

# BORN AGAIN, EQUAL AGAIN: PENTECOSTAL THEOLOGY, LEGAL PLURALISM, AND RECONCEPTUALISING WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN AFRICA

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## Abstract

*Christianity in Africa is often criticized for supporting patriarchal norms, especially within Pentecostal traditions, which are seen as incompatible with gender equality. This view ignores both the diversity and evolving nature of Pentecostal theology in Nigeria. This paper challenges the idea that Christianity is always oppressive to women by exploring how Pentecostal teachings on rebirth, personal transformation, and equality before God can work alongside human rights ideals. It also considers Nigeria's context of legal pluralism, where customary, religious, and state laws overlap, sometimes protecting but often limiting women's rights. Using a doctrinal approach that combines legal analysis with feminist theology, the study examines how these multiple legal systems interact with Pentecostal beliefs to shape women's status. Findings show that Pentecostalism, when critically reinterpreted, contains egalitarian elements that align with both constitutional and human rights principles. The paper suggests that Pentecostal leaders embrace inclusive interpretations of scripture, policymakers collaborate with faith communities to harmonize laws, and advocacy groups use both legal and theological tools to advance gender justice within this plural legal landscape.*

**Key-Words:** Gender Justice, Religious Reform, Women's Rights, Christian Belief, Pentecostal movement.

## 1. Introduction

In Nigeria, religion is not only a matter of faith, it actively influences gender identities, social standards, and legal consciousness. With its increasing influence, Pentecostalism offers both empowerment and the upholding of patriarchal structures.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this paper is to argue that the interaction between Nigeria's constitutional framework and Pentecostal theology creates an under-explored perspective where spiritual and legal identities meet and influence women's rights.<sup>2</sup> This study is driven by a central question: How do Pentecostal teachings on gender roles intersect with constitutional principles of equality and non-discrimination, and in what ways can these teachings be reinterpreted to advance gender justice? To address this inquiry, the paper employs an interdisciplinary framework that integrates feminist legal theory,<sup>3</sup> African feminist

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<sup>1</sup> M.A. Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*, Oxford, Regnum Books, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> N. Wariboko, *Pentecostal Theology in Africa*, Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza E., *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, London, SCM Press, 1983.

theology and constitutional analysis,<sup>4</sup> offering a broad examination of how religious doctrine and legal norms jointly influence the pursuit of women's rights. According to this conceptual framework, theology is a topic of constant discussion that has the potential to either uphold inequality or pave the way for emancipation. Methodologically, this study combines doctrinal analysis of Nigerian constitutional provisions with an examination of Pentecostal teachings,<sup>5</sup> alongside a critical review of feminist theological literature.<sup>6</sup> Through this blended approach, it highlights how religious beliefs shape legal identities and how legal frameworks, in turn, influence faith, offering a fuller picture of the struggles women face as they navigate both law and belief. What makes this work distinctive is its integrated perspective: it does not present Pentecostalism as a fixed barrier to gender justice but rather as a living tradition with the potential to support it.<sup>7</sup> Bringing doctrinal theology into conversation with constitutional law, the research suggests new ways to reconcile faith and rights, challenging the assumption that religion and gender equality are always at odds.<sup>8</sup> It further positions Pentecostal teachings on rebirth and spiritual empowerment as valuable theological tools that when interpreted with care can affirm women's moral and legal personhood, enriching ongoing scholarly discussions in law, religion, and human rights.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Gender and Christianity from African Perspective

The relationship between Christianity and gender in African thought is complex and full of contradictions. It is shaped by history, culture, and the tensions between different legal systems. Christianity has left a deep mark on Africa's religious life, cultural values, and laws, but its impact on gender is still debated. Many African feminist and postcolonial scholars point out that Christianity came not only as a religion but also as part of colonial rule, carrying gender expectations that pushed women to the rear. Missionaries and colonial authorities often reinterpreted local traditions and biblical texts in ways that reinforced male power, limiting women's roles in both the church and society.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Christianity is often criticized for being male-centered, reinforcing women's subordination through its patterns of male leadership and imagery. Mercy Oduyoye<sup>11</sup> notes that the Bible is frequently interpreted through patriarchal

<sup>4</sup> R. W. Jr. Galloway, Basic Constitutional Analysis, 28(4) 1988 *Santa Clara Law Review*, 913–954.

<sup>5</sup> C.J. Kaunda, 'Minding the Pentecostal Paradox': Currents and Cross-Currents in Pentecostal Studies in Africa, *Religion Compass* (PenteSA), 2024.

<sup>6</sup> U. King, *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, New York, Orbis Books, 1994; M.A. Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa*, Oxford, Regnum Books, 2004; J. Pobee, *Biblical Studies and Feminism in the African Context*, Ibadan, NABIS Western Zone, 2012; O. Olademo, 'New Dimensions in Nigerian Women's Pentecostal Experience: The Case of DODIM, Nigeria', 5(1) 2012 *Journal of World Christianity* 62–74, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jworlchri.5.1.0062>.

<sup>7</sup> Wariboko (n2).

<sup>8</sup> R. Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria*, University of Chicago Press, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Stebbins, How Christianity Influenced the World's Law Systems, *Reflections* (blog), Reasons to Believe, 10 November 2015, <https://reasons.org/explore/blogs/reflections/how-christianity-influenced-the-world-s-law-systems>. Reasons to Believe

<sup>10</sup> O. Nnaemeka, Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way, 29(2) 2004 *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 357–385, <https://doi.org/10.1086/378553>.

<sup>11</sup> Oduyoye (n1)

lenses, which elevate male authority while diminishing women's moral and legal autonomy. Pentecostalism, with its vibrant worship and strong conservative values, reflects these tensions clearly. Women play a central role in these churches, often as the most devoted members and primary caregivers, yet they are seldom given real decision-making power.<sup>12</sup> Even when women rise to roles as pastors or evangelists, their influence is often limited by systems that continue to favor male authority. Yet, this is not the whole story. Growing African Christian scholarship argues that religion should not be seen only as a tool of control but also as a source of freedom.<sup>13</sup> Feminist theologians emphasize that women are not merely passive followers of doctrine but active participants who reinterpret scripture to challenge traditional gender roles. The Pentecostal belief in being "born again" highlights this transformative potential.<sup>14</sup> For many women, rebirth is not only about spiritual renewal; it is also about redefining their identity beyond patriarchal labels. Through personal encounters with God, they gain confidence and a sense of divine legitimacy that empowers them to push back against male-dominated structures.<sup>15</sup> This direct connection to the divine reinforces interpretations of scripture that equality and recognize women's moral agency without the need for male intermediaries.<sup>16</sup>

Christianity has also shaped women's access to education, healthcare, and leadership, often through church networks. These networks provided platforms for women to step into public life and advocate for justice.<sup>17</sup> While church institutions have often upheld conservative roles for women, theology itself has also given women powerful tools for self-expression and social change even in legal spaces.<sup>18</sup> Scholars like Sylvia Tamale emphasise that even in legal spaces.<sup>19</sup> In African legal settings, where customary and religious laws often shape daily life, Christianity's influence is especially strong. Many women draw strength from Christian teachings to challenge oppressive norms and claim their rights. Pentecostalism, with its focus on divine justice, adds to this momentum by supporting the fight for gender equality. This vision fits well with constitutional protections like Section 42 of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution, which promises freedom from discrimination. Scholars advocate for merging religious and legal conversations, demonstrating that theology can provide a strong foundation for legal reforms that promote

<sup>12</sup> Wariboko (n2).

<sup>13</sup> T.C. Sakupapa, Tracking the Decolonial in African Christian Theology, 112(2) 2023, *International Review of Mission* 202–217, <https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12476>

<sup>14</sup> R.A. Rodríguez Villanueva, *The Vulnerability of Women as a Subject and Contemporary Theological Action: A Review of the Genesis and Evolution of Feminist Theology*, in S. Castaños-Cervantes, A. Ojeda García & C. L. Reitz-Krueger (eds), *Working with Vulnerable Populations*, Cham, Springer, 2024, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-67710-6\\_17](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-67710-6_17) SpringerLink

<sup>15</sup> M. R. A. Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective*, Cleveland, OH, Pilgrim Press, 2002. African Theology WorldwideGoogle Books

<sup>16</sup> E. Chitando and S. Chirongoma, *Justice Not Silence: Churches Facing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence*, Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Tamale, Sylvia, *African Sexualities: A Reader*, Pambazuka Press, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Zurlo, Gina A., and Dave Coles, *Women, Leadership, and Movements: A Critical Look at the Past, Present, and Future*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2024,-This study examines how Christian movements, including Pentecostal networks, have created public platforms for women's leadership and advocacy.

<sup>19</sup> Tamale, Sylvia, *Exploring the Contours of African Sexualities: Religion, Law and Power*, 14(1) 2014 *African Human Rights Law Journal* 150–177.

women's rights.<sup>20</sup> Recent research challenges the idea that Christianity and Pentecostalism in particular is inherently oppressive to women. Instead, studies are looking at how believers experience and reinterpret doctrines in their own lives. Pentecostalism's emphasis on personal spirituality and divine empowerment creates room for feminist perspectives to take root. Scholars like Chammah Kaunda<sup>21</sup> and Nimi Wariboko<sup>22</sup> argue that when Pentecostal theology is read with a critical eye, it can become a force that supports gender equality rather than suppressing it. Despite this, scholarship often still emphasizes Christianity's patriarchal side, neglecting how women negotiate theological spaces in complex ways.

### ***Pentecostalism in Nigeria: Historical Background and Doctrinal Developments***

The story of Pentecostalism in Nigeria is deeply woven and shaped by a blend of local spiritual traditions and external evangelical currents. According to Onongha<sup>23</sup> and Odey,<sup>24</sup> its modern surge took off during the 1960s and 1970s, driven by a new generation of charismatic preachers. Among the most influential was Archbishop Benson Idahosa, whose dynamic ministry and the founding of the Church of God Mission in 1972 became a turning point, sparking a wave of revival that reshaped Nigeria's Christian landscape. Odey<sup>25</sup> His preaching on prosperity anchored in faith and the assurance of divine favour struck a powerful chord during the economic hardships of the 1980s, a time when many Nigerians were grappling with the tough realities brought on by structural adjustment policies.<sup>26</sup> In the midst of widespread disillusionment, the Pentecostal message of both spiritual renewal and material uplift offered hope and a sense of possibility.<sup>27</sup> Around this same period, ministries like the Grace of God Ministry also rose to prominence, marking the beginning of a transformative new chapter in Nigerian Pentecostalism.<sup>28</sup> Yet, it would be misleading to see Nigerian Pentecostalism as purely a modern import or a product of Western influence. Long before Western missionaries arrived, homegrown revivalist movements were already stirring across the region. These movements found expression in African-initiated churches such as Obere Okaiye and the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star, which blended Christian teachings with local spiritual practices, laying the groundwork for the

<sup>20</sup> C.J. Kaunda, Ndembu Cultural Liminality, Terrains of Gender Contestation: Reconceptualising Zambian Pentecostalism as Liminal Spaces, 73(3) 2017 *HTS Theological Studies/Theological Studies* 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.3718>.

<sup>21</sup> Zurlo (n20).

<sup>22</sup> (n2) 9.

<sup>23</sup> K.O. Onongha, Pentecostalism, Power, and Politics in Nigeria, in A. Afolayan, O. Yacob-Haliso and T. Falola (eds), *Pentecostalism and Politics in Africa*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 371–382, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74911-2\\_18](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74911-2_18)

<sup>24</sup> E.A. Odey, Differential Dimensions between Pentecostals and Aladura Movements in Nigeria, 17(1) 2020 *Lwati: A Journal of Contemporary Research*, 105–123.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> A. Ayuk, The Pentecostal Transformation of Nigerian Church Life, 5(2) 2002, *Asia Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 189–204.

<sup>28</sup> M.A.B. Gaiya, The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria, *Occasional Papers*, Copenhagen, Centre of African Studies, University of Copenhagen, 2002.

vibrant Pentecostal expressions that would later flourish.<sup>29</sup> These early spiritual traditions showed distinctly African ways of meeting God, with lively worship and a strong sense of community.<sup>30</sup>

In the 1970s, Nigeria saw a surge of foreign evangelical influence through the visits of American preachers like T.L. Osborn and Ernest Angeley. Their large crusades inspired many Nigerians and shaped a new generation of pastors. Out of this influence came “new breed” ministries churches started by Nigerians but influenced by American Pentecostal styles in teaching, appearance, and preaching. The outcome was a unique mix where local revival energy blended with imported charismatic models, turning Nigeria into one of Africa’s most dynamic Pentecostal centers.<sup>31</sup> Three main teachings define Nigerian Pentecostalism: being “born again,” baptism in the Holy Spirit, and prosperity. The idea of being born again is not just about personal faith it signals a break from the past. New converts often talk about freedom from ancestral curses, poverty, and failure, linking salvation to a better life.<sup>32</sup> The Bible verse Galatians 3:28, which says, “in Christ there is neither male nor female,” is often quoted to promote spiritual equality. Yet, this equality rarely changes the gender hierarchies deeply embedded in church structures.<sup>33</sup> The second key belief, baptism in the Holy Spirit, is seen as God’s way of giving believers power. It is associated with speaking in tongues, healing, and prophecy, and evangelism gifts that, in theory, anyone can receive. Many Nigerian women have used this doctrine to claim spiritual authority as prophets, prayer leaders, and evangelists. However, despite these openings, church leadership remains mostly in male hands, showing a gap between spiritual gifts and institutional power.<sup>34</sup>

The third teaching, prosperity theology, says that wealth, health, and social success are signs of God’s favor and can be achieved through faith and giving. Critics say this turns religion into a commodity, but for many women, it has created new opportunities. Women have entered faith-based business ventures, led women’s ministries, and managed church welfare programs. These roles make them not just caregivers but also economic contributors and moral leaders. Still, prosperity preaching often supports traditional gender roles, presenting men as providers and women as supporters. Even so, Pentecostal women have pushed back.<sup>35</sup> Leaders like Funke Felix-Adejumo has used these teachings to promote women’s empowerment.<sup>36</sup> Through their ministries,

<sup>29</sup> A.O. Ogunrinade and O.F. Abu, Christianity in Nigeria before Pentecostalism, 2(2) 2013 *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 121–130, <https://doi.org/10.5901/ajis.2013.v2n2p121>. Richtmann

<sup>30</sup> A.C. Ukachi, *The Best Is Yet to Come: Pentecostal and Charismatic Revivals in Nigeria from 1914 to 1990s*, Xulon Press, 2013; N. Richman, *Nigerian Pentecostalism*, Database of Religious History (DRH), 19 August 2020, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12572448>.

<sup>31</sup> Richman (n30).

<sup>32</sup> H.C. Achunike, J. U. Bibinu, and R. H. Kitause, Born Againism in Northern Nigeria: The Pentecostal Experience in Taraba State, 15(3) 2024 *MCS Social Sciences Journal*, 23–..., <https://doi.org/10.36941/mjss-2024-0019>.

<sup>33</sup> (n20)

<sup>34</sup> (n2)

<sup>35</sup> A. Morgan, Pentecostal Women Leaders: The Interplay of Egalitarian Theology, Feminism, and Pentecostalism, 38 (1) 2024 *Priscilla Papers*, 25–29; <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/pentecostal-women-leaders-the-interplay-of-egalitarian-theology-feminism>

<sup>36</sup> Funke Felix-Adejumo, advocating for gender inclusion and women’s empowerment at the Commonwealth Africa Summit, *THISDAY*, 25 March 2022.

they have combined biblical teaching with health campaigns, leadership training, and education, showing how conservative theology can be reshaped to achieve progressive goals.<sup>37</sup> One reason women can take part in Pentecostal activities is the movement's decentralised and flexible nature. In many urban churches, women lead prayer groups, charity efforts, and children's ministries roles that, while unofficial, earn them respect and influence. These positions sometimes open doors to wider community leadership beyond the church. However, tensions remain. On one side, Pentecostal theology promises transformation and empowerment for all. On the other, its teachings on marriage and family often reinforce male authority. Sermons frequently cite Ephesians 5:22–25 to support male leadership at home, and many church rules limit women's access to senior leadership, often placing them under male oversight.<sup>38</sup> This creates a paradox: Nigerian Pentecostalism offers spiritual freedom but also enforces gendered restrictions. Its doctrines bring hope, healing, and social mobility, yet they also risk maintaining patriarchal norms. Still, many women resist these limits, using Pentecostal teachings themselves as tools to challenge and change their position. For scholars, religious leaders, and activists, these inner struggles are significant. Pentecostalism in Nigeria is not just a religious movement it is deeply personal and undeniably political.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Challenging the Idea that Christianity is inherently Patriarchal***

Christianity is often criticised as a religion that supports male dominance and female submission. This perception stems from selective readings of passages like 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 and Ephesians 5:22–24, which have historically been used to justify male authority in both church and home. In African legal systems, such interpretations have reinforced gender-discriminatory laws, particularly in areas such as marital authority, property rights, and decision-making. For example, laws influenced by Christian doctrine have frequently given men primary control over property and guardianship within marriage.<sup>40</sup> Feminist theologians, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza strongly challenge these interpretations.<sup>41</sup> They argue that such biblical texts reflect the cultural norms of their time rather than universal divine commands. Fiorenza's latest work calls on readers to question patriarchal readings and uncover the liberating messages within scripture- an approach that parallels modern interpretations of human rights law, where legal norms adapt and evolve alongside social progress.<sup>42</sup> David Stewart's *Hermeneutics of*

<sup>37</sup> K.O. Onongha, Pentecostalism, Power, and Politics in Nigeria, in A. Afolayan, O. Yacob-Haliso and T. Falola (eds), *Pentecostalism and Politics in Africa*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 371–382, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74911-2\\_18](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74911-2_18)

<sup>38</sup> A. E. Amaefule, 'Women in Neo-Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria', 31(1) 2022 *Feminist Theology*.

<sup>39</sup> O. Olademo, *New Dimensions in Nigerian Women's Pentecostal Experience: The Case of DODIM, Nigeria*, 5(1) 2012 *Journal of World Christianity* 62–74.

<sup>40</sup> S.O. Ademiluka, The Church and Gender Equality in Africa: Questioning Culture and the Theological Paradigm on Women Oppression, 2021 *Asian Journal of Social Science & Humanities*, <<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272878383>>

<sup>41</sup> R.R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1983; E. Fiorenza Schüssler, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1992.

<sup>42</sup> Rita Faraj, "Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza: The Dance of Hermeneutics and the Reconstructionist" (2024) 3(1-2) *Münster Journal for Islamic and Philosophical Studies* 71–94.

*Suspicion* approach advocates for interpretation that seeks to free and empower women and other oppressed groups, beginning with the biblical text itself. It treats the text like a crime scene, searching for traces of silenced voices and clues that can lead to the liberation of marginalized people.<sup>43</sup> It also involves reading the text against its male-centered bias to uncover new meanings that have not yet been shared with the faith community. Musa Dube similarly notes that scripture has often been manipulated to maintain patriarchal systems under the guise of morality, and their scholarship highlights the importance of recognising how religious narratives shape and at times distort gender roles.<sup>44</sup> Pentecostal theology provides a striking example of this adaptability. Core doctrines such as spiritual rebirth, equality before God, and empowerment by the Holy Spirit offer alternatives to traditional gender hierarchies. These beliefs affirm that all believers, regardless of gender, can teach, prophesy, and lead. If embraced fully, this spiritual egalitarianism has significant legal implications: it challenges gendered legal hierarchies and supports reforms in family law, succession, and civic participation. J. Asamoah-Gyadu observes that the “born again” experience symbolically disrupts entrenched social orders, including gender-based subordination.<sup>45</sup> Critics of Pentecostalism often point to its male-dominated leadership, yet they overlook how women actively claim influence within the movement.<sup>46</sup> Even without formal authority, women lead prayer groups, manage church resources, and shape decisions, exercising informal leadership that legal systems rarely acknowledge. This raises an important question: should the law only recognise formal leadership roles, or also affirm the informal power that women wield in their communities?<sup>47</sup> African feminist legal debates reflect this tension. Teresa Okure argues that religion is fundamentally incompatible with women’s rights,<sup>48</sup> while Michael Welker maintains that both theology and law can be reinterpreted to advance justice.<sup>49</sup> Nigerian Pentecostalism offers practical examples of women reshaping religious spaces. Leaders such as Pastor Funke Felix-Adejumo<sup>50</sup> and Rev. Dr. Mercy Ezekiel<sup>51</sup> actively challenge gender norms through their teachings. They promote spiritual empowerment, economic independence, and women’s legitimacy in leadership, helping to redefine women’s roles both in the church and in public life. These examples demonstrate that theology can enhance legal awareness, encouraging

<sup>43</sup> D. Stewart, The Hermeneutics of Suspicion, 3(3) 1989, *Literature and Theology* 296–307, <https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/3.3.296> accessed 23 June 2025.

<sup>44</sup> M.W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2000.

<sup>45</sup> J.K. Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context*, Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock, 2013

<sup>46</sup> E. Akpanke Odey & G.A. Onah, Pentecostalism and Women Leadership: Paradigm for Gender Re-Construction in Nigeria” (2020) 7(1) *International Journal of Pedagogy, Innovation and New Technologies* 76–83, DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0014.4461.

<sup>47</sup> E.M. Butler-Cooper, Women Daring to Lead in the Church, in *Encyclopedia of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Spirituality*, Cham, Springer, 2024, 1–7, <[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32257-0\\_33-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-32257-0_33-1)> accessed 23 June 2025.

<sup>48</sup> T. Okure, *To Cast Fire upon the Earth: An Introduction to the History of the Missionary Work of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus during the 19th and 20th Centuries*, 2000.

<sup>49</sup> M. Welker, *What Could Christian Theology Offer to the Disciplines of the Law?*, 32(1) 2017 *Journal of Law and Religion* 46–52.

<sup>50</sup> Funke Adejumo, *Funke Felix-Adejumo, Leading Women to the Winning Edge*, *BusinessDay NG*, 11 January 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Biography of Rev. Dr. Obiora and Rev. Dr. Mercy Ezekiel, *Believers Portal*, <<https://cpmeketarea.wordpress.com/2012/07/21/profile-on-rev-dr-obiora-and-rev-dr-mercy-ezekiel/>> accessed 23 June 2025.

women to claim their rights and visibility. The belief that Christian doctrine is inherently patriarchal ignores its potential for liberating reinterpretation. It also upholds a false divide between religious and secular spheres. Any legal critique must take into account the nuanced ways African women engage with and transform religious traditions. They are not passive followers but active interpreters, using faith to negotiate rights and reshape gender relations. A balanced legal approach to Pentecostal theology is therefore necessary. Such an approach should acknowledge both its oppressive histories and its liberative possibilities. Emphasising doctrines of spiritual rebirth, divine calling, and the equal distribution of the Holy Spirit's gifts, Pentecostalism can be aligned with a framework of gender justice. In this way, theology and law can work together to dismantle patriarchy and promote equality.

### ***Reconceptualising Christianity and Gender Equality in Nigeria***

Nigeria offers a unique setting to explore how Pentecostalism shapes gender relations. Over the past fifty years, Pentecostalism has influenced not just religious life, but also culture, politics, and civic engagement. Women make up the majority in many Pentecostal congregations and play a crucial role in keeping the churches vibrant. However, they often remain under male authority, reinforced through sermons, leadership structures, and teachings that emphasize female submission and domestic roles. As scholars have noted, Pentecostal discourses often uphold gender hierarchies under the banner of divine order and family values.<sup>52</sup> Yet, to view Pentecostalism only as oppressive would miss how Nigerian women use its teachings to carve out space, redefine their identities, and push back against injustice.<sup>53</sup>

This paper challenges the assumption that Christianity especially Pentecostalism is inherently at odds with gender equality in Nigeria. While patriarchal interpretations and institutional practices do marginalize women, such a view oversimplifies a complex tradition. It also overlooks how Pentecostal theology itself contains resources that women use to affirm their dignity, moral worth, and legal standing, both in religious and secular settings. When critically engaged, Christianity can actually serve as a platform for feminist and rights-based advocacy. Research shows that Pentecostalism's rapid growth has revived certain biblical teachings that are reshaping Nigerian Christianity.<sup>54</sup> Although its effects are mixed, Pentecostalism has created spaces where both men and women participate actively, opening opportunities for more balanced gender relations.<sup>55</sup> Women's leadership roles within these communities offer new ways to rethink gender

<sup>52</sup> Adolphus Ekedimma Amaefule, "Women in Neo-Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, and the Mainline Churches in Contemporary Nigeria" 31(1) (2022) *Feminist Theology* 31(1).

<sup>53</sup> Oyeronke Olademo, "New Dimensions in Nigerian Women's Pentecostal Experience: The Case of DODIM, Nigeria," 5(1) (2012) *Journal of World Christianity* 62–74

<sup>54</sup> Victoria Oladipupo, "*African Pentecostalism and Gender: An Analysis of the Transnational Leadership Roles of Women in the Redeemed Christian Church of God* (Lagos, Nigeria, and London, United Kingdom)," Doctoral thesis, University of Roehampton, awarded 11 March 2025.

<sup>55</sup> Kehinde Oluwatoyin Adabembe, "*Pentecostalism and Women Development in the Redeemed Christian Church of God: A Model for National Development*" 8 (2023) *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 2049–2061, DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS.2023.71066.



dynamics in Nigeria at large.<sup>56</sup> This paper focuses on three key doctrines spiritual rebirth, spiritual gifts, and equality before God to show how Pentecostal theology can become a tool for liberation with legal and social consequences.<sup>57</sup>

The doctrine of being “born again” lies at the heart of Pentecostal identity. It represents a radical transformation of the individual and a redefinition of social identity. It implies that all believers, regardless of gender, class, or ethnicity, stand as equals before God. Galatians 3:28 is often cited in this context: “there is neither male nor female” in Christ. Although this principle is not always practiced institutionally, it provides a theological foundation for challenging exclusionary norms.<sup>58</sup> Many women interpret their spiritual rebirth as a call to transcend traditional roles, reclaim agency, and assert their voices within both church and society.<sup>59</sup>

The doctrine of spiritual gifts also disrupts rigid gender roles. Pentecostalism teaches that the Holy Spirit grants gifts such as prophecy, healing, leadership, and teaching to all believers, regardless of gender. This challenges the idea that men are spiritually superior. In many Nigerian Pentecostal churches, women lead prayer meetings, preach, and exercise prophetic gifts. Some wield greater influence than male pastors, despite lacking formal titles. Their spiritual authority, recognized by congregations, gives them real power, even if not formally codified.<sup>60</sup>

The third key doctrine, equality before God, mirrors legal ideals. Pentecostalism’s teaching of direct access to God undermines the idea that men are spiritual gatekeepers and reinforces equal spiritual standing. Legally, this resonates with Section 42 of Nigeria’s 1999 Constitution, which guarantees freedom from discrimination and equality before the law. This theological vision supports broader claims for gender justice, enabling religious arguments to strengthen civic advocacy. For Pentecostal women, appealing to the Holy Spirit becomes a way to claim moral authority and legitimacy to lead, fostering a legal consciousness that helps them demand justice, autonomy, and recognition.<sup>61</sup> Real-life examples illustrate these dynamics. Pastor Funke Felix-Adejumo, now a bishop in the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, co-leads Agape Christian Ministries and runs initiatives such as the Funke Felix Adejumo Foundation and Grace Orphanage that empower women through education, economic support, and leadership training.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Rev. Dr. Mercy Ezekiel, co-pastor of Christian Pentecostal Mission International, blends pastoral

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<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth Akpanke Odey and Gregory Ajima Onah, “Pentecostalism and Women Leadership: Paradigm for Gender Re-Construction in Nigeria” 7(1) (2020) *International Journal of Pedagogy, Innovation and New Technologies* 76–83, DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0014.4461.

<sup>57</sup> V. Oladipupo, *African Pentecostalism and Gender: An Analysis of the Transnational Leadership Roles of Women in the Redeemed Christian Church of God (Lagos, Nigeria, and London, United Kingdom)* (PhD Thesis, University of Roehampton 2025).

<sup>58</sup> A. E. Amaefule, ‘Women in Neo-Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, and the Mainline Churches in Contemporary Nigeria’ (2022) 31 *Feminist Theology* 34–50.

<sup>59</sup> O. Olademo, ‘New Dimensions in Nigerian Women’s Pentecostal Experience: The Case of DODIM, Nigeria’ (2012) 5 *Journal of World Christianity* 62–74.

<sup>60</sup> O. Adeboye, ‘Women and Pentecostalism in Africa: Mediating Power and Social Change’ (2018) 48 *Journal of Religion in Africa* 236–258.

<sup>61</sup> I. M. Idumwonyi, *Crashed Realities? Gender Dynamics in Nigerian Pentecostalism* (Brill 2023).

<sup>62</sup> (n57).

work with education, healing, and humanitarian programs targeting youth and women.<sup>63</sup> Their ministries merge theology with social empowerment, promoting economic independence and self-confidence among women. Working at the intersection of faith and civic life, they challenge the boundaries separating religious belonging from legal citizenship, showing how Pentecostal language can affirm women's rights and reshape gender norms from within tradition.<sup>64</sup> While this research acknowledges Pentecostalism's patriarchal elements, it also insists that theology is a contested space capable of both exclusion and emancipation. By highlighting doctrines that promote equality, transformation, and divine calling, it reimagines the role of Christian theology in Nigeria's gender and legal discourse. It argues for moving beyond the idea of religion as inherently opposed to feminism, toward recognizing it as a complex, pluralistic, and potentially transformative ally in the pursuit of justice.<sup>65</sup>

### 3. Integrating Human Rights into Nigerian Pentecostal Theology for Gender Equality

In Nigeria, Christianity has long shaped views on gender roles, occasionally promoting the subjection of women. However, there are freeing aspects in the same theology. Human rights values of inherent dignity are firmly aligned with the notion of *imago Dei*,<sup>66</sup> which states that all persons are made in God's image. However, passages like Ephesians 5:22 and 1 Timothy 2:12 have frequently been construed to support the exclusion of women from positions of leadership. A vehicle for opposing such patriarchal interpretations and advancing an inclusive interpretation of scripture is provided by the human rights framework.

Many feminist theologians support a "hermeneutics of suspicion," which calls for a critical analysis of the Bible in order to expose patriarchal distortions.<sup>67</sup> Their writings demonstrate how theology may change while remaining true to its basic foundations. This is especially important for Nigeria, where cultural resonance is required for reinterpretation rather than the imposition of external values. Naturally, the tenets of Pentecostalism spiritual rebirth, the priesthood of all believers, and empowerment by the Holy Spirit have implications for equality. The notion that men and women are equally called to spiritual power is supported by these ideas. Despite conventional resistance, Pentecostal focus on divine calling frequently empowers women to take on leadership roles, subverting strict gender norms. It is possible to change attitudes in society and religious communities by utilizing this natural drive for equality. Section 42 of the 1999 Constitution states that discrimination is already illegal in Nigeria (as amended, s.42). However, enforcement is hampered by cultural and religious hurdles. Presenting gender equality as both a constitutional right and a heavenly commandment, incorporating human rights within Pentecostal

<sup>63</sup> K. O. Adabembe, 'Pentecostalism and Women Development in the Redeemed Christian Church of God: A Model for National Development' (2023) 8(7) *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 2049–2061 <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRIS.2023.71066>.

<sup>64</sup> R. I. J. Hackett, 'Women's Religious Activism in Nigeria: New Wine in Old Wineskins?' (2016) 46 *Journal of Religion in Africa* 240–270.

<sup>65</sup> Amaefule (n 58).

<sup>66</sup> Genesis 1:27

<sup>67</sup> R.R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Beacon Press 1983); E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (Crossroad 1983).

theology enhances campaigning. Support from religious communities can increase the persuasiveness and social acceptability of legislative reforms. Pentecostal churches have the power to lead change by adjusting their teachings. However, critics warn that using human rights language may feel foreign because it often reflects Western ideas. Therefore, any change in theology should involve dialogue and be rooted in local experiences, spiritual practices, and scripture. Instead of seeing faith only as oppressive, Saba Mahmood's idea of the "politics of piety" shows that believers also have moral agency and make their own choices.<sup>68</sup> This viewpoint guarantees that rights-based changes uphold religious beliefs while promoting gender parity. On a larger scale, Nigeria's responsibilities under international law are also supported by the alignment of religion with human rights. Nigeria has accepted the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights 1981, which upholds equality and dignity for everyone. Legal pluralism permits religious rules to impact social norms and family law, but they must be consistent with international and constitutional norms. By reaffirming that equality is both a spiritual and legal need, faith communities are essential to closing this gap.

### ***Exploring Gender, Constitutional Principles and Christian Doctrine***

Religion has a significant influence on both public and private life in Nigeria. Because of its emphasis on biblical interpretation, Pentecostal Christianity frequently functions independently. However, it operates within a legal framework based on the equality and nondiscrimination rights included in the constitution. Resolving conflicts between gender equity and religious activities requires balancing Christian theological standards with constitutional legality. The Federal Republic of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution makes gender equality a top priority. Section 42(1) states that no person should be deprived because of their birth circumstances and forbids discrimination on the basis of sex, religion, or political ideology. Despite unequal implementation, this section creates a legal standard for assessing the actions of religious communities, giving human rights campaigners and feminist law experts a constitutional foundation to challenge gender inequalities ingrained in Pentecostal doctrine.

Tensions still exist in spite of these fundamental safeguards. Doctrines that emphasize female subservience, male headship in marriage, and prohibitions on women speaking or holding high positions in the church are frequently promoted by Nigerian Pentecostalism. Such actions go against the principles of the constitution by institutionalizing gender inequality. The judicial system's unwillingness to step in under the pretense of religious autonomy upholds patriarchal standards even in communities with educated and politically active members.<sup>69</sup> But there is a chance for change because of this disagreement. In addition to being a legal document, the Constitution can be used as a framework for interpreting religious doctrine. This is done to promote theological thought that is consistent with human rights and Christian principles like justice, love, and human dignity, rather than to secularize religious organizations.

<sup>68</sup> S. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press 2019).

<sup>69</sup> C.C. Okereke and O. S. Adiele, Ministerial Ordination and Gender Inequality in Selected Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria, 7(3) 2023, *International Journal of Academic Multidisciplinary Research*, 187–201.

According to Ebenezer Obadare, democracy may be strengthened and society made more inclusive by aligning religious beliefs with constitutional ideals.<sup>70</sup> He contends that without abandoning faith, scripture may be understood to promote equality.<sup>71</sup> The theological and legal foundation for gender equality is simultaneously affirmed by Section 42 and verses like Galatians 3:28, which states, "There is neither male nor "...female... for you are all one in Christ Jesus." An "incarnational hermeneutic" is advocated by Christian feminist theologians from Nigeria, such as members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.<sup>72</sup> This approach ensures that theology tackles gender inequality in the actual world by placing women's lived experiences at the heart of scripture interpretation. These academics aim to undermine interpretations that restrict women's power in civic and religious domains by presenting gender equality as both a constitutional and spiritual truth.<sup>73</sup> Nigerian Pentecostal churches must reevaluate how their hierarchy conforms to equality provisions in the constitution. Keeping women out of key leadership roles is against both constitutional rights and the need for more in-depth theological analysis.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, because they frequently result in psychological, emotional, and societal suffering, ideologies that support female subordination should be thoroughly analyzed. While religious communities sometimes oppose legislative reforms pertaining to gender equality, domestic abuse, and reproductive rights, portraying these reforms as manifestations of Christian principles like justice, dignity, and compassion may foster wider acceptance.<sup>75</sup> Collaboration is crucial. To create common ground, theologians, legal experts, civil society groups, and church leaders must collaborate while referencing both scripture and constitutional norms. Churches may become places of freedom rather than oppression when the idea that all people are equal before God is in line with constitutional equality. Christian theology that incorporates constitutional ideas provides a means of practicing religion that respects civic duty and spiritual values.<sup>76</sup>

#### 4. How Faith Impact Gender Equality In Nigeria

Section 42 of the 1999 Constitution of the nation ensures equality for men and women. This part emphasizes equal opportunity in all areas of life and forbids discrimination based on sex. However, the doctrines of many Pentecostal churches, which read the Bible in ways that support male leadership and female obedience, sometimes conflict with these legal concepts. Scriptures like as Ephesians 5:22–24 and 1 Timothy 2:11–12 are frequently used to support these

<sup>70</sup> E. Obadare, *Pastoral Power, Clerical State: Pentecostalism, Gender, and Sexuality in Nigeria* (University of Notre Dame Press 2022).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> M. A. Oduyoye and M. Kanyoro (eds), *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (Orbis Books 1992).

<sup>73</sup> A. Ayanga, 'Gender Equality as Constitutional and Spiritual Truth in African Theology' (2016) 30 *Theological Studies Review* 77.

<sup>74</sup> O. Olutunde and J. Ehioghuae, 'Pentecostalism and Gender Equality in Nigeria: A Theological Appraisal' (2018) 21 *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies* 55.

<sup>75</sup> O. Adesanya, 'Reimagining Gender Justice in Nigerian Christianity' (2022) 14 *African Journal of Gender and Religion* 102

<sup>76</sup> E. Chitando and G. Chirongoma, *Justice Not Silence: Churches Facing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence* (WCC Publications 2012).

hierarchical roles.<sup>77</sup> In addition to being theological, these views have social influence and influence how women are viewed in communities, churches, and families.

In Nigeria, Pentecostalism has expanded rapidly and has had a profound impact on public opinion, morality, and politics. Pastors have become not only spiritual authorities but also influential social and political actors, wielding power that extends into statecraft, law enforcement, and even women's rights debates.<sup>78</sup> Their growing visibility in media and politics means that constitutional safeguards on gender equality are often mediated, and sometimes undermined, by Pentecostal interpretations of gender roles.<sup>79</sup> In many church settings, women are still primarily constructed as mothers, caregivers, and helpmates. While these roles are publicly celebrated, they nonetheless curtail women's autonomy and obstruct their participation in leadership and decision-making processes.<sup>80</sup> Yet, within Pentecostal circles there is an emerging counter-movement to reinterpret scripture in ways that affirm equality and human dignity. Passages such as Galatians 3:28, which declares that in Christ "there is neither male nor female," have been deployed to challenge entrenched patriarchal norms. This hermeneutical shift has been encouraged by the rise of educated clergy and the growing involvement of women in theological training and ministry. Female pastors and theologians now openly contest conventional wisdom, asserting that gender equality aligns with the spirit of Christianity rather than contradicting it.<sup>81</sup> Although resistance remains strong many congregations fear that new interpretations threaten cultural identity and spiritual authority such debates are increasingly unavoidable.<sup>82</sup> The challenge, therefore, is not merely legal but theological: how can Pentecostal principles be reconciled with constitutional equality in a way that honours religious tradition while advancing justice? The answer lies in acknowledging the enduring power of Pentecostal pastors to shape public morality and policy, while also recognising the internal reformers who are re-imagining scripture as a resource for equality rather than subjugation.

## 5. Leveraging Faith for Gender Justice

Gender inequality in Nigeria is deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions, reinforced by both religious and societal structures. Pentecostal Christianity has often faced criticism for perpetuating gender disparity, particularly through male-dominated leadership and doctrines. Scholars such as Obadare argue that while Pentecostalism grants women spiritual authority within prayer and worship, the institutional framework of the church restricts women to supportive roles, thereby

<sup>77</sup> United Nations (1979) *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. United Nations Treaty Series, 1249, 13.

<sup>78</sup> (n70).

<sup>79</sup> Paul O. Oderinde, Ifeoma Okoye and Olusegun A. Adegboyega, 'Roles of Pentecostalism in the Political and Economic Development of Nigeria between 1999 and 2015' (2023) 2(2) *International Journal of Contemporary Research in Humanities* 45.

<sup>80</sup> Olusola Ogunnubi, 'Pentecostalism and its Implications for Socio-Economic Development in Post-Independence Nigeria' (2024) 13(1) *Kasem Bundit Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* 77.

<sup>81</sup> Daniel Jordan Smith, 'The Pentecostal Prosperity Gospel in Nigeria: Paradoxes of Corruption and Inequality' (2021) 52(1) *Current Anthropology* 67.

<sup>82</sup> Benson O. Igboin, 'Prophet-Centrism in Church Advertising: A Visual Cultural Reading of Nigerian Church Adverts' (2023) Special Issue *Journal for Semitics* 45.

excluding them from substantive leadership.<sup>83</sup> Despite these challenges, there is a growing movement within Pentecostalism that seeks to reinterpret its theology to support gender equality. Religious thinkers such as Nomatter Sande have begun to highlight egalitarian elements in Pentecostal doctrine that, when re-examined, can empower women and challenge entrenched gender norms.<sup>84</sup> Annelin Eriksen's research provides a nuanced view, showing that women's conversion to Pentecostalism often brings access to social support, healing, and new forms of agency, but also simultaneously reinforces gendered expectations that limit women's autonomy.<sup>85</sup> This tension underscores how Pentecostalism can be both a site of empowerment and a mechanism of control. As a result, the emphasis on women's empowerment and community reform has become central to contemporary studies of Pentecostalism. This paper therefore explores how Pentecostalism can serve as a tool for gender justice by reshaping power dynamics, integrating human rights into Christian teachings, and emphasising the role of religious leaders and policymakers in promoting gender equality.<sup>86</sup>

### ***Uncovering the Hidden Equality in Pentecostal Belief***

Despite being frequently linked to traditional gender norms, Pentecostalism has a number of underutilized egalitarian components that might be used to advance gender justice. A profound reimagining of human equality and value is provided by the core Pentecostal idea of spiritual regeneration. Pentecostal theology emphasizes the "born again" experience, which involves a whole reinvention of one's identity before God, in addition to a personal spiritual regeneration. Because Pentecostal theology teaches that all believers, irrespective of gender, are equally gifted by the Holy Spirit for ministry, prophecy, and leadership, it offers a framework that transcends conventional gendered hierarchies within Christianity.<sup>87</sup> The movement's emphasis on direct encounter between the believer and God further undermines traditional patriarchal structures that have historically positioned men as mediators between women and the divine.<sup>88</sup> Even though women are often excluded from formal clerical offices in many Pentecostal denominations, they are nevertheless encouraged to assert spiritual authority in practical ways by leading prayer groups, engaging in evangelism, and exerting influence on church policy and communal life.<sup>89</sup> Egalitarianism in Pentecostalism is also supported by the biblical idea of equality before God. Scriptures that contradict patriarchal views of the Bible, such as Galatians 3:28, which declares

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<sup>83</sup> (n70).

<sup>84</sup> Nomatter Sande, *Pentecostalism and the Empowerment of Women in Africa* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 2016).

<sup>85</sup> Annelin Eriksen, 'Gender and Pentecostalism: Conversion, Empowerment and Social Change' (2014) 23(2) *Religion and Gender* 137.

<sup>86</sup> Abd Rahman and Muhammad Arhad et al, 'Pentecostalism, Human Rights and Gender Justice in Contemporary Africa' (2025) *Journal of Religion and Society* (forthcoming).

<sup>87</sup> Ezra Chitando and Sophia Chirongoma (eds), *Gender and Christianity in Africa: The Impact of Religious Traditions on Gender Roles* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008).

<sup>88</sup> Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>89</sup> Ruth Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female," are frequently emphasised. These passages offer a solid basis for promoting gender equality in both spiritual and social contexts, despite the fact that they are usually disregarded or undervalued in many Christian groups. If highlighted, these egalitarian components have the power to change how women are viewed in Pentecostalism and promote a more inclusive and just theology. Another way to question gender norms is through Pentecostalism's emphasis on the gifts of the Spirit. The idea that all Christians possess spiritual abilities including leadership, teaching, and prophecy highlights the fact that these abilities are gender-neutral. The idea that women's responsibilities in the church and society should be restricted is challenged by the call for women to use their abilities for the promotion of God's kingdom and the edifying of the church.

### **Can Nigerian Patriarchy Be Dismantled through Pentecostalism?**

Pentecostalism in Nigeria holds significant potential to challenge patriarchal traditions, both within church structures and in wider society. Unlike older missionary denominations that often maintain rigid gender hierarchies, Pentecostalism places strong emphasis on personal spiritual experience and a believer's direct access to God.<sup>90</sup> This openness allows greater room for reinterpretation of scripture and the application of Christian principles to everyday social realities, creating a fertile ground for questioning long-standing patriarchal norms that limit women's rights and opportunities.

One of the most striking examples of this potential is the visibility of women in Pentecostal leadership. Prominent figures such as Pastor Funke Felix-Adejumo and Rev. Dr. Mercy Ezekiel have used their ministries to promote women's empowerment, offering models of leadership that disrupt the assumption of male spiritual authority.<sup>91</sup> Through their preaching and outreach, these leaders advocate not only for women's spiritual growth but also for their economic independence and full participation in church and society. Their presence underscores how Pentecostal platforms can be leveraged to reframe women's roles in ways that challenge conventional patriarchal ideologies. Moreover, Pentecostal theology's focus on the power of the Holy Spirit reinforces the idea that transformation both individual and collective is possible.<sup>92</sup>

This theological orientation emboldens women to challenge restrictive cultural expectations by stepping into leadership roles, voicing resistance to injustice, and demanding greater recognition of their rights. Such participation also extends beyond the pulpit into broader community life. In many Pentecostal congregations, women spearhead initiatives addressing gender-based violence, health awareness, and discriminatory practices in law and policy.<sup>93</sup> By grounding their activism in Pentecostal spirituality, these women reframe the struggle against patriarchy not merely as a political project but as a sacred calling. On the long run, Pentecostalism provides a leverage for

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<sup>90</sup> Ruth Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>91</sup> Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>92</sup> Nimi Wariboko, *Nigerian Pentecostalism* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2014).

<sup>93</sup> Asonzeh Ukah, 'The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Nigeria: Local Identities and Global Processes in African Pentecostalism' (2008) 7(3) *Die Erde* 252

social critique and reform by positioning women at the centre of both spiritual and civic engagement. In this way, it serves not only as a religious movement but also as a vehicle for renegotiating power dynamics and promoting gender justice in Nigeria.<sup>94</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

The main goal of this study was to investigate if Pentecostal ideology and gender equality could be reconciled in the Nigerian setting. In order to address the problems caused by patriarchal systems in both the religious and social spheres, it aimed to critically analyze how Christian teachings especially those found in the Pentecostal tradition can be understood in a way that promotes gender justice. The study's goals were to identify the main theological stances within Pentecostalism that either promote or impede gender equality, examine how Nigerian laws and religious doctrine interact, and suggest reform strategies to guarantee that Pentecostalism advances a more just society for women.

## Findings

The study discovered that although Pentecostalism frequently upholds conventional gender roles, the movement does have important theological and doctrinal opportunities to advance gender equality. Gender justice is based on Pentecostalism's belief in the equal worth of all believers and its emphasis on the egalitarian activity of the Holy Spirit. However, among Pentecostal groups, the full fulfillment of women's rights is still constrained by patriarchal and cultural interpretations of scripture.

One of the main conclusions was that while Pentecostal organizations, especially those in Nigeria, have shown considerable adaptability in embracing gender-sensitive practices like women actively serving in church leadership, these shifts are frequently restricted to small groups or congregations. Women's rights can be supported by Pentecostal theology, but doing so calls both a reconsideration of conventional biblical readings and a closer study of feminist theology. The conflict between religious beliefs and Nigeria's legal system, which upholds gender equality, was another significant discovery. Legal measures that go against patriarchal customs are still met with resistance within many Pentecostal groups. In order to guarantee that women's rights are respected in the church and in national legislation, this emphasizes the necessity of increased cooperation between religious leaders and legislators.

## 7.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study offers several important recommendations for moving forward:

- i. Theological Rethinking: To advance gender equality, Pentecostal theologians and church leaders must undertake a careful and comprehensive reexamination of scripture and theology. This entails adopting feminist theological viewpoints that highlight the equal value and agency of women as well as reexamining conventional readings of important biblical passages, especially

<sup>94</sup>Adriaan van Klinken, 'Pentecostalism, Politics and Gender: A Comparative Perspective on Zambia and Nigeria' (2011) 25(3) *Religion in Africa* 345



those that have been used to defend the oppression of women. By emphasizing reinterpretation, churches may bring their teachings into line with the core Christian message of justice and equality.

ii. Pentecostal churches should actively promote and encourage women in leadership positions by implementing gender-sensitive leadership practices. Equal access to leadership roles and decision-making in the church is crucial for women. Women may be enabled to lead in all facets of church life by implementing policies that stress gender sensitivity and diversity, mentorship programs, and leadership development.

iii. Cooperation between the Religious and Legal Sectors: To ensure that religious doctrine is in line with national legislation that support gender equality, religious leaders especially those in Pentecostal communities must work with legislators. In order to ensure that women's rights are upheld in both religious settings and society at large, this collaboration is essential in bridging the gap between religion and legal rights. Together, the two fields may forge a more solid basis for gender justice that honors both secular and religious principles.

iv. Education and Advocacy: More education and advocacy about gender justice, human rights, and the significance of women's empowerment are desperately needed in Pentecostal communities. Providing clergy and churchgoers with theological training, conferences, and seminars helps promote a more gender-sensitive and inclusive approach to Christianity. Promoting gender equality inside the church will aid in changing beliefs and encouraging behaviors that uphold women's rights within the church and in society at large.