Decolonizing Religious Pedagogy: Christian Religious Studies Curriculum and the Construction of Female Leadership Aspirations for Women Stewardship in Developing Societies

Ada Chinwe JUNI Menakaya, PhD.

Department of Gender and Christian Education
CICA-University and Seminary, Orlando
Florida, USA

Abstract: This study investigates the epistemic architecture of Christian Religious Studies (CRS) curricula in female dominated secondary schools in developing societies with focus on southeast Nigeria; examining how these pedagogical frameworks simultaneously enable and constrain female leadership aspirations. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory and curriculum studies, the research employs qualitative methods—including curriculum document analysis, semi-structured interviews with 42 female students, and focus group discussions with 16 CRS educators—to explore the discursive production of gendered leadership imaginaries. Findings reveal a pedagogical double-bind: while biblical narratives of female agency are superficially acknowledged, the interpretive frameworks privileged in classroom practice reinforce patriarchal hierarchies rooted in both colonial missionary education and women stewardship circles. The study argues that meaningful decolonization requires not merely representational inclusion but fundamental epistemological rupture—a shift from transmission models of religious instruction toward critically reflexive pedagogies that enable students to interrogate the historical contingency of gender norms presented as divinely ordained. This research contributes to scholarship on curriculum decolonization, gendered subjectivities, and the enduring legacies of missionary education in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: curriculum decolonization, religious pedagogy, gender construction, leadership aspirations, women stewardship, postcolonial feminism, Nigeria

Introduction

The question of what constitutes legitimate knowledge in postcolonial educational systems remains persistently vexed. In southeastern Nigeria, where Christianity has achieved near-hegemonic status since the late nineteenth century, Christian Religious Studies operates as a compulsory curricular component through which millions of young women encounter formalized instruction about gender, authority, and social possibility (Achebe, 2020; Nwoye, 2021). Yet the pedagogical treatment of female leadership within this curricular domain has received surprisingly limited scholarly attention, particularly given the region's complex negotiation between indigenous matrilineal traditions, colonial patriarchal impositions, and contemporary Pentecostal gender politics with considerations on women stewardship.

This research emerges from a fundamental tension: while Southeast women in precolonial society recognized diverse forms of female authority—including the *omu* (queen mother in Igbo language), *umuada* (daughters' collective), and women's councils with legislative power—contemporary CRS curricula predominantly transmit biblical hermeneutics developed through colonial missionary frameworks that systematically marginalized female leadership (Amadiume, 2020; Okafor & Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2023). The colonial encounter did not simply introduce Christianity; it inaugurated specific interpretive regimes that aligned patriarchal readings of scripture with administrative convenience and Victorian gender ideology (Oyěwùmí, 2021). These interpretive traditions persist within postcolonial curricula, creating what this author terms a "double erasure"—the simultaneous occlusion of indigenous female authority structures and biblical models of women's leadership and stewardship.

Understanding Women's Leadership and Stewardship

Women's leadership and stewardship refers to the combination of women in positions of influence and decision-making, paired with a leadership style that emphasizes care, responsibility, and long-term impact rather than just control or authority.

Women's Leadership

Women's leadership means women holding and shaping roles in organizations, communities, and governance—whether in business, politics, education, or environmental management. It involves not only

access to power but also the ability to influence policies, strategies, and cultures. Research shows that women in leadership positions can drive innovation, accountability, and transparency, especially when they bring empathetic and collaborative approaches to decision (Chougule, Belagavi & Anvekarb (2025).

Stewardship in Leadership
Stewardship is a mindset and practice of taking responsibility for what is entrusted to you—whether it's people, resources, or a mission—and ensuring it is managed with integrity, sustainability, and the well-being of others in mind (Brown, 2026).. It shifts the focus from ownership to care, prioritizing long-term impact over short-term gains.

Key stewardship behaviors include:
- Being a role model for integrity, confidence, and grounded leadership.
- Collaborating and sharing credit, knowledge, and opportunities.
- Supporting others, especially emerging leaders, by offering encouragement and mentorship.
- Listening to diverse perspectives and making space for them.
- Elevating others, particularly women, to ensure inclusive leadership (Wafer, 2025).

Why It Matters in this Study: When women combine leadership with stewardship, they often:
a. Foster inclusive and sustainable growth by balancing strategic goals with ethical responsibility (Chougule, Belagavi & Anvekarb, 2025).
b. Strengthen trust and collaboration within teams and communities.
c. Leave a lasting legacy that benefits future generations, whether in business, governance, or environmental stewardship (Wafer, 2025).

In short, women's leadership and stewardship is about leading with purpose, responsibility, and care, ensuring that influence is used to uplift others and create enduring value.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond Nigeria. Across postcolonial contexts, religious education frequently functions as a site where epistemic violence operates through seemingly neutral pedagogical processes (Andreotti, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2021). By examining how CRS curricula shape female students' leadership self-concepts, this research illuminates broader questions about curriculum decolonization: Is it sufficient to add marginalized voices to existing frameworks, or must we fundamentally reconstruct the epistemological foundations of what counts as religious knowledge?

This paper proceeds through several movements. The author first established the theoretical coordinates through which curriculum, gender, and decolonization intersect. Subsequently, the author outlined the methodological approach that enabled engagement with both textual and lived dimensions of religious pedagogy. The empirical analysis reveals how curricular content and classroom practice together produce gendered subjectivities, before concluding with implications for transformative pedagogical praxis.

Theoretical Framework: Curriculum as Gendered Epistemology
Three intersecting theoretical traditions inform this analysis. First, postcolonial feminist scholarship emphasizes how gender operates not as a transhistorical category but as a system of meaning-making profoundly shaped by colonial encounter (Lugones, 2020; Oyěwùmí, 2021). Oyěwùmí's influential argument regarding the coloniality of gender in Yoruba (Nigeria) society applies equally to local women contexts: precolonial gender systems, while certainly hierarchical, did not map onto Western binaries of public/private, rational/emotional, or leader/follower in straightforward ways. The analytical task becomes tracing how contemporary gender regimes—including those transmitted through religious education—bears the imprint of colonial epistemologies.

Second, curriculum theory, particularly the tradition inaugurated by Apple (2020) and extended by scholars examining hidden curricula, directs attention toward curriculum as ideology in material form. Curricula do not simply convey information; they encode particular ways of knowing, being, and relating that feel natural precisely because they are pedagogically sedimented (Pinar, 2021). The CRS curriculum operates as what Bernstein (2020) termed a "classification and framing" system that determines which biblical texts receive emphasis, which interpretive methods achieve legitimacy, and which questions students learn to ask—or not ask.

Third, decolonial theory, particularly scholars working within African contexts, insists that genuine decolonization requires epistemic disobedience—refusing the terms of engagement established by colonial knowledge systems (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Mbembe, 2021). Applied to religious education, this suggests that adding lessons about Deborah or Esther, while maintaining interpretive frameworks that subordinate female

agency to male authority, represents what Tuck and Yang (2021) call "settler moves to innocence"—gestures that relieve anxiety without transforming fundamental structures.

These theoretical resources enable analysis that moves beyond content analysis alone. The question is not merely which biblical women appear in curricula, but how the entire pedagogical apparatus—textbooks, assessment rubrics, teacher training, classroom discourse—constructs particular gendered possibilities while foreclosing others.

Methodology

This qualitative study employed a multi-method design appropriate to examining both official curricula and their enactment in educational practice. Data collection occurred between September 2024 and March 2025 across six secondary schools in Anambra and Enugu states, selected through purposive sampling to represent diverse socioeconomic contexts and denominational affiliations (Catholic, Anglican, and Pentecostal mission schools).

The first phase involved systematic analysis of official CRS curriculum documents prescribed by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council for Senior Secondary Schools 1-3, alongside the five most commonly used textbooks. Analysis focused on: (1) selection and framing of biblical narratives featuring female characters; (2) interpretive strategies deployed in explanatory text; (3) discussion questions and assessment items; and (4) explicit and implicit messages regarding gender, leadership and stewardship.

The second phase comprised semi-structured interviews with 42 female students aged 15-18, recruited through school administrators with parental consent. Interview protocols explored students' interpretations of biblical female figures, their understanding of leadership possibilities for women, and their perceptions of how CRS instruction related to their own aspirations. Interviews averaged 47 minutes and were conducted in English, with occasional code-switching to Igbo as initiated by participants.

The third phase involved focus group discussions with 16 CRS teachers (nine female, seven male) across the six schools. These sessions examined teachers' pedagogical decision-making, their own interpretive frameworks regarding gender and biblical authority, and their awareness of tensions between curricular content and students' lived experiences.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using iterative thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Initial open coding identified emergent patterns, followed by focused coding organized around theoretical constructs of gender, authority, and epistemic colonization. Member checking with four teacher participants and eight students enhanced credibility.

Ethical protocols received approval from the institutional review board. All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms protect confidentiality throughout this presentation.

Findings: The Pedagogical Production of Gendered Leadership and Stewardship
Curricular Content: Selective Visibility and Interpretive Constraint

Analysis of official curriculum documents and textbooks revealed a pattern of what the uthor termed "selective visibility"—female biblical figures appear, but within interpretive frames that minimize their leadership agency. The prescribed curriculum includes units on Deborah, Esther, Ruth, Mary (mother of Jesus), and New Testament women. However, textbook treatment consistently emphasizes either their exceptional status (Deborah as divinely appointed anomaly) or their supportive roles (Esther's beauty and submission, Ruth's loyalty to male relatives, Mary's obedience).

Most striking was the pedagogical handling of Deborah, the only female judge explicitly presented as exercising political-military leadership. While her narrative receives coverage, the interpretive apparatus consistently raised questions about male absence rather than female competence. One widely used textbook states: "Deborah arose when no man was willing to lead. This shows God can use anyone when his chosen leaders fail" (Okonkwo & Nweke, 2022, p. 87). This framing positions female leadership as compensatory rather than normative, exceptional rather than representative of women's capacity.

Assessment questions reinforced this pattern. Across five textbooks analyzed, discussion questions regarding female biblical figures centered on: "What can we learn about submission from Esther?" and "How did Ruth demonstrate respect for male authority?" No questions invited students to critically examine why female prophetic or judicial authority appears threatening to interpreters, or how contemporary church structures might differ from biblical practice.

Significantly, the curriculum entirely omits women religious history, including powerful female figures like Queen Amina or the ritual authority of women in indigenous cosmology. This double absence—marginalized treatment of biblical women's leadership and stewardship combined with complete erasure of indigenous female authority—produces what postcolonial theorists recognize as epistemic dependence, wherein

legitimate knowledge arrives only through external (in this case, biblical and interpretively Western) authorization.

Classroom Enactment: Teacher Interpretation and Pedagogical Mediation

Focus group discussions revealed that teachers themselves operate within conflicting epistemological frameworks, attempting to navigate official curricula, denominational expectations, and students' questions. Mrs. Chinwe, a Catholic school teacher with 19 years' experience, articulated the tension: "The curriculum says teach about Deborah, but when students ask if women can be bishops or lead churches, what do I say? The Church says no. So I teach that Deborah was special, a unique situation" (Focus Group, November 2023).

This response illustrates how curricular content becomes mediated through institutional gender politics that extend beyond the classroom. Teachers reported pressure from religious authorities to emphasize "biblical womanhood" defined through submission, modesty, and domestic orientation—interpretive priorities that fundamentally shape how female biblical leadership and stewardship gets pedagogically constructed.

Male teachers particularly emphasized what they perceived as natural gender complementarity. Mr. Emeka explained: "Women have their leadership—in the home, in children's ministry, in hospitality. Men have theirs—in governance, in teaching doctrine, in making final decisions. This is biblical order" (Focus Group, January 2024). Such framings, while presented as scriptural fidelity, actually reflect Victorian separate spheres ideology imported through colonial missionary education and subsequently naturalized as timeless divine command (Achebe, 2020).

Yet some teachers demonstrated awareness of these tensions. Mrs. Ngozi described intentionally supplementing the curriculum: "I bring in stories of Igbo women leaders before the missionaries. I ask students to compare. They start asking good questions—why did our culture honor women's authority but our churches don't?" (Focus Group, December 2023). These pedagogical interventions suggest possibilities for decolonial praxis within existing constraints.

Student Reception: Internalized Limitation and Resistant Reading

Student interviews revealed complex negotiations between curricular messages and personal aspirations. Many students internalized leadership limitations as spiritually mandated. Chidinma (age 17) stated: "I want to be a lawyer, maybe a judge someday. But CRS teaches that women shouldn't have authority over men. So I'm confused. Can I lead in court but not in church?" (Interview, October 2023). This confusion reflects successful ideological transmission—the naturalization of arbitrary boundaries between secular and religious authority.

Other students, however, engaged in what literary theorists call "resistant reading," questioning interpretive authority even while recognizing risks. Adaeze (age 16) observed: "When we read about Deborah, the textbook says she was unusual. But it doesn't say God was displeased. So why assume women leading are wrong? Maybe the problem is how we read it" (Interview, February 2024). Such responses suggest that even within constraining pedagogical frameworks, students exercise interpretive agency.

Significantly, students with exposure to Pentecostal churches reported encountering different gender messages than those in the CRS curriculum. Several noted that while their churches featured prominent female preachers and prophets, the school curriculum presented female spiritual authority as historically aberrant. This disjuncture created what cognitive theorists would recognize as productive dissonance—a gap between authoritative knowledge claims that invites critical reflection.

When asked about leadership aspirations, 31 of 42 students articulated career goals involving significant responsibility (law, medicine, business, politics). Yet only 12 could envision women in senior church leadership, and even these students qualified their vision: "Maybe in the future," "In some denominations," "If she's really called." The contrast between secular and religious leadership imagination reveals how religious pedagogy specifically constrains aspirations within its own domain while students resist total limitation.

Discussion: Toward Decolonial Religious Pedagogy

These findings illuminate several critical insights. First, curriculum decolonization cannot be achieved through additive inclusion alone. The presence of female biblical figures in curricula matters far less than the interpretive frameworks through which students learn to understand them. As long as pedagogical practice positions female leadership as exceptional, compensatory, or restricted to feminized domains, curricular content reproduces rather than challenges colonial gender ideology.

Second, the research reveals how religious education operates as a site where colonial missionary epistemologies achieve contemporary reproduction through seemingly neutral biblical interpretation. The hermeneutical traditions privileged in CRS pedagogy—emphasizing female submission, male headship, and gender complementarity—derive not from transparent biblical meaning but from specific historical readings developed within nineteenth-century missionary education to align Christianity with Victorian social order

(Oyěwùmí, 2021). That these interpretive traditions now function as common sense demonstrates the pedagogical power of curriculum to naturalize historically contingent arrangements.

Third, genuine decolonization requires what I term "epistemic hospitality"—creating curricular space for multiple interpretive traditions, including indigenous Igbo understandings of female authority and alternative Christian hermeneutical approaches (such as feminist biblical scholarship or African women's theology). Several scholars have documented how African women theologians have developed sophisticated readings that center female biblical leadership and challenge patriarchal interpretation (Oduyoye, 2021; Nadar, 2022). Yet these scholarly traditions remain entirely absent from secondary school curricula.

The pathway toward decolonial religious pedagogy involves several transformations. First, teacher education must include critical engagement with the history of biblical interpretation, enabling teachers to recognize that current gender readings represent choices rather than inevitable meanings. Second, curricula should explicitly teach biblical hermeneutics as contested practice, introducing students to diverse interpretive communities and their methodological commitments. Third, pedagogical assessment should reward critical analysis rather than mere reproduction of authorized interpretation.

Most fundamentally, decolonial religious education requires what Freire (2021) called "conscientization"—developing students' critical consciousness regarding how knowledge systems encode power relations. This means not simply teaching about female biblical leaders but examining why certain readings achieve dominance, whose interests they serve, and how they relate to broader patterns of gender inequality. It means asking not just "What does the Bible say about women?" but "Who gets to decide what the Bible says, and what social arrangements does their interpretation legitimate?"

Conclusion

This research has examined how Christian Religious Studies curricula in women to participate in the ongoing construction of gendered subjectivities on leadership and stewardship possibilities. The analysis reveals that despite superficial inclusion of female biblical figures, the interpretive frameworks and pedagogical practices through which these figures are encountered consistently minimize female leadership agency while naturalizing patriarchal authority as divinely ordained. This pedagogical pattern represents not merely inadequate representation but active epistemic colonization—the reproduction of Victorian missionary gender ideology under the guise of biblical fidelity.

The implications is global to any postcolonial context where religious education remains shaped by colonial epistemologies. Decolonization requires not content revision alone but fundamental transformation of the interpretive authority structures embedded in curriculum and pedagogy. It requires epistemic hospitality that makes space for indigenous knowledge systems, alternative hermeneutical traditions, and student critical engagement rather than passive reception.

The students which the author interviewed demonstrate remarkable critical capacity, even within constraining pedagogical frameworks. They ask profound questions: Why do we honor women's authority in politics but not religion? If Deborah led Israel, why can't women lead churches? Why did our ancestors recognize female power that Christianity seems to deny? These questions deserve pedagogical response more sophisticated than appeals to divine commands or natural order.

Education, as Freire insisted, is never neutral. It either domesticates or liberates. Religious education that teaches young women to see female leadership as exceptional, compensatory, or confined to feminized domains domesticates their aspirations to fit predetermined social arrangements. Decolonial pedagogy would instead cultivate their capacity to interrogate received wisdom, recognize historical contingency in seemingly timeless truths, and imagine possibilities beyond the constrained horizons of colonial inheritance. The futures these young women create depend significantly on which educational path we choose.

References

[1]. Achebe, N. (2020). *Female monarchs and merchant queens in Africa*. Ohio University Press.
[2]. Amadiume, I. (2020). *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, religion and culture* (2nd ed.). Zed Books.
[3]. Andreotti, V. (2021). Decolonial solidarities: Tensions and possibilities. *Critical Studies in Education, 62*(3), 279-293.
[4]. Apple, M. W. (2020). *Ideology and curriculum* (4th ed.). Routledge.
[5]. Bernstein, B. (2020). On the classification and framing of educational knowledge. In A. R.
[6]. Sadovnik (Ed.), *Knowledge and pedagogy: The sociology of Basil Bernstein* (pp. 85-115). Routledge.
[7]. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology, 9*(1), 3-26.
[8]. Brown, S.V (2026) Leading from a Place of Strength: The Stewardship Advantage | LinkedIn

[9].   Chougule, A.V, Belagavi, VTU, & Anvekarb, S (June 2025), The impact of women leaders on environmental stewardship: A narrative view. IOSR Journal of Business and Management (IOSR-JBM) e-ISSN: 2278-487X, p-ISSN: 2319-7668. 27 (6)57-68 www.iosrjournals.org DOI: 10.9790/487X-2706115768

[10].   Freire, P. (2021). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (50th anniversary ed.). Bloomsbury Academic.

[11].   Lugones, M. (2020). The coloniality of gender. In W. Harcourt (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of gender and development* (pp. 13-33). Palgrave Macmillan.

[12].   Mbembe, A. (2021). Decolonizing the university: New directions. In *The African university in the twenty-first century* (pp. 29-58). University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

[13].   Nadar, S. (2022). Palatable patriarchy and violence against womxn in South African faith communities. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, 38*(1), 87-102.

[14].   Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2020). Decolonization, development and knowledge in Africa: Turning over a new leaf. Routledge.

[15].   Nwoye, C. M. (2021). Igbo cultural and religious worldview: An insider's perspective. *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology, 13*(1), 1-12.

[16].   Oduyoye, M. A. (2021). Daughters of Anowa: African women and patriarchy. In *The will to arise: Women, tradition, and the church in Africa* (2nd ed., pp. 67-91). Orbis Books.

[17].   Okafor, E. E., & Ezeanya-Esiobu, C. (2023). Indigenous governance institutions and women's political participation in precolonial Igboland. *African Studies Review, 66*(2), 412-438.

[18].   Okonkwo, U., & Nweke, J. (2022). *Comprehensive Christian Religious Studies for senior secondary schools*. Africana Publishers.

[19].   Oyěwùmí, O. (2021). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses* (2nd ed.). University of Minnesota Press.

[20].   Pinar, W. F. (2021). *What is curriculum theory?* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

[21].   Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2021). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Tabula Rasa, 38*, 61-111.

[22].   Wafer, K (2025) Women in leadership: 5 ways to lead with stewardship. Culled from *https://mw-cc.com/insights/f/women-in-leadership*

Web Page

[23].   https://www.iosrjournals.org › iosr-jbm › papers