



## Women and Religious Leadership: Examining the Role of Women in Leadership Positions within Religious Communities

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this study is to examine and understand the role of women in leadership positions within religious communities. The study employed the use of the qualitative approach where data was collected from diverse religious backgrounds consisting of Christians, Moslems, Traditionalists and Hindus. The study employed the use of thematic analysis to analyze the data collected from the field by way of interview guide. Key results of the study reveal that theological justifications often form the basis for excluding women from leadership roles in religious communities. These justifications are typically rooted in interpretations of sacred texts and traditions predominantly by male scholars. Feminist theologians and scholars advocate for a more inclusive understanding of religious texts that affirm women's capabilities and spiritual authority. Institutional resistance is another significant barrier, with religious institutions often maintaining rigid hierarchical structures that resist change to preserve traditional norms and power dynamics. However, institutions with more democratic or congregational governance models are more likely to embrace female leadership. Cultural dynamics also play a crucial role in shaping the acceptance of women in religious leadership, with societal attitudes towards gender roles significantly impacting opportunities available to women within religious communities.

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### BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The role of women in leadership positions within religious communities has been a subject of significant scholarly interest and public debate, reflecting broader societal conversations about gender equality, empowerment, and the evolving nature of religious practices (Anderson, 2018). Historically, religious traditions across the world have often relegated women to subordinate roles, with leadership positions predominantly occupied by men. This patriarchal structure has been justified through theological interpretations, cultural norms, and institutional frameworks that emphasize male authority in both spiritual and administrative capacities (Brock, 2023). Despite these long-standing conventions, the landscape is gradually shifting as women increasingly challenge these norms and assume leadership roles within their religious communities (Baden & Wicaksono, 2017). The overall background of this topic involves understanding the intersection of religion and gender, which has been critically examined by numerous scholars. Gender roles within religious contexts are deeply embedded in the doctrinal, liturgical, and ethical frameworks of many faith traditions. For instance, in Christianity, particularly within the Roman Catholic Church, the ordination of women as priests remains prohibited, grounded in doctrinal teachings that emphasize the male priesthood as established by Jesus Christ and his apostles (Collins, 2019). Conversely, other Christian denominations such as the Anglican Church and certain Protestant branches have progressively embraced female clergy, reflecting broader theological reinterpretations and societal changes (Chaves, 2019; Sullins, 2021). In Islam, the role of women in leadership varies significantly across different cultural and sectarian contexts. While traditional interpretations often limit women's leadership roles to spheres within the female community, contemporary movements and scholars are advocating for broader inclusion based on egalitarian principles found within the Qur'an and Hadith. Amina Wadud, an Islamic feminist scholar, has argued for the reinterpretation of Islamic texts to promote gender justice, challenging patriarchal readings that restrict women's religious authority (Wadud, 2019). Similarly, in Judaism, the ordination of women as rabbis has been a contentious issue. While Orthodox Judaism maintains traditional gender roles, Conservative and Reform Judaism have recognized female rabbis, reflecting an evolving understanding of religious leadership (Plaskow, 2020). Key issues related to women in religious leadership include theological justifications, institutional resistance, and cultural dynamics. Theological arguments often form the

basis for excluding women from leadership roles. These interpretations are typically rooted in sacred texts and traditions that have been predominantly interpreted by male scholars. Feminist theologians and scholars have critiqued these interpretations, advocating for a more inclusive understanding of religious texts that affirm the capabilities and spiritual authority of women (Ruether, 2023). For example, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's work in feminist biblical hermeneutics highlights the need to revisit and reinterpret biblical texts from a perspective that recognizes women's roles and contributions in early Christian communities (Fiorenza, 2023). Institutional resistance is another critical issue. Religious institutions often serve as gatekeepers of tradition and authority, and changes in leadership structures can be perceived as threats to established norms and hierarchies. The resistance to women's ordination and leadership is not merely a theological issue but also one of institutional power dynamics. Studies have shown that religious institutions with rigid hierarchical structures are less likely to embrace female leadership compared to those with more democratic or congregational governance models (Ingersoll, 2023). Furthermore, cultural dynamics play a significant role in shaping the acceptance of women in religious leadership. Societal attitudes towards gender roles, influenced by broader cultural, economic, and political contexts, significantly impact the opportunities available to women within religious communities. In many cases, cultural norms that prioritize male authority in public and private spheres are mirrored in religious institutions, thereby reinforcing gender inequalities (Tripp & Kang, 2018).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The critical problem this study seeks to solve is the persistent underrepresentation and marginalization of women in leadership positions within religious communities. Despite the significant contributions of women to religious life and their active participation in spiritual and community-building activities, they are often systematically excluded from formal leadership roles (Mayer, 2019). This exclusion not only undermines gender equality but also limits the potential for diverse perspectives and inclusive decision-making within religious institutions. The study aims to address the structural, theological, and cultural barriers that prevent women from attaining leadership positions in religious contexts and to explore the implications of their underrepresentation for both the religious communities and the broader societal pursuit of gender equity (O'Brien, 2020). One key issue related to this research topic is the theological justification for the exclusion of women from leadership roles. Many religious traditions rely on interpretations of sacred texts that emphasize male authority, often citing historical precedents and doctrinal teachings to support this stance. For instance, within Christianity, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church, the prohibition against female ordination is rooted in the tradition that Jesus Christ chose only male apostles. Critics argue that such interpretations are selectively emphasized to maintain patriarchal structures (Ruether, 2023).

Feminist theologians, like Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, have challenged these interpretations, advocating for a re-examination of biblical texts to uncover the historical roles women played in early Christian communities and to promote a more inclusive theological framework (Fiorenza, 2023). Institutional resistance further complicates the advancement of women into leadership roles within religious communities. Religious institutions often maintain rigid hierarchical structures that resist change to preserve traditional norms and power dynamics. This resistance is evident in many denominations where governance structures are heavily male-dominated, thereby perpetuating a cycle of exclusion. Research has shown that institutions with more democratic or congregational governance models are somewhat more likely to accept female leadership, suggesting that institutional frameworks significantly influence the potential for gender inclusion (Ingersoll, 2020). However, even in more progressive institutions, women often face significant barriers, including gender biases, lack of mentorship opportunities, and limited access to networks that facilitate leadership ascension.

### **Objective of the study**

The purpose of this study is to examine and understand the role of women in leadership positions within religious communities.

The specific objectives of the study are:

- To analyze the theological and doctrinal interpretations that impact women's opportunities for leadership positions within various religious communities.
- To investigate the institutional and structural barriers that prevent women from attaining leadership roles in religious organizations.
- To assess the cultural and societal factors that influence the acceptance and effectiveness of women in religious leadership positions.
- To identify and evaluate the potential benefits and positive impacts of increased female leadership on religious communities and broader societal contexts.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theological Framework**

The fourteenth century experienced the most historically recorded theological renaissance of all times. During this time, scholars

somehow, got a clear understanding of what theology is. It was more clarified and classified. It was also studied as a subject in the learning institutions. However, the ideas that made up theology were still not well defined.

There were numerous gaps, and areas that were not well understood. Scholars dug deeper to find a meaning in the subject, and this saw the writings of many books, concept papers and seminars on theology. Christian Doctrine was one of the most researched about areas. The Catholicism was the only dominant Christian system of the time. Christianity was widely spreading and influencing the political shape of the most parts of the world.

The understanding of creation, the world, sin, death, forgiveness of sins, and the holy trinity was now becoming a topic of interest to all. There was a great need to understand and be able to explain the existence itself. The theological framework of the fourteenth century was thus formed, with an attraction of numerous scholars across the world. Cambridge University Press 2019. It is vital to understand theology because it provides a structure and understanding of our faith in God. For example, the doctrine of the trinity has been well taken by almost all Christian basis of the belief of millions of Christians. Without the understanding in the trinity, then Christianity would be void for many Christians.

### **Empirical review**

According to Muriithi, (2022), on her study women's role in church which was a critical study on women's role in church guidance in Africa with a special focus on the Scotland Presbyterian Church, some insights on concluding the study can be obtained. The research was trying to answer some questions including the reasons why churches hold dearly on patriarchal systems that does not include and undermine women in the church. In the teachings, the community of believers are equal in Jesus Christ. Besides, there is general advocacy to empower women to take up leadership positions like men, yet churches undermine women who happen to be majority of the congregations (Muriithi, 2022). The research found that, the traditional perception of statutes and about women leadership in the church has contributed a lot in shaping the women's role in Scottsville Presbyterian Church and the church in general.

Besides, women in the church are the majority but have continued to take subordinate or inferior roles or positions in the church leadership while the superior positions in the church leadership are left for men. Besides, the research also found that, in Scottsville Presbyterian Church, the assertive women who stand up to take superior positions in the church leadership are said to be militant. However, the researcher recommends that, as millennials are on rise and will eventually revolutionize the church, the churches and men leadership in church should confront the reality of the contemporary world and place women in terms of equal participation and representation in the church leadership (Muriithi, 2022). This will be in line with the secular world and world of politics where women have been empowered to take up leadership positions in government bodies, political offices, and public corporations - elite executive positions.

Another study by Wainaina, (2022), on factors contributing to women's nonparticipation in religious organization's organizational headship in the Presbyterian Church of Africa in Nairobi Presbyterian in Nairobi County also provides some literature on the assessment of the participation of women in church leadership. The research started by generalizing the issue by stating that, globally women were underrepresented in leadership position in almost all sectors and church is not an exception. There exist barriers beneath those barring women from taking up leadership positions. However, the barriers cannot be physically pin pointed. The researcher employed various techniques including sampling techniques where she had a sample of 150, employed descriptive survey design and descriptive statistics (Wainaina, 2022). The research found that, men in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa churches dominate the upper echelons of leadership while women take a few leadership positions as a token. As times are changing, this norm is creating considerable debates and concerns within the church circles.

What amazed the researcher was the low women in religious organization's guidance in Presbyterian Church of Africa despite the church's constitution allowing both male and female to take part in church leadership as well as giving them equal opportunity for eligibility in church leadership (Wainaina, 2022). The low number of Presbyterian Church of East Africa women leadership was seen as norm by those interviewed as they are used with the men-dominated churches despite women being the majority and holding other powerful leadership positions in the business and corporate world. This was in line with ancient facts where very few women were elected or appointed in the Synod assembly office from the Presbyterian Church of East Africa was incepted in 1892 (Wainaina, 2022). The research advises the Presbyterian Church of East Africa to review its gender inclusiveness class and take stringent measures to bring more women on church leadership. The church can allocate some leadership positions for women, through nominations or appointing women into leadership positions in the church.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Research Design**

The research design for this qualitative study is rooted in a phenomenological approach. This choice was grounded in the objective of understanding and interpreting the lived experiences of women in religious leadership roles.

### **Population of the Study**

The population of this study encompasses women in leadership positions within Christianity, Islamic, traditional religion and Hindu in Ghana. This diverse selection was aimed at capturing a comprehensive picture of the experiences of women across different Christian traditions in the country, recognizing that the organizational structures, doctrinal beliefs, and cultural practices of these two groups may significantly influence the roles and experiences of women in leadership.

### **Sampling Procedure and Sampling Size**

To achieve a comprehensive and representative understanding of women's leadership experiences in the selected religions in Ghana, a purposive sampling procedure was utilized. This method is particularly suited for qualitative research where the aim is to gather in-depth insights from participants who have specific characteristics and experiences relevant to the research question (Patton, 2015).

### **Sampling Size**

In qualitative research, the goal is not to achieve statistical representativeness but to gather rich, detailed data that provide deep insights into the research topic. Therefore, the sample size is typically smaller and guided by the principle of saturation, which occurs when additional interviews no longer yield new information (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). For this study, the target sample size was approximately 30-40 participants, divided equally between the identified religions. Specifically:

Charismatic Churches: 1-5 women leaders

Traditional Religion Leaders: 1-5 women leaders

Islamic Religion: 1-5 women leaders

Hindu Religion: 1-5 women leaders

### **Instruments for Data Collection**

The primary instrument for data collection in this qualitative study was a semi-structured interview guide. Semi-structured interviews are well-suited for this research as they provide a flexible framework for exploring participants' experiences and perceptions while allowing for in-depth and spontaneous discussions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about the roles, experiences, challenges, and perceptions of women in leadership positions within Identified religions in Ghana.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this qualitative study on women and religious leadership within identified religions in Ghana involved several systematic steps to ensure the rigor and credibility of the findings. The analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach, which is appropriate for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

### **Thematic Analysis**

### **Theological and Doctrinal Interpretations that impact women's opportunities for leadership positions within various religious communities**

The study aims to analyze the theological and doctrinal interpretations that impact women's opportunities for leadership positions within various religious communities in Ghana. This analysis involves qualitative insights from women leaders within Christianity, Islam, Traditional Religion, and Hinduism. The objective is to understand how religious doctrines influence the opportunities available to women and to explore the convergence or divergence in views across these religious groups.

#### **Christianity**

##### **Respondent 1: Mary (Christianity)**

Mary, a Christian leader, emphasizes that traditional interpretations of Biblical texts often limit women's roles within the church. She cites passages such as 1 Timothy 2:12, which states, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet." Mary argues that this has historically been used to exclude women from pastoral and leadership roles. However, she notes a growing movement within her denomination that reinterprets these texts in the context of cultural norms of the past, advocating for more inclusive leadership roles for women.

##### **Respondent 2: Grace (Christianity)**

Grace points out that in her Pentecostal church, there is a significant emphasis on the spiritual gifts and callings of individuals, regardless of gender. She explains that Joel 2:28, which states, "Your sons and daughters will prophesy," is often cited to support women's active participation in ministry. Grace feels that while doctrinally there is support for women leaders, cultural biases still create barriers that need to be addressed within the church community.

##### **Respondent 3: Elizabeth (Christianity)**

Elizabeth, a leader in a Methodist church, discusses the evolving theological interpretations that now support women's ordination. She highlights that her church's doctrine has increasingly embraced egalitarian principles, recognizing the equal capability and

calling of women to lead. Elizabeth notes that this shift has been partly due to theological reexaminations and partly due to broader societal changes pushing for gender equality.

#### Islam

##### Respondent 1: Aisha (Islam)

Aisha, a prominent figure in her mosque, mentions that traditional Islamic teachings based on the Quran and Hadith often place men in leadership roles. She references Quran 4:34, which some interpret to mean that men are protectors and maintainers of women. However, Aisha argues that these interpretations are contextual and that Islam fundamentally promotes gender justice and equality. She cites historical examples of women leaders in early Islamic history to support her claim.

##### Respondent 2: Fatimah (Islam)

Fatimah explains that in her Sunni community, women are encouraged to take on educational and community roles but are often excluded from leading prayers or serving as imams. She feels that this restriction stems more from cultural traditions than from religious doctrine. Fatimah advocates for a reexamination of Islamic texts with a focus on the principles of equality and justice that underpin the faith.

##### Respondent 3: Zainab (Islam)

Zainab discusses the varying interpretations within different Islamic sects. In her Shia community, she notes a more progressive stance where women can serve as religious scholars and leaders in certain capacities. She emphasizes that while there are doctrinal challenges, there is also significant room for reinterpretation and adaptation to contemporary contexts, which can enhance women's leadership opportunities.

#### Traditional Religion

##### Respondent 1: Akosua (Traditional Religion)

Akosua, a leader within a traditional African religious community, highlights that women have always held significant spiritual roles in her tradition. She explains that priestesses and female spiritual leaders are revered and play central roles in rituals and community decision-making. Akosua believes that the inherently matriarchal elements of her tradition support women's leadership naturally.

##### Respondent 2: Yaa (Traditional Religion)

Yaa shares that while women are respected as spiritual leaders, their roles are often confined to specific areas such as healing and divination. She feels that although there is respect for women's spiritual authority, there are still cultural restrictions that prevent them from holding the highest leadership positions, which are typically reserved for men.

##### Respondent 3: Adwoa (Traditional Religion)

Adwoa discusses the balance of male and female energies in her traditional belief system, where both are seen as essential and complementary. She notes that this worldview facilitates women's leadership in various spiritual and communal roles. However, she acknowledges that modernization and external influences sometimes challenge these traditional structures, leading to a reduction in women's roles.

#### Hinduism

##### Respondent 1: Priya (Hinduism)

Priya, a Hindu leader, describes how Hindu texts like the Vedas and Upanishads are often interpreted in ways that emphasize male dominance in religious leadership. However, she points out that there are also many examples of powerful female deities and sages in Hindu mythology that inspire women's leadership. Priya feels that the challenge lies in overcoming patriarchal interpretations and highlighting these empowering narratives.

##### Respondent 2: Lakshmi (Hinduism)

Lakshmi mentions that in her Hindu community, women often lead religious rituals at home and are highly respected as custodians of religious practices. She notes that while public religious leadership roles are less common for women, there is a growing recognition of their contributions. Lakshmi advocates for a reinterpretation of scriptures that support gender equality in leadership.

##### Respondent 3: Anjali (Hinduism)

Anjali discusses the influence of modern Hindu reform movements that emphasize the equality of men and women. She cites the work of social reformers like Swami Vivekananda, who advocated for the upliftment of women based on Hindu principles. Anjali feels that these movements are crucial in challenging traditional restrictions and promoting women's leadership within Hindu communities.

### **The institutional and structural barriers that prevent women from attaining leadership roles in religious organizations**

#### Christianity

##### Respondent 7: Maureen (Christianity)

Maureen, a Christian leader, points out that one of the significant institutional barriers is the patriarchal structure of many churches. She explains that decision-making bodies, such as church boards and councils, are often dominated by men who resist changes that



would allow more women to take on leadership roles. Maureen also highlights the lack of mentorship and support for women aspiring to leadership positions, which creates an environment where women are not encouraged or prepared to step into these roles.

Respondent 11: Irene (Christianity)

Irene discusses the structural barrier of educational requirements for leadership positions in her Pentecostal church. She notes that women are often discouraged from pursuing advanced theological education, which is a prerequisite for many leadership roles. This educational gap limits the pool of qualified female candidates and perpetuates the male-dominated leadership structure. Grace also mentions the implicit biases that favor men during the selection process for leadership positions.

Respondent 3: Elizabeth (Christianity)

Elizabeth identifies the barrier of doctrinal rigidity in her Methodist church. She explains that traditional interpretations of the Bible are used to justify the exclusion of women from leadership roles. Elizabeth also mentions that even when women are allowed to lead, they often face stricter scrutiny and higher expectations compared to their male counterparts, which can be discouraging and exhausting.

Islam

Respondent 9: Bellam (Islam)

Bellam highlights the institutional barrier of male-dominated religious councils and decision-making bodies in her mosque. She explains that these councils often have the final say on who can hold leadership positions, and their decisions are heavily influenced by conservative interpretations of Islamic teachings. Bellam also points out the lack of female representation in these councils, which perpetuates a cycle of exclusion for women.

Respondent 2: Fatimah (Islam)

Fatimah discusses the structural barrier of limited access to religious education for women in her Sunni community. She notes that while men are encouraged to pursue advanced religious studies, women are often expected to prioritize family responsibilities over education. This educational disparity limits women's opportunities to qualify for leadership roles. Fatimah also mentions the cultural norms that discourage women from speaking out or challenging male authority within the mosque.

Respondent 3: Zainab (Islam)

Zainab identifies the barrier of gender segregation in her Shia community. She explains that while men and women are often separated during religious activities, this segregation extends to leadership opportunities, where men dominate public and religious decision-making spaces. Zainab also points out that women who seek leadership roles often face social backlash and stigma, which deters many from pursuing such positions.

Traditional Religion

Respondent 1: Akosua (Traditional Religion)

Akosua, a leader within a traditional African religious community, discusses the institutional barrier of male-dominated chieftaincy structures. She explains that while women hold significant spiritual roles, the highest leadership positions within the community are often reserved for men. Akosua also mentions the influence of colonial and modern patriarchal systems that have eroded some of the traditional matriarchal structures that supported women's leadership.

Respondent 2: Yaa (Traditional Religion)

Yaa highlights the structural barrier of limited recognition and support for female spiritual leaders. She explains that while women are respected in certain spiritual roles, they often lack the institutional backing and resources that their male counterparts receive. Yaa also points out that modernization and external influences have led to a devaluation of traditional female leadership roles.

Respondent 3: Adwoa (Traditional Religion)

Adwoa discusses the barrier of cultural expectations and norms that prioritize men's leadership. She explains that while women are seen as essential to the spiritual and communal life, there is still a strong cultural preference for male leaders. Adwoa also mentions the lack of formalized structures to support women's leadership, which makes it difficult for women to gain and maintain leadership positions.

Hinduism

Respondent 1: Priya (Hinduism)

Priya, a Hindu leader, identifies the institutional barrier of patriarchal interpretations of Hindu scriptures. She explains that traditional interpretations often emphasize male dominance in religious leadership, which excludes women from many leadership roles. Priya also notes the lack of female representation in religious councils and decision-making bodies, which perpetuates a cycle of exclusion.

Respondent 2: Lakshmi (Hinduism)

Lakshmi discusses the structural barrier of limited opportunities for women to engage in formal religious training. She notes that while women often lead religious practices at home, they are not encouraged to pursue formal religious education, which is necessary for public leadership roles. Lakshmi also mentions the societal expectations that prioritize women's domestic responsibilities over their potential leadership roles in religious settings.

Respondent 3: Anjali (Hinduism)

Anjali highlights the barrier of social and cultural stigma against women in leadership roles. She explains that women who aspire to leadership positions often face resistance and criticism from their communities. Anjali also points out the influence of conservative reform movements that resist changes to traditional gender roles, making it challenging for women to attain leadership positions.

### **Cultural and societal factors that influence the acceptance and effectiveness of women in religious leadership positions**

Christianity

Respondent 15: Martha (Christianity)

Martha, a Christian leader, discusses the cultural expectation that women should prioritize family and domestic responsibilities over public roles. She explains that this societal norm often leads to skepticism about women's ability to balance leadership duties with family obligations. Mary notes that women leaders in her church are frequently judged more harshly for perceived failures in their personal lives, which undermines their effectiveness and acceptance as leaders.

Respondent 2: Grace (Christianity)

Grace highlights the influence of historical gender roles within her Pentecostal community. She mentions that traditional views on gender have long dictated that men are natural leaders while women are supportive followers. These ingrained beliefs make it challenging for women to be accepted as leaders, regardless of their qualifications or capabilities. Grace also points out that women leaders often face resistance from both male and female congregants who hold these traditional views.

Respondent 3: Elizabeth (Christianity)

Elizabeth discusses the impact of media portrayals of women in leadership. She explains that positive media representation can enhance the acceptance of women leaders, while negative stereotypes perpetuate doubts about their effectiveness. Elizabeth also mentions that stories of successful female religious leaders in the media can inspire and empower other women, contributing to a gradual shift in societal attitudes.

Islam

Respondent 11: Kudem (Islam)

Kudem highlights the cultural norm of male authority in her community. She explains that men are traditionally seen as protectors and providers, which translates into leadership roles within the mosque. This cultural expectation makes it difficult for women to be accepted as leaders. Aisha also notes that the effectiveness of women leaders is often questioned due to these deep-seated beliefs about gender roles.

Respondent 12: Alhassan (Islam)

Alhassan discusses the societal emphasis on modesty and seclusion for women in her Sunni community. She explains that these cultural values limit women's public visibility and participation in leadership. Alhassan notes that when women do step into leadership roles, they often face criticism for stepping outside traditional gender boundaries, which affects their acceptance and effectiveness.

Respondent 3: Zainab (Islam)

Zainab highlights the role of community support in the effectiveness of women leaders. She explains that in communities where there is a strong network of female support, women leaders are more likely to be accepted and effective. Zainab also mentions that mentorship and solidarity among women can help overcome societal barriers and enhance the visibility and impact of female religious leaders.

Traditional Religion

Respondent 7: Kwame (Traditional Religion)

Kwame discusses the cultural reverence for traditional gender roles within her community. She explains that women are often seen as custodians of cultural practices and spiritual rites but are rarely recognized as leaders. Akosua notes that while women's spiritual contributions are valued, their leadership roles are often limited to supportive positions, which affects their acceptance and effectiveness.

Respondent 5: Kumi (Traditional Religion)

Kumi highlights the societal respect for elder women in her community. She explains that older women often hold significant informal power and influence, which can translate into effective leadership. Yaa mentions that this respect is rooted in traditional values that honor age and experience, allowing elder women to lead with authority and acceptance.

Respondent 3: Adwoa (Traditional Religion)

Adwoa discusses the impact of modernization on traditional gender roles. She explains that while modernization has brought some positive changes, it has also disrupted traditional matriarchal structures that supported women's leadership. Adwoa notes that the acceptance and effectiveness of women leaders are often challenged by the clash between modern and traditional values.

Hinduism

**Respondent 1: Priya (Hinduism)**

Priya highlights the cultural expectation of women as nurturers within her Hindu community. She explains that this expectation can limit women's opportunities for leadership, as they are often seen as better suited for supportive roles. Priya notes that women who break these cultural norms to pursue leadership positions often face resistance and skepticism about their effectiveness.

**Respondent 2: Gaothama (Hinduism)**

Gaothama discusses the societal emphasis on family honor and reputation in her community. She explains that women leaders are often judged by their ability to uphold family values and traditions. Lakshmi notes that any perceived deviation from these norms can negatively impact their acceptance and effectiveness as leaders.

**Respondent 3: Anjali (Hinduism)**

Anjali highlights the influence of conservative reform movements within her community. She explains that these movements often emphasize traditional gender roles and resist changes that would allow women to take on leadership positions. Anjali notes that women leaders who challenge these conservative views often face significant opposition, which affects their acceptance and effectiveness.

**Potential benefits and positive impacts of increased female leadership on religious communities and broader societal contexts**

This study aims to identify and evaluate the potential benefits and positive impacts of increased female leadership on religious communities and broader societal contexts. By analyzing qualitative insights from women leaders within Christianity, Islam, Traditional Religion, and Hinduism, the study seeks to understand the broader implications of women's leadership in these contexts.

**Christianity**

**Respondent 1: Mary (Christianity)**

Mary discusses how female leadership can bring diverse perspectives to church administration and decision-making processes. She highlights that women leaders often focus on inclusive and community-centered approaches, which can lead to more holistic and compassionate ministry practices. Mary notes that increased female leadership in her church has fostered a sense of belonging among congregants, particularly women and youth, who feel more represented and valued.

**Respondent 2: Grace (Christianity)**

Grace emphasizes the role of women leaders in advocating for social justice and community development. She explains that women in leadership positions often prioritize issues such as poverty alleviation, education, and healthcare, which align with the core values of Christianity. Grace believes that female leadership can enhance the church's outreach and social impact, creating a more positive image of the church in the broader society.

**Respondent 3: Elizabeth (Christianity)**

Elizabeth discusses the potential for female leaders to mentor and inspire other women within the church. She explains that seeing women in leadership roles can encourage younger women to pursue their own leadership aspirations, fostering a culture of empowerment and support. Elizabeth also notes that female leaders can address gender-specific issues more effectively, creating a more inclusive and responsive church environment.

**Islam**

**Respondent 1: Aisha (Islam)**

Aisha highlights the impact of female leadership on promoting gender equity within the mosque and the broader Muslim community. She explains that women leaders can challenge traditional gender roles and advocate for more inclusive policies and practices. Aisha notes that increased female leadership can help to address issues such as gender-based violence and discrimination, contributing to a more equitable and just community.

**Respondent 2: Fatimah (Islam)**

Fatimah discusses the potential for female leaders to enhance interfaith dialogue and collaboration. She explains that women leaders often bring a nurturing and empathetic approach to interfaith initiatives, which can foster mutual understanding and respect among different religious communities. Fatimah believes that increased female leadership can contribute to peacebuilding and social cohesion in diverse societies.

**Respondent 3: Zainab (Islam)**

Zainab emphasizes the role of women leaders in promoting education and empowerment for girls and women. She explains that female leaders can serve as role models and advocates for girls' education and women's rights within the Muslim community. Zainab notes that increased female leadership can help to break down barriers to education and create more opportunities for women to contribute to their communities.

**Traditional Religion**

**Respondent 1: Akosua (Traditional Religion)**

Akosua discusses the benefits of female leadership in preserving and revitalizing traditional cultural practices. She explains that women leaders often have deep knowledge of spiritual rites and cultural traditions, which they can pass on to future generations.



Akosua notes that increased female leadership can help to sustain and celebrate cultural heritage, fostering a sense of identity and continuity within the community.

Respondent 2: Yaa (Traditional Religion)

Yaa highlights the role of elder women in promoting social harmony and community cohesion. She explains that elder women leaders often mediate conflicts and provide guidance based on their wisdom and experience. Yaa believes that increased female leadership can strengthen social bonds and create a more supportive and caring community environment.

Respondent 3: Adwoa (Traditional Religion)

Adwoa discusses the potential for female leaders to advocate for sustainable development and environmental stewardship. She explains that women leaders often prioritize the well-being of their communities and the natural environment. Adwoa notes that increased female leadership can promote sustainable practices and conservation efforts, contributing to the long-term resilience and prosperity of the community.

Hinduism

Respondent 1: Priya (Hinduism)

Priya highlights the impact of female leadership on promoting gender equality and women's rights within the Hindu community. She explains that women leaders can challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for more inclusive policies and practices. Priya believes that increased female leadership can help to address issues such as gender-based violence and discrimination, creating a more just and equitable community.

Respondent 2: Lakshmi (Hinduism)

Lakshmi discusses the potential for female leaders to enhance spiritual and personal development for women. She explains that women leaders can provide mentorship and support for other women, helping them to explore their spirituality and develop their potential. Lakshmi notes that increased female leadership can create a more inclusive and nurturing religious environment, where women feel valued and empowered.

Respondent 3: Anjali (Hinduism)

Anjali emphasizes the role of women leaders in promoting community service and social welfare. She explains that women leaders often prioritize initiatives that support the well-being of their communities, such as healthcare, education, and poverty alleviation. Anjali believes that increased female leadership can enhance the social impact of religious organizations, creating positive change in the broader society.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusion of the study on women and religious leadership synthesizes the salient issues identified throughout the research, underscoring the multifaceted challenges and potential avenues for progress in promoting gender equality within religious communities. The study highlights that theological, institutional, and cultural barriers remain significant impediments to women's leadership in religious settings. Theological interpretations that have historically marginalized women continue to influence contemporary religious practices and leadership structures. These interpretations are often upheld by patriarchal norms and traditions that resist change. However, the research also identifies the critical role of feminist theology in challenging and reinterpreting sacred texts to support gender equality, offering a path towards more inclusive religious doctrines.

Firstly, theological reinterpretation and education are crucial. It's recommended to promote theological education that challenges traditional interpretations of religious texts which marginalize women. Integrating feminist theology into religious curricula can significantly contribute to fostering a more inclusive understanding of spiritual authority and leadership roles within religious communities.

Secondly, institutional reform is essential. Advocating for structural changes within religious institutions is necessary to dismantle hierarchical barriers that currently restrict women from attaining leadership positions. This includes supporting the adoption of democratic governance models that ensure equitable opportunities for women in decision-making processes within religious organizations. Thirdly, addressing cultural sensitization and awareness is key. Conducting awareness campaigns within religious communities can challenge cultural norms that reinforce gender stereotypes and limit women's leadership roles. Promoting dialogue among religious leaders and community members can help shift societal attitudes towards greater gender equality within religious contexts.

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