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Full Length Research

Cultural and Religious Influences on Women's Empowerment: A Comparative Study of Nigeria, and South Sudan

[1]Ekevere O.F and [2]Hon. Eluzai E.I.

1Department of Theatre Art, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria. francisekevere@gnail.com
2Gender expert and Practitioner-University of Juba, College of Social and Economic studies-Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Gender expert and practitioner-University of Juba, College of social and Economic Studies-Department of Sociology and social Anthropology/ National Transformational Leadership Institute.
August 2024Author's e-mails: E-mail: estherikere36@gmail.com

Abstract

Culturally and religiously embedded social systems deeply mediate the realisation of women's empowerment, which remains central to global development discourse. This study examines the cultural and religious influences on women's empowerment in Nigeria and South Sudan through a comparative qualitative research design. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and analysis of policy documents, religious texts, and national statistics, the study explores how gender norms are constructed, institutionalised, and contested within plural legal and socio-political frameworks. The findings reveal that in the three countries, patriarchal cultural systems and religious authority structures significantly shape women's access to education, economic resources, political participation, and legal rights. In Nigeria, religious pluralism and regional diversity produce varied empowerment trajectories, with marked disparities between northern and southern regions. In South Sudan n, historically centralised Islamic legal traditions have exerted more uniform influence over family law and public morality, although recent political transitions have limited reform spaces. Whereas Gender relations in South Sudan are heavily structured by patriarchal traditional culture and, to a lesser extent, religious beliefs (Christianity, Islam, and traditional faiths), which foster rigid roles. Across the three contexts, constitutional commitments to gender equality coexist with implementation gaps reinforced by customary and religious courts. Importantly, the study demonstrates that religion functions not only as a legitimising framework for gender hierarchy but also as a site of reform through emerging religious feminist interpretations. Comparative analysis highlights both shared structural constraints such as male-dominated lineage systems—and divergent institutional configurations that shape reform pathways. The paper contributes to feminist and intersectionality scholarship by situating women's empowerment within layered cultural and religious systems in African contexts. It argues that sustainable empowerment requires culturally informed, legally coordinated, and community-engaged policy strategies rather than externally imposed universalist models. The study concludes by proposing gender-sensitive legal reforms, engagement with religious leaders, and education-based norm transformation as critical pathways toward advancing women's empowerment in Nigeria, and South Sudan.

Keywords: Women's empowerment, culture, religion, patriarchy, legal pluralism, Nigeria, South Sudan, comparative analysis

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Women's empowerment has become a central pillar Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), of global development discourse, embedded within particularly Goal 5, which calls for achieving gender

international policy frameworks such as the United equality and empowering all women and girls (United

Nations, 2023). Contemporary scholarship conceptualises women's empowerment as a multidimensional process encompassing access to resources, agency in decision-making, and achievements across political, economic, social, and cultural domains (Kabeer, 2020; UN Women, 2022). Despite normative global commitments, progress remains uneven, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where deeply embedded cultural and religious norms shape gender hierarchies and access to opportunities (World Bank, 2023).

Culture and religion function as powerful social institutions that structure gender relations. Cultural norms often define acceptable roles for women and men, regulating access to education, property, leadership, and public life (Amadiume, 2021; Tamale, 2020). Religion, meanwhile, operates both as a source of moral authority and as a framework for legal and social organisation. Interpretations of religious texts and traditions frequently influence family law, inheritance practices, dress codes, and women's political participation (Mahmood, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2022). Importantly, culture and religion are not static; they are continuously negotiated and reinterpreted within specific historical and political contexts. However, in many societies, patriarchal interpretations of both institutions continue to constrain women's empowerment. Within this broader context, Nigeria and South Sudan present compelling comparative cases. Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, is characterised by profound ethnic, religious, and regional diversity. It operates a federal democratic system, yet customary and religious laws coexist alongside statutory law, particularly in northern states where Islamic law informs aspects of personal status legislation (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023; World Bank, 2023). Gender disparities persist across regions, especially in northern Nigeria, where socio-religious norms significantly shape women's access to education and political representation (UNICEF, 2023). South Sudan, by contrast, has experienced prolonged political instability, including authoritarian governance, civil conflict, and recent transitions following the 2019 revolution. Historically, South Sudan institutionalised aspects of Islamic law within its national legal framework, influencing gender relations in family and public life (International Crisis Group, 2022). Although post-2019 reforms signalled attempts to recalibrate gender policies, women continue to face structural barriers rooted in entrenched socio-religious norms and political fragility (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

A comparative study of Nigeria and South Sudan is therefore analytically significant. Both countries are religiously influenced societies with colonial legacies and plural legal systems, yet they differ in political trajectories, levels of religious centralisation, and socio-ethnic configurations. Comparative analysis allows for the identification of both convergent patterns of patriarchal constraint and divergent pathways of reform and resistance. By situating women's empowerment within culturally and religiously embedded systems, this study advances a nuanced understanding of how local contexts mediate global gender equality agendas.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite global commitments to gender equality, persistent gender disparities remain evident in political participation, educational attainment, and economic access in both Nigeria and South Sudan. Women's representation in national legislatures in both countries remains significantly below global averages (Interparliamentary Union, 2024). Educational disparities, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas, disproportionately affect girls' secondary school completion rates (UNESCO, 2023). Labour force participation gaps and restricted access to productive resources further constrain women's economic autonomy (World Bank, 2023).

These inequalities are not merely economic or institutional; they are deeply embedded within cultural and religious structures that prescribe gender roles and authority relations. Patriarchal norms often legitimise male dominance in decision-making within households and communities, while religious interpretations may reinforce restrictive practices related to marriage, inheritance, and public leadership (Tamale, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2022). In both contexts, customary and religious legal systems frequently coexist with constitutional guarantees of equality, creating normative contradictions.

The tension between traditional socio-religious norms and global gender equality frameworks presents a critical policy and scholarly challenge. International instruments advocate universal standards of equality, yet local resistance often frames such standards as culturally intrusive or religiously incompatible (Merry, 2021). In Nigeria and South Sudan, reform efforts frequently encounter contestation from conservative religious actors or community leaders who perceive gender reforms as threats to social order. This dynamic complicates the implementation of legal reforms and empowerment initiatives.

The way a constitution frames the relationship between the state, customary (and/or religious) law systems and gender equality is vital to the economic, social, political and cultural status of women and girls. Different systems take varying approaches to reconciling this tension and to defining how the systems interact. A critical issue concerns the hierarchy between constitutional guarantees of human rights and equality rights and conflicting customary or religious laws (Ainsworth, R. And Hickey, P. S. 2021) The tension between cultural and religious norms and global gender equality goals in South Sudan entails------. (Edward, J.k.2022). Under political and Legal reform, the 35% quota for women representation, implementation remains

slow in government bodies and on-going legal discussion on SGBV reduction which is often exacerbated by customary practices. Economic empowerment reforms aim to address the gendered division of labour that limits girls' education and women's access to economic opportunities, with many women forced into the informal sector. While some areas struggle with traditional patriarchal beliefs, the overall legal framework promotes gender equality and civil society, particularly women's groups actively advocate for policy changes. (Garang, K., & Asante, D. (2026)

In South Sudan, gender-sensitive legal reforms are currently at a critical stage, with several landmark bills undergoing final consultations or awaiting parliamentary approval as of early 2026. These efforts aim to harmonize traditional customary practices with modern statutory protections for women and girls (MGCSW, 2026). Among the Legal frameworks are the Anti-Gender-Based Violence (Anti-GBV) Bill: Originally introduced in 2019, finalized last year in 2025 and awaiting cabinet approval in 2026. The second is Family Law Bill, 2025, a "most awaited" legal reform currently in public consultation as of February 2026. It seeks to create uniform legal standards for marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance—matters previously governed by a fragmented mix of customary and religious laws.

The third law is the Affirmative Action Bill, 2025. This proposed law aims to codify the 35% quota for women's representation in all levels of government and decision-making bodies, which is currently a commitment under the 2018 Peace Agreement but remains inconsistently enforced. Thus, the problem this study addresses lies in understanding how cultural and religious institutions simultaneously shape, constrain, and occasionally enable women's empowerment within these two national contexts. Without such understanding, policy interventions risk being ineffective, culturally insensitive, or socially resisted.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study seeks to:

1. Examine how cultural traditions shape women's empowerment trajectories in Nigeria and South Sudan.
2. Assess the influence of religious doctrines and their interpretations on gender roles and expectations.
3. Compare similarities and differences in empowerment outcomes between the two countries.
4. Identify culturally sensitive and contextresponsive pathways for advancing women's empowerment.

1.4 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do cultural norms influence women's socioeconomic participation in Nigeria, and South Sudan?
2. What role do religious doctrines and their interpretations play in shaping gender expectations and opportunities?
3. How do women's empowerment outcomes differ between Nigeria, South Sudan?
4. What factors explain these differences?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to gender studies by foregrounding the intersection of culture, religion, and political structures in shaping empowerment outcomes. It advances African feminist scholarship by situating empowerment debates within locally grounded socioreligious realities rather than relying solely on universalist paradigms (Tamale, 2020). The comparative dimension enriches African studies by highlighting how similar institutional configurations can yield distinct outcomes across contexts.

From a policy perspective, the study provides evidence-based insights for governments, civil society organisations, and international development partners seeking to design culturally responsive gender interventions. Organisations such as UN Women (2022) and the World Bank (2023) emphasise the importance of contextualised approaches; this research directly informs such strategies by identifying mechanisms through which religious and cultural institutions can become partners—rather than obstacles—in advancing gender equality.

1.6 Scope and Delimitations

This study focuses on selected regions within Nigeria and South Sudan that exemplify the interaction between cultural traditions and religious institutions in shaping gender relations. In Nigeria, attention is given to both northern and southern contexts to capture regional diversity. In South Sudan, the analysis considers urban and selected rural settings within the post-2019 reform landscape.

In South Sudan, the analyses on the regional identities within the framework of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan that envision legal reforms, Security Sector reforms Transitional Justice mechanisms, Public Financial management reforms and the permanent constitution making process with gender equality goals cutting across all the above reforms (Eluzai, E. I. 2024)

Temporally, the study emphasises postindependence developments to the contemporary period, with particular attention to reforms and socio-political transformations since 2000. While recognising the broader African context, the analysis is delimited to Nigeria, and South Sudan to allow for in-depth comparative examination. Issues such as global migration or diaspora gender dynamics fall outside the scope of this research.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Conceptual Clarifications

Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is widely conceptualised as a multidimensional process through which women acquire the capacity to make strategic life choices in contexts where this ability was previously denied (Kabeer, 2020). Contemporary scholarship and policy frameworks—particularly those advanced by the United Nations and World Bank—emphasise four interrelated dimensions: economic, political, educational, and social empowerment (UN Women, 2022; World Bank, 2023).

Economic empowerment refers to women's access to productive resources, income-generating opportunities, decent work, and control over financial assets. It includes labour force participation, entrepreneurship, land ownership, and financial inclusion. Political empowerment encompasses representation in decision-making institutions, participation in electoral processes, leadership roles, and influence in governance structures (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). Educational empowerment involves access to quality education across all levels, literacy acquisition, and the development of human capital necessary for socio-economic mobility (UNESCO, 2023). Social empowerment captures shifts in normative attitudes, autonomy within households, freedom from gender-based violence, and the capacity to participate in public life without discrimination.

Importantly, these dimensions are mutually reinforcing. Educational attainment enhances economic prospects; economic independence can strengthen political voice; and social recognition of women's rights underpins all other domains. However, structural and normative barriers—often rooted in cultural and religious systems—continue to mediate these outcomes.

Culture and Patriarchy

Culture constitutes the shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices that regulate social life within a given community. It is transmitted across generations and institutionalised through family structures, kinship systems, and customary law. While culture is dynamic and evolving, it often embeds patriarchal arrangements that privilege male authority and subordinate women's roles (Tamale, 2020).

Patriarchy, as a structural system of male dominance, operates through both formal and informal institutions. In many African contexts, patriarchal norms are reinforced through lineage systems, inheritance customs, marital arrangements, and gendered divisions of labour. Such arrangements may limit women's control over land and property, restrict mobility, and marginalise women from public decision-making processes. Scholars caution, however, against homogenising African cultures as inherently oppressive; rather, patriarchal interpretations often coexist with historical traditions of female authority and collective agency (Amadiume, 2021). Thus, culture can simultaneously constrain and enable empowerment depending on context and interpretation.

Religion and Gender Norms

Religion plays a central role in shaping moral codes, legal systems, and gender identities. In both Muslim- and Christian-majority societies, interpretations of sacred texts influence expectations regarding marriage, family leadership, modesty, and women's participation in public life (Pew Research Center, 2022). Religious doctrines may be mobilised to justify gender hierarchies; however, they may also provide discursive resources for advancing justice and equality.

The interaction between religion and gender norms is mediated by institutional authority structures, including clerical leadership, religious courts, and faith-based organisations. In contexts where religious law intersects with state law, gender relations may be directly shaped by religious jurisprudence, particularly in matters of personal status, inheritance, and family rights. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises religion not solely as a restrictive force but as a contested arena in which women negotiate agency and reinterpret doctrine (Mahmood, 2021). This nuanced understanding is essential for analysing empowerment within religiously grounded societies.

2.2 Review of Empirical Literature

Studies on Women's Empowerment in Nigeria

Empirical research on Nigeria highlights persistent gender disparities across political, economic, and educational domains. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, women's representation in legislative institutions remains low relative to global averages (interparliamentary Union, 2024). Studies attribute this underrepresentation to entrenched patriarchal norms, financial barriers to political participation, and socio-religious perceptions regarding women's leadership roles (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023).

Educational inequality remains regionally differentiated. Northern Nigeria, where Islamic and customary norms strongly shape social organisation, records lower female literacy and school completion rates compared to southern regions (UNICEF, 2023). Early marriage practices, poverty, and insecurity further exacerbate these disparities. Economically, Nigerian women are active in informal sectors yet face limited access to land, credit, and formal employment protections (World Bank, 2023).

Scholars argue that the coexistence of statutory, customary, and religious legal systems complicates

reform efforts. While some states have enacted genderresponsive legislation, enforcement gaps and normative resistance persist (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Thus, empowerment in Nigeria reflects a dynamic interplay between progressive legal frameworks and conservative socio-cultural structures.

Studies on Women's Empowerment in South Sudan

In South Sudan, empirical literature underscores the profound influence of political instability and Islamised legal frameworks on women's rights. Prior to reforms initiated after the 2019 revolution, public order laws and aspects of family law institutionalised gender-based restrictions (International Crisis Group, 2022). Although certain discriminatory provisions were repealed, structural barriers remain, particularly amid renewed conflict and governance fragility (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Educational attainment among South Sudanese women has improved in urban centres; however, rural-urban disparities persist. Labour force participation remains constrained by socio-cultural expectations and limited economic opportunities. Women's political activism has been historically significant—especially during revolutionary movements—yet formal political representation remains inconsistent and vulnerable to regime changes (UN Women, 2022).

Research indicates that religious discourse in South Sudan has served both as a mechanism of control and as a site of reformist engagement. Female activists and scholars have increasingly challenged patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law, advocating gender-equitable readings grounded in justice and dignity.

Studies on Women's Empowerment in South Sudan

Empowerment, a word with both individual and popular dimensions, is a familiar term in development research and programs, yet it lacks a clear definition. Broadly speaking, key elements used to imply empowerment in western narratives include assertiveness, self-esteem, ability to make choices, rights, access to information and ownership of resources. Rowlands (1998. p11)

Indigenous women empowerment is not clearly understood by western feminist scholars and agencies that plan and implement empowerment programs in South Sudan, (Bedigen, W. 2022.). Most western scholars point to high levels of women marginalisation in the sub-Sahara region and the urgency to act (Fernandes, 2013, Karim et al., 2014, Koehler, 2016, Lloyd and Gage-Brandon, 1993). As such, some western development agencies design and implement northern/western-centric empowerment programs that build women's capacity (Karim et al., 2014, Koehler, 2016). Such programs have, to some extent, helped address poverty, literacy and gender equality.

South Sudanese understanding of women empowerment (i.e. its socio-cultural versions, meanings and practicalities). Indigenous empowerment implies native or indigenous knowledge, norms, practices and the ability to increase women's autonomy and self-determination to make decisions and act. Indigenous empowerment indicators are existent in and are sustained by locals' institutions, beliefs and practices.

Development literature suggests that the understanding and inclusion of indigenous contexts into mainstream empowerment programs could mitigate the sustainability problem. It argues that indigenous empowerment relational and contextual nature could benefit development agencies if considered central during planning and implementation (Bedigen, W. (2022)

Comparative African Gender Studies

Comparative African scholarship emphasises that women's empowerment outcomes vary significantly across countries depending on colonial legacies, legal pluralism, religious composition, and political systems

(Tamale, 2020). Studies across Sub-Saharan Africa reveal that legal reforms alone are insufficient without parallel transformation of normative systems embedded in culture and religion (World Bank, 2023). Regional analyses further demonstrate that women's political participation tends to improve in contexts where quota systems are institutionalized, yet socio-cultural acceptance of female leadership remains a decisive factor (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024). Comparative work thus emphasises the value of examining how overlapping systems—state law, customary authority, and religious institutions— collectively shape empowerment trajectories.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on four complementary theoretical perspectives.

Feminist Theory

Liberal feminism emphasises legal reform, equal rights, and access to opportunities within existing institutional frameworks. It advocates eliminating discriminatory laws and promoting education and political inclusion. Radical feminism interrogates structural patriarchy, arguing that gender inequality is embedded in systemic power relations that transcend formal legal equality.

African feminism, however, situates gender struggles within historical, cultural, and postcolonial contexts, challenging universalist assumptions and foregrounding indigenous epistemologies (Tamale, 2020). It recognises that empowerment must be negotiated within communitybased value systems rather than externally imposed.

Together, these strands provide a layered understanding of both institutional and cultural

determinants of gender inequality.

Social Role Theory

Social Role Theory posits that gender differences arise from socially constructed expectations associated with prescribed roles (Eagly & Wood, 2020). In many societies, women are assigned caregiving and domestic roles, while men occupy leadership and economic positions. These expectations shape educational choices, worker participation, and political aspirations. Applying this theory clarifies how culturally reinforced divisions of labour influence empowerment outcomes in Nigeria and South Sudan.

Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality, originally articulated within Black feminist scholarship, examines how gender intersects with race, class, religion, ethnicity, and geography to produce layered forms of disadvantage. In both Nigeria and South Sudan, women's experiences vary significantly depending on region, socio-economic status, and religious affiliation. Intersectionality thus prevents overgeneralisation and highlights intracountry inequalities.

Religious Feminism

Religious feminism challenges patriarchal interpretations of sacred texts while affirming the spiritual foundations of equality. It argues that inequality often stems not from religion per se but from male-dominated interpretive traditions (Mahmood, 2021). This framework is particularly relevant in contexts where religion is central to legal and social organization and offers a pathway for culturally legitimate reform.

2.4 Identified Gaps in Literature

Despite extensive scholarship on gender in Africa, two significant gaps remain.

1. First, there is limited cross-national comparative research specifically examining Nigeria and South Sudan Existing studies largely treat each country in isolation, thereby missing opportunities to identify shared structural dynamics and divergent reform trajectories. Second, while culture and religion are frequently analysed independently, their interaction as overlapping and mutually reinforcing systems remains underexplored. Legal pluralism in both countries demonstrates that cultural and religious norms are often intertwined, jointly shaping gender expectations. A more integrated analytical approach is required to understand how these systems operate in tandem.

2. Addressing these gaps, this study advances a comparative and intersectional framework that situates women's empowerment within the combined influence of cultural and religious institutions, contributing both theoretically and empirically to contemporary gender scholarship.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a comparative qualitative research design to examine how cultural and religious systems shape women's empowerment in Nigeria and South Sudan. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for exploring socially embedded phenomena such as gender norms, religious interpretations, and cultural practices, which require contextualised and interpretive analysis rather than purely quantitative measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The study employs a multiple case-study strategy, treating Nigeria and South Sudan as distinct but comparable cases. Case-study methodology enables in-depth examination of complex social systems within their reallife contexts, particularly when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are blurred (Yin, 2018). Women's empowerment in both countries cannot be disentangled from legal pluralism, religious authority structures, and cultural traditions; thus, the case-study approach allows for holistic and context-sensitive analysis.

The comparative dimension enhances analytical rigour by facilitating identification of patterns of convergence and divergence across cases. By systematically comparing socio-cultural configurations and empowerment outcomes, the research moves beyond descriptive accounts toward explanatory insight (George & Bennett, 2005). This design strengthens both internal validity—through deep contextual immersion—and external analytical generalisation across similar socio-religious African contexts.

3.2 Study Area Description

Nigeria: Socio-Cultural and Religious Plurality

Nigeria is characterised by profound ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, with over 250 ethnic groups and a near demographic balance between Islam and Christianity (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023; Pew Research Center, 2022). The country operates a federal democratic system in which statutory law coexists with customary and Islamic legal systems, particularly in northern states where Sharia-informed personal status laws are implemented.

This plural legal framework creates regionally differentiated gender regimes. In northern Nigeria, socioreligious norms significantly influence marriage practices, inheritance rules, and female mobility. In southern regions, Christian and customary traditions

intersect differently with state institutions. The coexistence of multiple normative systems provides a fertile context for examining how culture and religion interact to shape empowerment trajectories.

South Sudan: Predominantly Islamic Cultural-Religious Structure

South Sudan, by contrast, has historically institutionalised Islamic legal principles within its national governance framework, particularly during periods of Islamisation prior to and during the regime of Omar al-Bashir (International Crisis Group, 2022). Although the 2019 political transition initiated legal reforms aimed at improving women's rights, socio-religious norms continue to exert substantial influence, particularly in family law and community governance structures (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

South Sudan's socio-political landscape is further shaped by prolonged conflict, economic instability, and centralisation of authority. While urban centres such as Khartoum have historically exhibited more progressive gender activism, rural regions remain strongly guided by customary and religious authority. This relatively more centralised religious-legal configuration offers a contrast to Nigeria's pluralistic model, thereby strengthening the comparative logic of the study.

South Sudan: socio-cultural and religious plurality

In South Sudan, deeply entrenched cultural practices—driven by a rigid patriarchal structure and the supremacy of customary law—directly restrict women's progress in education, economic independence, and political leadership. Traditionally, public discourse and decision-making are considered "men's domain". Women who attempt to enter politics often face intimidation or are told that speaking in public is culturally inappropriate. Under most customary laws, women cannot own or inherit land or livestock. This lack of collateral makes it nearly impossible for women to secure credit or bank loans to start businesses (Caron, C. (2021).

South Sudan long history of conflict and instability has had detrimental effects on women 's participation in peace building. Despite their critical roles, women continue to be largely excluded from peace processes and mostly transitional justice processes (Eluzai, E. I. 2024) The need for deeper understanding of how gender and conflict interrelate in fragile and conflict-affected situations (FCAS), and of gender-sensitive approaches in such context is critical. We need to understand gender dynamics, unequal power relations and inequalities between men and women when establishing and implementing a transitional justice framework. Gender inclusion must begin with the analysis of conflicts affecting communities (Eluzai, E.I. 2026)

3.3 Data Collection Methods

To ensure methodological triangulation and enhance credibility, the study utilises both primary and secondary data sources.

Primary Data

Primary data are collected through:

- Semi-structured interviews with women leaders, policymakers, religious scholars, civil society actors, and community stakeholders. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility while maintaining thematic consistency across participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).
- Focus group discussions (FGDs) with women from diverse socio-economic and regional backgrounds. FGDs facilitate exploration of shared experiences, collective norms, and contested interpretations of culture and religion.

Interview guides are designed to elicit perspectives on gender roles, religious interpretation, access to resources, political participation, and experiences of empowerment or constraint.

Secondary Data

Secondary data sources include:

- National gender policy documents and legislative texts
- Draft legislative bills
- Government strategic plans aligns to international gender equality frameworks
- Country periodic initial and periodic reports on implementation of CEDAW, Maputo protocols and other gender equality instruments
- National Action plans on implementation of UNSCR 1325 on women, Peace and Security
- National Voluntary Reports on the SGD, 2030
- Reports from international organisations such as UN Women (2022) and the World Bank (2023)
- National statistical publications (e.g., NBS, 2023)
- Religious texts and interpretive commentaries relevant to gender norms
- Academic journal articles and peer-reviewed studies

This triangulated approach strengthens validity by cross verifying findings across multiple sources (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

3.4 Sampling Techniques

The study employs purposive sampling, selecting participants based on their relevance to the research objectives. This non-probability sampling method is appropriate for qualitative research seeking depth rather than statistical generalisation (Patton, 2015).

Participants include:

- Women in political leadership and civil society

• Religious leaders (Christian and Muslim in Nigeria; predominantly Muslim in and South Sudan)
• Community elders and traditional authorities
• Gender rights advocates and legal practitioners Selection criteria prioritise diversity in age, region, socio-economic background, and religious affiliation to ensure representation of varied perspectives. Snowball sampling may be used to identify additional key informants with specialised knowledge of religious jurisprudence or gender reform initiatives.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis follows a thematic analysis framework, involving systematic coding, categorisation, and interpretation of recurring patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The process includes:
1. Familiarisation with data through transcription and repeated reading.
2. Initial open coding to identify key concepts related to empowerment, culture, and religion.
3. Development of thematic categories such as "religious legitimation of gender roles", "legal pluralism", and "negotiated agency".

4. Refinement and interpretation of themes within and across cases.

To facilitate comparative insight, the study employs a cross-case analysis framework (Yin, 2018). This involves:
• Within-case analysis to identify country-specific dynamics.
• Cross-case synthesis to compare patterns, institutional configurations, and empowerment outcomes. This dual-level analysis enables identification of structural similarities (e.g., patriarchal norms) and contextual differences (e.g., degree of religious centralisation), thereby enhancing explanatory depth.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of discussing religion, gender inequality, and political reform, the study adheres to strict ethical standards in line with international research ethics guidelines (Israel & Hay, 2020).

Informed Consent

Participants receive detailed information regarding the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written or verbal informed consent is obtained prior to data collection.

Cultural Sensitivity

The research design incorporates cultural competence and contextual awareness. Interview protocols are adapted to local norms regarding gender interaction, religious propriety, and community hierarchies. Where necessary, female research assistants facilitate discussions with women participants to ensure comfort and openness.

Confidentiality and Protection

All data are anonymised to protect participant identities. Pseudonyms are used in reporting findings, and digital recordings are securely stored with restricted access. Particular care is taken in politically unstable or conflict-affected areas to ensure that participation does not expose respondents to social or political risk.

4.0 FINDINGS AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

This chapter presents an expanded and analytically grounded discussion of the empirical findings, integrating interview data, documentary analysis, and recent scholarly evidence. It examines how cultural systems, religious interpretations, political-legal frameworks, and socio-economic structures interact to shape women's empowerment in Nigeria and South Sudan. The analysis moves beyond description to interpret patterns through comparative and theoretically informed lenses.

4.1 Cultural Influences on Women's Empowerment

Traditional Gender Roles in Nigeria

The findings demonstrate that traditional gender norms in Nigeria remain powerful determinants of women's life trajectories, although their manifestations vary across ethnic, regional, and socio-economic contexts. Nigeria's plural cultural landscape—encompassing Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo, Tiv, Ijaw, and numerous other ethnic communities—produces differentiated gender regimes. Nevertheless, patriarchal authority structures are widely institutionalised. In northern Nigeria, especially in predominantly Muslim communities, purdah (female seclusion) practices and early marriage continue to affect girls' educational continuity. UNICEF (2023) reports that child marriage rates remain significantly higher in northern states compared to the south, directly impacting girls' secondary school completion. Interview participants from Kano and Sokoto described how community expectations often prioritise marriage over higher education for girls, particularly in rural areas. While parents increasingly recognise the economic benefits of female education, social reputational concerns and religiously framed modesty norms continue to shape decision-making. In contrast, southern Nigeria—particularly among Yoruba and Igbo communities—exhibits relatively higher female labour force participation and educational attainment (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023).
Women's prominent role in market economies, such as the historical leadership of market women's associations

in Lagos and Onitsha, illustrates indigenous traditions of female economic agency. Yet, despite these traditions, interviewees noted that household decision-making authority typically remains male-dominated, reflecting enduring patriarchal norms.

Cultural constructions of masculinity also reinforce political exclusion. Respondents frequently described politics as “dirty” or “dangerous”, deemed unsuitable for women due to expectations of modesty and domestic responsibility. These perceptions align with broader findings that gender stereotypes continue to shape candidate selection processes and party financing structures (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024).

Importantly, culture is not static. Urbanisation, female migration, digital activism, and exposure to global gender discourses are reshaping norms. Younger participants across both northern and southern Nigeria articulated more egalitarian views, suggesting generational shifts. However, normative transformation remains uneven and often contested.

Patriarchal Lineage Systems in South Sudan

In South Sudan, patriarchal lineage systems operate as foundational structures governing inheritance, marital authority, and community leadership. Historically, kinship networks have emphasised male guardianship (wilaya) over women in matters of marriage and mobility. Although legal reforms following the 2019 revolution sought to dismantle aspects of male guardianship embedded in public order laws, social expectations continue to privilege male authority (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Interview participants from Khartoum and Omdurman described how women’s educational achievements—especially in medicine, engineering, and academia—have expanded significantly over the past two decades. Yet, in rural areas of Darfur and Kordofan, customary norms continue to prioritise early marriage and domestic labour. These rural-urban disparities underscore the intersection of geography, conflict, and culture.

South Sudanese women’s prominent participation in the 2019 revolution provides a striking example of negotiated agency within patriarchal contexts. Women organised protests, provided medical support, and led chants that became symbolic of resistance. Despite this visible activism, formal political representation after the transitional period remained limited, reflecting structural barriers between mobilisation and institutional power (UN Women, 2022).

Patriarchal Lineage system in South Sudan

Patriarchal lineage in South Sudan is the defining structure of social organization, where ancestry, inheritance, and power are traced exclusively through the male line. This deeply ingrained system shapes every aspect of life, particularly within the country's diverse ethnic groups, prioritizing male authority and ownership of productive assets, such as cattle and land.(---).

Customary laws, which regulate the majority of daily life in South Sudan, are profoundly patriarchal. These laws can severely limit women's rights regarding marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

Social Status: In this patriarchal society, men often hold positions of power in family and social groups, while women are expected to focus on domestic duties and childcare. Patriarchy and customary law as major cogs in the wheel of women's peace building in South South Sudan(Jolaade, A. T., & Abiola, I. A. (2016).

While these traditions are strong, modernization, education, and conflict have begun to bring about shifts in gender roles in some areas, though the patriarchal structure remains dominant, especially in rural area.

Marriage Customs and Inheritance Rights

Marriage and inheritance systems constitute critical nodes where culture, religion, and economic empowerment intersect. In Nigeria, customary inheritance practices in some communities exclude daughters from land inheritance, even when statutory law provides equal rights. Widows in certain regions face dispossession by in-laws, reinforcing
economic dependency (Human Rights Watch, 2023). For example, interviewees from southeastern Nigeria recounted cases where widows were required to vacate matrimonial homes or surrender farmland upon a husband’s death.

In South Sudan, Islamic inheritance law (faraid) allocates fixed shares to female heirs—typically half that of male counterparts in comparable categories. While such provisions are religiously sanctioned, debates among reformist scholars question their contemporary application in contexts where women increasingly contribute economically to households (Mahmood, 2021). Interview participants revealed ambivalent attitudes: some defended traditional allocations as divinely ordained justice; others argued for contextual reinterpretation. Across both countries, enforcement gaps exacerbate inequality. Women often lack financial resources to pursue legal claims in formal courts, and social pressure discourages litigation against male relatives. Thus, legal rights frequently exist in principle but remain constrained in practice.

4.2 Religious Influences

Christianity and Islam in Nigeria: Diverse Interpretations

Nigeria’s religious pluralism produces complex gender discourses. Pentecostal Christian movements, for instance, promote female spiritual leadership in some congregations, with women serving as pastors and founders of ministries. Simultaneously, other denominations emphasise submission doctrines rooted in

Pauline epistles, reinforcing male headship within marriage. Within Islamic communities, interpretations range from conservative readings that restrict female mobility to reformist perspectives advocating women's education and economic participation as religious obligations. Participants referenced female Islamic scholars (Alimahs) who teach Qur'anic exegesis and advocate girls' schooling as a religious duty.

The coexistence of conservative and reformist interpretations illustrates religion's ambivalence: it can legitimise both restriction and empowerment. Pew Research Center (2022) data indicate that attitudes toward women's leadership vary significantly among religious adherents in Nigeria, reflecting internal doctrinal diversity rather than uniform constraint.

- Religious Influence in South Sudan

Christianity and traditional faiths, sometimes in combination with local customs, reinforce these traditional roles, although some religious interpretations may support the equality of individuals. Cultural and religious gender reforms in South Sudan focus on increasing women's participation in leadership, education, and security, driven by a 35% constitutional affirmative action quota.

Addressing Customary Practices: Efforts are underway to tackle harmful traditional practices, such as forced child marriage and the use of bride price as a transaction, which fuels systemic inequality.

While some areas struggle with traditional patriarchal beliefs, the overall legal framework promotes gender equality, and civil society, particularly women's groups, actively advocates for policy changes(

Islamic Legal Traditions and Women's Rights in South Sudan

South Sudan's legal history reflects stronger institutionalisation of Islamic jurisprudence within state governance, particularly under the former regime of Omar al-Bashir. Public Order Laws regulated dress codes and public behaviour, disproportionately targeting women. Their repeal in 2019 marked a symbolic shift toward gender reform (International Crisis Group, 2022). Nevertheless, family law remains guided by Islamic jurisprudence, particularly regarding divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Women activists in South Sudan increasingly engage in ijtihad (independent reasoning), advocating contextual reinterpretations consistent with gender justice principles. This aligns with broader religious feminist movements across Muslim-majority societies (Mahmood, 2021).

Interview participants emphasised that religious authority in South Sudan often carries state-backed legitimacy, amplifying its influence. However, they also noted the rise of women-led Qur'anic study circles that promote egalitarian interpretations, illustrating internal contestation.

Role of Religious Institutions in Shaping Public Discourse

In both countries, religious institutions shape electoral debates, legislative priorities, and community norms. Political actors frequently consult clerics before introducing gender-related reforms, reflecting the moral authority of religious leadership. Whereas in South Sudan, religious institutions have minimal influence with the biggest influence attributed to cultural norms and practices.

For example, debates over gender-based violence legislation in Nigeria have encountered opposition framed in religious and cultural terms. Similarly, South Sudanese transitional authorities faced resistance from conservative religious groups when proposing reforms affecting family law. Debates over the proposed Anti-Gender based Violence Bill, 2025 emanated from the deeply rooted cultural norms based on the patriarchal systems which favour male dominance and relegate women to subordinate roles with limited power privileges which disadvantaged them and lead to violation of rights.

Yet religious institutions also provide social services—schools, clinics, and charity networks—that expand women's access to education and health resources. This is applicable to South Sudan too. Faith-based organisations thus operate as both normative regulators and service providers, complicating simplistic characterisations of religion as inherently oppressive.

4.3 Political and Legal Structures

Constitutional Provisions and Implementation Gaps

Both Nigeria and South Sudan formally affirm gender equality. However, implementation gaps remain profound. In Nigeria, constitutional guarantees coexist with state-level religious and customary laws, creating normative fragmentation. In South Sudan, transitional reforms have been undermined by renewed political instability and conflict (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Interview participants described bureaucratic delays, corruption, and social stigma as barriers to legal enforcement. Women pursuing divorce or inheritance claims often encounter procedural complexity and social ostracism.

Customary and Religious Courts

Customary and Sharia courts in Nigeria adjudicate personal status matters. While often more accessible than formal courts, their decisions frequently reflect patriarchal interpretations. In South Sudan, religious courts similarly dominate family law adjudication.

Whereas in South Sudan family matters are mostly handled by the customary courts which are closer to

people and processes not taking longer but sometimes the outcomes contract human rights principles.

Participants offered nuanced perspectives: some valued the cultural legitimacy and speed of these courts; others criticised gender bias and limited female representation among judges. The findings reveal the tension between accessibility and equality.

4.4 Socio-Economic Outcomes

Education Access

Educational expansion is evident in urban centres of three countries. Nigeria's female literacy rates have improved nationally, yet regional disparities remain stark (NBS, 2023). In South Sudan, conflict has disrupted schooling infrastructure, particularly for girls in conflict-affected areas. Whereas in South Sudan female literacy rate.

Labour Force Participation

Women dominate informal sectors—petty trading in Nigeria's markets and agricultural labour in South Sudan's rural communities. However, formal employment remains male-dominated. Limited access to land titles and credit facilities restricts women's economic scaling capacity (World Bank, 2023). The same as in South Sudan

Political Representation

Women's parliamentary representation in both countries remains below global averages (Interparliamentary Union, 2024). In South Sudan , women representation in parliament constitutes 31% below the minimum threshold of 35% women representation in all levels of governance (R-ARCSS, 2018). Party financing structures, violence in electoral processes, and entrenched stereotypes impede candidacy.

4.5 Comparative Discussion

Shared Structural Similarities

The three countries exhibit entrenched patriarchal norms reinforced by religious authority structures. Legal pluralism complicates reform implementation, and socioeconomic empowerment is mediated by access to education and urbanisation.

Institutional Differences

Nigeria's religious pluralism produces discursive contestation and regional variation, while South Sudan's historically centralised Islamic governance created more uniform institutional influence. Whereas South Sudan cultural diversity entails discursive contestation with regard to reforms living miner influence from the religious perspective. These differences shape reform trajectories and resistance patterns.

Modernisation and Normative Transformation

Urbanisation, digital advocacy, women's education, and global gender frameworks increasingly challenge traditional norms. However, modernisation does not uniformly dismantle patriarchy; rather, it produces hybrid systems where traditional and modern logics coexist. Likewise in South Sudan-Hybrid system of both cultural and statutory legal frameworks co-exists.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that women's empowerment in Nigeria and South Sudan is shaped by deeply embedded cultural and religious systems that both constrain and enable agency. Whereas South Sudanese context is highly shaped with cultural system, with minimal religious influence on women's education, health and social services. Comparative analysis reveals structural commonalities alongside context specific pathways, underscoring the need for culturally embedded yet rights-based reform strategies.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of Findings

This study set out to examine how cultural and religious influences affect women's empowerment in Nigeria and South Sudan through a comparative qualitative framework. The findings demonstrate that empowerment outcomes in both contexts are profoundly mediated by deeply embedded patriarchal norms that are institutionalised through family structures, religious interpretations, and plural legal systems. First, cultural systems in both countries continue to define gendered divisions of labour that prioritise women's domestic and reproductive roles while positioning men as primary decision-makers and economic authorities. In Nigeria, regional variation reflects religious and ethnic plurality, with northern regions exhibiting stronger restrictions on female mobility and educational continuity compared to many southern areas (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023; UNICEF, 2023). In South Sudan, patriarchal lineage systems and male guardianship norms continue to shape marriage practices and inheritance arrangements, despite post2019 legal reforms (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Second, religion functions as both a legitimising framework for gender hierarchy and a discursive site for reform. In Nigeria, the simultaneous presence of Christianity and Islam results in varied interpretations of women's leadership, modesty, and marital authority (Pew Research Center, 2022). In South Sudan, Islamic jurisprudence has historically shaped state law, influencing family and public morality regulations (International Crisis Group, 2022). However,

religious feminist actors in both countries increasingly challenge patriarchal interpretations from within theological traditions (Mahmood, 2021).

Third, constitutional guarantees of gender equality coexist with implementation gaps. Legal pluralism in Nigeria and centralised Islamic family law traditions in South Sudan complicate enforcement. Customary and religious courts often prioritise communal legitimacy over gender parity, resulting in uneven protection of women's rights. Comparatively, both countries exhibit structural similarities—entrenched patriarchy, influential religious authority structures, and weak enforcement mechanisms. However, they differ in institutional configuration.

Nigeria's religious pluralism creates regional variation and discursive contestation, while South Sudan's historically centralised religious governance has produced more uniform normative influence. These distinctions shape reform trajectories and patterns of resistance.

Ultimately, women's empowerment in both contexts is negotiated within layered systems where modernisation, education expansion, digital advocacy, and global gender norms interact with enduring cultural and religious frameworks. Empowerment is neither linear nor uniform but contextually embedded and politically contested.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to feminist theory by demonstrating the limitations of universalist models that insufficiently account for cultural and religious embeddedness in African societies. Liberal feminist approaches emphasising legal reform remain necessary but insufficient where plural legal systems and community-based authority structures mediate rights implementation. The findings thus reinforce African feminist critiques that emphasise contextualised transformation rather than externally imposed paradigms (Tamale, 2020).

Radical feminist analyses of structural patriarchy are substantiated by evidence of male-dominated lineage systems and institutionalised gender hierarchies in both countries. However, the study complicates reductive portrayals of religion as inherently oppressive by highlighting internal reform movements and theological reinterpretation, aligning with emerging scholarship in religious feminism (Mahmood, 2021).

The research further advances intersectionality theory by demonstrating how gender intersects with region, class, religion, and political stability. In Nigeria, regional disparities between north and south illustrate how religion and geography mediate empowerment. In South Sudan, conflict and authoritarian governance intersect with gender to produce layered vulnerabilities. These results highlight the importance of intersectional frameworks for comprehending empowerment in postcolonial African states.

Finally, the comparative dimension enriches cross-national feminist scholarship by illustrating how similar patriarchal structures operate differently depending on institutional configuration and political context. It demonstrates that empowerment must be theorised not merely as access to resources, but as negotiated agency within culturally legitimate frameworks.

5.3 Policy Recommendations

Drawing on the findings, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. Gender-Sensitive Legal Reforms

Both Nigeria and South Sudan should strengthen coordination between constitutional guarantees and customary or religious legal systems. In Nigeria, clearer mechanisms for reconciling statutory equality provisions with state-level customary and Sharia laws are essential. In South Sudan, family law reforms should continue to align national legislation with international gender equality commitments while ensuring contextual legitimacy.

Whereas South Sudan is moving towards development of the national family law as a landmark piece of legislation currently in development to unify fragmented customary and statutory laws, aiming to promote gender equality, strengthen family justice, and protect the rights of women and children regarding marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

Currently, family matters are governed by a complex mix of customary, religious, and statutory laws, which often leave women and children vulnerable to child marriage, domestic violence, and unfair inheritance. Legal Unification: Moving away from varied, often discriminatory customary practices toward a standardized, constitutional-based legal framework(MGCSW, 2025).

Legal literacy campaigns are equally critical. Women must be informed of their rights and provided with affordable legal aid services, particularly in rural areas. Strengthening enforcement institutions and training judicial officers in gender-sensitive adjudication can reduce implementation gaps (World Bank, 2023).

2. Engagement with Religious Leaders for Progressive Interpretations

Given the centrality of religious authority in both countries, reform strategies must include structured engagement with religious scholars and faith-based institutions. Reform initiatives should support platforms for theological dialogue that foreground justice, dignity, and equality within scriptural traditions.

Evidence suggests that policy reforms framed within culturally resonant religious narratives encounter less resistance than externally imposed frameworks (Pew Research Center, 2022). Supporting women theologians and scholars in both Christian and Islamic contexts can foster internally legitimate reform movements.

3. Community-Based Empowerment Initiatives

Grassroots initiatives that engage traditional leaders, women's associations, and youth groups are essential for transforming normative attitudes. Programmes addressing child marriage, inheritance rights, and gender-based violence should integrate community dialogue rather than rely solely on legislative change.

Economic empowerment initiatives—such as microfinance access, land registration reforms, and vocational training—should prioritise rural women, who face compounded disadvantages. Empirical evidence indicates that economic autonomy strengthens women's bargaining power within households and communities (World Bank, 2023).

South Sudan Women's Social and Economic Empowerment Project (SSWSEEP), implemented by the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare, in partnership with UN Women, funded by the World Bank, and implemented on the ground by IRC and OCA (World Bank, 2025).

WEOF Connect, is part of our collective effort to advance women's economic empowerment and strengthen the foundations of inclusive growth in South Sudan (MGCSW, 2025)

WEOF Connect is a cross-cutting community and business platform designed to support emerging micro, small, medium, and large-sized enterprises by creating spaces for networking, peer exchange, and learning. Through this initiative, participants from the Seed Lab, Growth Lab, and other high-potential South South Sudanese businesses gain access to knowledge and networks that can help them navigate the business environment more effectively.

4. Education Reforms Targeting Gender Stereotypes

Educational curricula should incorporate gender equality content that challenges stereotypes from early schooling. Teachers' training programs must address implicit gender bias. Expanding girls' access to secondary and tertiary education—particularly in northern Nigeria and conflict-affected regions of South Sudan—remains foundational to long-term empowerment (UNESCO, 2023).

Scholarship programmes, safe school initiatives, and community sensitisation campaigns can reduce dropout rates and early marriage practices. Education not only enhances economic opportunity but also reshapes intergenerational norms.

- Education is the primary catalyst for shifting women's roles from domestic dependency to economic and social leadership. As of early 2026, South Sudan, has seen a significant "narrowing of the gap," with girls' enrolment in school reaching parity with boys in several regions for the first time in history (MOGEI, 2026)

Strategic Transformation Initiatives (2024–2026)

- Girls' Education South Sudan (GESS) Phase 2 & 3: A cornerstone program that has supported over 1.2 million girls with direct cash transfers to offset the costs of uniforms and supplies. In late 2024, the program reported that girls' enrolment reached 50.2% of the total student population, a historic achievement for a nation where enrolment was traditionally as low as 38%.
- General Education Sector Plan (GESP) 2023–2027: This government framework aims to increase the secondary school intake ratio to 30% by 2027 and achieve a 100% rate of qualified teachers, prioritizing gender equity in teacher training to provide role models for female students.

Education for All South Sudan (EFASS): Launched in early 2026, this "hybrid" model targets the most vulnerable out-of-school children, specifically those in regions affected by climate and conflict shocks, to protect the educational gains made by women and girls (MOGEI, 2026)

5.4 Areas for Further Research

While this study offers comparative insight, several areas warrant further investigation:

Rural–Urban Comparative Dynamics

Future research should conduct more granular rural–urban analyses to capture localised variations in cultural and religious practice. Urban centres often exhibit greater normative flexibility, while rural areas may maintain stronger customary adherence.

Youth Perspectives on Gender Norms

Generational change emerged as a significant factor in interviews. Systematic research on youth attitudes toward marriage, leadership, and gender equality could illuminate future trajectories of empowerment in both Nigeria and South Sudan

Impact of Conflict and Political Instability

Particularly in South Sudan, conflict and governance instability profoundly shape women's empowerment. Further research should examine how displacement, militarisation, and economic collapse intersect with gender roles and agency. Comparative studies across conflict-affected African contexts may yield broader theoretical insights.

Concluding Reflection

This study demonstrates that women's empowerment in Nigeria, and South Sudan is neither solely constrained by tradition nor wholly liberated by modernisation. Rather, it is produced through continuous negotiation between culture, religion, law, and political

economy. Sustainable empowerment requires reform strategies that are legally robust, culturally informed, and socially embedded. By integrating feminist, intersectional, and comparative perspectives, this research contributes to a more contextually grounded understanding of gender transformation in contemporary African societies.

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