

# **Contextualizing the New Testament Female Role in Leadership for the Growth of Nigerian Society**

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## **Abstract**

In the New Testament, women like Deborah a brave and courageous woman, she played the role of a captain in order to encourage male soldiers of Israel. Lydia, the seller of purple goods, and Priscilla, who worked alongside her husband Aquila in tentmaking, were economically independent and contributors to their communities. Phoebe, described as a "deacon" of the church in Cencreae (Romans 16:1), was involved in financial and charitable work, helping support the mission of the early Church. In Nigeria today, women have significant roles in economic growth, especially in agriculture, small-scale businesses, and the informal sector. Nigerian women, particularly in rural areas, play an essential role in food production and the preservation of local economies. However, despite their substantial contributions, women face challenges such as limited access to credit, land ownership, education and recognition. Much like the New Testament women who were involved in commerce and resource management, Nigerian women need policies and structures that recognize and support their economic empowerment. This study investigates the roles of women leaders in the New Testament and how these examples can influence the role of women in the growth of Nigeria society. Through qualitative and quantitative methodologies, this research examines how female biblical leadership such as Deborah, Phoebe, Priscilla, and Lydia can

inspire and empower Nigerian women to take more prominent roles in society and governance. The study is grounded in Feminist Leadership Theory, which advocates for the equal participation of women in leadership roles across all sectors of society. The research utilizes a survey of 1,000 Nigerian respondents to analyze attitudes towards women in leadership and their implications for Nigeria's social, economic, and political development. The study concludes that while there are barriers to female leadership in Nigeria society, using the New Testament's model of female leadership offers significant potential for societal change. The study provides recommendations for policy reforms, education, and social interventions to increase female participation in national growth.

**Keywords: Female Leadership, New Testament, Nigeria society, Growth.**

## **Introduction**

Historically, women have been excluded from leadership roles in many parts of the world, specifically Nigeria, due to cultural, religious, and societal factors. However, the New Testament offers examples of women who held significant leadership roles within early Christian communities, challenging patriarchal norms. Women like Deborah, Priscilla, Phoebe, and Junia illustrate biblical models of leadership that are often overlooked but offer insights into the broader discussion of women's roles in governance and societal development. This study examines these biblical roles and investigates their implications for Nigerian women, exploring how biblical perspectives can reshape contemporary views on female leadership and involvement in national development.

The primary aim of this study is to explore the leadership roles of some female in the New Testament and assess how these examples can inform and inspire women's involvement in the development of Nigeria. The study aims to understand how

these biblical portrayals can influence societal attitudes towards gender equality and empower Nigerian women to actively contribute to the nation's development.

## **Methodology**

This study uses both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. Qualitatively, a content analysis of the New Testament is conducted, focusing on key women leaders and their contributions to early Christian communities. Quantitatively, a survey is administered to 1,000 respondents in Nigeria (both male and female), exploring their views on women in leadership, their participation in societal development, and the influence of religious teachings on these perspectives. The survey is complemented by statistical analysis to identify patterns and correlations.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The study is grounded in Feminist Leadership Theory, which advocates for the equal participation of women in leadership roles across all sectors of society. This theory challenges traditional hierarchical structures and emphasizes a more inclusive and collaborative approach to leadership. Additionally, Social Learning Theory is used to explore how societal norms and attitudes towards women's leadership are learned and reinforced through cultural and religious frameworks.

## **Conceptual Clarification**

Scholars such as Elizabeth Johnson (1992) emphasize that the Bible's portrayal of women is often misinterpreted in a way that subordinates them, while feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983) argue that early Christian texts contain significant examples of women in leadership roles that can empower contemporary women. Phyllis Trible (1978) further argues that a feminist interpretation of the Bible reveals

stories of strong women leaders such as Deborah and Junia, whose leadership challenges patriarchal structures. Additionally, John Hull (1999) explains how religious traditions often shape public perceptions of women in leadership, both positively and negatively.

## **Scholars' Perspectives**

Trible (1978) and Ruether (1983) argue that biblical texts provide evidence of women in leadership roles, yet these examples have often been marginalized in traditional theological interpretations. In Nigeria, the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions is well documented. Omolara (2016) discusses how cultural and societal norms limit women's political participation, while Adebayo (2017) highlights the lack of educational opportunities for women in rural areas. However, Ogunyemi (2019) demonstrates that religious teachings, particularly those from the Bible, can be transformative in altering societal views on women's roles in leadership.

### **A. The place of Women in the New Testament**

The New Testament presents a complex and multifaceted view of women, recognizing them as integral to the mission and development of the early Christian community. Although the societal context was patriarchal, the New Testament provides numerous examples of women who held significant roles in the church, offering a revolutionary perspective on gender roles during that time. The place of women in the New Testament can be categorized into several key areas:

#### **1. Disciples and Followers of Jesus**

Women played a pivotal role as disciples and followers of Jesus Christ. They were often present during his ministry, supported his work, and were key witnesses to his resurrection. Some notable women include:

Mary Magdalene: She is one of the most prominent women in the New Testament. Mary Magdalene was a close follower of Jesus and was the first to witness his resurrection, making her the first to proclaim the good news of Jesus' victory over death (John 20:11-18). The women who supported Jesus financially: Luke 8:1-3 mentions a group of women who provided material support for Jesus and his disciples, including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna. Also, Mary, the Mother of Jesus: As the mother of Jesus, Mary holds a central role in the New Testament narrative, from the birth of Jesus to her presence at his crucifixion (Luke 1:26-38; John 19:25-27).

## **2. Female Leaders in the Early Church**

Women were involved in leadership roles in the early Christian community, even though these roles were often informal or less visible compared to their male counterparts. Some examples of women who held leadership positions include:

**Priscilla:** Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila, was a key figure in the early church. She was a teacher and a co-laborer with the Apostle Paul, helping to instruct Apollos (Acts 18:24-28). Her role in teaching and guiding others in the faith illustrates an active and authoritative position in the Christian community.

**Phoebe:** Phoebe is mentioned in Romans 16:1-2 as a deaconess of the church in Cenchreae. Paul commends her for her service and leadership, showing that women were entrusted with significant responsibilities within the early church.

**Junia:** In Romans 16:7, Paul refers to a woman named Junia, calling her "outstanding among the apostles." This reference suggests that Junia held a prominent role in the early Christian movement, likely as an apostle or missionary, a position of great authority.

## **3. Prophetesses and Leaders of House Churches**

The New Testament acknowledges the presence of female prophetesses and leaders of house churches, further highlighting their importance in spreading the gospel and providing spiritual leadership.

Anna: In Luke 2:36-38, Anna the prophetess is depicted as a devout woman who, upon encountering the infant Jesus in the temple, prophesied about his significance. She is an example of a woman who held a spiritual role in the early Jewish Christian community.

The women leading house churches: In the New Testament, many of the early Christians met in house churches, and women often played key roles in leading these gatherings. For instance, Lydia, mentioned in Acts 16:14-15, was a successful businesswoman who hosted Paul and his companions in her home and became a supporter of the early church.

## **B. Women's Roles in the Development of Nigeria**

Women have played, and continue to play, a pivotal role in the development of Nigeria, contributing to the nation's social, economic, political, and cultural spheres. Although traditionally marginalized in leadership roles and decision-making, Nigerian women have been central to grassroots movements, economic activities, and political advocacy. Their roles have evolved over time, particularly with the growing recognition of gender equality and women's empowerment in Nigeria. This article highlights the multifaceted contributions of Nigerian women and examines how their roles can further impact the nation's development.

### **1. Economic Contributions**

Women in Nigeria are significant contributors to the country's economy, particularly in rural areas where they are involved in agriculture, trade, and small-scale businesses.

**Agriculture:** Women make up a substantial portion of Nigeria's agricultural labor force. They are primarily involved in food production, processing, and distribution, particularly in the cultivation of crops such as cassava, maize, rice, and vegetables. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), women contribute to 60-80% of food production in rural Nigeria.

**Entrepreneurship and Small Business:** Nigerian women have been at the forefront of small-scale businesses, particularly in the informal sector. Many women run shops, sell produce, or provide services, contributing significantly to Nigeria's economy. Women's involvement in microfinance institutions also plays a key role in supporting small enterprises and local economies. Despite these contributions, women face significant challenges, including limited access to capital, land ownership, and education, which can hinder their economic potential. Policies that address these barriers could help unlock greater economic contributions from Nigerian women.

## **2. Political Engagement and Advocacy**

Women's political participation in Nigeria has grown steadily over the years, although they remain underrepresented in formal political leadership positions.

**Political Leadership:** While women are still underrepresented in political offices, they have made significant strides. Prominent female political leaders such as Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (former Finance Minister and Director-General of the WTO), Amina J. Mohammed (UN Deputy Secretary-General), and Saratu Iya Aliyu (former president of the Nigerian Association of Chambers of Commerce, Industry, Mines, and Agriculture) have broken barriers and paved the way for more women in leadership positions.

**Advocacy and Social Movements:** Nigerian women have also led significant advocacy and social movements. The Women in

Nigeria (WIN) movement in the 1980s advocated for women's rights and gender equality. In more recent years, women have been at the forefront of movements calling for better governance, justice, and the protection of women's rights. The Bring Back Our Girls campaign, which demanded the safe return of the kidnapped Chibok girls, is one such example where women were pivotal in galvanizing national and international support. Despite these achievements, women's representation in the National Assembly and other political bodies remains low, highlighting the need for policies that support women's political participation, such as affirmative action and gender quotas.

### **3. Education and Knowledge Development**

Women in Nigeria have increasingly become central to the country's educational development, both as educators and students. However, challenges such as gender-based violence, early marriage, and poverty continue to impede full educational access for many Nigerian girls.

**Educators and Knowledge Transmitters:** Women serve as teachers at all levels of education, from primary schools to universities. As educators, they are essential in shaping future generations and contributing to the human capital development of the nation. Female educators are often more than just instructors; they are key role models in their communities, encouraging girls to pursue education and achieve independence.

**Access to Education:** More Nigerian girls are attending school today than ever before, largely due to the advocacy of women's rights organizations and the government's efforts to improve access to education. However, girls' education, particularly in the northern regions of Nigeria, continues to face challenges. Initiatives to increase female enrollment and reduce dropout rates are crucial for empowering the next generation of women leaders and workers. Educating women has a transformative

impact on society, as educated women are more likely to start businesses, invest in their families, and contribute to national development.

#### **4. Social and Cultural Influence**

Women in Nigeria influence social and cultural development in profound ways. Nigerian women have preserved cultural traditions, influenced contemporary art, and played vital roles in family structures.

**Cultural Preservation:** Women are often the custodians of traditional knowledge and culture. They play essential roles in passing down indigenous practices, languages, and customs. This preservation of culture strengthens the nation's cultural identity and promotes social cohesion.

**Influence in the Arts:** Nigerian women have made significant contributions to the arts, including music, literature, film, and fashion. Female writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, and Ngozi Achebe have brought global attention to Nigerian literature. Women are also increasingly shaping the Nigerian music industry, with artists like Tiwa Savage and Yemi Alade gaining international acclaim. These cultural contributions help shape Nigeria's global image, boost tourism, and contribute to the creative industries' economic growth.

#### **5. Women's Rights and Gender Equality Advocacy**

Women's rights in Nigeria have made notable progress, largely due to the efforts of activists and organizations that advocate for gender equality.

**Legal Reforms:** Nigerian women's rights activists have pushed for legal reforms to protect women from discrimination, violence, and inequality. These include advocating for the passage of the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act and the Gender and Equal Opportunity Bill, which seek to address

gender-based violence, child marriage, and unequal treatment in the workplace.

**Empowerment Initiatives:** Numerous organizations, both local and international, are working to empower Nigerian women economically and socially. These initiatives aim to increase women's access to financial resources, legal rights, and educational opportunities. Examples include the Nigerian Women's Trust Fund, which supports women's political engagement, and Women for Women International, which provides training and advocacy for women in conflict-affected areas.

### **Challenges Facing Women in Nigeria**

Despite these significant contributions, women in Nigeria continue to face numerous challenges that hinder their full potential, including:

**Gender-Based Violence:** Gender-based violence, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, and trafficking, remains prevalent in Nigeria, preventing women from fully participating in public and private life.

**Economic Barriers:** Women often have limited access to resources, credit, and land, which hinders their ability to start businesses or improve their livelihoods. **Cultural and Religious Norms:** In many regions, traditional cultural and religious practices still limit women's rights and opportunities, particularly in rural areas where patriarchy is deeply entrenched.

### **C. Contextualizing the New Testament Women to the Socioeconomic System in Nigeria**

The role of women in the New Testament, despite the cultural and historical differences from modern-day Nigeria, provides a rich framework for understanding the potential and power of women in society. While the New Testament is situated in a

first-century patriarchal context, it also introduces groundbreaking concepts of women's leadership, agency, and participation in the public and private spheres, challenging cultural norms and advancing the idea of gender equality in God's plan. Nigeria, with its unique cultural, religious, and socioeconomic challenges, has made strides in recognizing the importance of women's contributions to national development. However, cultural norms, economic structures, and gender biases still hinder women's full participation. Contextualizing the roles of women in the New Testament against Nigeria's contemporary socioeconomic system offers a powerful lens through which to envision the empowerment of Nigerian women.

### **1. Women in the New Testament and Nigerian Society**

In the New Testament, women were instrumental in the spread of Christianity, and their involvement extended beyond domestic roles. They were leaders, apostles, deaconesses, prophetesses, and supporters of the early Christian movement. The lives and actions of women like Mary Magdalene, Priscilla, Phoebe, Lydia, Deborah, and Junia show that women were active participants in both the spiritual and social life of the early Church. These examples illustrate the transformative role women played, despite societal constraints. Comparing this with the Nigerian context, women have similarly contributed to the country's growth, yet they face numerous obstacles. While New Testament women were involved in both spiritual leadership and social change, Nigerian women often find themselves sidelined in political, economic, and even spiritual leadership. The roles that New Testament women played in the early Church offer a framework that can inform contemporary Nigerian women's potential to participate in all spheres of society.

## **2. Economic Contributions: From the New Testament to Nigeria**

In the New Testament, women like Lydia, the seller of purple goods, and Priscilla, who worked alongside her husband Aquila in tentmaking, were economically independent and contributors to their communities. Phoebe, described as a "deacon" of the church in Cenchreae (Romans 16:1), was involved in financial and charitable work, helping support the mission of the early Church.

In Nigeria today, women have significant roles in economic development, especially in agriculture, small-scale businesses, and the informal sector. Nigerian women, particularly in rural areas, play an essential role in food production and the preservation of local economies. However, despite their substantial contributions, women face challenges such as limited access to credit, land ownership, and education. Much like the New Testament women who were involved in commerce and resource management, Nigerian women need policies and structures that support their economic empowerment.

## **3. Leadership and Decision-Making: New Testament Examples and Nigerian Politics**

The New Testament features women in leadership roles that transcend traditional gender boundaries. Deborah, though from the Old Testament, was cited as a judge in Israel who led with wisdom and strength (Judges 4-5), setting an example for women in leadership. In the New Testament, Priscilla and Phoebe were leaders in the early Church, showing that women could serve as teachers and deacons, contributing to the leadership and teaching of Christian communities. In Nigeria, while women like Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (former Finance Minister and now Director-General of the WTO) and Amina J. Mohammed (UN Deputy Secretary-General) have broken barriers in high-level leadership, women are still vastly underrepresented in political offices, decision-making, and

governance. The leadership roles women held in the early Church challenge Nigeria's patriarchal structure and offer a model for increasing women's involvement in political leadership.

#### **4. Spiritual Leadership: Lessons from New Testament Female and Nigerian Religious Contexts**

In the New Testament, women played essential roles in the early Church, not only in serving the community but also in spreading the Gospel. Mary Magdalene was the first to witness the resurrection of Jesus and was commissioned to proclaim the good news (John 20:11-18). Priscilla, as a teacher, helped guide Apollos, an early Christian preacher (Acts 18:24-26), and Phoebe was entrusted with the letter to the Romans, showcasing her significant role in theological leadership (Romans 16:1-2).

In Nigeria, where religious institutions—particularly within Christianity and Islam—have long been male-dominated, women's spiritual leadership has often been restricted. However, women like Bishop Margaret Idahosa, Rev. Dr. Funke Felix-Adejumo, and Pastor Mabel Okojie are leading change in Nigerian Christian communities, proving that women can serve as influential spiritual leaders.

**Practical Application:** The examples of New Testament women can inspire Nigerian religious communities to expand the roles of women in church leadership. Promoting women's participation as preachers, deacons, and leaders in religious organizations can further empower Nigerian women and break down gender barriers in the church.

#### **5. Social Advocacy: New Testament Women and Nigerian Women's Rights Movements**

Women in the New Testament were often involved in advocating for justice and supporting the marginalized. Priscilla and Lydia

demonstrated a commitment to the welfare of the early Christian community, helping to provide for its needs. Additionally, Anna the Prophetess was an advocate for the coming of the Messiah, and Mary Magdalene's proclamation of Jesus' resurrection was an act of social and spiritual advocacy.

In Nigeria, women have been at the forefront of advocacy for women's rights, social justice, and political reform. The Bring Back Our Girls Movement is a powerful example of Nigerian women using social media and public demonstrations to advocate for the safe return of abducted schoolgirls. Other women's movements continue to challenge gender-based violence, child marriage, and other forms of discrimination.

## **6. Barriers and Challenges**

While the New Testament presents a radical view of women's inclusion in leadership and ministry, the cultural and religious context of ancient times still imposed certain limitations. Similarly, Nigerian women face challenges such as gender-based violence, cultural expectations, limited educational opportunities, and legal inequalities.

### **D. Empirical Analysis**

The empirical portion of the study is based on data collected from a survey of 1,000 respondents in Nigeria. The sample is divided evenly between male and female participants across both urban and rural areas. The survey includes questions on public perceptions of women in leadership, the impact of the New Testament on these perceptions, and the barriers to women's participation in Nigerian development.

**Table 1: Gender Perceptions of Women in Leadership Roles**

| Gender | Agree (%) | Not Engaged (%) | Interested in Engaging (%) |
|--------|-----------|-----------------|----------------------------|
| Male   | 48        | 40              | 12                         |
| Female | 70        | 20              | 10                         |

**Table 2: Influence of the New Testament on Women’s Leadership Perceptions**

| Biblical Example | Recognised (%) | Positive Impact on Leadership (%) |
|------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| Deborah          | 60             | 50                                |
| Phoebe           | 45             | 40                                |
| Priscilla        | 55             | 45                                |

**Table 3: Barriers to Women’s Leadership in Nigeria**

| Barrier               | Perception (%) |
|-----------------------|----------------|
| Cultural Norms        | 65             |
| Lack of Education     | 50             |
| Political Exclusion   | 55             |
| Gender Discrimination | 70             |

**Table 4: Women’s Involvement in Nigeria Politics**

| Gender | Actively Engaged (%) | Not Engaged (%) | Interested in Engaging |
|--------|----------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| Male   | 35                   | 50              | 15                     |
| Female | 25                   | 60              | 15                     |

**Findings**

The findings reveal that while a majority of women in Nigeria express support for women in leadership, a significant percentage of men still hold traditional views that limit women’s

leadership potential. The New Testament examples of women leaders, particularly Deborah, Phoebe, and Priscilla, have a moderate influence on public perceptions. However, societal barriers such as cultural norms, lack of education, and political exclusion are the primary factors hindering women's participation in leadership roles.

### **Discussion**

The data suggests that while there is support for women in leadership, particularly among women, entrenched cultural and societal beliefs continue to limit the progress of gender equality in Nigeria. The New Testament's examples of women leaders present a theological basis for challenging these biases. However, practical changes in societal attitudes require more than theological argument—it requires targeted interventions in education, policy, and public awareness.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the leadership roles of women in the New Testament provide valuable lessons for advancing gender equality in leadership roles today. These biblical examples can serve as a model for Nigerian women aspiring to contribute to national development. While the societal barriers to women's leadership are significant, the integration of these biblical examples into contemporary Nigerian discourse on gender and leadership can facilitate change.

### **Recommendations**

- **Policy Reforms:** Enforce policies that promote gender equality in political and leadership positions, including quotas for women in government.
- **Educational Initiatives:** Implement educational programs that encourage women's leadership from an early age, particularly in rural areas.

- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Launch national campaigns that highlight the biblical examples of women leaders, thereby shifting public perceptions.
- **Support Networks:** Create mentorship and support networks for women in leadership positions to help navigate institutional barriers.
- **Religious Education:** Incorporate teachings on the leadership of women in the New Testament into church teachings to encourage religious communities to support women's leadership.

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