



# Let a Woman Conduct: Gender Dynamics in Church Choral Ministries within the Baptist Churches of Southwestern Nigeria

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## Abstract

The paper addresses women's participation in church choral ministries, focusing on women as conductors. Despite the growing recognition of women leaders, women's involvement in music ministries is often challenged by gender- and tradition-based barriers. The study examines how women overcome these barriers, shape worship styles, and enrich the church's spiritual and musical life. This study employs a qualitative research method, utilising in-depth interviews with 15 women choral conductors, surveys of 30 church music directors across various denominations, and a critical analysis of historical and contemporary literature. Thematic analysis was used to interpret qualitative data, identifying key themes related to gender dynamics, leadership experiences, and musical influence within church settings. The research is guided by feminist theory, as outlined by Hooks (2000), and ecclesiological theory proposed by Johnson (2015). The paper outlines how women have shaped worship experiences and congregations' spiritual and artistic identity through historical examples, personal narratives, and contemporary practice. By juxtaposing their leadership within the discourses of religion and art, this article pays tribute to women conductors who employ their batons to glorify God and inspire others in the sacred domain of church ministries. The paper concludes that to tap the full potential of women in church music, there needs to be a deconstruction of the gendered barriers that continue to constrain their leadership opportunities. Churches must proactively offer mentorship, professional training, and equal leadership roles for women. Future research should explore the impact of cultural and denominational variations on women's leadership equality in church music, investigate the long-term career trajectories of women conductors, and examine the role of theological education in shaping gender-inclusive music ministries.

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## Introduction

Music is central to African culture and spirituality, serving as a conduit for storytelling, worship, and community cohesion. Historically, leadership roles in music—such as drummers, composers, and



conductors – were predominantly held by men, reflecting the patriarchal structures prevalent in many African societies (Hooks, 2000; Adeoye, 2022). Women's musical contributions were often limited to supportive roles, including providing vocal harmonies and playing auxiliary instruments (Chukwu, 2022).

Ethnomusicological research indicates that although women were actively involved in communal and ritual music-making, leadership roles in performance, composition, and instrumental expertise were generally reserved for men (Nketia, 1999). Women frequently led call-and-response chants and performed at ceremonies; however, the direction of musical ensembles and leading instrumental positions remained dominated by men (Kidula, 2017). Despite these limitations, women played a vital role in preserving oral traditions, transmitting cultural knowledge, and influencing musical innovations within their communities (Agawu, 2003).

In examining gender roles within Yoruba musical traditions, scholars such as Samuel (2018) and Oludare (2018) provide critical insights into female participation in traditionally male-dominated areas. Samuel (2018) highlights the rise of female *dùndún* drummers, noting that their performances challenge patriarchal norms by contesting gendered spaces historically occupied by men. Similarly, Oludare (2018) explores the gender stereotyping associated with traditional Yoruba musical instruments, observing that certain instruments are symbolically linked to specific genders, thereby reinforcing societal norms. These perspectives parallel the challenges faced by women in church choral leadership as both groups navigate and contest gendered spaces within their musical domains.

The influence of Western Christianity on African churches has further entrenched hierarchical structures that marginalise women's leadership in music. Churches adopted patriarchal traditions that restricted women's roles in choral ministries, positioning men as spiritual and artistic authorities (Brown, 2017). Recent research indicates that institutional practices favour male leadership despite ongoing reforms (Olawale, 2023). Nevertheless, women have remained central to church music by enriching liturgical traditions with indigenous musical elements, introducing innovative styles, and nurturing the spiritual life of congregations.

In contemporary times, African women increasingly assume leadership roles in church choral ministries, employing innovative approaches to overcome historical and cultural barriers. Female conductors and choir directors have emerged across various denominations, significantly shaping the musical and spiritual lives of congregations (Ogunrinade, 2020). These leaders blend cultural heritage with modern practices, thereby enhancing worship experiences. However, they continue to face challenges such as gender bias, resistance from male-dominated hierarchies, and limited access to mentorship and professional development (Smith & Johnson, 2019; Okoro & Eze, 2022).

A persistent challenge is the belief that leadership in church music is a male domain. This bias, rooted in traditional and religious perspectives, undermines women's contributions and confines their roles to supportive positions (Hooks, 2000). Systemic barriers also include unequal opportunities for funding and training, with sponsorship for advanced musical education being less accessible to female conductors compared to their male counterparts (Brown, 2017; Adekunle, 2022).

Despite these challenges, many African women have proactively created support systems. Programs like the Women in African Sacred Music Network offer networking, mentorship, and skill development opportunities. Additionally, grassroots movements such as community choir initiatives led by female conductors have nurtured new talent and challenged entrenched perceptions of gender roles in musical leadership. Scholars argue that institutional reforms, such as updating curricula to include contemporary and indigenous musical styles, empower women to reach their full potential



(Ossaiga, 2023a, 2023b). These reforms not only promote inclusivity but also bridge the gap between societal needs and the practices of church music education.

This article explores the evolving roles of women in church choral ministries by examining their leadership styles, the challenges they encounter, and their lasting legacy in worship spaces around the world. By showcasing the lives and contributions of prominent female conductors, the study demonstrates how women leaders are transforming the culture of sacred music, infusing new visions into worship, and promoting inclusivity in spiritual growth. It advocates for greater visibility and institutional support to ensure women's voices are valued equally to men's in church music leadership. It inspires future generations to continue shaping the direction of sacred music and worship.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs feminist theory, ecclesiological perspectives, and transformational leadership theory to examine the challenges and contributions of women in church choral leadership. Feminist theory, as articulated by Hooks (2000), provides a lens to understand how patriarchal structures within religious institutions have historically marginalised women, creating systemic barriers to leadership in sacred music. This framework illuminates the efforts of women conductors who challenge traditional norms to assert their leadership and promote inclusivity and gender equity in worship practices. Recent Nigerian scholarship, such as the work of Okoro and Eze (2022), further explores these gendered power dynamics in contemporary Nigerian church music leadership, advocating for context-specific feminist approaches to reform leadership roles in sacred spaces.

Ecclesiological perspectives, particularly those of Johnson (2015), advocate for a theology that promotes gender equity in ministry roles. This viewpoint is essential for understanding how theological interpretations shaped gender roles in church music ministries and how current shifts in ecclesiology are creating new opportunities for women in leadership. In the Nigerian context, Ossaiga (2023a) argues for decolonising church music education, emphasising that integrating indigenous theological insights can enhance gender equity in church leadership.

Leadership theory, particularly transformational leadership as proposed by Northouse (2019), is used to examine how women adopt visionary and inspirational leadership styles to navigate and thrive in choral conducting roles that have traditionally been male-dominated. Transformational leadership emphasises vision, inspiration, and mentorship—qualities many women conductors leverage to effectively lead choirs despite institutional resistance. Adekunle (2022) highlights emerging leadership trends in Nigerian church music, illustrating that female conductors are challenging conventional leadership models and pioneering innovative practices that blend traditional Nigerian cultural elements with contemporary leadership strategies.

Collectively, these theoretical frameworks provide a strong foundation for analysing women's experiences in church choral ministries. They underscore the structural challenges faced by women, the theological shifts that support their leadership, and the adaptive strategies they employ to carve out spaces for themselves in sacred music leadership. Integrating both classic and contemporary Nigerian scholarship enriches the analysis, ensuring that the discussion remains contextually relevant and reflective of Nigeria's evolving church music landscape.

### **Gender and Leadership in Church Choral Ministries**

Over the last few decades, women's participation in church choral ministries has undergone significant transformation as they have taken on leadership positions traditionally held by men (Hooks, 2000). Today, female conductors are breaking down gender barriers and enhancing the



worship experience through innovative ideas and styles in sacred music. Their efforts are reshaping church music for today's congregations in a more inclusive manner. However, these changes have not been without resistance, as women continue to encounter obstacles related to gender prejudice and institutional pushback. African churches have long been influenced by patriarchal structures that historically reserved key leadership roles for male conductors and choir directors (Kidula, 2017; Obi, 2020). Deeply rooted cultural beliefs associate authority and leadership with masculinity, thus upholding theological positions that have traditionally excluded women from leadership roles in the church. Nevertheless, despite these systemic barriers, the narrative of women's involvement in church music remains strong. In many churches today, women are essential to congregational choirs, providing vital musical talents and leadership. Their efforts to organise and sustain choral groups continue to affirm their critical role in the church's spiritual life – even when their potential to take on broader leadership roles is often undermined (Agawu, 2003).

The primary barrier for female conductors is the scepticism from male colleagues who adhere to traditional gender roles and leadership concepts. Recent studies by Okoro and Eze (2022) indicate that many women experience doubts about their competence, which leads to a lack of mentorship and professional support necessary for growth into leadership positions. Moreover, prevailing societal expectations often undermine women's authority in leadership roles by assuming that men are inherently better suited for such positions, thereby restricting career advancement in church music (Adekunle, 2022). Nevertheless, as more women break into leadership roles in church music, the landscape of choral ministry is evolving. By overcoming long-standing gendered barriers, female conductors enhance worship and pave the way for future generations in music ministry. Their leadership introduces fresh perspectives that foster inclusivity and promote spiritual growth, helping to shape a more progressive and equitable future for religious sacred music in churches worldwide.

### **Challenges Women Face in Conducting Roles**

The reluctance to allow women to conduct in African musical and choral settings is deeply rooted in entrenched stereotypes. Women aspiring to leadership roles in music often face doubts about their competence, as conducting is traditionally viewed as a masculine domain (Hooks, 2000). Cultural norms may discourage women from assuming visible leadership roles in religious settings where conventional interpretations of gender roles prevail. Additionally, practical barriers exist; for instance, women may have less access to formal music education and training, limiting their opportunities to develop the necessary conducting skills. Societal expectations that assign domestic responsibilities predominantly to women further restrict the time and resources available for pursuing leadership roles in music (Adekunle, 2022).

Despite these challenges, progress is being made. Increasingly, women are breaking barriers in African musical practices and church choral ministries. Recent research (e.g., Okoro & Eze, 2022; Adekunle, 2022) documents the emergence of female conductors in various contexts, challenging long-held stereotypes and demonstrating their competence and artistry. Educational institutions and advocacy groups play a critical role in supporting women in music by offering training, mentorship, and platforms to showcase their talents. Furthermore, some churches and musical organisations are starting to recognise the need for gender inclusivity by implementing policies that encourage women's music leadership and reinterpreting theological teachings to promote gender equity (Ossaiga, 2023a). Although these shifts are gradual, they signal a growing acknowledgement of women's contributions and potential as leaders in music.



## **Leadership Styles and Their Effect on Worship**

The increased involvement of women in church music ministries has significantly redefined leadership within sacred music. Interviews and surveys indicate that female choral conductors predominantly adopt collaborative, inclusive, and emotionally expressive leadership styles, thereby transforming the performance and experience of worship music. This approach reimagines traditional worship patterns by integrating diverse musical traditions, expanding repertoires, and reflecting theological insights within choral compositions. Data suggest that female conductors emphasise community-building and emotional intelligence, creating environments where choir members feel empowered to innovate, connect deeply with worship music, and experience spiritual growth. These findings align with Northouse's (2019) transformational leadership model, which highlights how effective leaders motivate, inspire, and nurture their teams toward a shared vision.

Recent work by Adekunle (2022) further confirms that female conductors in Nigeria effectively utilise these leadership practices to reshape the cultural and spiritual dimensions of church choral ministries. Adekunle's research highlights how these conductors navigate and challenge traditional gender roles within the church, fostering more inclusive and dynamic worship experiences. Transformational leadership approaches enhance musical performance and contribute to broader societal shifts toward gender equity in religious settings. This evolution in leadership styles signifies a profound transformation in the cultural and spiritual fabric of church communities, driven by the innovative contributions of female choral conductors.

One of the most striking aspects of women's leadership in church choral ministries is their emphasis on relational and empathetic leadership. Interview responses highlight how women conductors prioritise teamwork, emotional support, and a sense of belonging, fostering a more engaged and cohesive choir. For instance, Blessing Chokor, a contemporary church choral conductor, incorporates emotional intelligence into her leadership by addressing the emotional challenges choir members encounter during rehearsals, thereby enhancing their investment in the music (Chokor, Oral Interview, 2024). Similarly, balancing technical proficiency with the emotional and spiritual dimensions of music cultivates an environment where choir members feel valued and supported. She emphasises that a choir performs best when its members experience a sense of purpose and belonging, achieved by focusing on technical precision and the emotional power of the lyrics (Ayankemi, Oral Interview, 2024). This perspective aligns with Northouse's (2019) transformational leadership theory, which underscores how effective leaders balance technical mastery with motivational strategies to enhance team performance.

It is important to note that female choral conductors play a crucial role in advancing inclusivity and equity within sacred music leadership. They mentor emerging female musicians, advocate for diverse representation in leadership roles, and challenge traditional gender biases in church music ministries. This transformational leadership approach aligns with broader cultural movements that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion within religious spaces. By reshaping worship experiences, these conductors create opportunities for future generations of female leaders in sacred music, ensuring that women's leadership remains central to the evolving landscape of church music.

## **Challenges in Contemporary Leadership**

Despite notable advancements, female choral conductors face significant challenges rooted in gender bias within church hierarchies. These biases often subtly undermine women's authority to lead choirs and are perpetuated by longstanding patriarchal structures favouring male leadership. Baker's (2020) research highlights that women in church music leadership frequently receive inadequate recognition and support from clergy and congregations. Institutional policies in certain denominations further



restrict women's access to leadership roles, with some churches hesitant to appoint women as music directors or department heads. This systemic resistance underscores the need to dismantle gender biases and implement supportive policies within church music ministries.

Personal accounts from a female church choral conductor illuminate these challenges and emphasise that women often face subtle obstacles to their authority, encountering dismissive attitudes or surprise regarding their leadership roles. They frequently must exert extra effort to demonstrate their qualifications and dedication to counteract these biases. Although they foster emotional and spiritual connections within their choirs, they encounter institutional barriers, including a lack of professional development resources and limited access to networking and mentorship opportunities compared to their male counterparts (Adediran, Oral Interview, 2024). Similarly, female conductors often struggle with inadequate compensation and support from church leadership, with some having to advocate for appropriate recognition of their roles (Osagede, Oral Interview, 2024). These testimonies underscore the resilience of women choral conductors and the systemic changes necessary to provide equitable support within church music ministries.

To tackle these challenges, scholars and practitioners emphasise the need for institutional reforms that promote gender-inclusive policies, ensuring equal opportunities in training and leadership for women. Mentorship programs are essential for bridging knowledge gaps and building confidence among aspiring female conductors. Smith and Johnson (2019) support these initiatives, highlighting their importance in fostering professional growth and resilience. The Baptist denomination in Nigeria serves as a positive example, offering platforms for women to thrive in music ministry through extensive training and opportunities within the local assembly. These efforts not only empower women but also enrich the spiritual and musical life of congregations.

The leadership styles of female conductors significantly impact church music programs. Church members note the nurturing environment established by skilled female conductors, who lead with vision and compassion, transforming choirs into cohesive, family-like communities (Aboluwarin, Oral Interview, 2024). This relational approach to leadership aligns with insights from interviews with female conductors who prioritise teamwork, emotional intelligence, and spiritual connection, thereby enhancing the overall worship experience. Such leadership elevates musical performance and fosters a supportive community within the church.

However, young female conductors continue to face challenges not typically encountered by their male counterparts. Aremu describes the struggle to be taken seriously when introducing new repertoires or giving instructions, feeling an implicit need to prove herself despite her ongoing passion and preparation. While support from female mentors and peers provides guidance and encouragement, the lack of institutional support and professional development opportunities hinders her ability to build a sustainable career in church music (Aremu, Participant Observation, 2024). These experiences underscore the necessity for systemic changes within church and choral organisations to provide equal support and opportunities for women in music ministry.

### **Overcoming Obstacles**

The experiences of pioneering female musicians, like the Lijadu Sisters, who broke barriers in Nigeria's male-dominated music industry during the 1970s and 1980s, highlight the challenges and resilience of women in musical leadership roles. This narrative of overcoming obstacles presents real-life examples of women who have navigated and challenged gender biases in music leadership. Female conductors continue to employ various strategies to dismantle systemic barriers, including mentorship, community support, and professional development. These approaches align with



feminist theory (Hooks, 2000), emphasising collective action and the dismantling of patriarchal systems within faith-based institutions. Mentorship creates safe spaces for women to share experiences, receive guidance, and build resilience against gender bias, reinforcing feminist support networks and advocacy principles. Recent research by Adekunle (2022) demonstrates how mentorship initiatives within Nigerian church music contexts transform leadership dynamics by providing tailored support that addresses local cultural challenges.

Additionally, the Lijadu Sisters, pioneers in the Nigerian music industry during the 1970s and 1980s, confronted and overcame gender barriers in a male-dominated field. Their music often addressed social issues and women's rights, inspiring challenges to traditional gender roles in musical leadership. It is important to note that professional development is crucial for empowering female conductors through mentorship. Many pursue advanced degrees or specialised training to enhance their skills and credibility in church music leadership. This approach reflects ecclesiological theory (Johnson, 2015), which advocates for a theology prioritising competence and spiritual calling over traditional gender roles. By investing in professional growth, female conductors challenge long-standing theological narratives that have historically excluded women from leadership roles in sacred music. Supporting this view, Ossaiga (2023a) argues that decolonizing church music education through improved professional development is vital for nurturing indigenous leadership and ensuring female conductors are well-equipped to meet contemporary worship needs. This aligns with Offiong (2004), which highlights the evolving roles of women in Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, noting significant changes in women's leadership and participation. These two scholarly perspectives emphasise the important role of women in Nigerian Pentecostal churches, illustrating their active participation and leadership despite prevailing gender biases.

Moreover, community support is crucial for sustaining female leadership within church choral ministries. Women conductors build alliances, advocate for inclusive policies, and actively transform church music leadership. This collaborative effort exemplifies transformational leadership theory (Northouse, 2019), highlighting the significance of mentorship, vision, and empowerment in nurturing future leaders. Recent research by Okoro and Eze (2022) confirms that strong community networks provide emotional and professional support while challenging and gradually changing entrenched patriarchal norms. As more women conductors exhibit inclusivity and dynamic leadership, they establish a foundation for a more equitable and spiritually enriching future in church music.

### Data Presentations

The table below provides a concise overview of the qualitative and quantitative data that support the study's findings on the profound impact of women in church choral ministries.

Theme	Interview Insights (15 Female Conductors)	Survey Findings (30 Church Music Directors)
<b>Gender Dynamics</b>	All 15 conductors reported experiencing gender bias and institutional resistance that affect leadership opportunities.	80% (24/30) agreed that gender dynamics significantly influence leadership in church music.
<b>Leadership Experiences</b>	12 of the 15 conductors described their leadership as transformational, emphasising mentorship, community support, and resilience.	75% (23/30) confirmed that women's leadership enhances choir cohesion and positively shapes worship practices.



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Theme	Interview Insights (15 Female Conductors)	Survey Findings (30 Church Music Directors)
<b>Musical Influence</b>	Fourteen conductors highlighted their innovative musical contributions that reframe traditional worship and enrich spiritual experiences.	85% (26/30) believed that women's musical influence plays a vital role in evolving worship practices.

### Discussion of Findings

The study's findings, derived from interviews with 15 female choral conductors and surveys of 30 church music directors, reveal that women have significantly influenced church choral ministries by fostering community and spirituality within congregations. They utilise innovative programming, diverse repertoire selections, and nurturing leadership styles that enhance worship experiences and deepen spiritual engagement among choir members and congregants. This approach aligns with transformational leadership principles, emphasising emotional intelligence, mentorship, and inclusivity.

A prominent strength of female choral conductors is their ability to foster a sense of community within both the choir and the congregation. This relational leadership prioritises trust, collaboration, and inclusivity. Survey data indicate that 85% of church music directors believe that women's musical influence plays a vital role in evolving worship practices. Interviewees echoed this sentiment, emphasising the choir as a familial unit where every member feels valued and spiritually connected. This approach aligns with transformational leadership theory, which posits that effective leaders create environments where individuals feel motivated and empowered.

Despite their contributions, many women encounter gender biases, unequal access to leadership roles, and insufficient institutional support. These challenges were often mentioned in interviews, with 80% of surveyed music directors recognising the prevalence of gender biases in church music leadership. One conductor recounted her experience of being labelled as an 'assistant' despite leading rehearsals and selecting repertoire, necessitating continuous advocacy to acknowledge her leadership role. This resistance aligns with feminist theory, which critiques patriarchal structures that limit women's opportunities in institutional settings, and ecclesiological theory, which frames these challenges within church governance that frequently reinforces male-dominated leadership structures.

Women conductors utilise mentorship, community support, and professional development strategies to navigate these challenges. Many emphasised networking with other female leaders for guidance and assistance. Survey results indicate that 80% of female conductors participating in mentorship programs reported increased confidence and success in obtaining leadership roles. Organisations like the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) have played a crucial role in advocating for women in church music leadership, aligning with leadership theories that emphasise how transformational leaders nurture new talent and challenge existing power structures to foster more inclusive environments.

While significant progress has been made, systemic gender biases hinder women's full participation in church choral leadership. Women conductors have shown resilience and creativity in overcoming these barriers and advocating for greater inclusivity in church music ministries. Their leadership fosters a more vibrant and spiritually enriching future for church music. As more institutions recognise the value of women's leadership in sacred music, continued efforts are essential to dismantle remaining obstacles, including changes to institutional policies, increased mentorship opportunities, and expanded professional development programs. The contributions of women in church choral



ministries signify a transformational shift in worship leadership that combines artistic excellence with spiritual depth. As female conductors continue to break barriers and redefine church music leadership, they pave the way for future generations to lead with confidence, creativity, and a deep commitment to their faith.

### Conclusion

The call for "Let a woman conduct" seeks recognition and acknowledgement of women as leaders in African music and church choral ministries. This is vital within the well-established tradition of African music, which has historically excluded women due to biased gender discrimination in music leadership. Given the opportunity, women bring fresh insights, enrich church music, and foster deeper spiritual connections. Their leadership in church choirs is inclusive and empathetic, focusing on community building, thus transforming this choral ministry into a hub of musical excellence and spiritual growth. However, significant obstacles still hinder women's access to leadership roles in church music, including institutional biases and a lack of acknowledgement of their contributions. If these barriers are to be fully dismantled to unlock the potential of women in church music, churches must actively support them through mentorship, professional development, and equitable opportunities for leadership positions. By nurturing an inclusive ministry that embraces diverse leadership styles, congregations can ensure that the future of sacred music remains dynamic, inclusive, and spiritually nourishing. The potential of women in choral leadership is crucial for the future of church music and its broader influence in the community.

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