

**FROM MARGINS TO MINISTRY: WOMEN'S VOICES IN AFRICAN FAITH-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT****Dr. Chioma Maureen Udemba**

Department of Religion and Human Relations

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka Nigeria

[cm.udemba@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:cm.udemba@unizik.edu.ng)/[chioma.udemba@cgu.edu](mailto:chioma.udemba@cgu.edu)/[chiomajesus57@yahoo.com](mailto:chiomajesus57@yahoo.com)

Phone: 2347019151359

**ABSTRACT**

This article explores the transformative roles played by African religious women—particularly Catholic nuns, Protestant laywomen, and Pentecostal female leaders—in driving faith-based community development across education, health, and human rights sectors. These women, long marginalized within patriarchal religious systems, have nonetheless emerged as critical agents of change by reimagining ministry beyond the pulpit and into the heart of community life. Framed through the lenses of feminist theology, intersectionality, and liberation theology, the article critically examines how African religious women have negotiated power, challenged doctrinal hierarchies, and created alternative spaces for agency and resistance.

Drawing upon historical legacies, contemporary case studies, and the author's research on religious women's leadership in Nigeria and beyond (Udemba, 2024a, 2024b), this article centers figures such as Mother Mary Charles Magdalene Walker and highlights ministries that integrate spiritual commitment with practical social activism. Udemba and Ojukwu's (2023) work on women's education advocacy through faith-based institutions illustrates the enduring impact of religious women in community empowerment. Moreover, Udemba's (2025) insights into cross-cultural human relations emphasize the importance of faith-led dialogue and feminist praxis in sustaining holistic development.

By analyzing historical legacies and contemporary examples, including Catholic figures like Mother Mary Charles Magdalene Walker and the pioneering works of African sisters and ecumenical women leaders, the article positions these women as co-creators of holistic, justice-oriented ministries. It draws on oral histories, ethnographic insights, and theological reflections to show how they integrate spiritual commitment with practical social interventions—building schools, founding clinics, and mobilizing against systemic inequalities.

Furthermore, this piece interrogates the persistent structural barriers that religious women face, including gendered restrictions in church leadership, doctrinal silencing, and limited access to theological education. In highlighting the intersection of gender, class, and spirituality, the article calls for a broader and more inclusive understanding of ministry that values the embodied experiences and contributions of African women. Ultimately, it argues that African faith-based development cannot be fully understood—or sustained—without acknowledging the pivotal leadership and prophetic voice of women on the margins who have long been shaping the soul of the continent's religious and civic life.

**INTRODUCTION**

In African societies, religion is not simply a spiritual framework—it is a lived, communal reality that shapes identity, governance, and social norms. It permeates every dimension of life, from birth rituals to political decision-making, offering moral codes and social cohesion. However, within many African religious traditions—both Christian and Indigenous—women have historically been relegated to the periphery. Despite being the numerical majority in most congregations, their voices are often muted in decision-making structures, doctrinal interpretations, and ecclesial leadership.

# IJETRM

## International Journal of Engineering Technology Research & Management

(IJETRM)

<https://ijetrm.com/>

Yet, African religious women—nuns, lay ministers, and spiritual caregivers—have not remained passive recipients of marginalization. Rather, they have redefined religious vocation by extending it into public spheres. From operating schools and hospitals to engaging in grassroots advocacy, these women challenge the binary between sacred and secular service. Their work disrupts the assumption that religious leadership is inherently male, and that social development is separate from spiritual ministry.

This article seeks to amplify the under-recognized voices of African religious women who have emerged as vanguards of community transformation. It explores two guiding questions:

- **How have African religious women contributed to faith-based development?**
- **What barriers persist in their pursuit of justice-oriented ministries?**

Grounded in feminist theology, African womanist thought, and liberationist religious ethics, this article contends that African religious women are central—though often invisible—actors in community development.

### Theoretical Framing: Religion, Gender, and Social Transformation

To understand the roles of African religious women in development, one must locate their work within intersecting theoretical frameworks. **Feminist theology** challenges patriarchal interpretations of sacred texts and affirms women's capacity for divine agency. African theologians such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro have long emphasized that African women's spirituality is embodied through service and justice (Oduyoye, 2001; Kanyoro, 2002).

Additionally, **womanist theology** and **African gender hermeneutics** push further, arguing that African women must be read not as victims of tradition but as agents navigating systems of both oppression and survival. These perspectives advocate for an integrative approach that sees education, healthcare, and economic empowerment as extensions of religious vocation.

Your own research (Udemba, 2023) echoes this perspective by illustrating how **feminist religious pedagogy** in Nigeria reorients curriculum and ministry to reflect women's lived realities and social responsibilities. This theological shift affirms that spiritual formation and community development are not mutually exclusive.

### Historical Overview: From Invisible Labor to Institutional Builders

Historically, African religious women have contributed significantly to societal development, often under the radar of ecclesiastical recognition. During colonial and missionary periods, women religious—particularly Catholic nuns—established some of the earliest girls' schools and maternity clinics in Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya. For example, the pioneering work of **Mother Mary Charles Magdalen Walker (RSC)** in Calabar, Nigeria, laid the groundwork for women's education in regions where girls were previously excluded from formal schooling (Udemba & Ojukwu, 2023).

These women formed congregations, taught hygiene and nutrition, delivered babies, and trained women in trades—all in the name of their religious callings. Their presence often provided the only accessible health and educational services in rural and underserved areas. Yet, despite these critical contributions, their stories remain absent from official church histories and state archives.

As Phiri and Nadar (2006) argue, the "hermeneutics of suspicion" must be applied to traditional narratives that eclipse women's religious labor, revealing how colonial and patriarchal church structures intentionally muted their roles.

### Contemporary Interventions: Women at the Forefront of Faith-Based Development

In the evolving landscape of African community development, women of faith remain central actors—teachers, healers, and advocates—who transform societies from within. Through formal institutions and grassroots initiatives, religious women, especially nuns and lay ministers, have become architects of social change.

### Education: Lifting Margins Through Literacy

Religious sisters across Africa have founded and sustained educational institutions that serve girls from the poorest and most marginalized communities. For example, the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus (HHCJ), a congregation of African Catholic nuns, run dozens of girls' schools across Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon. These institutions not only

# IJETRM

## International Journal of Engineering Technology Research & Management

(IJETRM)

<https://ijetrm.com/>

provide academic instruction but also mentor young women in leadership, spiritual discernment, and civic responsibility. Many of their graduates are now professional teachers, doctors, lawyers—who attribute their early empowerment to the holistic education they receive.

Similarly, the daughters of Mary and Joseph and Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur have long histories of building schools in rural communities across Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo, often in areas where state educational infrastructure is absent. These congregations embody an ethic of "education as liberation," challenging both illiteracy and patriarchal social norms that restrict girls' futures.

### Health and Wellness: Healing with Compassion and Competence

Beyond classrooms, religious women have also led the charge in health care delivery. The Medical Missionaries of Mary (MMM) operate hospitals and mobile clinics across West Africa, with special emphasis on maternal and child health. Their facilities not only provide biomedical care but also integrate counseling, spiritual support, and public health education.

In Uganda, the Little Sisters of St. Francis run the St. Francis Hospital Nsambya, one of Kampala's oldest and most reputable health institutions. The hospital, managed predominantly by religious sisters, offers affordable care and has trained hundreds of nurses and midwives through its adjacent health sciences school. These initiatives demonstrate how faith-based medical care remains critical, particularly in underserved and conflict-affected regions.

Muslim women's organizations also play crucial roles. For instance, women affiliated with Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN) have mobilized around reproductive health education, vaccination campaigns, and HIV/AIDS awareness in northern Nigeria, promoting culturally sensitive health outreach within religiously conservative communities.

### Advocacy and Peacebuilding: From Silent Labor to Vocal Leadership

Women religious are increasingly visible in advocacy spaces once dominated by clergy or male-led institutions. They spearhead anti-trafficking campaigns, support survivors of gender-based violence, and engage in interfaith dialogue for peace. The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in South Sudan and the Central African Republic includes several women religious who serve displaced populations and advocate for human rights protections in volatile zones.

In Sierra Leone, during the Ebola crisis, religious sisters coordinated burial teams, offered psychosocial care, and countered misinformation in remote communities. These efforts were later recognized as instrumental in restoring public trust in health and religious institutions alike.

However, structural inequalities remain. Many women religious are excluded from decision-making forums within their churches. They often lack access to financial resources, rely on volunteer labor, and face skepticism when asserting theological or policy perspectives. Reports on faith-based development frequently marginalize their role, even when they are its primary drivers

### Voices of Justice: Religious Women as Advocates and Peacebuilders

In many African contexts, where patriarchal dominance and political instability persist, religious women emerge as unexpected but formidable peacebuilders and social advocates. Their contributions go beyond conventional roles of caregiving and education to embrace direct activism, community mediation, and political engagement.

### Women Religious as Agents of Peace

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, where decades of armed conflict have left deep scars, religious sisters play vital roles in trauma healing, peace education, and post-conflict reconciliation. Networks such as Solidarity with South Sudan, comprised largely of women religious, conduct trauma healing and reconciliation workshops for survivors of gender-based violence. These ministries provide not only psychosocial support, but also spiritual healing rooted in Christian compassion.

According to Kanyoro (2002), such practices represent a "feminist theology of resistance"—a faith-based activism informed by women's lived experiences of violence, poverty, and exclusion. Similarly, Isabel Apawo Phiri (2006) emphasizes the healing and liberative potential embedded in African women's religious expressions, noting that their "embodied spirituality" disrupts traditional binaries between the sacred and the secular.

# IJETRM

## International Journal of Engineering Technology Research & Management

(IJETRM)

<https://ijetrm.com/>

In Nigeria, women religious within the Catholic Church and Pentecostal movements have been central in peacebuilding during ethno-religious conflicts, especially in the Middle Belt and northeast regions. Ilo (2012) documents how women-led prayer circles, interfaith dialogue sessions, and peace caravans have significantly reduced tensions in local communities. These religious women frame peace as not only the absence of conflict but also the active presence of justice.

### Lay Religious Women and Legal Advocacy

Beyond the convent walls, lay religious women are actively involved in combating human trafficking, child marriage, and domestic violence. In Kenya, the Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya (AOSK) runs nationwide advocacy campaigns against child marriage, operating safe houses, offering legal aid, and conducting workshops for girls and families in rural areas.

According to Chitando and Chirongoma (2012), such interventions demonstrate the growing integration of religious ethics with human rights frameworks. These women bridge sacred and secular realms, drawing upon biblical teachings on justice and compassion while simultaneously invoking the language of rights and dignity.

Furthermore, in Zimbabwe, female-led church groups have partnered with local councils to reform discriminatory inheritance laws, thus ensuring widows and daughters gain access to land and property. Dube (2003) argues that this is a form of “hermeneutics of liberation”, where religious texts are reinterpreted through a feminist and socially conscious lens to confront oppressive cultural norms.

### Barriers to Recognition: Structural and Theological Inequality

Despite their critical contributions, women religious and lay leaders remain institutionally marginalized. Their exclusion from formal decision-making bodies, sacramental leadership, and funding mechanisms reflects a wider theological and structural bias within both religious institutions and international development agencies.

As Phiri and Nadar (2006) contend, many African churches continue to uphold male clericalism that limits women’s leadership to “support roles” even when they do most of the groundwork in communities. This has prompted calls for a decolonization of theological education, ensuring women’s voices are central in curriculum development and ecclesiastical governance.

From a policy perspective, development organizations often bypass women religious in project planning and funding allocations, despite their embeddedness in local communities. Their work is frequently categorized as “voluntary” or “pastoral,” and thus not seen as central to policy-driven outcomes.

Oduyoye (2001) critiques this invisibilization, emphasizing that African women's theologies are not “add-ons” to Western feminist theology or liberation theology, but grounded paradigms in their own right. These theologies emerge from women’s everyday struggles, communal spirituality, and indigenous knowledge systems.

### Toward a Transformative Faith-Based Praxis

To rectify these systemic exclusions, both religious and secular institutions must reimagine faith-based leadership through a gender-just and culturally grounded lens. This includes:

- Theological education reform that prioritizes African feminist theology and intercultural dialogue;
- Inclusive ordination policies and expanded leadership roles for women in churches;
- Funding frameworks that recognize and support the grassroots development work of religious women;
- Partnership models between churches, NGOs, and academic institutions to document and amplify women’s impact.

Okure (2009) advocates for a contextual biblical hermeneutics that centers marginalized voices in scriptural interpretation. This approach ensures that theology remains responsive to the real-life challenges African women face and provides ethical frameworks for activism and advocacy.

## CONCLUSION

African religious women are not merely custodians of tradition—they are catalysts for transformation. They engage in peacebuilding, legal reform, education, and spiritual renewal with profound commitment and visionary leadership.

# IJETRM

## International Journal of Engineering Technology Research & Management

(IJETRM)

<https://ijetrm.com/>

Recognizing their roles is not just a matter of fairness, it is essential for building equitable societies and reimagining the future of religion and gender justice in Africa.

### REFERENCES

- 1) Becker, F. (2009). *Healing the body, saving the soul: Missionary medicine in colonial Tanganyika, 1870–1960*. Ohio University Press.
- 2) Chitando, E., & Chirongoma, S. (2012). *Redemptive masculinities: Men, HIV, and religion*. WCC Publications.
- 3) Dube, M. W. (2003). *The HIV and AIDS Bible: Some selected essays*. University of Scranton Press.
- 4) Ilo, S. C. (2012). *The face of Africa: Looking beyond the shadows*. St. Paul's Publications.
- 5) Kanyoro, M. R. A. (2002). *Introducing feminist cultural hermeneutics: An African perspective*. Sheffield Academic Press.
- 6) Oduyoye, M. A. (2001). *Introducing African women's theology*. Sheffield Academic Press.
- 7) Okure, T. (2009). Feminist theology from the standpoint of a biblical scholar. *Journal of African Christian Thought*, 12(1), 8–15.
- 8) Phiri, I. A., & Nadar, S. (2006). *African women, religion, and health: Essays in honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*. Orbis Books.
- 9) Udemba, C. M. (2023). Centre for Women Studies and Intervention as a Continuation of Mother Mary Walker's Advocacy for the Dignity and Right of Women in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 1(1).
- 10) Udemba, C. M. (2024a). Faith Unveiled: Empowering Women Across Religious Landscapes. *Nigerian Journal of African Studies*, 6(1), 1–6.
- 11) Udemba, C. M. (2024b). Feminist Religious Pedagogy and Curriculum Reform in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of African Studies*, 6(1), 1–6.
- 12) Udemba, C. M. (2025). Navigating the Dynamics of Cross-Cultural Human Relations in a Globalized World. In *Studies in Religion, Society and Human Relations: Festschrift in Honour of Rev. Fr. Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna*.