

A Discourse Analysis on Proverbs 31:10–31 and Its Implications for Young Women in Esan-West Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Raphael Akhijemen Idialu

Wesley University, Ondo

 idialuraphael@gmail.com, raphael.idialu@wesleyuni.edu.ng

Princess Omovrigho Idialu

Wesley University, Ondo

*This article is part of a special issue titled *Sustainability, innovation, and development: A Festschrift in honour of Rt. Rev. Prof. Obeka Samuel Sunday*.*



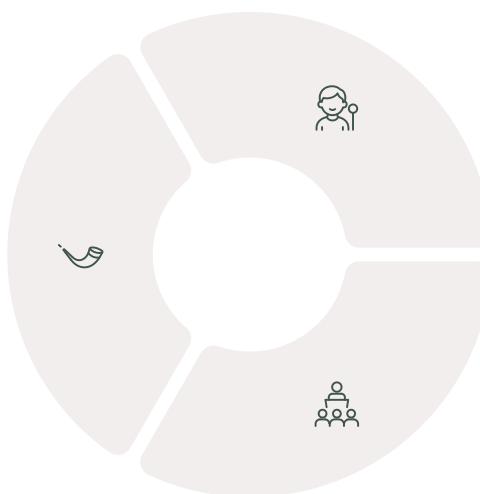
Sustain

ABSTRACT

This work examines Proverbs 31:10 - 31, with a particular focus on young women from the Esan-West Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. It affirmatively presents the characteristics of an ideal woman, fostering specific gender expectations. This study employs the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to examine the interplay between Scripture, cultural expectations, and the lived realities of young women in society. The study utilised a mixed-methods research approach. Quantitative data were gathered through questionnaires administered to 100 women (aged 18 - 30) from the towns of Ekpoma, Irukpene, and Ujoelen. Qualitative data were obtained from two focus group discussions, each comprising ten participants, and seven key informant interviews. Findings show that Proverbs 31:10 - 31 contains moral and spiritual ideals that encourage hard work. In Esan-West, most young women reinterpret the Scripture to emphasise leadership and entrepreneurial traits. The study recommends that religious authorities adopt contextual interpretations regarding the Proverbs 31 woman—one who embraces domesticity alongside public life, leadership, and active civic engagement.

Textual Analysis

Critical discourse analysis of Proverbs 31:10 - 31 examining interpretive practices and cultural meanings.



Target Population

100 young women aged 18 - 30 from Ekpoma, Irukpene, and Ujoelen in Esan-West LGA.

Research Methods

Mixed-methods approach: questionnaires, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews.

Research Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examining Scripture, cultural expectations, and lived realities.

Key Findings

Young women reinterpret Scripture to emphasise leadership and entrepreneurial traits alongside traditional virtues.

Main Contribution

Contextual hermeneutics promoting empowerment while respecting cultural and spiritual heritage.

Keywords: Proverbs 31:10 - 31, Discourse Analysis, Esan-West, Ekpoma, Irukpene, Ujoelen.

INTRODUCTION

The book of Proverbs has continued to shape moral, social, and even gendered expectations within Christianity and, by extension, Nigeria. To this day, it serves as a guide for Christian women in shaping their identity. In particular, Proverbs 31:10-31 serves as the basis for messages and teachings on feminine ideals in both Mainline and Pentecostal churches, providing an eloquent and celebratory description of the 'virtuous woman'. The proverbs have inspired countless teachings celebrating modern-day womanhood. Positively, the celebration of a wife's industriousness, family support, and moral uprightness has become a source of great encouragement (Camp, 1985; Yoder, 2001).

Christian women are taught to work towards these goals, but are often restricted in the range of ambitions available to them. It has become a pervasive expectation for women in Africa and abroad, though this sometimes narrows the perceived spectrum of legitimate aspirations to a checklist for true womanhood (Amadiume, 1987; Oyéwùmí, 1997). The established feminine ideal governs everyday life and becomes commonplace in the average discourse at different levels of society.

01

Historical Context

Proverbs 31 has shaped Christian feminine ideals for centuries, particularly in African contexts where traditional and biblical values intersect (Claassens, 2016).

02

Contemporary Challenge

Young women in Esan-West navigate between traditional scriptural interpretations and modern aspirations for education and leadership.

03

Research Need

Understanding how biblical discourse shapes lived experiences requires contextual analysis of interpretive and application practices (Van Dijk, 2008).

New research indicates that biblical texts, such as Proverbs 31:10-31, reflect women's contemporary perception of womanhood in Nigeria. For example, contemporary studies show that through religious indoctrination, younger women assimilate the ideals of hard work, integrity, and obedience to male dominance and social authority. With this submission, they internalise a value system that considers personal and societal esteem contingent upon adherence to these ideals, as per Scripture (Amadiume, 1987). Similarly, Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe (2022) observe that these attitudes are most often passed down through family discussions, church activities, and women's fellowships, which serve as both benchmarks and examples for appropriate female behaviour over time.

The above trends are typical of the Esan-West Local Government Area of Edo State, given its strong Christian population coupled with enduring patriarchal tendencies. As Osezua & Agholor (2019) note, the area incorporates Christianity and indigenous practices, but old customs remain prominent, tempered through biblical texts and church teachings. Women from Esan-West are caught between tradition, modernity, and religion while struggling with the legacy of the Proverbs 31 woman in a world filled with narratives advocating gender equality and feminism (Oyéwùmí, 1997).

To understand this interaction, we must examine foundational elements. Proverbs 31:10 - 31 acts as both a text and a cultural touchstone, whose practical prose (words, arrangement, and teachings) is not self-evident. As Fairclough (2001) highlights, religious documents gain social force through interpretive and application practices within community life. This justifies a discourse analysis approach for this research, enabling interrogation of both the text and its social reality (Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough, 1995). Young women (18-30) in Esan-West, who constitute roughly 35% of the youth population with high church attendance (Edo State Bureau of Statistics, 2023), are a primary concern.

These young women face a complex challenge: advancing careers, education, and economic independence while navigating religious narratives of marriageability, modesty, and domesticity (Amadiume, 1987). Churches and faith-based organizations, including youth and women's fellowships, are key spaces where Proverbs 31 is taught and applied, often serving as a measure for young women's lives. While this can inspire, failure to meet every ideal may lead to self-doubt or social scrutiny (Ajayi & Chantler, 2021).

The sociocultural context of Esan-West LGA is also crucial. Osezua & Agholor (2019) and Enato (2021) emphasize how local culture interprets religious mandates, with fathers, elders, and clergy acting as interpreters and enforcers. Consequently, the Proverbs 31 woman is sometimes seen as both a paragon of virtue and an enforcer of domesticity, promoting a woman's satisfaction as primarily derived from being a wife, mother, and servant.

As noted by Osezua & Agholor (2019), Tannen (2021), and Fairclough (1989), discourse is multifaceted. This study examines how Proverbs 31:10 - 31 is taught, referenced, and enacted in Esan-West, and how young women contend with its demands amidst changing social realities. This is investigated through questionnaires, focus groups, and key informant interviews (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

These dynamics profoundly impact beliefs, actions, aspirations, and social functions in Nigeria. Udo et al. (2020) observed in Edo State that this Scripture positively and negatively influences women's marriages and career decisions. It has limited professional ambition due to domestic obligations but also catalyzed entrepreneurial zeal inspired by the industrious woman stereotype. In Esan-West, compliance with Proverbs 31 is a source of both internalized anxiety and motivation, depending on family structure, church focus, and self-agency (Idialu, 2018).

Existing literature shows that texts like Proverbs 31:10 - 31 are not isolated scriptures; they are subject to interpretation and modification within specific Nigerian sociocultural contexts, especially among youth and women forging new forms of agency. The interplay of sociocultural expectation and lived experience transforms the Proverbs 31 woman into an ever-evolving figure: a source of hope and a point of constructive tension as young women in Esan-West and elsewhere reconcile faith with modernity.

This paper, titled *A Discourse Analysis on Proverbs 31:10 - 31 and its Implications for Young Women in Esan-West Local Government Area of Edo State*, critiques the Proverb's portrayal of women. Focusing on young women enables a stronger connection to the text's central female character, though men can also benefit from its lessons.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

While the 'virtuous woman' of Proverbs 31:10 - 31 is admired in Christian circles for embodying industry, faithfulness, and resourcefulness, its interpretation in cultures like Esan-West Local Government Area presents significant challenges, particularly regarding young women's attitudes toward hard work and ambition.

The biblical quotation is deeply intertwined with sociocultural gender roles and religious practices governing girls' socialization in Esan-West. In many Nigerian contexts, Proverbs 31 ideals are filtered through patriarchal lenses, reinforcing dominance and self-sacrificing domesticity. While intended to uphold social order, these expectations impose a rigid blueprint of femininity that often fails to acknowledge the diverse realities young women face today.

Sociocultural Constraints

- Rigid gender role expectations
- Patriarchal interpretation frameworks
- Limited recognition of diverse life paths
- Pressure to conform to traditional domesticity

Identity Conflicts

- Tension between tradition and modernity
- Psychological distress from perfectionist standards
- Conflicted aspirations and social expectations
- Lack of contextual biblical interpretation

Modern gender and theological analyses critically examine the idealization of the 'Proverbs 31 woman,' arguing that its virtues may push young women to extreme perfectionist attempts (Afolabi, 2019). In Esan-West, preliminary observations suggest many young women struggle to reconcile tradition, religion, and modernity. The constant pressure to excel as entrepreneurs, devoted daughters, and virtuous citizens can undermine self-esteem and lead to psychological distress, including emotional exhaustion, identity conflict, and social challenges (Ajayi & Chantler, 2021). These internalized, unreasonably high standards often result in unfulfilled expectations, especially in societies with rigidly defined roles.

Another troubling issue arises from the very literal interpretation of Proverbs 31:10 - 31, especially across different rungs of the gender hierarchy. When Scripture is used to uphold the man-as-leader, woman-as-helper model, it has the potential to reinforce patriarchal systems that limit women's agency (Aina & Ojedokun, 2021). Even though the text acknowledges some measure of a woman's industriousness and autonomy in her affairs, most church teachings, as well as family instructions, highlight submission to domestic tasks at the expense of leadership positions (Odumuyiwa, 2020). Such views are detrimental not only to the pursuit of gender equity but also to the dismantling of inequalities embedded in social structures, thereby contradicting constitutions and international laws addressing gender violence.

There is also a lack of research on young women from Esan-West and how they internalize or contest the Proverbs 31 archetype. Most of the available research in Nigeria on Scripture and gender roles focuses on urban areas or adopts a broad, national-level approach, overlooking local peculiarities (Obielosi, 2020). This gap underscores the need for ethnographic research to explore how young women from Esan-West reinterpret, negotiate, or even disregard this scriptural archetype in contemporary society. The absence of such evidence hinders the design of policies and grassroots programs aimed at supporting the development of young women in the region.

The interplay of rapid changes in sociocultural practices and economic realities creates a unique and complicated situation. Younger women in Esan-West are increasingly exposed to modern education, digital content, and global conversations on women's rights, which occasionally clash with traditional values (Olonade et al., 2021). With the deeper integration of global culture in Nigeria and across Africa, there is an urgent need to reinterpret ancient biblical texts within a more supportive and nurturing framework while maintaining spiritual commitment. This concept has been referred to in scholarly writing as 'contextual theology,' which advocates empowerment and promotes egalitarian structures in religious communities (Olajide, 2021). If this issue is not addressed, faith communities risk alienating young women or perpetuating disempowering expectations that undermine their active participation in socio-economic development.

To put it succinctly, the central issue is how the celebrated virtues of the Proverbs 31 paradigm function among young women in Esan-West. Do they serve as a means of empowering them spiritually and socially to flourish in the 21st century? Or do they operate as covert forms of control that curtail their freedom, ambitions, and societal impact? Addressing this question is crucial for creating pathways for young women that respect culture and tradition while remaining relevant to the demands of contemporary society.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

The main objective of this study is to analyse the interpretive practices of Proverbs 31:10 - 31 and their implications for young women in the Esan-West Local Government Area of Edo State. The specific objectives are to:



Textual Analysis

Conduct a textual and contextual discourse analysis of Proverbs 31:10 - 31.



Traditional-Modern Interplay

Explore the interplay between traditional interpretations and the contemporary experiences of young women.

Perception Investigation

Investigate the perceptions and interpretations of Proverbs 31:10 - 31 among young women in Esan-West LGA.



Empowerment Framework

Offer recommendations for framing the Proverbs 31 narrative in a manner that empowers young women for modern challenges.

Impact Assessment

Assess the influence of the Proverbs 31 discourse on the beliefs, aspirations, and social roles of these young women.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study, analyzing Proverbs 31:10 - 31 and its impact on young women in the Esan-West Local Government Area, offers significant academic, social, and practical value. It addresses a scholarly gap concerning the interrelationship between biblical texts, gender discourse, and the modern African experience (Camp, 1985; Oyéwùmí, 1997; Yoder, 2001), particularly examining Proverbs 31 within the specific Esan-West socio-cultural context (Yoder, 2001). Anchored in critical discourse theory (Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2001), the research explores not only the biblical text's content but also its rendition in sermons and women's meetings, and its interpretation in everyday life (Claassens, 2016; Van Dijk, 2008). This approach illuminates how sacred texts shape and are shaped by gendered realities, demonstrating the dynamic interplay between culture and daily life.

Empirically, this research provides vital information from a region often overlooked in Nigerian women's and gender studies (Amadiume, 1987; Oyéwùmí, 1997). Utilizing a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), it offers quantitative data and qualitative insights into young women's diverse experiences, enhancing scholarly understanding and serving as a resource for related research.

Practically and socially, the study offers insights for religious leaders, educators, policymakers, and young women. Its examination of Proverbs 31's application can refine religious education, ensuring scriptural interpretation supports young women. These findings can motivate religious communities to re-evaluate their narratives for greater constructiveness, responsiveness, and relevance in spirituality and gender. Additionally, educators and policymakers can use this research to develop targeted programs and policies assisting young women in navigating faith, societal expectations, and their rights in an evolving society.

Ultimately, this study fosters constructive dialogue on the evolving importance of religious texts and thoughtful engagement with traditions in contemporary African society, exhibiting both academic and ecclesiastical relevance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, developed by Norman Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995) and Ruth Wodak (Wodak & Meyer, 2001), forms this study's foundation. CDA is an interdisciplinary framework viewing language as a social practice linked with institutional structures, power relations, and socio-political ideology. Fairclough, a primary CDA figure, maintains that discourses are not merely representations of reality but are also part of social practices produced through language or communication (Fairclough, 1989). CDA encourages scholars to analyze how texts—spoken or written—assert and challenge existing power relations in society (Van Dijk, 2008).

Wodak outlines CDA's path through her discourse-historical method, situating discourse within historical, social, and political contexts (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). She argues that discourses both produce and are products of existing social inequalities and subordinate structures. Both Fairclough and Wodak emphasize moving beyond superficial language forms to uncover underlying reasoning, ideology, and the reproduction or contestation of power relations (Fairclough, 2001).

CDA analyzes Proverbs 31:10-31 not just as a religious text, but as a cultural document defining "acceptable femininity" (Camp, 1985; Yoder, 2001). It examines the text's vocabulary and imagery to understand how they prescribe, uphold, or contest gender roles in Esan-West. This passage, depicting the ideal woman as industrious, virtuous, wise, and supportive, functions as a discourse negotiating spiritual devotion, female agency, social currency, and domesticity. CDA reveals tensions between Scripture, tradition, and lived experience by showing how diverse textual interpretations intersect with culture and contemporary realities (Claassens, 2016).

A core CDA principle is its focus on discourse's ideological functions (Fairclough, 1992). This study applies it to the assimilation and teaching of the Proverbs 31 narrative in Esan-West's churches, families, and schools. CDA allows examination of how prevailing discourses shape women's identities and roles in a religious context, while also being negotiated by younger women. This complicates the analysis, as CDA challenges the assumption that biblical texts are static; instead, it views interpretation and application as dynamic processes involving shifting power relations within communities, between sexes, and across generations (Amadiume, 1987; Oyěwùmí, 1997).

CDA's strength lies in its depth and criticality, demanding interrogation of accepted meanings and recognizing the link between language, power, and ideology (Fairclough, 1995). For Proverbs 31:10-31, this is vital due to the text's historical weaponization, which both elevates and constrains women, fostering empowerment and justifying restrictive gender roles. CDA enables simultaneous acknowledgment of these enabling and repressive functions, particularly as described by young women in Esan-West.

Despite criticisms, CDA's reflexivity and methodological rigor make it valuable for disentangling the complexities of power relations, meaning-making, and identity construction in discourse, especially in studying religion, gender, and society (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Gender Role Theory and Feminist Hermeneutics

The study also incorporates Gender Role Theory and feminist biblical hermeneutics. Gender Role Theory explains how socialization processes lead individuals to adopt culturally expected gender behaviors. This helps explain how young women in Esan-West accept, negotiate, or resist the idealization of Proverbs 31 as presented in daily life.

Feminist biblical hermeneutics examines Scripture from women's perspectives, focusing on power and social justice. This approach is highly relevant for passages prescribing standards for women, challenging subordinating interpretations and uncovering liberating readings within the text.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Views language as social practice. Examines how texts assert and challenge power relations. Uncovers underlying ideologies in religious discourse.

Gender Role Theory

Explains socialisation into culturally expected behaviors. Shows how women accept, negotiate, or resist gender ideals through social processes.

Feminist Hermeneutics

Examines Scripture from women's perspectives. Challenges subordinating interpretations. Recovers liberating readings within biblical texts.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Proverbs 31:10–31 in Biblical and Theological Scholarship

Notable scholarship has focused on Proverbs 31:10–31, particularly its interpretation and impact in different contexts. Ethnographic work argues that the passage encompasses a woman's role as an entrepreneur, social figure, and leader, in contrast to the narrow interpretation that limits her to domestic responsibilities. This perspective counters the simplistic portrayal of the "virtuous woman" as merely a homemaker by emphasising her entrepreneurial and community-oriented attributes (Camp, 1985; Yoder, 2001).

Trible (2018) and Yee (2023) have further scrutinised the passage's use in various socio-religious contexts, noting that patriarchal societies have appropriated it to reinforce existing gender hierarchies. For instance, in her qualitative study of biblical instruction in church circles, Trible (2018) reported that while the passage highlights the woman's business and leadership skills, sermons and religious instruction predominantly emphasised her submission within the household and the domestic sphere. Yee's cross-cultural study (2023) found that in rural Asia and parts of Africa, Proverbs 31:10–31 was employed to mould women into marriage and homemaking devotees, thereby ignoring the text's recognition of her managerial and provider roles.

In the African context, Oduyoye asserts that biblical texts such as Proverbs 31 serve both as empowering devices and control mechanisms, as evidenced through interviews and case studies (Oduyoye, 1995). Scripture, coupled with subordinate family and societal roles, encouraged women in Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya to pursue various personal goals, yet they often felt undermined. Nigerian gender studies further explore these dynamics (Amadiume, 1987; Oyéwùmí, 1997). Ezebuiro (2011) similarly argues that Nigerian women who attempted to embody the "virtuous woman" archetype struggled with chronic stress arising from these complex societal expectations.

Relating these findings to the present study in Esan-West, it becomes evident that the empirical trends identified elsewhere resonate deeply. Findings from focus group discussions and surveys with young women in Esan-West suggest that they interpret Proverbs 31 as both an empowering and a constraining narrative. The qualitative data collected in this study reinforce the perspectives of Oduyoye (1995) and Ezebuiro (2011): participants admire the resilience and entrepreneurial spirit encapsulated in the passage, but they are simultaneously expected to submit and excel as wives and mothers. Moreover, as in Trible's research (2018), church teaching in Esan-West tends to emphasise the domestic aspects of the passage at the expense of its central celebration of women's leadership and enterprise.

Thus, the empirical literature indicates that while Proverbs 31:10–31 may be liberating in theory, its practical implementation is shaped by patriarchal frameworks—a pattern also observed among young women in Esan-West, as revealed in this study (Claassens, 2016; Van Dijk, 2008).

Proverbs 31 and African Cultures

The intersection between Christian literature and African indigenous cultures has remained a pressing issue concerning the socio-ethnic dynamics at the crossroads of gender and religious studies. Oduyoye (2019) reflects on the contributions of early African feminist theologians, focusing on qualitative research that examines how African Christian women negotiate and construct their identities. Her conclusions highlight that women in African contexts exist within multiple interlocking systems of control, including Christianity, which encompasses aspects of faith and the role of women as outlined in Proverbs 31. From Oduyoye's accounts with Nigerian Christian women, it emerged that they tend to negotiate successfully with both the Bible and prevailing traditions. Women thus engage in an identity construction process, struggling with competing ideals and expectations. In doing so, they act as powerful interpreters of religion, exercising agency by viewing religious prescriptions not merely as fixed commands but as flexible guidelines that can be adapted to changing social conditions in education, business, and community leadership (Amadiume, 1987; Oyěwùmí, 1997).

In a similar vein, Ukpong and Ayantayo (2017) investigated the influence of biblical texts on Nigerian gender stereotypes. For Ukpong (2017), ethnographic observation and survey data revealed recurring motifs—especially those commanding silence and praising hard work and chastity—within women's sermons, marriage counselling, and fellowships. He observed a complex effect: on one hand, Scripture such as Proverbs 31 provides motivation for women to strive and be resourceful; on the other hand, it is often interpreted in ways that reinforce women's prioritisation of marriage, homemaking, and support of male dominance. Supporting these conclusions, Ayantayo (2017) demonstrated that local church teachings routinely promoted conservative gender roles while frequently silencing discussions around women's rights, positions, and ambitions beyond the domestic sphere.

This research reveals a similar trend in Esan-West LGA. Findings indicate that young women regard Proverbs 31 both culturally and spiritually as a significant point of reference. Like Oduyoye's findings (2019), many participants from Esan-West appear to practise what may be termed creative negotiation, balancing contemporary culture and scriptural ideals across education, employment, and faith. Views expressed by church leaders and educators in the present study align with the observations of Ukpong and Ayantayo (2017): Proverbs 31 serves both as inspiration for hard work and virtue, and as a pedestal for domesticity and submission.

These empirical findings highlight a crucial insight: the reference to Proverbs 31 across African contexts, and more specifically in Esan-West, cannot be assumed to be uniform. Instead, it is mediated, reframed, and at times contested by the very women it seeks to address, revealing the complex relationship between text, culture, and lived experience.

Biblical Scholarship Trends

Camp (1985) emphasises an entrepreneurial interpretation. Trible (2018) notes patriarchal appropriation. Yee (2023) documents cross-cultural gender reinforcement patterns.

1

Contemporary Research

Ezebuiro (2011) documents the inspiration-constraint duality. This study provides current insights into women's experiences with Proverbs 31.

2

African Feminist Theology

Oduyoye (1995, 2019) shows women navigating multiple control systems. Ukpong & Ayantayo (2017) reveal complex effects: motivation versus domestic prioritisation.

3

Gender Norms and Young Women's Experience

Feminist and sociological literature extensively examines the intersection of gender, religious teachings, and young Nigerian women's realities. Many young women navigate traditional femininity (family, tradition, Scripture) alongside contemporary notions of autonomy, education, and professional advancement (Amadiume, 1987; Oyéwùmí, 1997). This often places them at an "identity crossroads," a fluid space shaped by social reality and personal agency.

Soyombo (2023) explores how culture and religion frame women's behavior in patriarchal societies, highlighting a paradox: these narratives offer identity and meaning but restrict opportunities by glorifying submission and domesticity. Their strength lies in transmission through socialising agencies like family, religious functions, and schools, entrenching conservative gender roles.

Empirical studies in Nigeria support these trends. Ezebuiro (2021), through surveys and interviews with young Christian women in Southeast Nigeria, found that scriptural interpretations, such as Proverbs 31, both inspire and constrain. Participants valued biblical instructions for promoting hard work, but many reported pressure or inadequacy when unable to meet the ideal woman depicted (Camp, 1985; Yoder, 2001). This duality shows how religious traditions can be both empowering and restrictive to female agency.

Similarly, Osezua (2022) examined faith and female identity among tertiary-educated women in southwestern Nigeria, finding that increased education doesn't fully free women from classical frameworks. Despite modern education and economic participation offering some escape from imposed gender roles, religious institutions powerfully bind women to narratives of subservience and devotion, shaping personal and social identities.

For the current study in Esan-West LGA, these findings underscore Proverbs 31:10 - 31's significance. Young women in Esan-West, like those in Ezebuiro's and Oseua's studies, balance self-transformation from popular culture with religious virtues. The study's mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) confirms that religious gender discourse has both enabling and constraining elements for participants. This literature reveals that young women in Esan-West face broader national issues, exposing the contradiction where religious texts like Proverbs 31 simultaneously empower them and reinforce traditional systems maintaining male dominance (Claassens, 2016; Van Dijk, 2008).

Discourse Studies on Religious Texts

Discourse analysis has long been relevant for examining how religious scriptures shape and reinforce societal gender roles. Scholars, through sociolinguistic and socio-ethnographic studies (Fairclough, 1992; Wodak & Meyer, 2001), explore how religious discourse organizes subordination. Interpretations of biblical texts often uphold patriarchal control (Fairclough, 1989; Van Dijk, 2008), with qualitative analysis of sermons, religious education resources, and community talks demonstrating their reinforcement of gender hierarchies (Claassens, 2016).

Huckin (2022) used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze sermons and theological commentaries on Proverbs, including Proverbs 31. His research, through interviews and textual analysis, argued that religious literature actively constructs and reproduces discourses of power and identity. He found that the ritualistic citation of Proverbs 31:10 - 31 in many Protestant churches reinforces the gender binary and legitimizes particular expressions of womanhood, promoting a narrow view of femininity while discouraging divergence.

Other studies corroborate these findings. Trible (2018) and Yee (2023) elaborate that biblical texts function as active instruments of gendering within patriarchal systems. Oduyoye (2019) empirically demonstrated how African Christian women negotiate, resist, or internalize these discourses (Amadiume, 1987; Oyéwùmí, 1997). Her interviews and ethnographic research show some women draw strength from Proverbs 31's praise of industriousness, while others suffer from the demanding expectation of selflessness and servitude (Camp, 1985; Yoder, 2001).

Earlier studies in Esan-West Local Government Area used empirically verifiable, consistent methodologies. Similar to Tannen and Huckin's work, this study applies Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 2008) with survey and interview data to explore how the Proverbs 31 ideal constructs gender roles. Oduyoye's framework is contextualized to illustrate how young women in Esan can perform or resist these impositions, justifying this research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Situating this study within empirical discourse analysis allows for uncovering how Proverbs 31:10 - 31 sustains or challenges gendered identities. It also integrates ethnographic perspectives on Nigerian Christian women's lives, highlighting the sustainability and creativity involved in constructing femininity through religious discourse, both locally and beyond.

Esan-West Context

Pre-existing empirical studies on Christianity and cultural relations in Edo State (Olonade et al., 2021; Udoh et al., 2020) offer frameworks for analyzing the religion-culture relationship in the area. Both highlight Christianity's profound impact on gender relations, promoting education and health services while reinforcing patriarchal control within the church. Gender relations remain problematic as they reinforce traditional views of a wife as a homemaker/supportive worker, submissive to her husband, even as they open opportunities for female education and empowerment. Udoh et al. (2020) argue that girls from Esan-West experience a cross-cultural fusion that is both debilitating and enabling as they navigate dominant cultural and Christian patriarchal values.

To contextualize these findings, Enato (2021) analyzes young women's everyday realities in Esan-West. She focuses on their efforts to conform to social constructions of moral and domestically responsible women, while simultaneously pursuing careers, higher education, and leadership. The gap between these binary constructs highlights the juxtaposition of religious ideologies prescribing appropriate gender behavior with the agency young women demonstrate in striving to transform their realities.

However, these empirical studies do not directly address the localized interpretation of Proverbs 31:10-31. This study fills that gap by conducting a focused discourse analysis of Proverbs 31 within Esan-West, examining how this biblical ideal shapes young women's identity, goals, and agency. Thus, the study contributes to literature by demonstrating the connection between biblical discourse and women's daily lives and transformative realities in Esan-West.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Methodology

The study used a mixed-methods approach (convergent parallel, exploratory, and explanatory sequential designs; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) to capture Proverbs 31:10-31's practical implications for young women in Esan-West, involving:

Quantitative Component

- 100 young women (aged 18-30)
- Stratified across Ekpoma, Irukpene, Ujelen
- Structured questionnaire survey
- Statistical analysis of response patterns

Qualitative Component

- Two focus group discussions (10 participants each)
- Seven key informant interviews
- Three church leaders, two female educators
- Thematic analysis of narrative data

Sampling Strategy

- Purposive and stratified sampling
- Age, education, church affiliation criteria
- Representative of Esan-West demographics
- Triangulated data collection approach

Combining qualitative and quantitative methods provided a comprehensive understanding of Proverbs 31:10 - 31's impact on young women in Esan-West. Focus group discussions offered unique interpretations via personal narratives, while the questionnaire survey revealed overarching trends. Expert insights from church leaders and educators enriched the analysis through key informant interviews. This triangulated approach enhanced reliability and offered versatility in understanding the biblical discourse's influence.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

Purposive and stratified sampling ensured relevance and representativeness. Esan-West Local Government Area was purposely selected due to its strong Christian population and biblical teachings shaping social values. Ekpoma, Iruekpen, and Ujoelen were identified as major towns; participants were stratified by age (18-30), educational level, and church affiliation to capture diverse perspectives.

A total of 100 young women were purposively selected for the survey. Qualitative insights were gathered from two focus group discussions (ten purposively sampled volunteers each) and key informant interviews with three church leaders and two female educators, chosen for their professional influence and guidance. This purposeful combination facilitated collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, aligning with research objectives.

Data Analysis: Main Themes

A. Knowledge and Perception of Proverbs 31:10-31

Findings showed 87% of participants knew Proverbs 31:10 - 31, mainly encountering it in church, from family, or at women's fellowship meetings. This widespread recognition confirms the passage's prominence in young women's social and religious lives, showing religious and family settings are primary sources of value-oriented instruction (Camp, 1985; Yoder, 2001).

B. Interpretations and Personal Implications

Among respondents, 56% viewed Proverbs 31:10 - 31 as motivating for hard work, virtue, faith, and self-improvement. However, 33% felt pressure to "live up to" its expectations, causing anxiety or inadequacy. Meanwhile, 11% regarded the passage as outdated or less relevant to modern challenges, indicating a perceived gap (Claassens, 2016).

C. Influence on Social Roles

Work ethic and family orientation were most frequently adopted from Proverbs 31:10 - 31, generally viewed positively. However, some participants worried that societal standards, drawn from this scripture, unduly pressured women to prioritize teaching, marriage, and homemaking over higher education or professional careers. Such expectations were seen as constraining personal and professional development (Amadiume, 1987; Oyéwùmí, 1997).

D. Agency and Resistance

Many young women reinterpreted Proverbs 31 as a model of female agency, emphasizing entrepreneurship, assertiveness, and leadership in family and society, not just domesticity. Some applied this to business and politics. A smaller group criticized conventional interpretations for perpetuating gender inequality by confining women to rigid roles within patriarchal frameworks (Van Dijk, 2008). These diverse responses show how young women mobilize scripture for both meaning-making and critiquing its restrictive uses.

E. Church Leaders' Perspective

Ecclesiastical leaders in Esan-West viewed Proverbs 31 as encouraging women to balance family, spiritual, and communal responsibilities, acknowledging them as industrious, virtuous, and active participants. Nevertheless, most sermons reinforced conservative gender roles, primarily directing messages toward wives and mothers, reaffirming submissive and domestic expectations alongside self-improvement (Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

F. Societal Pressures

Many young women reported significant social and familial pressure to embody the Proverbs 31 ideal, especially regarding marriageability. Families and communities often assessed suitability for marriage based on traits like industriousness, submissiveness, and domestic competence. This pressure positioned biblical ideals as a standard for personal and social worth, impacting self-esteem and life choices (Fairclough, 2001).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Discursive Construction of Ideals

A critical interpretation of Proverbs 31:10 - 31 reveals its meaningful engagement in the discourse of womanhood in regions like Esan-West (Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1995; Van Dijk, 2008). This text challenges the devaluation of women's roles in patriarchal societies by recognizing virtuous women and valuing them above material wealth (Yoder, 2001). It dismantles the restrictive narrative of women solely as homemakers, portraying the woman as a diligent, wise entrepreneur engaged in management, trade, philanthropy, and providing for her family and the needy (Camp, 1985). These descriptions align with modern movements for women's economic empowerment and agency.

However, this recognition is accompanied by significant tension. While commanding admiration and respect for women's skills, the text simultaneously encapsulates the traditional expectation of women as helpers to their husbands and families. Rigid application risks reinforcing patriarchal structures, marginalizing unmarried, childless, or career-oriented women (Amadiume, 1987). Thus, Proverbs 31:10 - 31 functions as both a source of empowerment and a limitation (Claassens, 2016), with its idealistic philosophies often failing to capture the ethnographically diverse realities of women in Esan-West (Oyewumi, 1997).

Lived Experience in Esan-West

In Esan-West, there is a delicate balance between traditional biblical perspectives and modern practices. Data shows many young women value Proverbs 31:10-31 for its emphasis on industriousness, perseverance, and resourcefulness, viewing the Proverbs 31 woman as both an ambitious entrepreneur and a dedicated caregiver. However, realizing this ideal is challenging due to persistent social and familial expectations.

While young women increasingly aspire to degrees, professional careers, and social autonomy, cultural and religious narratives still emphasize early marriage, submission, and domestic mastery as measures of virtue. This dual burden of excelling in public and domestic spheres can lead to psychological distress, conflicted identities, and anxiety when expectations seem unattainable (Oyéwùmí, 1997). The Proverbs 31 ideal often causes self-doubt and anxiety, especially when personal circumstances diverge from archetypal expectations. This aligns with research indicating heightened perfectionistic distress and lower self-esteem among Nigerian women facing moral and gender-based scrutiny. The "near-superhuman ideal" can negatively impact women's self-perception and wellbeing (Yoder, 2001).

Conversely, some respondents asserted agency by reframing the Proverbs 31 woman as a social and economic actor, validating their participation in wider society. These contrasting experiences demonstrate that young women in Esan-West both accept and resist Proverbs 31's cultural frameworks.

Agency, Contestation, and Negotiation

Interviews and focus group discussions reveal significant agency among young women in Esan-West in engaging with the Proverbs 31 discourse (Fairclough, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Instead of viewing religious texts as rigid, participants reconcile moral and spiritual values with socio-economic realities. While upholding virtues like hard work and loyalty, they challenge the confinement of women's contributions to the domestic sphere. Many reinterpret the Proverbs 31 woman as embodying entrepreneurship, social work, and leadership—qualities vital for modern success (Amadiume, 1987; Oyéwùmí, 1997).

There was clear resistance to restrictive patriarchal readings. Some young women advocate for contextual interpretations that empower them to pursue education, careers, and leadership, arguing that biblical teachings remain relevant when adapted to contemporary society (Claassens, 2016). Through this negotiation, they construct frameworks aligned with their aspirations, challenging traditional gender norms and stimulating dialogue within faith-based communities for women's empowerment.

Role of Religious and Educational Institutions

Religious and educational institutions significantly influence how young women in Esan-West interpret and internalize Proverbs 31:10-31. Churches and religious leaders often emphasize discipline, faith, industry, and community service, fostering self-worth and purpose. Research indicates religious institutions can encourage women's public engagement by framing hard work and wisdom as spiritual mandates.

Conversely, strict adherence to teachings promoting submission and domesticity can reinforce stereotypes, limiting women's participation in economic, academic, and political spheres. Such constraints may prompt some women to abandon personal ambition for marriage and homemaking.

Educational institutions, however, facilitate critical engagement with culture and religion. Formal education helps young women re-examine identities, appreciate diverse perspectives, and negotiate roles beyond traditional boundaries. Educated women are often more aware of gender discrimination and better able to reinterpret religious constructs to support personal development. Thus, the synergy of formal education and religious instruction can foster a more balanced and empowering identity for young women in Esan-West.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This paper examined the discourse of Proverbs 31:10-31 and its impact on young women in Esan-West LGA. Utilizing critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1995, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2001), the passage was found to be a key reference for femininity, influencing self-image, goals, and socio-cultural positions. While it offers empowering potential (Yoder, 2001; Camp, 1985), patriarchal readings often impose constraints, consistent with Nigerian gender studies (Amadiume, 1987; Oyewumi, 1997) and critical discourse analysis of religious texts (Claassens, 2016; Van Dijk, 2008).

Conclusion

Proverbs 31:10-31 symbolizes both the celebration and standard of womanhood, yet can create emotional challenges. In Esan-West, it continues to shape gender norms. Young women actively interpret and reinterpret this discourse to align with their lived experiences. The passage's enduring power lies in its capacity for contextual reinterpretation rather than its fixity.

Recommendations

- **Adopt Contextual Hermeneutics in Religious Teaching**

Religious teaching in Esan-West should adopt contextual hermeneutic approaches to Proverbs 31:10 - 31. Feminist and liberation theology workshops can support contextual interpretation. Pastors, youth leaders, and educators should engage the passage to resonate with contemporary realities and aspirations, focusing on virtues like diligence, industry, intelligence, leadership, and compassion. This inclusive approach would empower young women in both domestic and public spheres.

- **Integrate Leadership and Entrepreneurship Training**

Churches and schools should organize skill-building workshops and mentorship programs to foster leadership, problem-solving, and entrepreneurial skills. Inviting local female role models can demonstrate how Proverbs 31 virtues apply in business, education, and community service.

- **Highlight Diverse Female Role Models**

Churches and religious organizations should highlight biblical and contemporary examples of women who have impacted their communities in various capacities. Promoting these examples through sermons, bulletins, and school assemblies will broaden perceptions of what constitutes a “virtuous woman.”

- **Address and Challenge Restrictive Stereotypes**

Create forums for young women to share experiences within faith and culture. Equip church and community leaders with resources to challenge gender stereotypes in teaching and counseling, fostering inclusivity.

- **Encourage Active Participation in Civic and Professional Life**

Support young women in pursuing higher education, professional careers, and leadership. Establish platforms for volunteering, community projects, and decision-making to promote civic and professional engagement.

- **Foster Ongoing Dialogues Between Generations**

Organize intergenerational workshops on Proverbs 31 interpretations. These dialogues will foster mutual respect, sharing of perspectives, and acknowledgment of evolving viewpoints for communal and spiritual growth.

- **Collaborate with Educational Institutions**

Partner with educational institutions to integrate discussions on biblical womanhood, empowerment, and contemporary gender roles into clubs, counseling, and curricula. Encourage educators to use Proverbs 31 to foster self-worth, ambition, and holistic development, balancing faith and modern expectations.

Implementing these recommendations will empower young women in Esan-West to embody Proverbs 31 virtues, enabling them to thrive in a changing society while rooted in cultural and spiritual heritage.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Not Applicable

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

FUNDING

This research received no external funding.

REFERENCES

Ajayi, C. E., & Chantler, K. (2021). The role of cultural beliefs, norms, and practices in Nigerian women's experiences of sexual abuse and violence. *Violence Against Women*, 28(2), 465-486.

Amadiume, I. (1987). *Male daughters, female husbands: Gender and sex in an African society*. Zed Books.

Camp, C. V. (1985). *Wisdom and the feminine in the book of Proverbs*. Sheffield Academic Press.

Claassens, L. J. (2016). *Claiming her dignity: Female resistance in the Old Testament*. Liturgical Press.

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Enato, L. S. E. (2021). Modernization, women empowerment and social change in Esan society of Edo State, Nigeria. *Journal of Humanities and Social Policy*, 7(1), 41-58.

Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. Longman.

Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Polity Press.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.

Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and power* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Idialu, R. A. (2018). Learning from the woman of courage in Proverbs 31:10-31: A leadership call for socio-economic development in Nigeria. *Babcock University Journal of Education and Humanities*, 5(2), 45-64.

Olajide, M. D. E. J. (2021). The "Woman of Substance" (Proverbs 31:10-31) and ecclesiastical dignity in Nigeria. *KIU Journal of Humanities*, 6(2), 78-95.

Olonade, O. Y., Oyibode, B. O., & Idowu, B. O. (2021). Understanding gender issues in Nigeria: the imperative for sustainable development. *Helijon*, 7(7), e07622.

Osezua, O. C., & Agholor, H. N. (2019). Patriarchy, cultural prejudices and spousal violence in the ancient city of Benin of Southern Nigeria. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 20(7), 409-422.

Oyewumi, O. (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourses*. University of Minnesota Press.

Udoh, O. D., Folarin, S. F., & Isumonah, V. A. (2020). The influence of religion and culture on women's rights to property in Nigeria. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 7(1), 1750244.

Van Dijk, T. A. (2008). *Discourse and power*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2001). *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. SAGE Publications.

Yoder, C. R. (2001). The woman of substance (‘eshet-ḥayil): A socioeconomic reading of Proverbs 31:10-31. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 120(3), 427-447.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

Raphael Akhijemen Idialu

Wesley University, Ondo

 idialuraphael@gmail.com, raphael.idialu@wesleyuni.edu.ng

Princess Omovrigho Idialu

Wesley University, Ondo

Received: April 30, 2025

Accepted: August 05, 2025

Published: November 19, 2025

Citation:

Idialu, R. A., & Idialu, P. O. (2025). A discourse analysis on Proverbs 31:10 - 31 and its implication for young women in Esan-West Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. *SustainE*, 3(2), 437-458. In A. A. Atowoju, E. O. Oyekanmi, A. A. Akinsemolu, & D. M. Duyile (Eds.), *Sustainability, innovation, and development: A Festschrift in honour of Rt. Rev. Prof. Obeka Samuel Sunday* [Special issue]. <https://doi.org/10.55366/suse.v3i2.21>

Disclaimer: The opinions and statements expressed in this article are the author(s)' sole responsibility and do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints of their affiliated organisations, the publisher, the hosted journal, the editors, or the reviewers. Furthermore, any product evaluated in this article or claims made by its manufacturer are not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.



Distributed under Creative Commons CC-BY 4.0