

# Contested Authority: Mizo Christian Youth and the Evolving Debate on Women's Leadership in the Church

Grace Lalkhawngaihi

Department of Psychology, Zakir Husain Delhi College, University of Delhi

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the attitudes of Indian Mizo Christian youth towards women's leadership in the church, a pivotal institution within a traditionally patriarchal society. Using a qualitative methodology, data from 30 youth were collected using Keith Drury's Women Leadership Scale and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal a complex interplay of progressive and conservative forces. While a significant portion of respondents advocated for gender equality based on spiritual gifts and divine calling, substantial resistance persisted against the ordination of women and their authority over men. This opposition was primarily justified through specific biblical interpretations, entrenched cultural norms, and beliefs in male superiority. The study concludes that the perspectives of Indian Mizo Christian youth are in a distinct state of transition, embodying a tension between modern, egalitarian ideals and the powerful, enduring influence of socio-religious traditions.

**Keywords:** Women Leadership, Church, Gender Equality, Patriarchy, Youth Attitudes

## INTRODUCTION

The traditional Mizo society situated in the North-east of India was predominantly patriarchal, a system where men were vested with supreme authority, often leading to the objectification of women and their systematic exclusion from the administrative and decision-making functions of the community (Nunthara, 1996). The arrival of English missionaries in 1891 in Mizoram, India, catalyzed a profound social transformation, famously converting a "head-hunting community into a civilised society" (Lloyd, 1991). However, as scholars like Chatterjee (2003) argue in the context of colonialism, such transformations are often selective. In the Mizo case, the project of 'civilization' remained conspicuously incomplete in the realm of gender dynamics. The pre-existing structures of gender inequality were not dismantled but were effectively transposed into the newly adopted religious institution, the Church (Zama, 2012).

The church in Mizoram has evolved beyond a mere place of worship to become a central socio-cultural and political force, deeply influencing Mizo identity and social norms (Pachau, 2002). Consequently, the question of women's leadership within the church serves as a critical lens for examining broader social issues. It directly challenges the legacy of patriarchy, interrogates the interpretation of religious texts, and reveals the processes of socialization where gender roles are internalized and contested. The attitudes of Christian youth, who are uniquely positioned at the intersection of tradition and modernity, serve as a significant barometer for forecasting potential future shifts within this domain (Arnett, 2002).

This research paper presents a study aimed at understanding the attitudes of Mizo Christian youth towards women's leadership in the church. By analyzing their responses, this paper will explore the theological, cultural, and social arguments that both constrain and enable the possibility of gender-inclusive leadership within one of Mizoram's most influential institutions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is situated at the intersection of several interconnected bodies of literature, each providing a crucial framework for understanding the complexities of women's leadership in the Mizo church.

The first body of literature concerns Women in Christianity and Feminist Theology. This field offers a critical re-examination of the Bible, challenging patriarchal interpretations that have historically suppressed women's roles. Feminist theologians, such as Fiorenza (1983), have worked to recover the significant presence and leadership of women in the early Christian movement, while others have articulated a theology of liberation grounded in the principle of equality in Christ, as articulated in Galatians 3:28 (Parvey, 1991). This scholarly work provides the theological tools to deconstruct arguments against women's ordination and leadership.

Secondly, research on Women and Leadership in the social sciences provides empirical evidence and theoretical models for understanding the barriers women face. Studies consistently demonstrate that women possess effective leadership capabilities, often exhibiting transformational and democratic styles (Eagly & Carli, 2003). However, this literature also documents pervasive obstacles, including the "glass ceiling," gender bias, and the "think manager-think male" stereotype (Schein, 2001), which are highly relevant to the resistance women face in ecclesiastical leadership.

Finally, a growing corpus of work on Mizo Women and Christianity provides the essential historical and cultural context. Scholars have documented how Christianity, while introducing education and new social opportunities for Mizo women, simultaneously reinforced a patriarchal hierarchy within the church structure (K. Thanzauva, 1997; Z. Dingal, 2015). The ordained ministry, in particular, has remained a predominantly male preserve, with women's roles largely confined to gender-segregated auxiliaries.

This study contributes to this under-researched area by focusing specifically on the perspectives of Mizo Christian youth. While existing literature has outlined the historical and structural barriers, there is a scarcity of research investigating the attitudes of the younger generation, whose views are crucial for understanding the potential for future ecclesial and social change.

## **Rationale for the Study**

While extensive scholarship has documented the historical and structural barriers facing women in the Mizo church, a critical gap exists in understanding the perceptions of the generation that will inherit and shape this institution. The attitudes of Mizo Christian youth, who navigate the intersecting forces of traditional norms, modern education, and global perspectives, have not been sufficiently investigated. As future lay leaders, theologians, and potential reformers of the church, their views on women's leadership are not merely academic; they are a vital indicator of the institution's future trajectory. This study is therefore necessary to gauge whether the deep-seated patriarchal structures within the church are being reinforced or challenged by its rising generation, making their attitudes a critical subject for scholarly inquiry.

## **Objective**

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the attitudes of Mizo Christian youth towards women's leadership within the church. This objective will facilitate an exploration of the complex factors that either constrain or enable support for women in roles of religious authority, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of the potential for change within one of Mizoram's most influential institutions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample**

The study recruited 30 respondents (15 male, 15 female) aged 18 to 28 from The Mizo Christian Fellowship (North Branch). This purposive sampling ensured the participants were actively engaged in a Christian community.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected using Keith Drury's Women Leadership Scale, which presents ten progressive statements on women's leadership, from viewing them as property (Statement 1) to full equality in all positions (Statement 10). Respondents were engaged in a discussion based on these statements.

## **Method of Analysis**

The responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. Key phrases and ideas from the transcripts were coded, and these codes were subsequently grouped into emergent themes representing both supportive and oppositional attitudes.

## **RESULTS**

The analysis revealed a spectrum of attitudes, which were organized into two overarching thematic categories: arguments For and Against women's leadership in the church.

### **Themes Supporting Women's Leadership**

#### **Leadership based on Calling, Gifts, and Merit**

A prominent theme, especially among those leaning towards Statement 10, was that leadership should be determined by divine calling, spiritual gifts, and personal merit rather than gender. As M-No.7 asserted, his choice was driven by the word "Gifts," appreciating the unique attributes women bring. F-No1 similarly emphasized that a person's rise should be based on "quality rather than her gender or sex," though she critiqued the over-reliance on "calling" as potentially diminishing the role of personal effort and qualification.

#### **Distinction between Difference and Inequality**

Several respondents clearly distinguished between gender differences and gender inequality. F-No5 succinctly stated, "difference should not be confused with inequality." M-No.8 engaged in a sophisticated sociological argument, suggesting that the aggregate of different attributes between men and women could balance out to a state of overall equality, challenging the basis for systemic discrimination.

#### **Critique of Biblical Interpretation and Societal Norms**

Some respondents directly challenged the traditional justifications for barring women. M-No.7 accused the church of being "cruel" and suggested that the prohibition of women ministers is based on a "wrong interpretation of the Bible." M-No.8 further argued that the perceived physical and mental weakness of women is a "socially accepted norm," a product of nurture rather than nature, implying that these barriers are socially constructed and can be dismantled.

#### **A Vision for Future Equality**

There was a sense of optimism and a call for change among some. M-No.5, while currently opposing ordination, believed it "can happen" in the future. Others, like M-No.8, argued that successful women should not be seen as "exceptions" but as proof of a general "possibility." There was also a call for more female role models to "champion fight for their cause in Church."

### **Themes Opposing Women's Leadership**

#### **Limited Jurisdiction of Women's Authority**

A consistent barrier was the belief that women can lead other women and children but should not hold authority over men. F-No17 explicitly stated, "women can lead others but they are suited to lead children and women, they should not lead men." This creates a separate but unequal sphere of influence within the church.

#### **Theological Sanction of Male Headship**

Opposition was often rooted in a specific interpretation of the Bible. F-No17 justified male leadership by stating "men are superior in the way God created them," reflecting the "man as the head" theology (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:3). This provides a divine mandate for the patriarchal structure, making it resistant to change.

## The Bar on Ordination

The most significant and persistent barrier was against the ordination of women. Respondents like M-No.5 and F-No17 expressed support for women in various church roles but drew a firm line at ordination, viewing it as "reserved for only males." This highlights the pulpit and sacramental authority as the ultimate masculine domains.

## Cultural Pragmatism and Male Ego

Some arguments were based on socio-cultural pragmatism rather than strict theology. M-No.8 observed that in the current society, "men in general may not be willing to follow women leaders," pointing to the "male ego" as a practical obstacle. This suggests that even if theological arguments were resolved, cultural resistance would remain.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the attitudes of Mizo Christian youth towards women's leadership in the church are not monolithic but are instead a complex tapestry woven with threads of progressive thought and deep-seated traditionalism. This discussion will interpret these findings through the lenses of patriarchal social structures, theological hermeneutics, and the internalization of gender roles, situating the Mizo experience within broader scholarly discourse.

### The Enduring Shadow of Patriarchy: Culture and the "Male Ego"

The historical context of a "traditional patriarchal system" where "men were regarded as the supreme authority" provides the foundational framework for understanding the resistance to women's leadership. Despite the civilizing mission of the English missionaries in 1891, the administrative gender hierarchy was transposed into the church (Thanzauva, 1997). This legacy is evident in the responses. The argument that "women can lead others but they are suited to lead children and women, they should not lead men" (F-No17) and the observation that "men in general may not be willing to follow women leaders" (M-No.8) are direct reflections of this patriarchal norm.

This aligns with the concept of the "glass ceiling," an invisible barrier based on attitudinal and organizational bias that prevents women from reaching top leadership positions (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990). In the Mizo church context, this is not merely a ceiling but a theological and cultural wall, segregating leadership by gender. The male respondent's reference to the "male ego" underscores that the barrier is not always a matter of formal doctrine but also of informal social and psychological resistance to a reversal of traditional power dynamics. As noted by L. H. Malsawmdawngliana (2019), the Mizo public sphere, heavily influenced by the church, remains a domain where male authority is normalized, making female leadership over men seem culturally incongruent.

### Theological Hermeneutics: The Battle for Biblical Interpretation

The most potent justifications for limiting women's leadership are theological. Respondents who opposed women leading men or being ordained cited the "superiority of men as created by God" (F-No17), a clear reference to complementarian theology which posits that men and women have distinct, non-overlapping roles, with leadership being a male responsibility (Grudem, 2021). This perspective often draws from biblical passages like 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:12 to argue for male headship in the church and home.

However, a significant finding of this study is the emergence of a counter-narrative among the youth that directly challenges this hermeneutic. Respondent M-No.7's assertion that "there's a part where there cant be women ministers in the Bible or something. We must have interpreted it wrongly somewhere down the line" is a clear articulation of a feminist or egalitarian theological perspective. Egalitarian theologians argue that the overarching biblical message is one of redemption and equality in Christ (Galatians 3:28) and that the restrictive passages must be understood in their specific historical and cultural context (Pierce & Groothuis,

2004). This indicates a growing critical engagement with scripture among Mizo youth, moving away from passive acceptance of traditional interpretations towards a more contextual and critical analysis. This theological tension is the central battleground upon the issue of women's ordination is fought.

### **Distinguishing Difference from Inequality: A Conceptual Leap**

A sophisticated theme that emerged was the conscious effort to separate gender difference from gender inequality. As F-No5 stated, "difference should not be confused with inequality." This was further elaborated by M-No.8, who philosophically reasoned that if one were to take "the universal aggregate of all these attributes that women are good or bad at... we would have an aggregate that might balance itself such that men and women may be considered equal."

This line of thinking directly counters the patriarchal logic that difference inherently justifies hierarchy. It reflects an understanding of diversity in leadership, where different qualities—often stereotyped as male (agentic) and female (communal)—can be complementary and equally valuable (Eagly & Carli, 2003). M-No.7's appreciation for women being "more caring and loving" and bringing "emotion into reality" highlights this valuation of traditionally feminine attributes. By rejecting the premise that difference necessitates inferiority, these respondents create a logical foundation for gender equality that is not contingent on sameness.

### **Internalized Subordination and the "Calling" Paradigm**

The study also provides evidence of the internalization of patriarchal norms, a process where subordinate groups accept the logic of their own subordination (Kabeer, 1999). The response of F-No17, who affirms women's value and capability but still denies them leadership over men and ordination, is a classic example. She has internalized the boundaries of her authority within the church, "orienting their commitment accordingly," as noted in the coded themes.

Furthermore, the paradigm of "calling and gifts" (Statement 10), while progressive in its intent to bypass gender, was critically examined by F-No1. She argued that reducing a woman's achievement to "some divine intervention or ascription based" risks undermining her "personal qualities, effort etc." This is a crucial critique. It suggests that for women to be truly equal, their leadership must be recognized as earned through merit and competence, not merely as a divine exception to a masculine rule. An over-reliance on "calling" can paradoxically maintain the status quo by suggesting that only a few, extraordinary women are chosen by God to lead, thereby not challenging the underlying structural inequality (Robert, 2016).

### **Implications and Limitations**

This study on Mizo Christian youth attitudes toward women's leadership carries significant implications for the future of the church and society. The findings reveal a clear generational divide, suggesting that existing church policies are increasingly misaligned with the perspectives of its youth. For church leadership, this signals an urgent need for theological dialogue and the creation of pathways for women in preaching and administrative roles to remain relevant. Beyond the church walls, the ideological shift among young people provides a foundation for challenging patriarchal norms across Mizo society, empowering women and youth by validating their experiences and potentially galvanizing them as agents of change. Furthermore, the study opens crucial avenues for future research, including longitudinal studies, denominational comparisons, and an examination of current church leaders' attitudes to fully map this evolving landscape.

However, the insights must be considered within the study's specific limitations. The findings, while rich in detail, are not universally generalizable due to the small, qualitative sample size drawn from a single fellowship, which may not represent the full diversity of Mizo Christian youth. The potential for social desirability bias means respondents may not have been fully candid on this sensitive topic. Additionally, the research does not account for theological variations across different denominations, and its methodological reliance on a single, pre-defined scale may have overlooked uniquely Mizo cultural or theological concepts that could have emerged from a more open-ended investigative approach.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the attitudes of Mizo Christian youth towards women's leadership are in a state of flux, embodying a profound tension between the forces of change and continuity. On one hand, there is a clear, articulate, and growing movement that champions equality based on merit, critiques traditional biblical interpretations, and conceptually separates difference from inequality. On the other hand, the powerful, intertwined forces of cultural patriarchy, a complementarian reading of scripture, and the internalization of subordination continue to pose significant barriers, particularly against the ordination of women and their leadership over men.

The youth are, therefore, not passive inheritors of tradition but active participants in a slow-moving transformation of their religious and social landscape. Their dialogues and doubts signify a potential for change from within. For the Mizo church to genuinely engage with its entire membership, it must foster a more robust theological dialogue on gender, consciously promote and celebrate female leaders as role models, and critically examine how its structures perpetuate a cultural patriarchy that may be at odds with the liberative core of the Christian gospel. The future of women's leadership in the Mizo church depends on which of these competing narratives ultimately captures the heart of its youth.

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### Ethical approval and informed consent statements

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the The North Delhi Mizo Christian Fellowship Church. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the research, and confidentiality and anonymity were assured.

### Declaration of conflicting interest

No potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Data availability statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. However, anonymized extracts of the verbatim responses are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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