

# Prospects of addressing the challenges of gender inequalities in Christian missions

**Author:**Akinyemi O. Alawode<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**Akinyemi Alawode,  
akinalawode@gmail.com**Dates:**

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Gender inequality has been pervasive in many aspects of society, including religious institutions. Christian missions often reinforce patriarchal structures that limit the participation of women in leadership and ministry roles. However, this does not reflect the true nature of Christianity, which embraces equality and inclusivity for all individuals. This article analyses the challenges of gender inequality within Christian missions in Northern Nigeria to propose ways of addressing the issue and focussing on addressing the challenges in Nigeria, Northern Nigeria especially. The article adopted the descriptive method employing an interview guide as an instrument to collect primary data from missionaries of the Nigerian Baptist Convention in Northern Nigeria. It employed content analysis to analyse data collected from the field.

**Contribution:** The contribution of this article is that it gives an overview of gender inequality in Northern Nigeria, examines the challenges of gender inequalities in Christian missions, highlights and explains the prospects of tackling the challenges, and concludes on the issues raised within the article.

**Keywords:** prospects; addressing; challenges; gender inequalities; Christian missions; Northern Nigeria.

## Introduction

The challenge of gender inequalities has been a perennial one, and has been addressed from different perspectives. Beyond the problems in different walks of life, it is a common problem in the religious setting and among the missionaries. For some years now, several missionary activities have been embarked upon for the church's expansion by male and female missionaries, but with a closer look at women's involvement. This article aims to address the following questions: How can the challenges of gender inequalities in Christian missions in Northern Nigeria not help missionary expansion? What are the prospects of tackling the challenges of gender inequalities in Christian missions in Northern Nigeria?

The number of women and men calling into question the need to champion the campaign for gender equality is growing by the day. The article attempts to give an overview of gender inequality in Northern Nigeria, examines the challenges of gender inequalities in Christian missions, highlights and explains the prospects of tackling the challenges, and concludes on the issues raised within the article.

## Overview of gender inequalities in Northern Nigeria

Gender is how societies divide humanity according to sex into two distinctive categories. Gender guides how males and females think about themselves, and further influences how they relate with others because it determines their position in the community. Gender is about the roles, behaviours, activities, attributes and opportunities society considers appropriate for males and females. Gender interacts with the binary biological sex categories (World Health Organization [WHO] 2020:17). Gender inequality is the disparity between males and females. These barriers give certain high-class people access to a better stake of societal resources, making them better off than those in the lower class (Anyalebechi 2016:1–9; Kleven & Landais 2017:180–209; Matthew et al. 2020:763–780).

Therefore, gender is a dimension of social inequality (Hazel & Kleyman 2019:285). This inequality, historically not favoured by females, is not an easy matter of biological differences between the sexes. Indeed, females and males differ biologically, but these disparities are complex and inconsistent. In global perception, the preference for boys is more evident in Africa and most Asia countries. Hence, discrimination against females is common in these countries.

**Note:** Historical Thought and Source Interpretation.

**Read online:**

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Nigeria is a well-known African nation because of its large population and disposition to religious activities, especially Christianity. The country is divided into six geopolitical zones: North West, North Central, North East, South West, South-South and South East. All these geopolitical zones comprise 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). The country's population is over 218 million, and the religious population is 45.9% Christians, 53.5% Muslims and 0.6% other religious adherents (Society & Religions 2022), and it varies with each state. Muslims dominate the northern region, and Christians dominate the country's southern region; this is unsurprising because the northeastern part is the first contact with Islam in Nigeria.

Islam has been spreading in Nigeria since the 11th century when it first surfaced in Borno, the country's northeastern part (Musa 2019:97). And a significant religious activist, Uthman dan Fodio, the Fulani great grandfather started a jihad [holy war] in 1804 that lasted for 6 years, aiming to purify, revive and establish Islam (African Studies Centre 2022). Christianity, missionary interest and propaganda in Northern Nigeria may have been prevalent before the 18th century. By 1708, at least 100 000 Christian adherents were in the kingdom of Kororofa (Ayandele 1966:3). Both the religion and the culture of the people in northern Nigeria determine the degree to which gender inequality thrives in the region.

The cultural attitude of people towards the female gender in Northern Nigeria is glaring through the questions people ask after a child's birth. One such question is, 'What is the child's gender?'. The answer to such a question largely determines a child's societal destiny (Omorieg & Abraham 2009:3). Northern Nigeria is one of the vital regions with patriarchal leadership.

In African society, including northern Nigeria, women's education did not receive significant attention, leading to the second-class status assigned to women in society. Women are relegated to mere agents of domestic engagements at home, with considerable reproductive roles. This apathy arising from gender inequality has also affected education in Nigeria. As a result, the males have dominated northern Nigerian schools from the primary to tertiary level.

The vulnerability of the female gender in the Northern part of Nigeria is likened to an 'endangered species' that struggles daily to survive. The country's northern region is notorious for negativities: illiteracy, unemployment, poverty, insecurity and now, blatant abuse of the health and reproductive rights of women and girls. This article uses statistics and scholarly findings of research and literature to expose the precarious activities that pervade the region and highlights the above factors: poverty, illiteracy and unemployment. The article articulates these factors, which include but are not restricted to abuse of health and reproductive right of women and girls, insecurity, illiteracy and early marriage. Their absence in religious leadership has not been debated in the frontline. The situation has grown to the level of scholars calling the

country's national leadership to treat the condition of women and girls in the north as an emergency by setting up structures headed by or with joint headship roles of women that will examine their situations and proffer solutions (Ogbe 2020:55). Some have suggested the creation of an Empowerment Education Fund (EEF) to plan accessibility for mandatory primary, secondary and even tertiary education for the female child in Northern Nigeria (Ogunode & Adah 2020:3).

The research article 'Gender inequality: Determinants and outcomes in Nigeria' by Adeosun and Owolabi (2021) shows that gender discrimination is more pronounced across the region, location, and in some employment sectors than others. Geographical area has a higher effect on earnings inequality but is more pronounced among females. However, married women are more deprived (Adeosun & Owolabi 2021:165–181). It is therefore clearly evident that continuous efforts must be made to ensure that gender inequality is reduced in contemporary society.

## Challenges of gender inequalities in Christian missions

There are specific challenges facing missionaries everywhere today, which include the changing meaning and practice of mission, justice and peace. However, all missionaries interviewed by the researcher attested that the females are only involved in cross-cultural missions when they are married to male missionaries. More so, the engaged females at best did that on a service-type level. One of the male respondents opined that females are engaged on the condition that they will minister to women, young ladies and children. Alternatively, a female respondent believes that if the women are involved in an education mission in a school set-up or a medical mission, they can be engaged in cross-cultural missions because it is easy to reach women in such mission areas, especially concerning children's welfare (health). The comment of the female respondent, who is a missionary's wife, resonates with the male respondent's stance. The response being male clergy take centre stage, monopolising leadership and policy-making roles. This reality raises the following question among the scholars: What leads to this gender classification of work? This question has been answered from the field research reported in this article (Makama 2013:137).

It is essential to mention that the interviews reveal that the agitation of individuals for gender equality may not be granted because it is a denominational stance borne out of cultural and theological consideration, especially for Northern Nigeria.

Uchem (2001:148) is one of the missionary sisters who shared her experience formally reflecting on gender inequality in her article titled 'Gender inequality as an enduring obstacle to Mission'. This researcher analyses her experience alongside the responses of Baptist missionaries in Northern Nigeria, pinpointing the challenges of gender inequality in missions,

especially in Northern Nigeria. There are many challenges facing female missionaries, such as difficulties in ministry, lack of monetary support, internal denominational affairs, and culturally reinforced biblical interpretation.

### Difficulties in ministry

The experience of Uchem (2001) is similar to that of Baptist females on the Baptist mission fields in Northern Nigeria as they can be involved in the social ministry department and other relevant places. One of the male missionaries opined that on a general note, women could be involved in cross-cultural missions but at the directive of their husbands, which the Bible said has authority over them, on the condition that they are support staff such as teachers. This comment shows a limitation of the ministry of the female gender based on theological understanding.

Zentner (2015:17) further narrated that many believe it must be the male gender. In contrast to Zentner's experience, Baptist females on the mission fields do not work independently but with their husbands who assign roles; hence, they can take up the lead role in some capacities when the husband is unavailable. Compared with some Baptist females on the field who were ordained as Ministers, they can take pastoral roles because they are trained Baptist ministers.

### The problem of financial support

The field research reveals that only missionaries' wives are paid because, apart from an American woman who never married as a missionary to Nigeria, all recognised missionaries are of the male gender. Hence, they are paid a stipend because of their husbands. The report shows that females who studied missiology in the same Seminary as the men are offered appointments directly as convention missionaries. When such a female missiologist is married to a missionary, her pay remains the stipend like every other missionary's spouse in cross-cultural missions; this no doubt shows the challenge of financing that gender inequality poses in cross-cultural missions.

A higher percentage of the Baptist missionaries in Northern Nigeria commented that the convention is trying to pay missionaries' wives with a package depending on their academic qualification; that is, the illiterates up till those who have a National Certificate of Education (NCE) are entitled to 50% of the husband's monthly salary. In comparison, those with university degrees and above are entitled to 75% of their husband's monthly salary. Only a few interviewees felt it could be improved upon with time. A mark of 75% and interviewees' response shows that Baptist finance regarding gender is sound and still a work in progress.

### Internal denominational affair challenge

In the Baptist denomination, missionaries reveal that the denominational stand is not based on female inferiority.

However, it is the policy of the Global Missions Board, the Mission Agency of the Nigerian Baptist Convention, not to engage single women and/or married women alone, except those whose spouses died in active service on the mission field (Rev Obus Obade [Kufunat's home mission field] and Rev Adene Joan [Zamanja's home mission field] pers. comm., 03 July 2023). This stance has been for a long time been on the ground in the denomination. Therefore, the denominational stance can be for the reason of order or for the inferiority of the female gender, which fits more into the situation of gender inequality in cross-cultural missions. Some denominations have a stance based on the biblical injunction that women should submit to their husbands.

### Culturally reinforced biblical interpretation challenge

Culturally reinforced biblical interpretation is a critical challenge. A report from the Baptist mission field reveals diverse views according to the female gender. Some male missionaries believe that the Bible supports women playing supportive roles in the field and would not advise a frontier role for female missionaries. She can serve alongside her husband or a male counterpart. Another opinion by a male missionary and another missionary's wife is that female missionaries should be called to the mission field since God can use any gender to do his work. Females have more opportunities to minister to people since they can easily interact and adapt to the new environment. A higher percentage of respondents believe that culture is not a barrier to male dominance in Northern Nigeria, and since the Bible does not directly address whether female missionaries should be engaged or not, female missionaries can be engaged to take a frontier role. One of the respondents noted that the Southern Baptist Convention sent some single ladies, married women, and their husbands as missionaries to Africa. Hence, in as much as the Western world is practising gender equality, it may not be accessible in Northern Nigeria because of the doctrine and teachings of Islam, where women do not have the final say and cannot decide for men because they are under men's authority.

### Strategies for addressing gender inequalities

Gender inequalities in Christian missions in Northern Nigeria have been a longstanding issue with deep-rooted cultural and religious factors. While there is a growing recognition of the importance of gender equality in contemporary society, many Christian missions in this region continue to face challenges in promoting gender equality. Addressing these gender inequalities requires a multi-faceted approach, including promoting education, fostering inclusive leadership, creating ministry spaces for women and financial support, and challenging patriarchal interpretations.

Gender inequalities in Christian missions in Northern Nigeria present significant challenges. However, there are

prospects in the sense that tackling these issues and promoting greater gender equality in Christian missions in Northern Nigeria helps to enhance the work of missions as it allows for more human resources for the Christian mission.

### **Education and empowerment**

Writing on education in Nigeria, Patience Chioma, Ogbonna Goodluck and Jonathan Nwosu submit that Nigeria, being a patriarchal society, gives preference for male education, resulting in a disparity between males and females in the area of access to education as females are not given equal opportunity like their male counterparts (Chioma, Goodluck & Nwosu 2021:123). This is glaringly more evident in Northern Nigeria; Grace Okafor notes that fathers deliberately denied their daughters education, because they consider investment in female education as an unprofitable venture since it is primarily upheld that marriage and motherhood are the primary duties of women and that the girls are expected to finally end up in another man's home. Above all, the girls are often sent into early marriage (Okafor 2010:61, 65). Hence, providing education and skills training for women in Northern Nigeria can help empower them to overcome traditional gender roles and participate more actively in Christian missions.

Another dimension to education is providing biblical and theological training for Christian women in Northern Nigeria. This will help equip them as they interact with other women in the marketplace and the community.

### **Christian ministry, evangelism and missions/ creating ministry spaces for women**

The mandate of the great commission, as found in Matthew 28:19, is a mandate for all Christians of all generations, male and female, laity and clergy. All Christ's disciples are responsible for faithfully spreading the Christian faith. The work of missions is for all believers. Women's involvement in Christian ministry has been from the inception of Christianity. Cunningham, Hamilton and Rogers (2000:227, 229) submit that Paul opened the door of public ministry to women, for men and women were treated the same way as co-workers in the gospel proclamation, and he was absolutely committed to equality. The account of Priscilla and Aquila is one of the most prominent in the Scriptures. Cunningham et al. further note that while Paul did ministry with Priscilla and Aquila, he also made references to some women who were involved in ministry during his time, one of whom is Phoebe, whom Paul commended as a fellow servant of the Lord and exemplary leader in the church. He never withheld leadership responsibility from godly women (Cunningham et al. 2000:230).

Over the years in the church's history, women have played a substantial role in the church's missionary activities. Rose Uchem, affirming this, submits that women and missionary sisters had carried out much of the missionary activities on behalf of the whole church. However, she notes that much of their work had been primarily on service-type and back-

stage roles, While the male-dominated clergy takes centre stage, monopolising the leadership and the policy-making roles (Uchem 2006:270). One significant issue that makes tackling gender inequality in Christian missions in Northern Nigeria vital is the practice of Purdah among the Islamic-dominated northern region. According to Okafor (2010:65), women in purdah, particularly the married ones, are usually secluded from the public according to the Islamic ways of life, as women in purdah hardly come out in public places. With this practice, reaching such women with the gospel becomes challenging. However, with Christian women's proper training and equipping, it is much more efficient for them to relate with fellow women. Christian mission practitioners should advocate for equal opportunities for women to serve as pastors, missionaries, teachers and administrators through which they can reach fellow women whom the socio-religious and cultural barriers of Northern Nigeria would not allow men to reach.

### **Fostering inclusive leadership**

Promoting and supporting women in leadership roles within Christian missions can challenge gender inequalities. Providing mentorship and training programmes targeting women can aid them in developing the necessary skills and confidence (Okure 2017:18). Some Christian organisations and leaders are committed to empowering women in mission leadership roles. They advocate for equal opportunities for women to serve as pastors, missionaries, teachers and administrators. Through training programmes and mentorship, they equip women with the necessary skills and support to become influential leaders in Christian missions. Kategile (2020:51) submits that women should be willing to be educated and encouraged to learn new ways of serving God and the people. In this way, women will get new knowledge that will arm them to function in all ministerial positions and be well-equipped with the necessary qualifications to participate in all ministerial roles like their male counterparts. Another way of getting the female gender to the place of executive leadership in the church is to encourage females to be educated.

### **Challenging patriarchal interpretations**

Some religious interpretations in Northern Nigeria reinforce patriarchal norms and limit women's roles within Christian missions. Selective interpretations of religious texts often perpetuate gender disparities and discourage women from pursuing leadership roles (Orji & Enyi 2018:145). However, women missionaries in Northern Nigeria may face gender-based violence and discrimination within the church and the broader society. This further reinforces the existing gender inequalities and creates additional challenges for women's participation in Christian missions (Okeke-Uzodike 2017:74-75). Such religious interpretations which promote perpetual gender disparities and discourage women from taking up leadership roles should be confronted. Challenging patriarchal norms and cultural traditions perpetuating gender inequalities in Christian missions is crucial to engaging with local communities and religious leaders to

promote more inclusive interpretations of religious texts to foster gender equality.

## Finance

Women are generally known to be passionate about giving for missions. An example is the Women Missionary Union of the Nigerian Baptist Convention, which the writer has observed over the years to commit many financial and material resources to the Baptist mission fields within and outside the country. A careful look at the Global Missions Board book of the report shows the women's contributions to various mission fields of the convention.

## Conclusion

Christian missions in Northern Nigeria can potentially be powerful agents of change, not only in religious matters but also in addressing gender inequalities. This article highlighted the historical, cultural and contextual challenges perpetuating gender disparities within these missions. By recognising these challenges and implementing the prospects mentioned above, Christian missions can become more inclusive and effective in their work in Northern Nigeria. Addressing gender inequalities is a moral imperative and a strategic move that can lead to substantial, more sustainable mission efforts.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Author's contributions

A.O.A. is the sole author of this research article.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author, and the publisher.

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