

Original Article

The Leadership Role of Nigerian Women in Churches: Deborah's Example

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Received: 29 March 2025

Revised: 03 May 2025

Accepted: 21 May 2025

Published: 12 June 2025

Abstract - The role of a good leader cannot be divorced from the growth, progress and development of a society. It is a concept that serves as an offshoot of peace and unity in a given area. Besides, a leader's leadership style, whether secular or religious, dictates how a society will look. However, a look at Nigerian society revealed that leadership roles are accorded to any person with the trait and charisma to lead, irrespective of gender. Thus, the leadership role is not to be restricted to any gender in any secular organization, and the same is true for the work of God. However, in the Old Testament, the position of women was restricted to certain areas; they were not allowed to lead in any congregational worship or serve as the head of families; hence, women were seen as subordinate to their husbands. As a corollary in contemporary society, some women are faced with the problem of discrimination to the extent that some churches do not allow them to lead, preach the words of God or hold important positions. But with the coming and teaching of Christ, there were lots of changes and improvements concerning the position of women in the society in which this study intends to sensitize Nigerians and how significant women are towards the growth and development of the work of God and the society at large. To this end, this work examined the life of Deborah in the Book of Judges as an epitome of leadership. The work adopted the historical method. The findings of the work revealed that the leadership role is significant towards the progress of society. It was also noted that women were restricted in contributing their role to the growth of the Church in the Old Testament. Finding also stated that there is no person God cannot use for his work. The work recommended that gender issues should not be a barrier in the work of God, prejudice should be shunned in the work of God, and individuals are admonished to live their lives in such a way that it will serve as a model for others in society.

Keywords - Churches, Leader, Leadership, Society, Women.

1. Introduction

One of the concepts that is very much sacrosanct in the development of a society is leadership. This is the position of leader or in charge of an organization. It could also be seen as the qualities and skills of a good leader. It is a position where a leader sees himself as more successful than anyone in an organization. Leadership plays a significant role in the administration of an organization. It is a concept that cannot be ignored before any achievement can be recorded. Besides, the growth or failure of any organization depends largely on the styles adopted to lead, direct, control the affairs of the state or manage both the natural and human resources of such area by the leader.

Meanwhile, as significant as a leader is in the secular world, it is also important in the religious organization. To move society forward, leaders, including religious organizations, must live exemplary lives that can be imbibed

by the followers, such as lives of humility, faithfulness, honesty, patriotism, and role models, among others. Recently, gender issues have not been a barrier to God's work. However, we need to put it on record that the Jewish community restricted the role of women in the Old Testament, perhaps because of their cultural traces, which can be found in some of the churches in contemporary society.

However, there were some exceptional cases in which God used some characters in the scripture for his work. Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth, could be seen as an example; she was used for God's work due to some traits inherent in her. She was the first and the fourth out of sixteen judges who ruled over Israel for over five centuries, 520 years between Joshua and Saul, the first king (Obasanjo, 1997). Through Deborah's prophetic and godly conduct and administration, she prepared the Israelites for deliverance



from the oppression and yoke of the Canaanites. This states that God can use anybody for his work. In line with this view, Fawad (2023) opines that women play an essential role in society, just as Deborah did in her time. She acknowledged that women are the strength of character of families and are crucial to the growth and development of communities. As a corollary, Ajayi (2014) states that women have become a veritable agency in the expansion of the Church of God, and their activities can be seen as a formidable partner and helper to the growth of the Church. Fawad notes that for centuries, women have been relegated, discriminated against, and marginalized, to the extent that some are not allowed to hold important positions in the Church or society, but added that there has been improvement and growing awareness of the importance of women in society. However, the problem in this work is that some people believe that women are not resourceful and cannot manage or hold a position as men. They are regarded as second-class citizens or inferior beings. However, this work presents women with equal opportunity with men in society to the extent that they can serve humanity to record success. Thus, the work examines Deborah in the Bible as a case study and lesson that can be learnt in her life while serving humanity.

2. The Place of Women in the Christian Community

Before the introduction of Christianity in African society, the attitude of men toward women made women not take their rightful place as complete human beings in society. Kunambi (1978) believed that women were not directly associated with decision-making due to the pre-existing situation in society. She was not allowed to have a say or express consent concerning the person to marry her. She acknowledged that, after marriage, she was not considered to own her property; even if she were the firstborn, she would not be entitled to inherit anything from her father.

However, with the introduction of Christianity, there has been a gradual development in the role of women in society and the Church. In the Old Testament, the Jewish society is patriarchal; this is the situation whereby the society is ruled or controlled by men or given power and importance only to men. This is evident within their family system, wherein the husband or father was the head of the family. James (1984) asserted that the husband was regarded as the head of the family, the ruler or the one with dominion over his wife. Onyenze and Ebebe (2024) added that most institutionalized religions are patriarchal, which signifies the system where men act like fathers. Women's activities are not recognized in this situation, even in religious activities. Sometimes, women are considered capable of realizing spiritual goals or dangerous to men's spiritual lives.

In Numbers 30:3-16, there are a number of rights that were accorded man over a woman; Jewett and Mollenknott (1975) stated that "if a woman must be subordinate, she must

necessarily be inferior", this is an indication that women are subordinate authorities in the Old Testament has nothing to do with either women's stupidity or inability to make decisions but instead connected with the man's legal responsibility in the home. Hence, the husband's role in the home in the Old Testament is presented as a matter of divine appointment and not on the platform of an Inferiority-superiority contest.

Considering the place of women in the New Testament, it should be noted that the definition includes the inter-testamental period. James (1984) stated that women were grouped with children and Gentile enslaved people. Based on this teaching, the rabbis taught that women were not capable of learning about religious things; in their opinion, women, by nature, can lure men into sexual temptation. They guided against this in a number of ways, such as men should avoid coming in contact with women, women should stay indoors, men should avoid speaking with women and women should veil themselves. In religious life, James (1984) was of the view that women were restricted to the court of Gentiles when Herod's temple was standing. He acknowledged that during the menstrual and post-natal period, women were not allowed to enter the temple area, even the synagogue, an example that can be found in some of the white garment churches in Nigeria. Just like children and enslaved people, the presence of women was not important to form a quorum. From archaeological remains, women were frequently seated in separate sections. Women, though qualified to read the scriptures, were not allowed. It could be deduced that women's lives during the rabbinical or inter-testamental times were strictly restricted.

Meanwhile, during the New Testament era, there were many improvements in the culture of Rome, which gave much freedom to women and allowed them to move with men, and they even began to hold positions in public life. During the ministry of Christ, one of the features that distinguished him from the rabbis and their teachings regarding women was that he proclaimed the kingdom of God with power, i.e., the Holy Spirit. Samuel (2005) opined that as the one who brought the kingdom of God to the people, Christ did not share the hatred the rabbis had for the women. He saw everybody, male and female, who did his father's will as one. Matthew 12:56 corroborated this by saying, "For whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother, sister, and mother". Some other scriptural passages that state that Jesus treated everybody equally could be found in John 4:5-30, Matthew 15:22-28, Luke 7:36-50, Mark 5: 25-34, and John 8:31-47. Jesus could be seen as a man who brought universal salvation, taught women and encouraged them to learn (Luke 10:38-42). This was contrary to the rabbinical teaching that women could not be taught. Apart from this, women participated in the ministry of Jesus, he was said to have travelled with them as companions (Luke 8). Matthew 27:55, Matthew 28 and Mark 15:40-41 recorded

how women featured prominently in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

3. The Roles of Women in Nigerian Churches

Feminism is a concept developed in response to women's resistance to how their societies treated them. Given Olademo (2013), some women in Western societies consider men an ardent opponent, the traces of which can be found in some churches in Nigerian society. However, the evolution brought by the Christian missionaries and the education system brought by the West has dramatically influenced the pattern of life of women in African society. Besides, Global Volunteers (2023) states that the contribution of women to a society in transition from pre-literate to literate is undeniable. At the same time, the coming of Christ and his ministry greatly impacted the lives of women in the Bible. When Christianity was introduced to African society, the issue of barriers was not placed on gender; women had the same opportunities as their male counterparts. Although women were not allowed to be ordained as Pastors or Reverends in some mission Churches in Nigeria, they hold important positions and contribute to the Church's growth and edification.

In Nigerian Churches, there are religious associations organized by both women and men for the progress and unity in the body of Christ. Some of these associations are so significant that the Churches cannot do without them. Filomena (1978) believed that in many Churches, religious piety is extended through participation in one or more of the women's associations attached to the Church. She acknowledged that the pious woman not only knows the whole order of service and most of the hymns off-hand but belongs to several religious associations that work for the progress of the Church. Akinfenwa (2005) agreed with this view when she added that "Christian Churches today have strong women association, such as the Baptist women missionary union, Mother's union of the Anglican Church and the Catholic Women Organization (C.W.O)." In our society and the Churches in Nigeria, some of these organizations serve as a forum for women to educate, empower and guide each other. Other areas where women are significant at large are at home, in the Church, in society, and in supporting the Church. Filomena added that women in many churches organized fundraising activities and thanksgiving services; however, the proceeds realized go toward the general maintenance and renovation of the Church or the purchase of some important items, such as chairs, glass windows, drums, and bells. They may also contribute in cash and kind to the upliftment of the Church. Women are also relevant in organizing themselves as prayer band, Choristers, and counsellors and serve as role models to the youths and the aged in the Church. In Nigeria, in recent times, the impact of Toun Soetan, Funmi Aragbaye and Bola Aare cannot be over-emphasized in the area of gospel songs that inspire many people.

Apart from this, there are women in Nigerian Churches who serve as the founders of the Church, especially from African Indigenous Church and Neo-Pentecostal Churches. For instance, Agbala Daniel Cathedral in Ibadan was founded by a woman, Archbishop (Dr) Dorcas S. Olaniyi. Besides, Captain Mrs. Christianah Abiodun Emmanuel was regarded as the co-founder of Emmanuel the Cherubim and Seraphim Society through her spiritual experience in 1925 (Ogunkunle 2007). In Mainline Churches, some women played a significant role in the field of mission, especially in evangelism. They give in kind and cash to the less privileged in society, make visits to the prison yard and leper colony, motherless babies homes, homes for the disabled and orphanages. In some of the Churches in Nigeria, the women are taught to take good care of the homes, the husband and the children. This is done to promote effectiveness and bring about harmonious relationships in the family. The above submission is corroborated by Ayeni (2023), who opines that women missionaries were more involved in practical Christianity. As an extension of the home and women's ministry, the Church was concerned with love and caring for the community's and individuals' needs and sufferings. He added that women were more compassionate and deeply burdened about those who never heard the gospel. Ayeni's words summarise that women have more missionary qualities than men; softer minds exhibit a higher degree of meekness, gentleness, love and patience. Their motherly and caring qualities made them more acceptable in the society.

In another dimension, women in Nigerian churches play a diverse and significant role in contributing to spiritual, social and financial aspects of Church life. Though some denominations have limitations on women's leadership roles, others do not. In some churches where women were given opportunities, they are actively involved in evangelism, services, worship and community outreach. The summary of their roles could be seen as follows;

- **Evangelism and Outreach:** Women are often at the forefront of grassroots evangelism, reaching out to communities and spreading the gospel.
- **Diaconate and Welfare:** Deaconesses care for members' welfare, especially widows, and assist in worship services like leading prayer and offertory.
- **Worship and Music:** They play a significant role in choirs and praise teams leading musical worship services.
- **Community Leadership:** Women are often seen as trusted household and community leaders. Many of them serve in various leadership roles within the Church and beyond.
- **Financial Support:** They are to be active in fundraising and providing financial support to the Church.

In considering the role of women in the Church, their status varies across denominations. Some Churches still discriminate, while others allow them to work in the Church.

With their contributions, their socio-religious and economic status is a factor to reckon with (<https://wissjournals.com.ng>).

4. Deborah as an Epitome of Leadership

In the Old Testament, four women are referred to as prophetesses. These include Miriam, the sister of Moses; Huidah, the wife of the keeper of the royal wardrobes; Noadiah, who joined other prophets to intimidate Nehemiah (Neh. 6:14); and Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth and a mother of Israel (Ogunkunle, 2007). Deborah was chosen for discussion in this work because the Bible placed her at the height of political power by the common consent of the people; her character can be emulated to make society aware that women can play a significant role in the service of the humanities. Deborah lived in the Judges' time, some thirteen centuries before Christ, about 1300 BCE. Before and during this period, few women in the history of Israel had attained public dignity and supreme authority, such as Deborah. She was like Joan of Arc, who, twenty-seven centuries later, rode in front of the French and led them to victory (Herbert, 1988). Because her parents were elated at the baby's birth, they gave her a name known as "honey bee" This suggests that they considered her to be small and active and believed that the baby was destined to reach a place of excellence.

In the Book of Judges, 4:4-5 Deborah was described as a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth who judged Israel at that time and sat under the palm tree of Deborah between the cities of Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment. Benowitz (2004) opined that Deborah was the most outstanding lady in Israel's history when women were only valued as child-bearers, homemakers and labourers in the fields; she rose from obscurity to become the most important person in the nation. Deborah was also seen as a judge, a military general, a ruler, a prophetess, a musician, and a poet, all of whom excelled in every quality of her life. Deborah married a man called Lappidoth, of whom nothing is known. Considering her position, she must have been good, gracious, and wise because when God appointed judges, she was among them. As a woman appointed by God, she judged Israel not as a princess or by any civil authority conferred on her but more as a prophetess and God's representative. She had her judgement seat, which could also be her house, under a palm tree named after her.

When Deborah judged the Israelites, their transgressions were great and witnessed a period where individuals pleased themselves. There was also abuse of law and order in the society; there was recurrent backsliding and a period of low spiritual ebb. At this period, the nation was dominated by aggressors, including the kings of Syria and Canaan. With this problem, the Promised Land had not been completely conquered, exposing the Israelites to dangers. Following the death of Ehud, in Judges 4:1, the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and they were sold into the

hand of Jabin, King of Canaan. The Book of Judges 4:3 acknowledged that the Canaanites oppressed the Israelites for twenty years. This circumstance made them cry to God to save them in response to their plight. God raised Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, a Prophetess and a Judge to deliver the Israelites.

In response to the call of God, Deborah summoned Barak, the commander of the Israelite army, to raise ten thousand women from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun (Judges 46). She added that God would draw out Sisera, the General of Jabin's army, to meet him by the river Kishon with his Chariots and troops. Judges 4:7 opined that God promised to give Sisera and his army to Barak's hand, which implies that Barak will defeat Sisera and his army on the battlefield. Due to the cowardness of Barak, he said he would go and fight the Canaanites only if Deborah would follow him to the battlefield; Barak held the view that Deborah's presence would assure him of God's presence and help. D.A. Falade (2015) stated that "Deborah agreed to go with him but said that for his lack of faith, the glory of the battle would be ascribed to a woman, for the Lord would sell Sisera into the hands of a woman. Deborah and Barak went to the Battlefield at Kedesh with faith and courage in God and defeated the Canaanite army. Because of the victory over the Canaanite army, the song of Deborah in Judges 5 is universally regarded as a masterpiece of Hebrew poetry.

5. Lessons from Deborah's Life

Deborah, otherwise known as the "mother of Israel", exhibited faith and courage in ancient Israel's national life when women were considered second-class citizens. Deborah acted successfully as a prophetess, judge, and military leader. With her faith and courage, she made a significant contribution towards the national development of Israel in terms of religious, social, and political life. Hence, Christians and non-Christians can emulate Deborah's behaviour to develop a community or nation. Deborah's success story calls for women to contribute to national development. Some of the characteristic features of Deborah in leadership which can be emulated are:

5.1. Faith

Deborah was described as a woman of faith in the Bible. She believed in the words of God and held the view that there is nothing God cannot do. In Judges 4, when Barak summoned the troops from Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh, he saw none were well-armed and had chariots, but Deborah's faith drove them on. Deborah looked out from a high rock when Deborah and Barak's army approached the hills where Sisera and his men were. She told Barak, "Up, this is the day the Lord will deliver Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone out before you"? (Judges 4:14). This implies that Christians should always look up to God. They should believe there is nothing complicated for God to do, and it is imperative to hold his words, for he is the universe's

creator and sustainer. Nigerians should repose their faith in God and not man.

5.2. Confidence

As a Prophetess, Deborah had confidence in the words of God. She was not a coward, as Barak displayed. She said positively to the faint-hearted Barak, "Go and draw toward Mount Tabor and take with you 10,000 men from the tribes of Naphtali and the children of Zebulun (Judges 4:6). She was confident that the Lord would deliver Sisera into their hands. Due to a lack of confidence to go to the battlefield, Barak placed a condition on his acceptance, if you go with me, I will go, but if you are not willing, I will not go (Judges 48). This demonstrates Barak's confidence in Deborah. In contemporary Churches today, Christians should repose their confidence in God; Barak had much confidence in Deborah because he believed that the spirit of God dealt with her. In (Judges 4:9) Deborah said I would go with you, but the honour of the day will be given to a woman. Thus, Christians and the populace must be confident in God, not man.

5.3. Reconciliation

Deborah was recognized as the tribe's judicial/political authority. Judge 45 states that she held court under Deborah's palm tree between Ramah and Bethel in the mountains of Ephraim. She settled many disputes which the Israelites could not resolve locally. Thus, Christians can imbibe this trait. Conflicts need to be resolved by Christians amicably. Christians can also serve as models to non-Christians in reconciliation in society; good relations should be the most important thing. For instance 2015, in Oyo State, there was a reconciliation meeting among the leaders of Christians, Muslims, and government representatives on resolving the wearing of IJAB among the students in all the government's secondary schools. This was done amicably among the citizens of the state without any conflict. This act of reconciliation can also be extended to families in order to put an end to issues that may lead to conflict.

5.4. Special Relationship with God

One of the lessons from Deborah's attitude is that she had a special relationship with God. She was called by God and commissioned to speak in His name. God may also call Christians for a particular work; it is good to listen and be ready to be commissioned to speak the words. Besides, Christians should watch their relationship with God; they are to live in harmony with the commandments of God. They should also watch their relationship with their neighbours to harmonize with the Royal law. However, in an attempt to have a good relationship with God, one should not hide under the disguise of religion.

5.5. Role Model

Deborah was a counsellor to her people, a Judge in the period of disputes and a great soldier during the war. She exhibited the trait God gave her. This type of trait is expected

from every individual to promote the harmonious relationship between man and God. Human beings should serve as good models in any undertaking so that people can emulate us in good deeds.

5.6. Appreciation

In Judges 5:1-31, after God had given Deborah and her people victory over their numerous enemies, she looked back to begin to count and name their blessings. They could see that God had fought and won their battles for them. In contemporary Churches, some people do not remember to credit their victory to God; some praise man instead of God; this is wrong and bad in the sight of the Lord. The victory someone has is God's giving one; hence, all glory should be given to God alone.

6. Recommendations

The following suggestions are useful for Nigerian Christians considering Deborah's life and attributes.

- Christians should be ready to work for God irrespective of the position in which they belong in society. They should note that the issue of gender is not a barrier in the presence of God.
- Christians should look for ways of contributing to national development in all spheres of life; this will align with what Deborah did in the Bible.
- The concept of prejudice should be put aside while working for God. Christians should note that there is no one God cannot use to accomplish his mission.
- Christians should live in such a way that it will serve as a model for others.
- When there are challenges, Christians are admonished to be courageous and bold in holding such problems and trust in God for positive solutions. When Barak seemed discouraged because of the task ahead, Deborah spoke boldly and confidently to God, and they won the battle.

7. Conclusion

Deborah was a woman whose confidence was rooted in a close relationship with God and her awareness that God had chosen to use her to guide His people. Indeed, Deborah's role was not typical for a woman in a strongly patriarchal society. However, Deborah did not draw back, not minding what others might think. Deborah had heard God speaking to her, and she was willing to put herself forward only because she knew God had also chosen to speak through her.

Deborah's fame as a prophetess was reliable as a way of promoting unity in the land, and her reputation reached new proportions when she foretold the destruction of enemies who had oppressed the nation for decades. Considering the traits Deborah displayed, she was self-confident and assertive, modest and self-effacing. She was bold enough to step out of the shadows in which most women of her time lived. In

displaying these qualities, Deborah stood as a timeless example for spiritual leaders of either sex or Christians. To allow progress in society and the Church of God, it is suitable for Christians and leaders to emulate Deborah's traits for the growth and development of our area. In the contemporary world, one of the things to take note of is that everybody is important, whether male or female. Human beings, irrespective of sex, should not be ignored or relegated.

Deborah, in the Bible, carried out the work of God in an effective manner and was later elevated due to the opportunity given to her to serve. Women in the Church should be allowed to serve; they should not be relegated nor ignored to contribute their quota toward the edification of the Church, for they are part of the creature of God full of reasoning and wisdom.

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