



Research Paper

# Influence Of Culture on Women and Leadership Position Among the Yoruba

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## Abstract

Nigeria, a multi-ethnic and culturally diverse nation, is home to over 300 ethnic groups, with the Yoruba forming one of its most influential populations. Despite the rich cultural heritage of the Yoruba, their traditional practices have historically marginalized women, particularly in leadership roles. This study examines the influence of Yoruba cultural systems on women's leadership positions in Nigeria, focusing on how traditional beliefs and practices have restricted female participation in political and socio-economic leadership. The central problem addressed in this research is the persistent cultural limitation placed on Yoruba women, which hinders their access to leadership despite significant contributions to family, economy, and community development. The objectives include identifying cultural practices that restrict women's leadership, assessing the current state of female representation in Yoruba political and religious structures, and recommending strategies for promoting gender-inclusive leadership. The study adopts a qualitative methodology, utilizing historical analysis, document review, and key informant interviews from selected Yoruba communities. Primary and secondary sources were analyzed to understand the evolution of women's roles from pre-colonial to post-colonial periods and how colonial and post-independence structures entrenched gender inequality. Findings reveal that while pre-colonial Yoruba society allowed for influential female figures like the Iyalode, Iyaloja, Iyalaje, Regent, Erelu, Ayaba, among others, colonial systems reinforced patriarchy by sidelining indigenous female leadership roles. Cultural festivals like the Oro and societal expectations about domestic responsibilities further suppress women's leadership potential. In modern political settings, Yoruba women face systemic discrimination rooted in both cultural and institutional biases. The study concludes that without a cultural reorientation, gender equality in leadership will remain elusive in Yoruba society. It recommends policy reforms, inclusive cultural education, and empowerment programs that challenge patriarchal norms while promoting women's active participation in governance. Addressing these cultural impediments is essential for achieving gender-balanced development and leadership equity in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Culture, Women, Leadership, Tradition, Yoruba

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## I. Introduction

Nigeria is the largest country along the West African coast in terms of geographical size and population. It is a multi-ethnic nation comprised of over 300 distinct ethnic groups, each with unique historical, cultural, and geographical identities (National Population Commission [NPC], 2023). Strategically located on the Gulf of Guinea, Nigeria shares borders with Benin to the west, Niger to the north, Chad to the northeast, and Cameroon to the east (CIA World Factbook, 2024). The modern Nigerian state emerged from the colonial amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914, orchestrated by British colonial administrator Lord Frederick Lugard. This act of unification laid the foundation for Nigeria's present geopolitical structure (Falola & Heaton, 2022). The name "Nigeria" was derived from the River Niger, a prominent geographical feature traversing the country, and was coined by British journalist Flora Shaw in the late 19th century to describe the area inhabited by people around the Niger River (Falola & Heaton, 2022). Nigeria's major ethnic groups include the Hausa, Fulani, Tiv, Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, Ijaw, and Kanuri, among others. Among these, the Yoruba ethnic group stands out due to

its extensive cultural heritage and socio-political influence. The Yoruba are primarily located in southwestern Nigeria, spanning states such as Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti, as well as parts of Kwara and Kogi, and extending into neighboring countries such as Benin and Togo (Akinyemi, 2020). The Yoruba are recognized for their deep cultural traditions, rich linguistic heritage, and vibrant systems of governance and belief, which permeate every aspect of life within the ethnic group.

Nigeria remains a deeply patriarchal society, where men predominantly control and influence the social, political, economic, and cultural spheres of women's lives. This patriarchal system has been reinforced through socialization processes and cultural practices that systematically privilege male interests and leadership over those of women (British Council Nigeria, 2012; UN Women, 2022). In most sectors—including governance, education, religion, and household leadership—men overwhelmingly occupy positions of power, often to the exclusion of women. This imbalance is deeply rooted in cultural frameworks that shape societal norms and behaviors.

Culture in this context can be defined as the cumulative manifestation of the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and material characteristics that define a social group. It includes but is not limited to, art, literature, language, lifestyle, systems of value, customs, and traditions (UNESCO, 2002). These cultural structures contribute to the shaping of gender roles and expectations in Nigeria, creating distinct societal roles for men and women. According to Kroeber and Parsons (1958), culture encompasses the “transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas, and other symbolic-meaningful systems as factors in the shaping of human behavior.” In essence, culture influences how people think, feel, and act, and is passed down through symbols and practices embedded in community life. The resilience and continuity of these traditions are sustained by individuals who serve as custodians of cultural heritage, reinforcing existing social structures including those that maintain gender disparities.

Culture embodies the totality of a people's way of life, including their concepts, habits, skills, arts, tools, institutions, and other material and non-material attributes within a specific historical context. It reflects the intellectual and artistic achievements of a society, often expressed through literature, philosophy, and the arts (Adegun, 2008). Culture also represents how humans interact with their environment—shaping their responses to natural and social stimuli—and is central to how individuals understand their existence and role within a community (Adewuya, 2002). The renowned anthropologist Edward B. Tylor classically defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor, 2021). From this and other interpretations, culture can be understood as both the content and process of socialization—transmitting the habits, values, traditions, and norms that govern aspects such as religion, governance, marriage, work, birth, death, and dress (UNESCO, 2002). As Ajetunmobi (2000) emphasizes, culture is the total heritage of a society, including learned behavior and knowledge passed from one generation to another through socialization. While modernization and westernization have influenced aspects of traditional African cultures, some elements remain notably resistant to change. For instance, in Yoruba culture, leadership roles for women continue to be constrained by long-standing cultural expectations and structures. These enduring traits reflect the deep-rooted nature of cultural norms that persist despite contemporary pressures for transformation (British Council Nigeria, 2012; UN Women, 2022).

From the scholarly definitions and perspectives, several core characteristics of culture can be identified. Firstly, culture consists of ideals, beliefs, values, and perceptions that are shaped through the interactions between individuals and their surrounding environment (UNESCO, 2022). It is a social construct that reflects how people understand and navigate their world. Secondly, culture is generational—it is transmitted from one generation to the next through processes such as education, storytelling, and socialization (UNESCO, 2019). This transfer ensures the continuity of societal norms and traditions over time. Moreover, culture is learned. It is acquired through engagement with members of a society and becomes part of an individual's identity through interaction, imitation, and participation in communal life (Obono, 2021). Additionally, culture is dynamic; it is not static but evolves continuously as a result of internal innovation and external influence. The interaction of diverse cultural systems—especially in multicultural or globalized societies—can lead to significant transformations in cultural expressions and practices (Adediran & Odumosu, 2022). Finally, culture is both universal and relational; every human society possesses culture, but the specific traits and expressions vary and are shaped by the society's unique context and historical experiences (Ayodele, 2008). It is against this background that this paper explores the influence of culture on women and leadership position among the Yoruba.

## **II. Conceptual Analysis**

### **Women**

Women are adult female human beings and they are major stakeholders in the development project of any society as they constitute 49% of the total population of the country (Okafor and Akokuwebe, 2015). Despite their population, they are still marginalized in virtually all aspect of life especially in political representation, religious leadership, traditional leadership, economic management and leadership, and a host of others. It is against this background that this paper, therefore, examines the influence of culture on women leadership position in Nigeria. It is obvious that the Yoruba culture system affects women leadership positions as roles placed on women centers

on home management, financial support for husbands and also to support men in leadership positions. Due to this, it is not so surprising that the rate at which women are educated in this part of Nigeria limit their opportunity of being placed in leadership position in the society(Adeboye, 2020).

In Yoruba society, cultural practices often restrict women from holding pivotal positions, leading to systemic discrimination that marginalizes them within the community (Adeboye, 2020).For instance, during traditional festivals like the Oro Festival, women are prohibited from participating or even witnessing certain rituals, reinforcing gender-based exclusions (Wikipedia, 2025).Such cultural norms contribute to the perception of women primarily as homemakers and caregivers, limiting their participation in leadership roles (Dehinsilu-Aluko, 2021).This societal framework fosters a belief that women should be seen and not heard, undermining their confidence to pursue leadership positions (Adisa, Mordi & Osabutey, 2024).

### **Leadership**

Leadership is a fundamental aspect of any human collective—be it a society, group, or organization—as it primarily focuses on directing and motivating individuals toward achieving common goals. It is widely accepted in organizational theory that leadership involves influencing others to willingly commit to shared objectives. As such, it goes beyond positional authority, emphasizing relational and motivational dimensions (Northouse, 2021). Koontz and O'Donnell earlier described leadership as the capacity of a manager to inspire subordinates to act with enthusiasm and commitment toward organizational goals, highlighting its deeply human-centered nature (cited in Ojo, 2022).

Ajayi (1998) emphasized leadership as the art of persuading others to pursue defined goals with passion and unity of purpose, referring to it as the binding force that holds a group together. In support of this, Appleby (1994) maintained that effective leadership depends on the trust and cooperation between leaders and followers, noting that a leader must assume responsibility for the attainment of group objectives. Leadership, therefore, requires emotional intelligence, empathy, and the ability to foster collaboration across hierarchies. These foundational views are now complemented by contemporary models that prioritize participative and transformational leadership styles (Bolden, 2016).

Leadership is not limited to a particular gender, and modern research continues to disprove the outdated notion that men are naturally more capable leaders. The assumption that great leaders are born, not made, has evolved to accommodate a broader understanding that leadership traits can be developed through experience, training, and personal growth (Eagly & Chin, 2010). Nwobodo (2010) listed several qualities essential for effective leadership, including intelligence, stamina, responsibility, people management, and motivation—traits that are not inherently gendered but can be exhibited by both men and women alike.

This understanding challenges traditional gender stereotypes that often exclude women from leadership roles. Neuroscientific studies have consistently shown no significant differences in cognitive ability or emotional intelligence between male and female brains that would support gender exclusivity in leadership capacities (Fine, 2017). Therefore, leadership must be recognized as an inclusive concept, shaped more by competence and integrity than by gender. As societies move toward equity and inclusivity, recognizing the leadership potential in all individuals regardless of gender is crucial for sustainable development and effective governance.

### **Yoruba Traditional Society**

Nigeria is a multicultural nation composed of over 300 ethnic groups, each distinguished by unique languages, customs, and socio-political systems (National Population Commission [NPC], 2023). Among the three dominant ethnic groups are the Yoruba, who number between 10 to 20 million and are primarily concentrated in the southwestern part of Nigeria. This region includes six key states: Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti, with Yoruba communities also found in parts of Kogi, Kwara, Benin, and Togo (Falola & Heaton, 2022). Despite geographic spread, Yoruba people maintain a strong sense of shared identity, particularly expressed through their cultural heritage, including language, kinship systems, political structures, and religious practices.

A key feature of Yoruba culture is its deeply spiritual traditional religion, centered on a pantheon of deities known as Òrìṣà. The Yoruba religion recognizes between 400 and 700 deities, many of which are associated with natural elements such as rivers, hills, and forests, reflecting the people's respect for nature and its influence on their cosmology (Awolalu & Dopamu, 2023). These deities play vital roles in guiding societal values, decision-making, and rituals. Leadership in religious ceremonies is traditionally male-dominated, as men are considered the primary custodians of sacred rites, though recent studies show an increasing recognition of women's roles in Yoruba spiritual practices (Adeoye & Olaniyi, 2021). These religious traditions continue to play a vital role in defining the social and cultural fabric of Yoruba society today.

### **Recognizing Women for Position in the Yoruba Society**

The portrayal of women as “weaker vessels” in biblical scripture has often been misinterpreted to imply inferiority, yet women hold crucial roles in every society. In pre-colonial Nigeria, the status and responsibilities of

women varied widely across different ethnic groups, depending largely on kinship structures and their economic functions (Akinyemi & Adesina, 2021). For instance, among the Yoruba, women occupied significant economic positions as traders, farmers, and local manufacturers. Despite a predominantly patriarchal society, women in pre-colonial Yoruba culture played complementary roles to men rather than being merely subordinate (Oluyemi, 2022). This dynamic underscores the essential nature of women's contributions, although it often occurred within the constraints of a male-dominated socio-political hierarchy.

The patriarchal structure of pre-colonial Nigeria laid the groundwork for the persistent exclusion of women from formal political participation. Power structures during this epoch were dominated by men, and only a few exceptional women broke into the male-dominated public sphere (Afolayan, 2023). These societal norms, deeply rooted in tradition and culture, created enduring limitations for women. Colonialism exacerbated this marginalization by introducing Western political systems that favored male leadership while systematically sidelining indigenous female political institutions, such as the Yoruba *Iyalode* system (Odejide, 2021). Women were denied political representation and their potential leadership abilities were dismissed, reinforcing a patriarchal order that continued into the postcolonial era.

During colonial rule, women were repressed and discouraged from entering political and public spaces. The colonial narrative, heavily influenced by Western gender ideologies, viewed women as unfit for political engagement. Colonial officials and local patriarchs believed that politics would “unsex” women, destabilize family structures, and result in demographic decline. As noted by Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997), such arguments positioned women as inherently childlike, emotionally unstable, and incapable of rational thought—a perception that justified excluding them from leadership and governance. This perception denied women agency and framed them merely as caregivers and supporters rather than active decision-makers in society.

Despite these constraints, Yoruba women historically exercised influence in economic spheres and, occasionally, in indirect political roles—often through their lineage or strategic marriages into ruling families (Akinyemi & Adesina, 2021). However, these avenues rarely translated into visible public authority. The prevailing cultural belief that women's brains were too malleable for leadership roles further entrenched gender-based discrimination. In Yoruba tradition, positions such as kingship (*Oba*), priesthood, and family leadership were almost exclusively reserved for men. This cultural pattern reinforces the notion that, even when women played vital roles, they remained behind the scenes, constrained by a patriarchal system that undervalued their intellectual and leadership capabilities (Oluyemi, 2022).

### **Women Leadership Position and Politics in Yoruba-land**

In many African countries such as Nigeria, obnoxious social norm or culture, political exclusion and economic lopsidedness dictates the presence and voice of women in public life despite the fact that women constitute 49% of the total population, yet there has been a gross gender gap between men and women especially in political representation, economic management and leadership, (Okafor and Akokuwebe, 2015) that is to say that political equality is still obscure in Nigeria especially in the Yoruba setting, as men have control over assets and have relatively better education and also have dominant positions in terms of political power.

Women leadership positions and political participation in Yoruba-land reflect a complex interplay of traditional norms, evolving socio-political dynamics, and increasing advocacy for gender inclusion. Historically, Yoruba society exhibited forms of female leadership through roles such as *Iyalode*—a prominent chieftaincy title representing women's interests in governance and community affairs (Oladosu, 2019). Despite this, contemporary political structures have often marginalized women, constraining their access to formal political offices due to entrenched patriarchal norms and socio-cultural barriers (Oladimeji & Alabi, 2022). However, recent decades have witnessed growing female political activism and representation in Yoruba states like Oyo, Osun, and Ondo, catalyzed by policy frameworks and gender-sensitive electoral reforms aimed at promoting inclusivity (Adeyemo, 2021). The involvement of women in political leadership positions not only challenges existing gender stereotypes but also enhances governance through inclusive policymaking that addresses gender-specific and community developmental needs (Akande & Bello, 2023).

The evolving landscape of women's political leadership in Yoruba-land is further influenced by education, civil society engagement, and international gender equality initiatives, which have empowered Yoruba women to contest and hold elective and appointive positions more effectively (Ajiboye, 2020). Nonetheless, challenges such as limited financial resources, gender-based violence, and systemic exclusion continue to impede women's full political participation (Onabanjo, 2023). Scholars argue that strengthening women's leadership in Yoruba politics necessitates a multi-faceted approach encompassing legal reforms, capacity-building programs, and cultural reorientation to dismantle discriminatory practices (Ogunyemi, 2022). As such, women's leadership in Yoruba-land is increasingly recognized as pivotal not only to democratization processes but also to sustainable socio-economic development, aligning with global commitments like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that emphasize gender equality in political representation (United Nations, 2023).

### **Limitation in the Path of Leadership for Women in Yoruba Society**

Women are often stereotyped as physically weaker than men, a perception that frequently extends unfairly into assumptions about their intelligence and integrity. This broad generalization tends to define and limit gender roles in many societies, assigning men and women to predetermined functions and expectations (Eze & Nwosu, 2022). However, such rigid gender roles fail to capture the complexities within cultures like that of the Yoruba, where gender dynamics are more fluid and versatile, making strict dichotomies impractical (Adeyemi, 2023). The Yoruba cultural context highlights the importance of understanding gender beyond simplistic physical or intellectual comparisons, recognizing a nuanced interplay between social roles and identities.

In Yoruba culture, hierarchical structures clearly delineate gender roles, yet these do not necessarily impose complete subordination of women. Recent scholarship by Oladipo (2023) discusses how female principles symbolize “coolness” (ero), while male principles represent “toughness” (lile), reflecting culturally embedded values where women are seen as nurturing and men as assertive. This cultural symbolism extends to social expectations: males are traditionally viewed as heirs (arole), tasked with carrying on family lineage, while females are associated with complementary but different societal roles (Oladipo, 2023). These deeply rooted gender constructs inform how power and responsibility are distributed within Yoruba communities.

Despite this complementary view, women in Yoruba society often face marginalization akin to second-class citizenship, where patriarchal norms allow men to dominate social, familial, and political spheres (Okeke, 2022). Women frequently suffer abuse and are metaphorically described as “foot mats” under the feet of men who may assault or oppress them. Gender underpins every social order—from family to politics—embedding inequality in fundamental institutions (Ajayi & Ibrahim, 2022). Politically, women remain marginalized with limited access to leadership roles. Most political parties in Nigeria do not maintain adequate records of women’s membership, and very few women are granted candidacy for elections, reflecting persistent gender biases within political institutions (Ajayi & Ibrahim, 2022).

The political arena in Nigeria is largely regarded as a male preserve. Men dominate financial, economic, and political negotiations, which often occur outside the domestic sphere (Ogunbiyi, 2023). Consequently, Nigerian women face restricted access to decision-making processes and control over economic resources. This structural imbalance severely limits their ability to contest elections and attain leadership positions (Ogunbiyi, 2023; Oladipo & Bello, 2024). Scholars have noted that socio-cultural barriers—such as widowhood rites, female genital mutilation (FGM), restrictive religious doctrines, early marriage, and gender inequality—compound the challenges to women’s political empowerment (Okafor & Akokuwebe, 2015).

Further compounding this marginalization are cultural and traditional practices that exclude women from accessing critical resources such as education, land ownership, capital, and entrepreneurial training (Balogun, 2022). These deprivations prevent women from acquiring the knowledge and financial independence necessary to challenge their subordinate status (Balogun, 2022). Additionally, the dehumanizing treatment of widows, domestic violence, and other forms of subjugation erode women’s self-esteem and silence their public participation (Adediran, 2021). Such practices confine women to private spheres and discourage active engagement in leadership or politics.

Stereotypes also constrain women’s aspirations to attain leadership roles in political and organizational structures. The traditional expectation that women and girls prioritize household chores leaves little time for education or self-development, reinforcing a cycle of limited opportunity (Adebayo, 2023). Among the Yoruba, a widely held belief places women firmly in the domestic sphere, famously stating that a woman’s place is “in the kitchen and another man’s home.” This cultural mindset contributes to the undervaluing of educating girls and women, further limiting their social mobility (Adebayo, 2023).

Patriarchal traditions prevalent across many African societies, including Nigeria, perpetuate male supremacy that restricts women’s rights and status. In Yoruba culture, for example, customary laws prevent women from inheriting land directly from their fathers or husbands, depriving them of essential economic assets and reinforcing their subordinate status (Nwankwo, 2023). This legal exclusion from property ownership entrenches economic dependency and restricts women’s ability to exert influence within their families and communities (Nwankwo, 2023).

Finally, the denial of equal rights to women in southwestern Nigeria effectively confines them to marginal roles, often restricted to household responsibilities with limited public participation (Afolabi & Salami, 2024). This persistent exclusion diminishes women’s access to knowledge, skills, and confidence necessary for leadership, limiting their social and political empowerment. When these factors are critically examined, it becomes clear that cultural, legal, and institutional barriers have collectively hindered women’s advancement and continue to challenge efforts toward gender equality in Nigeria.

### **Influence of Culture on Women and Leadership Position in Yoruba Society**

Despite constituting approximately half of the global population, women remain significantly underrepresented in public leadership roles worldwide. As of 2023, only 11.3% of countries had female heads of state, and 9.8% had female heads of government (UN Women, 2023). This disparity is evident even in

international organizations; for instance, the United Nations has never had a female Secretary-General since its establishment in 1946 (Topping, 2023). This global trend of marginalization is mirrored in Yoruba society, where traditional structures often limit women's roles in political leadership. While women may hold titles such as Iyalode, representing women's interests in the council of chiefs, they are typically excluded from ascending to paramount leadership positions like that of the Oba (king) (Oke, 2024).

In Yoruba traditional religious practices, gender roles are distinctly delineated, often restricting women's participation in certain rites. For example, the Oro festival is exclusively male, with women prohibited from witnessing or participating in its rituals, under the belief that such exposure could lead to dire consequences (Wikipedia, 2025). However, women do hold significant roles in other religious contexts; they serve as priestesses, diviners, and custodians of spiritual knowledge in various cults and ceremonies (Olajubu, 2008). This dichotomy illustrates a complex interplay between inclusion and exclusion, where women's religious authority is both recognized and limited by cultural norms.

The patriarchal nature of Yoruba society, akin to that of ancient Jewish culture, often positions women in subordinate roles across various spheres, including the home, politics, and religion. Women have historically been excluded from decision-making councils, partly due to perceptions of their propensity to disclose secrets, thereby justifying their marginalization (Orebiyi, 2024). Nevertheless, women have found avenues to exert influence, particularly through roles like the Iyalode, which allows them to advocate for women's interests within the traditional political framework (Oke, 2024). These roles, while significant, often operate within boundaries set by patriarchal structures, highlighting the ongoing challenges women face in achieving equal representation and authority.

### **Rationale for Women's Participation in Leadership Positions**

The need to enhance societal development and inclusive governance is a rationale for women's participation in leadership positions. Women play a pivotal role in fostering inclusive and resilient societies. Their involvement in leadership significantly enhances the formulation and implementation of policies that address the needs of marginalized populations, including women, children, and the economically disadvantaged. For instance, in Rwanda, where women hold over 60% of parliamentary seats, legislation focusing on gender equality, education, and healthcare has flourished, positively impacting societal development (UN Women, 2020).

Also, women's participation in leadership positions promotes transparency and reducing corruption. Research suggests that female leaders tend to promote transparency and accountability in governance. Countries with greater female representation in political leadership often report lower levels of corruption. For example, Scandinavian nations such as Sweden and Norway, known for high female political participation, consistently rank among the least corrupt countries globally (Transparency International, 2023).

Furthermore, women's participation in leadership positions advances peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Women are frequently at the forefront of peacebuilding efforts due to their experiences as primary victims of armed conflicts. Their inclusion in peace processes contributes to more sustainable outcomes. The Liberian peace movement led by women, including Nobel Laureate Leymah Gbowee, was instrumental in ending the Second Liberian Civil War in 2003, demonstrating women's critical role in conflict resolution (Gbowee, 2011).

Moreover, women's participation in leadership positions drives local development and human capital growth. Female leadership has been closely associated with improvements in social infrastructure such as education, health, and community welfare. Studies show that women in local governance are more likely to invest in public services and grassroots development. In India, female-led village councils have been linked to increased investment in water, sanitation, and education (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004), thereby contributing to higher human development indicators.

### **Ways of Improving on Leadership Positions for Women in Yoruba Society**

In Nigeria, particularly within Yoruba society, traditional perceptions continue to position women as subordinate to men, reinforcing gender disparities across political, economic, social, and religious spheres. This subordination is deeply rooted in cultural norms that have historically limited women's roles and opportunities. For instance, in Yoruba culture, women are often excluded from certain religious rites and leadership positions, reflecting a broader societal view of male superiority (Omotayo, 2023). Additionally, the introduction of colonial rule further entrenched these disparities by restructuring political systems in ways that marginalized women's participation and reinforced patriarchal structures (Beissel et al., 2023). Despite some progress in women's rights, some enduring cultural and historical factors continue to impede gender equality in Nigeria.

Furthermore, there are challenging restrictive cultural norms and gender barriers. To enhance women's leadership in Yoruba society, it is essential to dismantle entrenched cultural traditions and gender-based restrictions that hinder women's development. Traditional beliefs that confine women to domestic roles must be replaced with inclusive practices that promote gender equity. For instance, community sensitization programs in Ekiti and Osun States have begun challenging such norms through advocacy and public engagement (Aina, 2019).

There should be promotion of equitable family values. A focus on positive family values that recognize the equal capacities of men and women is crucial. Gender-balanced upbringing in Yoruba homes will help foster future generations where both sexes are seen as equally capable in leadership and societal participation. This shift starts with gender-neutral education and domestic responsibilities within families (Ajayi & Olabode, 2022). Also, as regards women's self-advocacy and leadership aspiration, women must take personal initiative to assert themselves in public and private leadership roles. This includes active participation in political and economic spheres, as well as advocating for their own inclusion. According to Falana (2021), "women must begin to speak for themselves and not wait for others to hand over leadership to them; visibility is a key part of power."

Furthermore, men should be educated and mobilized on gender equality: Men should be re-educated on the importance of women's empowerment. This can be achieved through inclusive curricula, media campaigns, and civic education emphasizing the value of gender equality. Government and civil society must support compulsory girl-child education, as seen in Lagos State's gender-inclusive education policies (UNICEF Nigeria, 2023). Also, as regards eliminating gender-based discrimination, systemic and institutional discrimination against women must be identified and addressed. Gender audits and reforms in traditional, legal, and workplace settings should aim to remove disparities in opportunity, pay, and leadership representation. For example, the National Gender Policy (2006) advocates the eradication of such discriminative structures.

There should also be the formulation of empowerment-focused policies. Government policies should aim to raise the social and economic status of women to be on par with men. This includes affirmative action strategies, gender budgeting, and leadership quotas in political appointments. The 35% affirmative action policy in Nigeria, though yet to be fully implemented, represents a step in this direction (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2020). Moreover, access to credit and financial support is crucial, financial empowerment through access to credit facilities tailored to women's needs is essential. These should be low-interest and collateral-friendly loans designed for women entrepreneurs and farmers. Initiatives such as the Women's Fund under the Bank of Industry have supported many women across Yoruba states (BOI, 2021). In addition, functional ministries for women affairs in all states should also be established, every state in Nigeria should have a fully functioning Ministry of Women Affairs dedicated to addressing the specific challenges facing women and girls. These ministries should go beyond ceremonial roles and focus on policy execution, training programs, and protection of women's rights. Ondo State's Ministry of Women Affairs, for instance, has implemented several programs focused on economic empowerment and girl-child protection.

### **III. Conclusion and Recommendations**

In the Yoruba cultural context, colonial legacies and patriarchal norms have historically relegated women to domestic roles, undermining the significant contributions made by their foremothers in community leadership and development. This regression has been compounded by socio-cultural practices that restrict women's access to essential resources such as education, healthcare, and political participation. Consequently, women remain underrepresented in decision-making processes, with their roles often confined to the private sphere. Factors contributing to this marginalization include entrenched gender stereotypes, limited financial resources, religious constraints, and inadequate educational opportunities (Akokuwebe, 2015; Pulse Nigeria, 2024). These systemic barriers have impeded women's full participation in leadership and governance.

Despite these challenges, Nigerian women have demonstrated resilience and capacity for leadership when afforded opportunities. Since the return to democracy in 1999, several women have emerged as influential leaders across various sectors. Notable figures include Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, who served twice as Nigeria's Finance Minister and is currently the Director-General of the World Trade Organization (Okonjo-Iweala, 2024); Amina J. Mohammed, the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations (Mohammed, 2025); and Senator Oluremi Tinubu, the wife of the President of Nigeria, who has held multiple terms in the Nigerian Senate (Tinubu, 2025). These women's achievements underscore the potential for impactful leadership when systemic barriers are addressed.

Empowering women through education, economic opportunities, and inclusive policies is crucial for sustainable development. When women are educated and economically empowered, they contribute significantly to societal advancement, balancing professional responsibilities with familial roles. The successes of Nigerian women leaders affirm that, given equal opportunities, women can perform as effectively as their male counterparts. This aligns with the adage, "What a man can do, a woman can do better," emphasizing the importance of gender equality in leadership for national progress. Finally, the culture of Yoruba should not be a barrier to women to occupy any position.

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