrating modesty to foster cohesion (Mbiti, 1969). For women, humility is frequently enforced as submission, quietness, self-effacement, and acceptance of subordinate positions (e.g., interpretations of Ephesians 5:22-24; 1 Timothy 2:11-12), where assertiveness can be misconstrued as pride (Clark, 2001; Abogunrin, 1979). This reveals the core "Humility Paradox": The virtues of service and humility that women are expected to embody most perfectly often become tools justifying their exclusion from authority. Exemplary practice within prescribed roles reinforces barriers to advancement.

To critique this and envision transformation, African feminist theological frameworks are essential. Mercy Oduyoye critiques the dual patriarchies constraining women and advocates for their full agency and voice ("Talitha cum!", Mark 5:41), valuing theology from women's lived experiences and communal equality (Oduyoye, 1995, 2001). Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza provides critical methodologies:



1) Hermeneutics of Suspicion interrogates texts/traditions to expose androcentric biases legitimating subordination (Fiorenza, 1983); 2) Hermeneutics of Remembrance recovers women's erased historical agency and contributions (Fiorenza, 1992); 3) Ekklesia of Women envisions faith communities as "discipleship[s] of equals" where power is shared based on gifts, not gender (Fiorenza, 1983). Together, these enable deconstructing patriarchal interpretations, recovering women's agency in service, and redefining humility as communal strength and service as empowering leadership.

Women's Service and Humility in Action: Historical and Contemporary Expressions

Moving beyond constrained definitions, history reveals Nigerian women actively embodying service and humility in ways that demonstrate profound agency, leadership, and impact within both Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR). Far from passive acceptance, their expressions of these virtues often constituted acts of quiet strength, resilience, and transformative power. Within Christianity, pioneer evangelists and church founders defied simplistic notions of passive service. Sarah Marsh Harden, far beyond being merely a supportive wife, became the de facto leader of the Baptist community in Lagos during the critical absence of American missionaries caused by the US Civil War, sustaining the nascent church through evangelism, pastoral care, and supporting persecuted Christians fleeing inland, embodying service through resilient leadership (Atanda, 1985, p. 34; Collins, 1993, p. 1). Her humility lay in dedication, not subservience to absent male authority.

Similarly, Josephine Scaggs, awarded an OBE for her extraordinary ministry in the riverine Joinkrama area, founded and supervised 42 churches, traveling tirelessly by "cycle and canoe," directly engaging in evangelism and pastoral oversight (Ferguson, 1971, pp. 52, 61); her humble service was expressed in relentless work in challenging conditions, not in the absence of authority. Women also played foundational roles in Aladura churches (e.g., Cherubim & Seraphim - C&S, Christ Apostolic Church - CAC), such as Captain Abiodun Akinsowon (co-founder of C&S) and numerous female prophets and visionaries (e.g., *Obinrin Rere* groups), operating with significant spiritual authority through prayer, healing, and evangelism from the outset (Peel, 1968; Omoyajowo, 1982). In contemporary Pentecostalism, women like Pastor (Mrs.) Faith Oyedepo (Winners' Chapel), Rev. (Dr.) Uma Ukpai, and numerous founders of smaller ministries demonstrate significant leadership through preaching, teaching, administration, and large-scale humanitarian work, navigating complex expectations of humility and visibility (Burgess, 2008; Soothill, 2010).

Women have also been pivotal **institution builders and caregivers**, translating compassion into lasting structures. Witnessing the plight of a motherless baby in Ogbomoso (1926), Ruth Kersey's humble response was not passive pity but active institution-building, initiating care that evolved into the formal Ruth Kersey Children's Home (Travis Collins, 1993, p. 16 - implied context). Missionary nurses like Kathleen Menley,

Eleanor, and Mary Evelyn Freedenberg pioneered medical missions, establishing clinics and hospitals (e.g., Baptist Hospital, Joinkrama), embodying service through skilled, compassionate healthcare in remote areas, demonstrating humility through practical care rather than seeking acclaim (Collins, 1993, p. 16).

Furthermore, Women's Organizations (Women's Missionary Union - WMU, Mothers' Union - MU, Catholic Women's Organization - CWO) function as engines of service, fundraising, establishing and running schools, clinics, orphanages, skills acquisition centres, providing welfare support, and organizing prayer networks (Bullock, 1994, p. 1); their work, often performed with quiet dedication (humility), forms the economic and social backbone of many churches. The vital, often unseen, labour of sustaining community and ritual life constitutes another profound expression of service. Anna Hinderer's diary reveals the demanding, humble service involved in ministry, especially among children in Ibadan: "you see your work before you, see thousands of children... and you are utterly helpless... it is hard work" (Ferguson, 1971, p. 81), highlighting the essential emotional and physical labour for nurture and continuity.

Missionary wives, like Mrs. Edgerley, though roles were circumscribed, performed vital work among women and children, hospitality, and community building, facilitating broader missionary presence and acceptance (Ferguson, 1971, p. 99). Countless unnamed women form the bedrock of congregations, organizing worship, teaching Sunday School, leading choirs, visiting the sick, preparing communal meals, cleaning sacred spaces, and providing emotional support – labour performed with humility that sustains the daily life and spirit of religious communities.

Within ATR, women hold specific, powerful roles as custodians of tradition and spiritual power, defined by service to deities and community. Priestesses (*Iyalorisas, Iyaloja, Iyami Aje* - e.g., of Osun, Yemoja) undergo rigorous training, dedicating their lives to serving specific deities (*òrìṣà*). They mediate between the community and the divine, perform essential rituals, maintain shrines, offer spiritual counsel and healing, and oversee major festivals (e.g., Osun-Osogbo) (Olajubu, 2003; Olupona, 2011). Their service requires deep knowledge, discipline, and humility before the divine, commanding significant respect and authority within their domain, even amidst broader patriarchal structures.

Specific women also act as custodians of ritual knowledge and practice, such as the female custodian in Ogbomoso whose blessing is essential for the masquerade festival to commence, embodying service through the preservation and enactment of sacred tradition. Oral traditions also credit figures like Eye Mote (Iyin-Ekiti) with defending communities, demonstrating service through spiritual and physical protection, embodying communal humility through self-sacrifice. Contemporary expressions of this legacy continue in the 21st century. Women lead faith-based NGOs tackling poverty, healthcare (HIV/AIDS, maternal health), education (girl-child), and conflict resolution, translating religious conviction into social service.

As pastors and preachers, they are increasingly visible



in Pentecostal and some Aladura/Protestant circles, leading congregations, preaching, teaching, and providing pastoral care while navigating complex expectations. Theologians and scholars contribute significantly to theological discourse, challenging patriarchal interpretations and offering womanist/feminist perspectives (e.g., works by Njoroge, Oduyoye, Phiri, Olajubu), serving through intellectual leadership. Grassroots community organizers mobilize communities for development projects, peacebuilding initiatives, and advocacy around issues like gender-based violence, embodying service grounded in faith and local need. Across time and tradition, Nigerian women have demonstrated that authentic service and humility are not antithetical to agency, leadership, or profound impact.

Navigating the Terrain: Challenges for Nigerian Women in the 21st Century

Despite their vital contributions and expressions of service, Nigerian women of faith encounter significant, interconnected challenges rooted in patriarchal interpretations of religion, culture, and institutional structures. **Theological and interpretative barriers** form a primary obstacle. Passages like 1 Timothy 2:11-12 ("*I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man*"), 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 ("*women should remain silent in the churches*"), and Ephesians 5:22-24 (wives submit to husbands) are interpreted literally and universally to justify excluding women from preaching, ordination, and senior leadership positions in many denominations (Catholic, Orthodox, Baptist conventions, many Anglican dioceses, Reformed churches), confining service to roles deemed "appropriate" by male hierarchy (Abogunrin, 1979, p. 15).

Hierarchical interpretations of Genesis 2 (Adam created first, Eve from his rib) and Genesis 3:16 ("he shall rule over you") are used ontologically to establish permanent male authority, framing female leadership as inherently prideful or disorderly, violating patriarchal definitions of humility (Clark, 2001). The theological framework of **complementarianism**, influential in many Evangelical and Pentecostal circles, asserts "equal worth but different roles," typically reserving ultimate teaching and leadership authority for men and positioning women's ambition as ungodly. Furthermore, the biblical witness to female leaders (Deborah, Huldah, Phoebe, Junia, Priscilla, the "elect lady" of 2 John) is often minimized or reinterpreted to fit patriarchal norms, while a hermeneutic of suspicion is rarely applied to restrictive texts (Gundry, 1977, p. 91).

These theological barriers are **reinforced by entrenched cultural and patriarchal systems**. Patrilineal systems governing inheritance, lineage tracing, traditional titles (chieftaincy), and family leadership predominantly flow through male lines, reinforcing the notion that authority is inherently masculine and directing women's service towards upholding these structures. Rigid cultural gender role prescriptions often confine women to domestic and supportive spheres, making public spiritual leadership or challenging male decisions appear culturally inappropriate, arrogant, or a failure of humility (Helwig, p. 6).

Practices like bride price (dowry), while complex, can subtly reinforce notions of women as property transferred between male lineages, impacting their autonomy within marriage and the wider religious community, framing their role primarily as service to the husband/family. Resistance to change is significant, as patriarchal structures benefit those in power (primarily men), with Hearn (2001, p. 10) noting the resistance of "straightforwardly patriarchal men" to equality agendas unless they perceive personal benefit; cultural notions of tradition are frequently invoked to resist women's leadership.

Institutional obstacles concretize these barriers. Formal exclusion persists through glass ceilings and stained-glass ceilings, with major denominations barring women from ordination and highest offices. Even where female pastors are allowed, they are often underrepresented in top leadership (General Overseers, Presiding Bishops, Synod Presidents) and major decision-making bodies (Soothill, 2010). Access to deep theological training, degrees, and leadership development programs specifically preparing women for senior roles can be restricted or discouraged in some contexts, limiting their qualifications and confidence. Control of church finances, property, and key appointments typically rests with men, limiting women's ability to initiate and sustain independent ministries or meaningfully challenge the status quo.

Gendered liturgy and language, using exclusively male imagery for God and humanity in worship practices, hymns, prayers, and religious language, reinforces male normativity and subtly marginalizes women's full participation and self-understanding. The "Humility Trap" manifests pervasively. Women's extensive, often unpaid labour in sustaining congregations (cleaning, cooking, childcare, fundraising, teaching children) is frequently taken for granted, its value unrecognized in formal structures or histories (Bullock, 1994, p. 1; Akintunde, 2005, p. 143). Expectations of female humility are used to discourage women from speaking out against injustice, challenging male authority, expressing ambition, or claiming credit for their work, with assertiveness mislabelled as pride. Furthermore, patriarchy can be spiritualized as "God's order," demanding humble acceptance; resisting exclusion or seeking equality is then framed as rebellion against divine will, a failure in humility.

Socio-economic and political factors compound these religious challenges. Economic vulnerability and poverty can force women into dependent relationships within religious communities, limiting their ability to challenge patriarchal norms or pursue leadership roles requiring financial independence. Gender-based violence, sometimes justified by distorted religious interpretations or cultural practices framed as "discipline," remains a severe challenge, creating fear and inhibiting full participation.

Women's underrepresentation in broader political power structures mirrors and reinforces their marginalization within religious institutions, limiting their ability to influence laws and policies impacting religious gender dynamics. These interconnected and pervasive challenges require immense resilience, strategic agency, and constant negotiation from Nigerian women seeking to live out their faith through meaningful service and authentic humility that does not equate to subjugation.



Reimagining Virtue: Pathways Towards Gender Justice and Empowered Service

Confronting the challenges to women's full participation requires moving beyond critique to propose actionable pathways grounded in feminist theology and the historical evidence of women's agency. This necessitates a fundamental reimagining of service and humility as virtues of communal strength and empowerment. A Feminist Reinterpretation of Service and Humility forms the cornerstone of this transformation. Service (*diakonia*) must be reclaimed as Christ-like leadership that empowers others and transforms communities. The focus shifts decisively from service upholding patriarchal structures to service dedicated to building an *ekklesia* of equals and advancing the common good (Fiorenza). All forms of service whether institution-building, caregiving, or community organizing must be equally valued, recognizing the inherent leadership within each. This embodies Mercy Amba Oduyoye's powerful call, "Talitha cum!" women rising to serve in the fullness of their God-given authority.

Similarly, humility must be redefined not as self-abnegation or submission to hierarchy, but as Relational Authenticity: knowing one's gifts and limitations, being open to learning and correction, and acknowledging interdependence within the community (Fiorenza's *ekklesia*). It is Respect for All, grounded in the inherent dignity of every person (Genesis 1:27), rather than deference based solely on gender or position. Crucially, it manifests as a Commitment to Justice: humbly acknowledging one's privilege and actively working to dismantle systems of oppression. True humility, therefore, enables speaking truth to power and challenging injustice.

Affirming Women's Leadership and Authority demands concrete institutional change. Churches must undertake serious theological re-examinations, applying Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion to restrictive texts and hermeneutics of remembrance to recover affirming biblical narratives (Romans 16; Galatians 3:28; Acts 2:17-18; the ministry of Jesus with women). Theological seminaries must integrate feminist theology (Oduyoye, Fiorenza) and women's studies into their core curricula.

Furthermore, denominations that restrict women must abolish formal policies barring ordination and access to all levels of leadership, including the episcopacy, based on the overwhelming evidence of the Spirit's work in women and the demands of justice. Actively identifying, mentoring, sponsoring, and promoting qualified women into senior leadership positions (Presiding Bishops, General Overseers, Synod Presidents) is essential. Equitable representation on all decision-making bodies must be ensured, providing platforms for women's voices and theological contributions. Recognizing and affirming the spiritual gifts (prophecy, teaching, healing, leadership) evident in women, as historically demonstrated in movements like Aladura and Pentecostalism, is vital, creating space for their exercise beyond rigid institutional confines.

Recovering and Celebrating Women's Histories is fundamental to countering erasure. Churches, theological institutions, and academic bodies should commission dedicated documentation projects to recover the contributions of women

like Harden, Scaggs, Kersey, Elton, ATR priestesses, and countless unnamed sustainers, utilizing oral histories and archival research. These recovered histories must then be integrated into official church narratives, theological education, seminary training, sermons, and Sunday school curricula, making women's agency central to the story of Nigerian religion. Public recognition through named institutions, awards, festivals, and publications celebrates the legacies of pioneering women, countering historical amnesia and providing essential role models.

Cultivating Supportive Communities and Alliances provides crucial networks for empowerment. Strengthening interdenominational and interfaith networks of women facilitates mutual support, resource sharing, advocacy training, and mentorship (older women mentoring younger), creating safe spaces for theological reflection and sharing experiences ("hearthhold" theology). Engaging men as allies requires targeted programs to educate men (clergy, lay leaders, congregants) on gender justice, feminist theology, and the benefits of equality for the whole community. Male leaders must be encouraged to publicly champion women's leadership, share power, and actively dismantle patriarchal structures, promoting positive models of partnership. Ecumenical and interfaith collaboration fosters dialogue and joint action on issues of gender equality and women's empowerment within faith communities.

Transforming Language, Liturgy, and Practice addresses symbolic and ritual reinforcement of equality. Consistently using gender-inclusive language for humanity and exploring diverse biblical metaphors for God (including feminine Wisdom/Sophia imagery) in liturgy, hymns, prayers, and teaching is necessary. Reformed liturgies that explicitly affirm women's calling, celebrate female biblical figures and historical leaders, promote mutuality, and observe days commemorating women's contributions should be developed and incorporated. Furthermore, faith communities must engage in critical, culturally sensitive dialogue about harmful cultural practices, such as bride price, that can reinforce patriarchal notions impacting women's status, framing these discussions around shared religious values of dignity, justice, and love.

Ultimately, Women's Assertive Agency is indispensable. Women themselves must actively claim their space, drawing inspiration from historical figures who served with quiet strength and contemporary leaders who break barriers. This involves pursuing theological education and leadership training, mentoring younger women and building solidarity networks, speaking out against injustice within religious spaces using scripture and theology to support their claims, creating alternative spaces for ministry and leadership when excluded from traditional structures, and embodying a humility that is confident in God's calling and strength, not self-diminishing. This integrated approach, redefining virtue, affirming leadership, recovering history, building community, transforming practice, and asserting agency, charts the pathway towards genuine gender justice and empowered service.

The intertwined virtues of service and humility are not



inherently problematic for Nigerian women in religion; the core issue lies in their patriarchal distortion and weaponization. This paper has demonstrated that Nigerian women have historically embodied these virtues with profound agency, resilience, and transformative power – serving as pioneer evangelists like Sarah Marsh Harden and Josephine Scaggs, institution builders like Ruth Kersey, dedicated caregivers, custodians of African Traditional Religion (ATR) traditions, and the indispensable sustaining backbone of congregations. Their service has consistently expressed quiet strength, and their humility reflected deep commitment, never weakness.

However, the 21st century presents persistent challenges: restrictive theological interpretations used to confine women, entrenched cultural patriarchy, institutional barriers to leadership positions, and the insidious "humility trap" that equates female virtue with subservience and invisibility. These structures stifle the full potential of women and, consequently, diminish the vitality, witness, and transformative capacity of Nigerian religious communities themselves. The path forward demands courageous transformation, rigorously guided by the insights of African feminist theology. This necessitates a fundamental **reimagining of virtue**, embracing a feminist hermeneutic that redefines service (*diakonia*) as empowered, transformative agency and humility as relational strength and commitment to justice within the *ekklesia* of equals.

Concurrently, it requires dismantling barriers through serious theological reform, the removal of institutional obstacles to women's ordination and access to all levels of leadership (including the episcopacy), and the active promotion and mentoring of women into positions of senior authority. Recovering history is essential, involving the systematic documentation and centering of women's indispensable contributions within the official narrative of Nigerian faith, countering historical amnesia. Building alliances is crucial, fostering supportive interdenominational and interfaith women's networks, proactively engaging men as educated allies committed to gender justice, and promoting ecumenical and interfaith collaboration.

Finally, it calls for assertive agency from women themselves, encouraging them to pursue theological education, claim their God-given calling, challenge injustice with theological conviction, and build solidarity. As Hazel Ayang (1999) asserted, "The church needs and requires the Services and participation of both men and women if it is to bear fruit" (p. 90). Nyambura Njoroge (2001) insisted that a vibrant African church necessitates engaging women's theology (p. 316).

True service to God and community in Nigeria requires the full participation, leadership, and theological voice of women, liberated from patriarchal constraints. When women rise ("Talitha cum!") into the fullness of their God-given authority, serving with strength and humility authentically redefined, Nigerian religious communities will not only become more just but also more dynamic, compassionate, and truly transformative forces for collective flourishing in the 21st century and beyond. The time for this essential transformation is now.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the findings, the following recommendations are hereby proposed:

1. Undertake feminist theological reinterpretation of service and humility using hermeneutics of suspicion/remembrance.
2. Remove all formal barriers to women's ordination and leadership positions, including episcopal roles.
3. Implement active promotion and mentorship programs for women in senior leadership.
4. Systematically document and integrate women's historical contributions into religious education and narratives.
5. Strengthen interdenominational/interfaith women's networks for support and advocacy.
6. Develop and implement gender-inclusive liturgical language and practices.
7. Engage in critical dialogue on harmful cultural practices (e.g., bride price) through theological lenses.
8. Support women's assertive agency through theological education and solidarity initiatives.

CONCLUSION

In Nigeria's religious landscape, virtues such as service and humility—celebrated across both Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR)—have become paradoxical tools of suppression for women. While these virtues are upheld as pathways to spiritual fulfillment, they are often weaponized through patriarchal interpretation to constrain female agency. This "humility paradox" reveals how women's exemplary practice of these virtues ironically reinforces their marginalization, exposing the gendered dynamics embedded in religious life.

Despite being the backbone of faith communities—serving as pioneering evangelists like Sarah Marsh Harden and Josephine Scaggs, ATR priestesses, institution-builders, and sustainers of communal worship—women continue to face theological, cultural, and institutional barriers. Sacrificial service is frequently equated with silent support, and humility is misread as subservience. Androcentric readings of scripture (e.g., 1 Timothy 2:11–12; Ephesians 5:22–24) legitimize restrictions on women's voices, while patrilineal customs such as bride price naturalize male authority. Institutional structures further entrench exclusion through stained-glass ceilings that limit women's access to formal leadership. Yet, Nigerian women have persistently subverted these constraints.

From Aladura prophetesses to contemporary theologians and grassroots organizers, they have redefined service and humility as acts of resilient agency. Their lived witness challenges the dominant narrative and offers a model of empowered spirituality rooted in justice and community. Transforming this landscape requires both theological and



institutional renewal. Liberative reinterpretation—drawing on Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s hermeneutics of suspicion and remembrance and Mercy Amba Oduyoye’s call for risen agency—must redefine service as empowered leadership within an *ekklesia* of equals, and humility as relational strength grounded in justice.

Institutional transformation must follow: abolishing gender-based ordination bans, promoting women to senior roles, and integrating the contributions of overlooked female religious figures into curricula and liturgy. Equally vital is the cultivation of communal solidarity—through interfaith women’s networks, male allyship, and liturgical reform that affirms equality in practice. As Ayang (1999) aptly states, “The church needs the service of both men and women to bear fruit.” Only by reclaiming these virtues as sources of dignity and agency can Nigeria’s religious communities realize their transformative potential and embody a vision of spiritual flourishing that includes all.

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