



Women's Creative Initiatives in the Methodist Diocese of Zonkwa, Nigeria: A Philosophical and Socio-Religious Analysis

ABSTRACT

This study offers a critical and interpretive examination of women's creative initiatives in the Methodist Diocese of Zonkwa, Kaduna State, Nigeria, situating their activities within broader philosophical discourses on human agency and Christian theological reflections on vocation, service, and human dignity. Departing from purely descriptive accounts of women's participation in church life, the paper conceptualizes creativity as a morally grounded form of action through which women negotiate faith, culture, and socio-economic realities. Drawing on feminist philosophy, African communal ethics, and Methodist social theology, the study argues that women's initiatives constitute a form of lived religion in which belief is embodied through concrete practices aimed at individual and communal flourishing. Methodologically, the study employs qualitative approaches, including semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary analysis of diocesan records and women's fellowship reports. These sources enable a nuanced exploration of women's engagement in economic empowerment schemes, educational and literacy programs, health and welfare advocacy, liturgical innovation, and informal and formal leadership within the church. The findings reveal that, despite enduring cultural norms, patriarchal structures, and institutional limitations, women in the Diocese of Zonkwa exhibit remarkable moral resilience, creativity, and practical wisdom (phronesis). Their initiatives reflect an ethical orientation rooted in care, responsibility, and communal wellbeing, resonating strongly with African philosophical notions of relational personhood and Methodist emphases on social holiness. Philosophically, the study demonstrates that women's creativity within the church is not merely instrumental but intrinsically moral, expressing agency that is relational rather than individualistic. Religiously, it shows that women's actions embody a theology of service grounded in the Christian understanding of vocation as a calling to participate in God's redemptive work in the world. The paper concludes that women's creative initiatives in the Methodist Diocese of Zonkwa represent a practical synthesis of faith and social action, offering a compelling model of gendered religious agency in contemporary African Christianity. It recommends institutional reforms, theological re-orientation, and policy-based support mechanisms aimed at fostering gender-inclusive leadership, strengthening women's ministries, and enhancing the church's contribution to sustainable development within both ecclesial and wider societal contexts.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Creativity, Methodism, Philosophy of Religion, Social Theology, Nigeria.

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I. Introduction

Across Christian history, women have played decisive yet frequently under-acknowledged roles in shaping religious institutions, sustaining communal life, and translating faith into social practice. From the women who supported Jesus' ministry in the Gospels to female leaders and organizers in early Methodism, women's contributions have often occurred at the intersection of devotion, service, and social responsibility. Philosophically, such roles can be understood through the concept of human agency—the capacity of individuals and groups to act purposefully and creatively within structural constraints such as patriarchy, economic limitation, and institutional hierarchy (Kabeer, 1999). Agency in this sense is neither absolute autonomy nor passive compliance; rather, it is a relational and moral capacity exercised within specific historical and cultural contexts.

Within Christian theology, women's agency finds grounding in the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, which affirms the equal dignity and worth of all human beings as created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27). This theological principle challenges hierarchical constructions of gender by locating human value not in social status or ecclesiastical office, but in divine intentionality and moral responsibility. In the Methodist tradition, this theological vision is further reinforced by John Wesley's emphasis on social holiness, which understands salvation as inseparable from active engagement in works of mercy, justice, and communal care (Chilcote, 1993). Methodism's historical openness to lay participation and women's involvement in teaching, organizing, and evangelism provides a fertile framework for examining women's creativity as both religious practice and social intervention.

In Northern Nigeria, and particularly in southern Kaduna, women's participation in Christian life has unfolded within complex socio-historical conditions shaped by colonial encounter, missionary Christianity, entrenched patriarchal norms, and ongoing inter-religious coexistence. These dynamics have simultaneously constrained and enabled women's religious expression (Ogbomo, 2015). In many communities, cultural expectations have historically confined women to domestic and supportive roles, while leadership and public religious authority remained male-dominated. Yet, women have persistently carved out spaces of influence through church fellowships, informal leadership, and community-oriented initiatives that respond to everyday social and economic needs.

The Methodist Diocese of Zonkwa, established within this plural and often contested social environment, offers a compelling case study of women's creative religious agency. Women in the Diocese, particularly through the Methodist Women's Fellowship and other auxiliary groups, have initiated cooperative societies, skill-acquisition programs, literacy classes, maternal health campaigns, and welfare support for widows, orphans, and internally displaced persons. These initiatives are not merely pragmatic responses to socio-economic hardship; they reflect a philosophical orientation toward creativity as moral action, where innovation emerges from ethical concern for communal wellbeing. In Aristotelian terms, such practices may be understood as expressions of *phronesis*—practical wisdom exercised in concrete situations for the good of others.

Religiously, women's initiatives in Zonkwa embody a theology of vocation as service, in which Christian calling is realized through everyday acts of care, organization, and social responsibility. Their engagement in liturgical creativity—such as composing indigenous hymns, organizing women-led prayer services, and contextualizing worship practices—further illustrates how faith is interpreted and lived within local cultural realities. These practices resonate with African philosophical notions of personhood that emphasize relationality, mutual obligation, and communal flourishing, thereby bridging Christian theology and indigenous ethical worldviews.

This paper therefore examines how women's creative initiatives in the Methodist Diocese of Zonkwa reflect a convergence of philosophical ideas of agency and creativity with Methodist theological commitments to social holiness and justice. By foregrounding women's lived experiences and practical interventions, the study challenges narratives that marginalize women's roles in African Christianity and instead presents them as central actors in religious life and socio-economic transformation. In doing so, it contributes to broader scholarly conversations on gender, religion, and development in contemporary Africa.

II. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

In this study, creativity is conceptualized not merely as aesthetic or artistic expression but as a moral and practical capacity through which individuals and groups generate context-sensitive responses to concrete human challenges. Philosophically, this understanding resonates with Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), which emphasizes ethical judgment exercised in specific social situations rather than abstract rule-following (Aristotle, trans. 2009). Creativity, from this perspective, emerges where moral discernment meets lived experience, enabling actors to navigate constraints and act in ways that promote human flourishing.

This interpretation also aligns with African communitarian ethics, which define personhood and moral responsibility in relational rather than individualistic terms. African philosophical traditions emphasize that human wellbeing is realized through interconnectedness, mutual care, and collective survival (Gyekye, 1997). Within such frameworks, creativity is often expressed through adaptive social practices—cooperative labor, shared economic strategies, and communal support systems—rather than through solitary innovation. In the Methodist Diocese of Zonkwa, women's cooperative societies, rotating savings schemes, and collective skill-acquisition initiatives exemplify this form of relational creativity. These practices are not merely economic tools; they represent ethically grounded responses to poverty, unemployment, and social vulnerability.

Closely linked to creativity is the concept of agency, understood as the capacity of individuals to act meaningfully within structural constraints. Following Kabeer (1999), agency is not equivalent to unrestricted choice but involves the ability to define goals, make decisions, and act upon them, even in contexts marked by inequality and limited resources. Women in Zonkwa exercise agency by transforming church-based platforms—such as women's fellowships and prayer groups—into spaces for economic empowerment, education, and social advocacy. These actions demonstrate what may be described as embedded agency, operating within religious and cultural institutions rather than in opposition to them.

Empowerment, as conceptualized in this study, follows Kabeer's (1999) tripartite framework of resources, agency, and achievements. Resources include not only material assets but also social networks, religious capital, and moral legitimacy. In Zonkwa, access to church structures provides women with organizational resources and collective identity. Agency is exercised through decision-making, leadership roles, and program implementation, while achievements are visible in improved livelihoods, enhanced literacy, community welfare, and increased recognition of women's contributions. Empowerment, therefore, is understood as a process rather than an end-state, unfolding through sustained creative engagement with social realities.

Methodist Social Theology

The theological dimension of this study is grounded in Methodist social theology, which derives from the teachings and praxis of John Wesley. Wesleyan theology rejects any separation between faith and social responsibility, insisting that genuine Christian discipleship is expressed through works of mercy and justice (Chilcote, 1993). This emphasis on social holiness understands salvation as both personal and communal, encompassing the transformation of individuals and society alike.

Methodism's historical openness to lay participation and women's involvement in ministry provides an important theological context for interpreting women's initiatives in Zonkwa. Although formal ordination has often remained restricted, Methodist tradition has long recognized women as class leaders, teachers, caregivers, and evangelists. Such roles reflect a theology of vocation in which Christian calling is realized through service to others, particularly the poor and marginalized.

Within the Diocese of Zonkwa, women's engagement in education, healthcare advocacy, and welfare support can thus be interpreted as expressions of lived theology—a form of theology enacted through practice rather than confined to doctrinal articulation. For example, women-led literacy classes and maternal health awareness programs embody Wesley's insistence on caring for both the soul and the body. Similarly, support initiatives for widows, orphans, and internally displaced persons reflect a theological ethic of compassion grounded in the Christian command to love one's neighbor.

Furthermore, Methodist social theology emphasizes practical divinity, the application of

theological knowledge to everyday life. Women's liturgical creativity in Zonkwa—such as composing indigenous hymns, organizing prayer meetings that address local social challenges, and integrating cultural expressions into worship—illustrates how doctrine is contextualized and made meaningful within African cultural settings. These practices bridge formal theology and grassroots experience, reinforcing the view that theology is not solely the preserve of clergy or academics but is continually shaped by the lived faith of believers.

Integrative Framework

Taken together, the concepts of creativity, agency, empowerment, and Methodist social theology provide an integrated framework for analyzing women's initiatives in the Methodist Diocese of Zonkwa. Philosophically, women's actions reflect practical wisdom exercised within relational contexts. Theologically, they represent faith translated into social responsibility and communal care. This framework allows the study to move beyond viewing women as passive recipients of church programs, instead recognizing them as moral agents and theological actors whose creative initiatives contribute to both religious vitality and socio-economic transformation.

Historical Background of the Methodist Diocese of Zonkwa

The emergence of Methodism in southern Kaduna is inseparable from the broader history of Christian missionary expansion in Northern Nigeria during the early twentieth century. Methodist missionary activity, initially coordinated through regional mission circuits, sought not only to evangelize but also to establish institutions of education, healthcare, and social welfare. This dual emphasis reflected the Methodist theological conviction that faith must be expressed through practical engagement with human suffering—a principle rooted in John Wesley's understanding of social holiness (Chilcote, 1993).

Over time, demographic growth, expanding congregations, and the increasing complexity of pastoral needs necessitated ecclesiastical restructuring within the Methodist Church Nigeria. Administrative realignments led to the creation of new districts and dioceses aimed at ensuring effective pastoral oversight and contextual responsiveness. The Methodist Diocese of Zonkwa, formally inaugurated in 2023, represents the culmination of this historical process. Conceived as a missionary-oriented diocese, Zonkwa was established to address the spiritual, educational, and socio-economic challenges of communities in southern Kaduna, an area marked by ethnic diversity, religious plurality, and recurring socio-political tensions (Methodist Church Nigeria [MCN], 2015, 2021).

Philosophically, the creation of the Diocese of Zonkwa may be understood as an institutional response to the ethical demand for proximity and relational care. In African communitarian thought, moral responsibility increases with closeness and shared life; institutions are therefore expected to reflect the lived realities of the people they serve (Gyekye, 1997). The Diocese's missionary orientation aligns with this ethical vision by prioritizing grassroots engagement, pastoral accessibility, and community-based development initiatives.

Women in the History of the Diocese

From the earliest phases of Methodist missionary presence in southern Kaduna, women played foundational yet often under-documented roles in sustaining church life. As catechists, educators, caregivers, and organizers of fellowship groups, women functioned as cultural mediators between missionary Christianity and local communities. Although formal ecclesiastical structures excluded women from ordained ministry for much of the Church's history, women exercised informal authority through teaching, mentoring, and organizing communal religious life.

Historically, women's involvement in education and healthcare proved particularly significant. Women teachers and caregivers contributed to early mission schools and clinics, reinforcing Methodism's commitment to holistic salvation that attends to both spiritual and material wellbeing. The Methodist Women's Fellowship emerged as a central institutional platform for women's participation, providing spaces for spiritual formation, literacy education, mutual support, and collective action. Through regular meetings, prayer sessions, and community outreach, the Fellowship cultivated moral discipline, religious identity, and social responsibility among women

across generations.

From a philosophical standpoint, women's historical participation in the Diocese exemplifies relational agency—agency exercised not through formal power but through sustained moral influence within social networks. Their leadership reflects a form of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) that prioritizes care, continuity, and communal survival, particularly in contexts of social uncertainty.

Women's Creative Initiatives in the Diocese of Zonkwa

Economic Empowerment

Women in the Methodist Diocese of Zonkwa have developed diverse economic empowerment initiatives aimed at improving household livelihoods and community resilience. These include cooperative savings and credit associations, skill-acquisition workshops in tailoring, soap-making, baking, and food processing, as well as engagement in small-scale trading. Such initiatives are often organized through women's fellowship groups, leveraging trust and shared religious identity as social capital.

These practices reflect not only economic rationality but also ethical commitments rooted in Christian notions of stewardship and African communal values. Income generated through these initiatives frequently supports children's education, healthcare expenses, and church activities, illustrating how economic creativity is integrated into broader moral obligations toward family and community. In this sense, women's economic initiatives function as moral economies, where profit is subordinated to communal wellbeing.

Education and Literacy

Education has historically occupied a central place in Methodist mission theology, understood as a means of moral and spiritual formation. In Zonkwa, women have continued this tradition by organizing adult literacy classes, mentoring younger girls, and advocating for female education through scholarship schemes. These initiatives address structural inequalities that limit women's access to formal education, particularly in rural communities.

Religiously, women's commitment to education reflects a theological understanding of knowledge as a divine gift to be cultivated for service. Philosophically, it resonates with the view that empowerment involves expanding people's capabilities to make informed choices and participate meaningfully in social life (Kabeer, 1999).

Health and Social Welfare

Women in the Diocese of Zonkwa play leading roles in health and social welfare initiatives, including maternal health education, HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns, and support for widows, orphans, and vulnerable families. These activities are often carried out in collaboration with local health workers and community leaders, demonstrating the church's integrative approach to social care.

Such initiatives exemplify compassion as a theological virtue, translating Christian love into concrete social action. They also align with African ethical traditions that prioritize care for the vulnerable as a measure of communal morality. Through these efforts, women act as agents of healing in both physical and social senses.

Liturgical and Cultural Creativity

Liturgical creativity represents a significant dimension of women's contribution to church life in Zonkwa. Women actively compose indigenous hymns, organize drama and dance performances during worship, and adapt liturgical expressions to reflect local cultural idioms. These practices affirm African identity within global Christianity and challenge the perception of Christian worship as culturally alien.

From a theological perspective, such creativity reflects the incarnation principle—the belief that divine truth is expressed within specific cultural contexts. Philosophically, it underscores the idea that meaning is generated through lived experience rather than abstract universals.

Leadership and Advocacy

Although formal church leadership structures remain predominantly male, women in the Diocese of Zonkwa increasingly participate in administrative roles, fellowship leadership, and

advocacy initiatives. Women have become vocal in addressing issues such as gender-based violence, family stability, and social justice, often employing moral persuasion grounded in Christian ethics rather than confrontational activism.

This mode of leadership reflects a distinctly ethical form of power, rooted in credibility, service, and moral example. By challenging restrictive norms from within religious and cultural frameworks, women demonstrate how faith can function as a resource for gradual social transformation.

III. Discussion

Philosophically, women's creative initiatives in the Methodist Diocese of Zonkwa illustrate creativity as moral agency exercised within structural constraint. Rather than operating in contexts of unrestricted freedom, women act within layered limitations shaped by patriarchal norms, economic scarcity, and ecclesiastical hierarchies. Their creativity, therefore, aligns with relational and situational understandings of agency that emphasize ethical action over individual autonomy (Kabeer, 1999). In this sense, women's initiatives exemplify *phronesis*—practical wisdom that enables moral judgment and adaptive action in concrete social circumstances.

The cooperative societies, skill-acquisition programs, and welfare initiatives organized by women in Zonkwa are not merely pragmatic responses to poverty; they are ethically motivated practices grounded in concern for family stability and communal wellbeing. Such initiatives resonate strongly with African communitarian philosophy, which prioritizes collective flourishing and mutual responsibility over individual accumulation (Gyekye, 1997). Women's economic activities function as moral economies in which profit is subordinated to social obligation, reflecting an ethical worldview deeply embedded in both African philosophy and Christian moral teaching.

Religiously, women's initiatives reflect a theology of service rooted in love of neighbor (*agape*) and the Methodist doctrine of social holiness. Within Wesleyan theology, faith is authenticated through works of mercy and justice, making social engagement a constitutive dimension of Christian discipleship rather than an optional supplement (Chilcote, 1993). Women's leadership in maternal health advocacy, support for widows and orphans, and educational initiatives embodies this theological vision by translating doctrinal commitments into concrete social action.

Moreover, women's liturgical and cultural creativity—through indigenous hymns, drama, and contextual worship practices—demonstrates how theology is continually reinterpreted through lived experience. These practices affirm African cultural identity within Christian worship while resisting rigid liturgical uniformity. Theologically, this reflects the incarnational principle that divine truth is mediated through specific cultural forms. Philosophically, it underscores the idea that meaning is produced through practice rather than abstract doctrine.

Despite these achievements, the persistence of cultural barriers, limited access to financial resources and underrepresentation in formal leadership structures highlights ongoing institutional challenges. Women's initiatives often rely on voluntary labor and informal funding mechanisms, making them vulnerable to economic shocks and leadership transitions. This reality underscores the need for deliberate institutional reforms that recognize women not only as helpers but as partners in mission and development. Yet, the endurance and adaptability of women's initiatives also demonstrate the transformative potential of faith-based empowerment, particularly when grounded in moral legitimacy and communal trust.

IV. Conclusion

This study has shown that women in the Methodist Diocese of Zonkwa are not passive beneficiaries of ecclesiastical programs but active agents of religious, social, and economic transformation. Through creative initiatives in economic empowerment, education, health advocacy, worship, and leadership, women integrate philosophical notions of agency and practical wisdom with Methodist theological commitments to service, social holiness, and justice. Their actions reveal a form of lived theology in which faith is embodied through everyday practices aimed at sustaining life and promoting communal flourishing.

The Zonkwa case demonstrates that development rooted in moral values and communal responsibility can emerge from within religious institutions, particularly when women are empowered

to act creatively and ethically. Recognizing and strengthening women's initiatives is therefore not only a matter of gender equity but also a strategic imperative for sustainable church growth and social cohesion in Northern Nigeria. By affirming women's agency and institutionalizing their contributions, the Methodist Church can deepen its witness as a transformative moral community responsive to the complex challenges of contemporary African society.

V. Recommendations

Institutional Support and Sustainable Financing

The Methodist Diocese of Zonkwa should establish a Diocesan Women's Development Fund dedicated to the sustainable financing of women-led initiatives. Philosophically, such institutional support affirms women's agency by transforming informal moral action into structurally recognized participation. Agency, as Kabeer (1999) argues, is most effective when supported by access to resources that enable individuals to translate intentions into sustained outcomes. A dedicated fund would therefore move women's initiatives from precarious voluntarism to institutional durability.

Religiously, this recommendation resonates with the Methodist theological commitment to stewardship and social holiness, which emphasizes the responsible management of resources for communal good. In practical terms, the fund could support cooperative societies, skill-acquisition centers, and small-scale enterprises already operated by women in Zonkwa, ensuring continuity and accountability. Transparent governance structures involving both clergy and women leaders would further reinforce trust and ethical responsibility.

Capacity Building and Leadership Development

Regular capacity-building programs should be instituted to enhance women's competencies in leadership, entrepreneurship, financial management, and digital literacy. From a philosophical standpoint, capacity building expands human capabilities, enabling individuals to exercise practical wisdom (phronesis) in increasingly complex socio-economic environments. Empowerment, in this sense, is not only material but cognitive and relational equipping women to make informed decisions and adapt creatively to change (Gyekye, 1997; Kabeer, 1999).

Theologically, leadership development aligns with the Christian understanding of vocation as a calling to serve others through the responsible use of one's gifts. Training programs could draw on existing diocesan structures, such as women's fellowships and youth ministries, to deliver workshops on project management, digital communication, and social entrepreneurship. Enhanced digital literacy, in particular, would enable women in Zonkwa to access wider markets, mobilize resources, and engage in advocacy within and beyond the church.

Theological Re-orientation and Gender-Inclusive Teaching

The Diocese should actively promote gender-inclusive interpretations of scripture and Methodist doctrine through clergy training, Bible study materials, and theological education programs. Philosophically, this approach reflects a commitment to justice as fairness, challenging interpretive traditions that marginalize women's voices while affirming equal moral worth. Religious narratives and doctrines shape social imagination; inclusive theology therefore functions as a powerful tool for cultural transformation.

Within Methodist tradition, John Wesley's emphasis on grace, moral equality, and social holiness provides a strong theological foundation for recognizing women's leadership and ministry (Chilcote, 1993). In Zonkwa, contextual Bible studies that highlight women's roles in biblical history and early Methodism can help reframe gender relations within the church. Such theological re-orientation would legitimize women's initiatives not as auxiliary contributions but as integral expressions of Christian discipleship.

Strategic Partnerships and Community Engagement

The Methodist Diocese of Zonkwa should strengthen partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), faith-based organizations, and government agencies, particularly in the areas of health, education, and social welfare. Philosophically, partnerships reflect the African communitarian ethic that emphasizes collective problem-solving and shared responsibility for social wellbeing (Gyekye, 1997).

Religiously, collaboration aligns with the Methodist vision of mission as cooperative engagement in God's redemptive work. Partnerships could enhance women-led initiatives in maternal health education, literacy programs, and support for widows and vulnerable populations by providing technical expertise, funding, and policy support. Such collaboration would also position the church as an active stakeholder in local development planning, strengthening its moral and social influence.

Further Research and Knowledge Production

Finally, the Diocese and affiliated academic institutions should encourage longitudinal and interdisciplinary research on the long-term impact of women's initiatives on community development, religious life, and gender relations. From a philosophical perspective, sustained inquiry is essential for reflective practice, allowing institutions to learn from experience and adapt ethically over time. Research also validates women's contributions by documenting them within scholarly and policy-relevant frameworks.

Religiously, research supports the Methodist tradition of thoughtful engagement with social realities, ensuring that theology remains responsive to lived experience. Studies combining historical analysis, sociology of religion, and development studies would deepen understanding of how women's creative initiatives shape both church and society in southern Kaduna. Such evidence-based knowledge can inform policy formulation, theological education, and program design, ensuring that women's agency continues to be nurtured and sustained.

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