

JESUS' TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS AS A FRAMEWORK FOR ADDRESSING GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality remains a pervasive challenge in Nigeria, cutting across politics, economics, education, and religion, where women are frequently marginalized from leadership and decision-making roles. This study examines Jesus' treatment of women in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) as a theological and ethical framework for addressing gender discrimination in contemporary Nigeria. Using a comparative and descriptive research methodology, the paper analyzes key Gospel narratives within their historical and cultural contexts and interprets their implications for contemporary gender justice. Findings reveal that, while first-century Judaism was characterized by strong patriarchal norms, Jesus consistently broke cultural barriers by affirming women's dignity, agency, and discipleship. His radical inclusion of women as witnesses, patrons, and exemplars of faith provides a model that contrasts sharply with Nigeria's entrenched socio-cultural and ecclesiastical exclusions. The study also establishes that Nigerian society, despite constitutional and international commitments to equality, continues to underrepresent women in politics, restrict them in church leadership, and limit their access to education and economic opportunities. The research concludes that the Synoptic model of Jesus' inclusive ministry provides a redemptive paradigm for rethinking gender relations in

Nigeria. It suggests intentional theological reorientation, policy reforms within churches, and the empowerment of women as indispensable partners in national development and ecclesial life.

Keywords: Women, Gender, Synoptic Gospels, Discrimination, Nigeria.

Introduction

Gender equality remains one of the most pressing social, political, and religious concerns in the twenty-first century, yet women across the world continue to face systemic discrimination that limits their participation in key spheres of life. In Nigeria, this discrimination manifests in multiple ways, ranging from economic marginalization and political underrepresentation to the persistent exclusion of women from leadership roles within religious institutions (Ukpong and Essien, 2012). Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, women are often confined to supportive or symbolic roles, while positions of authority and decision-making remain dominated by men. This entrenched inequality is perpetuated by cultural norms, patriarchal structures, and selective religious interpretations that sustain stereotypes portraying women as subordinate, emotionally fragile, or less capable of leadership.

Such gender disparities are not unique to contemporary Nigeria; they have historical and cultural roots stretching back to antiquity. In first-century Judaism, women were similarly restricted by legal, religious, and social norms that relegated them to the margins of public and religious life (Essien, 2020). Yet, against this backdrop, the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth stands out as radically countercultural. The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) present numerous accounts of Jesus engaging with women in ways that affirmed their dignity, recognized their agency, and integrated them into the community of discipleship. Jesus' willingness to break social taboos, elevate women's voices, and acknowledge their faith and service challenges the patriarchal norms of both ancient Judaism and modern societies.

In the Nigerian context, where gender inequality remains a persistent barrier to women's full participation in church and society, the example of Jesus presents a powerful theological and ethical framework for transformation. Through a careful examination of Jesus' treatment of women in the Synoptic Gospels, this study seeks to draw out principles that can be applied to address gender discrimination in contemporary Nigeria. Through a careful analysis of the historical background, Gospel narratives, and the theological implications of Jesus' interactions with women, the paper aims to demonstrate how the church and wider society can be re-oriented toward gender justice.

Gender Issues in the World

The term gender distinguishes the set of learned expectation behaviours, and attitude about being a man or woman from our biologically determined traits, collectively termed as "sex". Gender simply refers to the different and distinct roles and responsibilities allocated to both men and women in various families, societies. In all societies, gender is culturally and socially defined (Olusakin, 2014). In other words, gender connotes the various duties and obligations espoused by different societies and cultures about men and women. The concept of gender also includes expectations held about the characteristics, attitudes and likely behaviours of both women and men (femininity and masculinity). In this article, gender refers to the

historically contingent expectations, institutions, and power dynamics that produce unequal life chances for women and men, and for people whose identities do not fit binary norms. Although many countries have adopted equality laws, robust global data still show persistent gendered exclusions in education, politics, religion/faith leadership, the economy, and safety.

In education, UNESCO data show that gender parity narrows at higher levels of schooling as roughly two-thirds of countries achieve parity in primary completion, but fewer than one-fifth do so at upper secondary (UIS, 2023). Worldwide, approximately 133 million girls and 139 million boys remain out of school, with disparities widening for poor and rural girls at post-primary levels. There is also gender disparity in political representation and decision-making. As of 1 August 2025, women hold 27.2% of the world's parliamentary seats, up from 11.3% in 1995, but still far from parity (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2025). The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2024 likewise finds Political Empowerment to be the least closed domain globally, at 22.5% toward parity; at the current pace, closing this sub-index would take an estimated 169 years (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2024).

Again, there is global gender imbalance in religion and faith leadership. Women are, on the average, more religiously committed than men across many societies (Pew Research Center, 2016), yet they remain under-represented in formal leadership. Even in denominations that ordain women, leadership skews male. For example, in the Church of England, women constituted about 32% of ordained ministers (2019) and roughly 30% of incumbents in recent tallies (Church of England, 2019). In the United States, women lead an estimated 13% of Protestant congregations as head or senior pastors (Whitehead & Baker, 2023). Meanwhile, major traditions such as the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches still restrict priestly ordination to men, with only incremental openings in administrative roles. The result is a global faith landscape in which women's participation is high but their institutional authority is structurally constrained (Essien and Edem, 2024a).

Economic participation, pay, and unpaid care. Globally, parity in economic participation and opportunity is only 60.5% closed (WEF, 2024a). The ILO continues to estimate an average gender pay gap near 20%, with wide variation by country (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2023). Progress is uneven despite recent rebounds in real wages after pandemic-era losses. Crucially, women carry a disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work, about 2.5 times as many hours per day as men on average, depressing labour-force participation and earnings (UN Women, 2024a). These indicators show that women's marginalization is structural, cross-sectoral, and globally patterned. This global picture sets the stage for the core task of this study which is to bring the Synoptic Gospels' portrait of Jesus' treatment of women into critical conversation with contemporary gender discrimination, especially in Nigeria, so as to develop a theologically grounded, contextually realistic framework for reform in church and society.

Historical and Cultural Background of Women in First-Century Judaism

In first-century Judaism, women lived within a social framework shaped by both Jewish law and the broader Greco-Roman culture. Daily life and community structures were heavily patriarchal, with men occupying the public and religious spaces while women were largely confined to domestic roles. The home was the center of a woman's identity, raising children,

managing household affairs, and supporting her husband were considered her primary duties. Public recognition and legal standing were generally tied to her relationship with a male guardian, whether father, husband, or eldest son. In matters of law, for instance, women could rarely testify in court, and property rights were restricted, though some wealthier or widowed women did manage estates or engage in trade (Safrai, 1976).

Religious life was also marked by limitations. Women participated in synagogue life but in a restricted manner. They often sat separately from men and were excluded from leading public readings of the Torah or holding religious office (Brooten, 1982). While the Torah stresses the dignity and worth of all God's people, interpretive traditions and social norms often placed women in a subordinate position. Rabbinic teachings of the period, preserved in the Mishnah, reflect both protective attitudes toward women and a tendency to restrict their autonomy. Some rabbis emphasized the virtue of modesty, advising minimal public interaction between the sexes, which further reinforced women's domestic confinement. However, the situation was not entirely monolithic.

First-century Palestine was at cultural crossroads, influenced by Hellenistic ideals, Roman law, and local traditions. This meant that the lived experience of women varied depending on geography, wealth, and family standing. Wealthy Jewish women in urban centers like Jerusalem or Sepphoris sometimes acted as patrons of religious and charitable works. Archaeological evidence, including inscriptions and burial sites, indicates that some women held honorary titles in synagogues or were remembered as benefactors. This means that the boundaries were not entirely rigid.

Culturally, women were central to the preservation of Jewish identity. They were the first educators of children in the faith, ensuring the transmission of language, dietary laws, and Sabbath observance. In an age of foreign occupation and political instability, the household became a primary space where Jewish tradition was nurtured. Even though public recognition was scarce, women played a vital role in sustaining the religious life of their communities. This complex background helps to explain why Jesus' interaction with women in the Synoptic Gospels was so striking. Against a backdrop where women's voices were often muted and their public presence limited, his willingness to teach them, speak openly with them, and affirm their dignity carried profound social and theological implications. It represented a radical break from certain prevailing norms while still working within the cultural realities of the time.

Jesus' Interaction with Women in the Synoptic Gospel

The term "Synoptic Gospels" refers to the first three books of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), which, despite their unique emphases, share a significant degree of overlap in narrative structure, content, and wording. The word "synoptic," from the Greek *syn* ("together") and *opsis* ("view"), shows that these Gospels can be "seen together" and compared side by side because of their common perspective on the life and ministry of Jesus (Olson, 2019). Within these accounts, one of the striking themes is Jesus' engagement with women, which is antithetical to the backdrop of the patriarchal world of first-century Judaism and the Greco-Roman milieu. The cultural climate of the time afforded women limited public visibility and constrained their religious and social participation. Yet, in the Synoptic

tradition, Jesus' interactions with women emerge as radical and countercultural. This reveals a posture of dignity, compassion, and inclusion that defied the dominant gender norms of His day.

In Matthew's account, for instance, Jesus includes women in His teaching ministry and also affirms their faith in ways that place them alongside (or even above) male disciples. The story of the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21–28) is a clear example. In a society where Gentiles and women were doubly marginalized, Jesus' initial silence and apparent resistance provide a narrative tension that ultimately magnifies her persistence and theological insight. His final words, "Great is your faith," was Jesus' commendation, showing that covenantal inclusion rests not on ethnicity or gender but on faith itself. Similarly, the women at the crucifixion and resurrection (Matt. 27:55–28:10) are steadfast witnesses when many male disciples flee, and in Matthew's telling, they are the first to receive and carry the resurrection message, an honour that, in the patriarchal logic of the day, would have been unthinkable.

Mark's Gospel, while more concise, carries a similar undercurrent. Women appear as recipients of healing, as in the case of the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:25–34), who defies purity taboos by touching Jesus' garment. Instead of rebuke, Jesus addresses her directly, calling her "daughter" and affirming that her faith has made her well. In this interaction, He overturns purity codes and social stigma in a single sentence, and he restores both her body and her public dignity. Mark also records women as central figures at the crucifixion and the empty tomb (Mark 15:40–16:8), with the unresolved ending perhaps underlining the reality that the gospel's earliest witnesses were precisely those whose testimony was often dismissed in Jewish courts, women. This narrative choice substantiates the fact that the proclamation of the resurrection is grounded in God's sovereignty rather than human conventions of credibility.

Luke also provides the most expansive portrait of women among the synoptics, weaving their presence into the fabric of Jesus' mission from the outset. His birth narratives foreground Mary, Elizabeth, and Anna, each portrayed as spiritually perceptive and active participants in God's redemptive work. Throughout the ministry narratives, Luke includes as disciples and patrons (Luke 8:1–3), naming Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna as part of the traveling ministry team, a radical acknowledgment of women's leadership and financial support. Parables such as the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8) use women as moral exemplars, while Jesus' defense of Mary of Bethany's choice to sit at His feet and learn (Luke 10:38–42) directly challenges the gendered division of religious roles. In Luke's crucifixion and resurrection scenes, women remain central, their presence contrasted with the absence of most male disciples.

From the foregoing, these accounts dismantle the rigid social and religious hierarchies of their time, and portrays women as integral participants in God's salvific work. Jesus' actions, whether in public teaching, private encounters, or symbolic gestures, consistently affirm the dignity, agency, and theological insight of women. This inclusive posture carries profound theological implications for gender equality in contemporary Christian thought. It suggests that the Kingdom of God, as envisioned and embodied by Jesus, resists the patriarchal exclusions of both ancient Judaism and subsequent church traditions.

Gender Discrimination in Contemporary Nigerian Society and Church

Gender discrimination in contemporary Nigerian society and the Church cannot be understood in isolation from the historical, cultural, and religious structures that have shaped gender roles in the world for centuries. The same patriarchal patterns evident in first-century Judaism and reinforced in later religious traditions have been deeply embedded in Nigerian life, influencing politics, education, economics, religion, and even interpersonal relationships. While modern democratic frameworks promise equality, the reality is that women in Nigeria still face systemic and institutionalized barriers that keep them at the margins of power and influence. In the political sphere, gender discrimination manifests most visibly in the severe underrepresentation of women in elective and appointive positions. Despite Nigeria's commitment to international conventions such as the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which urged 30% female representation in governance, women's political participation remains dismally low.

Another area where there is marginalization of Nigerian women is in the political sphere. As pointed out by Ekanem, Essien and Okon (2022), politics in Nigeria is characterized by structural and cultural peculiarities that distinguish it from political systems in many developed countries. This uniqueness often manifests in exclusionary practices that hinder equitable participation. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023), women make up only 3.6% of Nigeria's national parliament, placing the country among the lowest in the world for female political representation. At the state level, the picture is equally bleak. In Akwa Ibom State, for example, despite being a signatory to the United Nations' gender equality commitments, no woman has ever served as governor, speaker of the State Assembly, or chairman of a major political party since the state's creation. Even when women secure positions, they are often relegated to "soft" portfolios or symbolic roles that carry limited decision-making power (Edem and Essien, 2024a).

This exclusion is both descriptive, women's numbers in political institutions do not reflect their proportion in society (and substantive) their unique perspectives are rarely incorporated into political agendas (Phillips, 1995). The result is a persistent cycle in which policies affecting women are formulated without adequate female input, leading to governance that often overlooks women's specific needs and rights. The roots of this imbalance lie not just in political structures, but in the socialization processes that define women's roles from childhood. The Nigerian socio-cultural system remains deeply patriarchal, with men perceived as natural leaders and women as dependents or domestic helpers. Traditional norms allocate public leadership and decision-making to men while confining women to the domestic sphere, a division reinforced by proverbs, folklore, and even religious interpretations (Makama, 2013). Women who attempt to cross these boundaries into political life often face stigma, suspicion, and moral policing. Late-night political meetings—a standard part of Nigerian political culture, are seen as inappropriate for "respectable" women, creating an almost deliberate exclusion mechanism (Olojede, 2015).

Economically, gender discrimination compounds these barriers. Nigerian women earn on average 77% of what men earn for similar work (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022), and they have less access to credit, land, and other productive resources. Given the high cost of electoral participation in Nigeria, where party nomination forms alone can cost millions of naira,

alongside the financial demands of campaigning, most women simply cannot afford to compete with male counterparts. Even political parties that offer nominal fee waivers to female aspirants rarely provide the logistical or financial backing necessary to win elections.

The situation is mirrored in religious institutions, where cultural norms often merge with theological interpretations to reinforce male dominance. In many Nigerian churches, leadership structures remain overwhelmingly male, with women restricted to auxiliary or supportive roles such as choir leadership, hospitality, and children's ministry. While some denominations allow female ordination, these women often face resistance from congregations or are excluded from key decision-making councils. This dynamic reflects a selective reading of scripture, where stories of women leaders like Deborah, Priscilla, and Phoebe are downplayed, while patriarchal narratives are emphasized as divinely mandated. Theological interpretations that equate leadership with maleness continue to justify women's exclusion from the pulpit and church governance (Kanyoro, 2001).

Educational disparities further entrench these inequalities. Although Nigeria has made progress in closing the gender gap in primary education, UNICEF (2021) reports that in the northern regions, particularly the North-East and North-West, over 60% of out-of-school children are girls. Early marriage, poverty, and cultural norms that prioritize boys' education continue to undermine women's long-term empowerment. Historically, the Nigerian Church sought to address such gaps by establishing mission schools that expanded access to education (Essien and Edem, 2024b; Essien, 2020), yet the persistence of gender-based exclusions shows that these efforts have not fully dismantled entrenched inequalities. Without equal access to education, women remain disadvantaged in the labour market and political sphere, perpetuating a cycle of dependence and marginalization.

In the Church, gender discrimination takes subtler but equally impactful forms. Sermons and doctrinal teachings often emphasize women's submission and domestic duties over their leadership potential. Even where women demonstrate spiritual and administrative competence, they are rarely entrusted with authority over mixed-gender congregations. This selective gatekeeping is often defended as faithfulness to "biblical order," despite growing scholarly consensus that the early Christian movement included prominent female leaders (Fiorenza, 1983). The irony is that the same Christian faith, whose founder Jesus Christ broke gender barriers in first-century Palestine by engaging women as disciples and proclaimers of the Gospel, is often invoked to justify their exclusion in 21st-century Nigeria. These realities reveal that gender discrimination in Nigeria is not confined to a single domain, instead, it is a multidimensional system. Political exclusion, economic inequality, educational disparity, cultural patriarchy, and religious marginalization are interconnected, each strengthening the other. The result is a society in which women, despite being half of the population, remain largely invisible in the spaces where decisions are made.

Applying the Synoptic Model to the Nigerian Context

The Synoptic Gospels present a coherent and unified portrait of Jesus' countercultural treatment of women. These Gospels portray Jesus as one who consistently dismantled the social, cultural, and religious barriers that marginalized them. When this vision is brought into conversation with the Nigerian context, the parallels are both striking and challenging.

Nigerian society, like first-century Judaism, is shaped by patriarchal norms that often define a woman's worth in terms of her roles as wife, mother, or caretaker, limiting her visibility and participation in religious leadership, politics, and decision-making spheres. In many Christian communities within Nigeria, women remain largely excluded from top ecclesiastical offices, and cultural practices founded on tradition, sometimes support this by selective biblical interpretations, leading to the relegation of women only to secondary roles.

Applying the Synoptic model means asking whether the radical inclusivity seen in Jesus' ministry can reshape gender relations within Nigerian Christianity and the broader society. For example, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus affirms Mary of Bethany's choice to sit at His feet as a disciple (Luke 10:39), a privilege traditionally reserved for men in rabbinic settings. This moment disrupts cultural expectations and establishes a theological precedent for women's full participation in spiritual learning and leadership. Translating this into Nigerian contexts challenges both church and cultural systems that restrict women from theological education, ordination, or authoritative preaching roles. If the church is to be faithful to Jesus' example, it cannot perpetuate structural inequalities that He came to dismantle.

Furthermore, the Nigerian socio-political landscape reveals persistent gender disparities that mirror the marginalization of women in ancient Palestine. The 2023 Inter-Parliamentary Union data shows that women occupy less than 10% of Nigeria's National Assembly seats, one of the lowest rates globally. This underrepresentation mirrors the absence of women in decision-making councils of first-century Judaism, yet the Synoptic narratives remind us that Jesus brought women into the heart of His mission, from the anointing at Bethany to the presence of women at the cross and the empty tomb. In a similar vein, Nigerian women, despite systemic barriers, are active agents of change, leading grassroots initiatives, championing education, and advancing social justice. Recognizing and empowering such leadership is not a matter of modern political correctness but a theological mandate evident in the very character of Jesus' ministry.

The cultural application of the Synoptic witness also challenges the misappropriation of certain biblical passages to justify female subordination in Nigeria. Just as Jesus reinterpreted the Law and prophetic tradition to affirm the dignity of the marginalized, Nigerian Christians are called to read Scripture in a way that dismantles harmful stereotypes and affirms the image of God in both men and women. This requires robust theological education, intentional policy changes in churches and institutions, and an openness to learning from the lived experiences of women across denominations and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, applying the Synoptic model in Nigeria means embracing a holistic vision of the Kingdom of God, one in which men and women labour side by side in mutual respect and shared authority. It means recognizing that the gospel's call to justice and equality is not a Western import but an integral part of Jesus' message, one that transcends cultural and historical boundaries. In doing so, Nigerian Christianity can bear witness to the radical inclusivity of Christ, offering a prophetic challenge to both religious and societal structures that continue to marginalize half of the human family.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The persistence of gender discrimination in Nigeria reflects not only structural inequalities in politics, economics, and education but also deeper cultural and religious biases that continue to marginalize women. As demonstrated in this study, such exclusions mirror the patriarchal patterns of first-century Judaism, where women were confined to domestic and subordinate roles. Yet the Synoptic Gospels reveal a radically different vision through the ministry of Jesus, who consistently affirmed the dignity, faith, and leadership of women, thereby dismantling the boundaries that denied them full participation in God's mission. Jesus' treatment of women stands as a theological and ethical challenge to contemporary Nigerian society and church. Importantly, the example of Jesus does not call for a rejection of cultural identity but for a transformative reorientation that grounds social and ecclesial life in justice, inclusion, and mutual respect.

When interpreted alongside global gender justice frameworks and contextual African perspectives, the Synoptic model of Jesus offers not a distant ideal but a practical paradigm for reform. For Nigeria, overcoming gender discrimination will require more than constitutional guarantees or ecclesiastical declarations; it demands intentional theological renewal, cultural re-education, and institutional reforms that honour the equal image of God in women and men. Only then can the Nigerian church and society embody the inclusive vision of the Kingdom of God, where justice and partnership replace exclusion and subordination.

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