

Gender Lessons from 1 Corinthians 11:2-5 for Sustainable Development in Igboland

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Igbo Village Harmony

ABSTRACT

The proper place and role of women in political and religious circles remain an ongoing discussion in Nigeria, Africa, and the world at large. The Bible, which should have been a source of hope for women, has been used by many as an instrument to justify the subjection of women to many unthinkable and obnoxious practices, even in Igbo land. Therefore, this paper, "Gender Lessons from 1 Corinthians 11:2-5 for Sustainable Development in Igbo Land," is a careful application of biblical truths to address the issues surrounding sexes and gender roles in Igbo land. The researcher examines the current status of women, drawing upon historical antecedents from biblical records and cultural facts. Furthermore, he adopted an exegetical analysis of the text as the bedrock for his hermeneutical application of the biblical truths inherent in the text. The researcher found that men and women are equal in personhood but different in function. Moreover, the elimination of sexes should be avoided at all costs; anything that would undermine that distinction would amount to a rejection of the creaturely status of humankind. Hence, any departure from that distinction would be displeasing to God. Finally, the failure of women or children in society is traced to husbands or parents as a source of shame or dishonour. If the truths revealed are properly understood and applied, Igbo society will not only grow but will also experience peace and sustainable development.

Research Method

Exegetical analysis of 1 Corinthians 11:2-5 with hermeneutical application to the Igbo cultural context.

Key Finding

Men and women are equal in personhood but different in function within God's created order.

Application

Biblical principles, properly applied, can promote peace and sustainable development in Igbo society.

Keywords: Gender roles, biblical exegesis, Igbo culture, sustainable development, 1 Corinthians, gender equality

INTRODUCTION

The proper place or role of women in political and religious circles remains an ongoing discussion all over the world. Gender issues have become a crucial scholarly debate in both developmental and academic discourse, particularly as a result of unequal access to resources and opportunities among males and females (Akinwumi, 2013). In Africa, the discourse about women has gained wide attention in recent years. The cultural role assigned to women in Igbo land and other parts of Africa has given rise to the quest by feminists for a reconsideration of certain cultural practices against women (Emeka-Nwobia, 2021). In most denominations, the Bible, which should have been a source of hope for women, has been used by many as an instrument to justify the subjection of women to many unthinkable and obnoxious practices (Ani et al., 2014). This misuse of Scripture has contributed to gender inequality in both religious and secular contexts across Africa (Ugwu & Miller, 2023).

The challenge of gender inequality in Igbo society is particularly complex, as traditional structures have been modified by colonial influences and contemporary interpretations of biblical texts (Oguejiofor & Odimegwu, 2023). While anthropological studies during colonial times depicted Igbo women as socially, politically, and economically influential in their societies, the patrilineal nature of Igbo society and colonial realities succeeded in diminishing the pristine powers of women. Contemporary factors that perpetuate cultural denigration of women include language, proverbs, music, marriage processes, inheritance rights (Onyebueke et al., 2024), and widowhood practices.

This paper seeks to address these challenges by providing a careful application of biblical truths to the issues surrounding gender roles in Igbo land, specifically drawing lessons from 1 Corinthians 11:2-5. The goal is to demonstrate how proper biblical interpretation (Fee, 2014) can contribute to sustainable development by promoting gender equity rather than inequality (Iwuchukwu, 2013).

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF GENDER

Gender is a social construct (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). It refers to the social attributes ascribed to the different sexes. Offorma (2014) clearly stated that "gender is different from sex." Eboyem (2024) defines gender as "the socially defined capacities and attributes assigned to persons on the basis of their alleged sexual characteristics." Ezeifeke & Ogbazi (2016) shed more light on the above definition by observing that gender reflects the social roles attributed to males and females and the reinforcement of these roles by their culture.

From the above definition, culture reinforces the social roles attributed to either the male or female sex. Muogbo, U. S. (2020) noted that gender simply refers to all characteristics, expected behaviour, and duties of males and females that a particular community expects of them. From this perspective, gender roles vary from community to community (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). While sex refers to the biological make-up of a man or woman, gender determines resemblances and dissimilarities between males and females without referring to biology.



Sex vs. Gender

Sex refers to biological make-up, whereas gender determines social roles and cultural expectations for males and females.



Cultural Construction

Gender roles vary from community to community and are reinforced by cultural values and social norms.



Power Relations

Gender also encompasses how society differentiates behaviour and access to power between women and men.

"Gender, therefore, calls for an understanding of the social norms and cultural values of a society, which determine the expected roles of male and female (Offorma, G. C. (2014), p. 20)." The United Nations Development Programme Report defines gender as: "The qualities associated with men and women that are socially and culturally determined. Gender includes the way in which society differentiates appropriate behaviour and access to power for women and men. Although the details vary from society to society, and change over time, gender relations tend to include a stronger element of inequality between men and women and are strongly influenced by ideology (Lamontagne-Godwin, J. D. (2019), p. 258)."

Okonkwo, A. (2009) argues that gender could not only be attributed to constructive elements of social relationships, focusing on observed differences between the sexes, but also as a major means of showing relationships of power. Indeed, the socially constructed roles display relationships of power as discussed by Scott above. One may ask: who is at the helm of affairs that influences social constructions? It is obviously men; therefore, it is not surprising to see that socially constructed roles are made to show the superiority of the male sex over and above the female sex.

This was the situation in the Jewish religion, from where major biblical narratives were captured (Fee, 2014; Thiselton, 2000), and it is the same situation in Africa where we live. In our attempt to interpret the scripture, we must be able to differentiate between culturally established facts and divinely established truths. The fact that the Bible was written in a culture that relegated women to the background does not in any way suggest that God was in support of such. Divine truths found in scripture, if understood, will enrich our socially constructed cultural practices. God is obviously above culture and gender, so the biblical principles, truths, or messages found in scripture should not be overshadowed by our culturally constructed practices (Naselli, 2023). Therefore, in our discussion on gender issues, we must be willing to subject these issues, no matter how old or reasonable they may sound, to the truth from God's word. In so doing, we will bring to life the liberating truth for all (male and female) to see. Only by this can both sexes contribute meaningfully to reshaping our culture and developing our society (Iwuchukwu, 2013; Ugwu & Miller, 2023; Jakawa, 2025; Naidoo, 2025). This is especially relevant when considering women's land inheritance rights in Igbo culture (Onyebueke et al., 2024).

BRIEF EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF 1 CORINTHIANS 11:3-5 (Fee, 2014)

Verse 3 (Paul's Theological Hypothesis)

3 Θελω δε ὑμᾶς εἰδέναι ὅτι παντοῦ ἀνδρὸς ἡ κεφαλὴ ὁ Χριστὸς ἐστίν, κεφαλὴ ὡς ὁ ἄνθρωπος, κεφαλὴ ὡς τοῦ Χριστοῦ ὁ θεός (Thiselton, 2000)

Verse 3 is best described as Paul's theological hypothesis. After commending them, he proceeded to correct the behaviour of certain women who had failed to behave modestly when leading worship (Jakawa, 2025). Following his rhetorical pattern of writing, Paul stated his proposition through a sound theological principle of human interdependence.

The Head of Every Man Christ	Head of the Woman Man	Head of Christ God
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From this theological argument set forth by Paul, he established that every person has a 'head'. This hierarchy can also be arranged as follows:

GOD
CHRIST
MAN
WOMAN



- Divine Head**
GOD as ultimate authority
- Redeemer Head**
CHRIST as mediator and leader
- Human Headship**
MAN and WOMAN in relational roles

From our discourse on κεφαλή^{above}, Paul was conveying that everyone has someone foremost in their life, not speaking of superiority or inferiority. The source hypothesis above will shed more light on this. As Christians, we believe the woman was "sourced" from and for the man. Christ was not created, but incarnated from the Father as a man and remains the Head of His Church. The Nicene Creed clearly states, "He was begotten, not made, and of one substance with the Father." Christ was present from the beginning; therefore, being of one substance means He embodied God from whom He incarnated. Daniel Wallace put it thus: "He is equal to the Father in essence while subordinate in function" (Wallace, 2004). This same observation applies to the woman in relation to the man. While "every" qualifying man might suggest Christ is the source of all humankind (women inclusive), the woman was directly sourced from man, who shares the Christ-like nature with the woman. Thus, the woman was sourced directly from the man and indirectly from Christ, the head of every man.

Verse 4-5 (Argument from Headship and Dishonour)

4 πᾶς ἄνθρωπος προσευχόμενος ἢ προφητεύων κατακεφαλῆς ἔχων καταισχύνην τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ. 5. πᾶσα δὲ γυνὴ προσευχομένη ἢ προφητεύουσα ἀκατακαλύπτῳ τῇ κεφαλῇ καταισχύνην τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτῆς· ἐν γὰρ ἐστὶν καὶ τὸ αὐτὸ τῇ ἐξυρημένῃ

From these verses, we see that Paul included Christ in verse three to drive home his theological argument, focusing mainly on women not covering their heads (Fee, 2014). The καταισχύνη (shame) for the man underscores the real problem of women not covering (Naselli, 2023).

The words "κατακεφαλῆς ἔχων" literally mean "having something hanging down from his head" (Thiselton, 2000), which some interpret as "a man with long hair." Paul might be referencing the Jewish tallit, "a four-cornered shawl having fringes consisting of eight threads, each knotted five times, and worn over the head in prayer. It was placed upon the worshipper's head at his entrance into the synagogue" (Sprinkle, 2024). Since Romans, like Jews, prayed with veiled heads, Paul most likely referred to the veil, not the *tallit*.

To understand verse 5, we must first determine what it means for a woman to pray and prophesy "uncovered." Sprinkle (2024), from his analysis of ἀκατακαλύπτῳ, aligns with the traditional view of removing her external covering. Therefore, in verse five, Paul was simply saying that any woman praying without a veil dishonours her head (source: the man). Combining verses 4 and 5 suggests that the issue of women not covering their heads impacted the male/female relationship of that era. "By making their appearance such that it tended to eliminate distinction between the sexes, they were bringing shame on that relationship, which had not yet been abrogated even though the new age had been inaugurated" (Sprinkle, 2024; Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). They were not yet like the angels, without sexes, neither marrying nor given in marriage. Thus, in verse 6, Paul stresses his point to women: "Women who want to erase these distinctions in worship should carry all the way through and shave their heads entirely—but if not, they should keep their heads covered in worship and thereby reflect the relations God instituted" (Schreiner, 2004).

Paul conveyed his message to the people through their honour/shame, praise/blame society, where attaining honour and avoiding shame was the most important cultural norm. Historically, following Roman wives' attitudes, in Cyprus, "a woman guilty of adultery shall have her hair cut off and be a prostitute, like a foreigner or freedwoman that provided sexual favours at a dinner. Therefore, Paul equated not wearing a veil with the social stigma of a publicly exposed and punished adulteress reduced to the status of a prostitute" (Wu, R. (2020). The veil in classical antiquity: A sociocultural and exegetical study of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. University of Sheffield.). Paul proceeded with his argument employing such a strong comparison.

However, applying these first-century cultural practices to contemporary contexts presents a significant hermeneutical challenge (Naselli, 2023). Scholarly debate, particularly concerning κεφαλή (kephalē) (Thiselton, 2000), suggests multiple interpretations beyond simple hierarchy. Scholars like Gordon Fee (Fee, 2014) argue the passage primarily concerns Corinthian cultural conventions of modesty and honour, not universal directives, proposing κεφαλή here means "source" rather than "authority." Similarly, Craig Keener emphasizes the cultural specificity of Roman head coverings as a marker of marital status and honour, implying the *practice* is culturally bound, not a timeless theological principle. This is further complicated by the tension between Paul's affirmation of women praying and prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11:2-5 and apparent restrictions on women speaking in other Pauline passages (e.g., 1 Corinthians 14:34-35). Engaging with these alternative views and historical contexts helps distinguish between culturally specific instructions and universal theological principles, urging us to consider the underlying intent of Paul's message regarding order and respectful conduct in worship, rather than literal imposition of ancient sartorial customs.

GENDER LESSONS FROM THE TEXT FOR CHRISTIANS IN IGBO LAND

From the brief exegetical discussion above, the following lessons can be deduced from the text:

Equality in Personhood but Different in Function

"But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ. The head of the woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God." The quest for gender equality continues to be a central topic in contemporary discourse until a better and more balanced understanding of male headship is developed. A careful study of the entire scope (1 Corinthians 11:2-12) reveals that Paul grounds his argument in creation; he implies that those who do not accept this fundamental truth should attribute it to God, who established it, rather than to him, who is merely reiterating God's decree.

Biblical Foundation

Paul grounds his argument on God's creation order, emphasising that male headship is divinely established, not culturally imposed (Fee, 2014; Thiselton, 2000).

Functional Difference

The headship of man must be seen in its function, not in terms of superiority. Women are equal to men in essence but differ in functional roles (Jakawa, 2025; Naidoo, 2025).

Paul, in clear terms, grounds his entire argument on the fact that God created man and woman, male and female (Fee, 2014). However, Paul emphasised the headship of man, which is not foreign to the Igbo people of Nigeria (Ugwu & Miller, 2023). Paul, in his ontological hierarchy, stated that "the man is the head of the woman" (11:3) (Thiselton, 2000). The problem lies in the understanding of male headship.

For a better appreciation of this lesson, we must be reminded that within the Jewish world, some ancient cultures, and among early church fathers, women were often viewed as inferior beings and, in most cases, described in derogatory terms (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). We need to briefly reflect on how women have been neglected, and in some cases rejected and excluded, from both the church and society at large (Jakawa, 2025; Naidoo, 2025).

Avoid Elimination of Sexual Distinctions

Christians should avoid efforts to eliminate sexual differences in unsuitable ways (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). A man is a man, and a woman remains a woman. This is distinct from functional roles; as Callon, C. (2024). Authority over whose head? Did Paul instruct wives or all women to cover their heads (1 Corinthians 11:2-16). Harvard Theological Review, 117(4). notes, "Paul was faced with a problem in the Corinthian church that made the distinction between the sexes difficult." There were women who did not wear the veil, thus making it difficult to identify them as women distinct from men (Naselli, 2023).

Paul, according to Callon, C. (2024). Authority over whose head? Did Paul instruct wives or all women to cover their heads (1 Corinthians 11:2-16). Harvard Theological Review, 117(4)., proposed measures that would help in maintaining this distinction (1 Cor. 11:7-10) (Naselli, 2023). "The key theological basis for this is located in God's own initiative at creation." The created order should be properly manifested in every aspect of our Christian life. Sexes, from creation, were made differently (Fee, 2014). The headship is not the sole point here, but rather the inherent difference.

Avoidance of Shame and Dishonour

"Every man praying or prophesying with anything on his head dishonours his head, but every woman praying or prophesying unveiled dishonours her head—it is the same as having been shaved." (Naselli, 2023)

There is another side to the story that parents and husbands in Igboland must understand. In Corinth, certain cultural practices, as stated in our historical survey, enabled Paul to effectively convey his argument to the Corinthians. Two of these cultural practices must be re-emphasised:

The Pater Familias

The father of the household is responsible for the well-being and comportment of its members, enforcing discipline, and training and protecting them.

Honour/Shame Culture

The most important cultural norm was the attainment of honour and the avoidance of shame. Seating assignment and opportunities to speak were based on one's honour or fame.

From these values, we can see that when a father, who is the head of the family, fails to properly control members of his household, they can bring shame and blame upon him. This situation suggests that it is another person who bears the shame or dishonour. This value is almost identical to an Igbo proverb which says, "Nkita rie nsi, eze ere ewu," meaning that when the dog eats excreta, the goat's teeth get rotten.

Household Dynamics, Gender Equality, and Societal Development

Extending the understanding of household dynamics and the consequences of honour and shame, we can further appreciate the profound impact of gender relations within the home on broader societal development. The principles of mutual respect and ordered relationships, even when viewed through a hierarchical lens, contribute significantly to the well-being and progress of communities.

Empirical evidence from development studies consistently highlights the correlation between gender equality at the household level and positive community development outcomes. Organizations like the World Bank have extensively documented how investing in women's empowerment—improving their access to education, health, economic opportunities, and decision-making power within the family—leads to substantial gains in poverty reduction, child health, food security, and overall economic growth. In many African contexts, research (Iwuchukwu, 2013) indicates that households where women have a greater say in financial and domestic decisions exhibit better nutritional outcomes for children, higher educational attainment for girls, and more sustainable resource management. This suggests that a balanced functional differentiation, rooted in respect rather than subjugation, benefits the entire social fabric.

While these interpretations draw from Pauline texts concerning household order, it is also crucial to engage with feminist theological scholarship, particularly from African contexts, which offers valuable critiques and alternative readings of gender roles and authority structures (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). Scholars such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Teresa Okure have challenged traditional patriarchal interpretations (Ugwu & Miller, 2023), emphasizing the liberating aspects of the Gospel and advocating for a re-evaluation of 'headship' that promotes genuine partnership and mutuality (Jakawa, 2025; Naidoo, 2025). They often highlight how African cultural nuances, alongside biblical exegesis, can inform a more egalitarian understanding of gender relations that aligns with both Christian principles and modern development goals (Iwuchukwu, 2013). While acknowledging these diverse and crucial perspectives, this analysis posits that Paul's underlying concern was the maintenance of functional order that prevents societal breakdown (Fee, 2014; Thiselton, 2000; Naselli, 2023), an order that can, when properly understood through the lens of mutual honor and respect, contribute to the flourishing of both individuals and the community, even in contexts like Igboland today (Onyebueke et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This research has meaningfully contributed to the gender discourse by drawing lessons from 1 Corinthians 11:2-5 for parents and Christians in Igboland. The researcher drew from history (capturing the Igbo worldview and biblical records) to discuss the role of women. A careful exegetical analysis of the text yielded findings such as: equality in personhood but difference in function, the avoidance of the elimination of sexes, and the importance of shame and honour. These findings were deduced and applied to the Igboland context for sustainable development.

01	02
Biblical Understanding	Cultural Application
Proper understanding of scriptural principles regarding gender roles and relationships within God's created order.	Application of biblical truths to the Igbo cultural context, respecting both divine principles and local values.
03	04
Sustainable Development	Social Harmony
Recognition that both men and women are essential for community growth and development when functioning in their God-given roles.	Achievement of peace and sustained growth through a proper understanding and application of gender roles.

If the truths so revealed are properly understood and applied, Igbo society will not only grow but will experience peace and sustained growth.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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