

The Contributions and Challenges Faced by Women and Young People in Shaping Ecumenical Activities in Uganda

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Abstract

This study explored the contributions and challenges faced by women and young people in shaping ecumenical activities in Uganda. It was grounded in the recognition that women and youth were vital actors in advancing Christian unity, peacebuilding, social justice, and interfaith engagement within contemporary church contexts. While their participation had expanded in recent years, it often remained constrained by structural, cultural, and theological limitations. The study therefore examined the roles these groups played, analyzed their contributions to ecumenical cooperation, identified the challenges they encountered, and proposed ways to strengthen their participation. A qualitative research approach was adopted, drawing on feminist theory, participatory ecclesiology, and empowerment theory as complementary analytical frameworks. Feminist theory enabled a critical examination of gendered patterns of exclusion and inequality within ecclesial and ecumenical structures. Participatory ecclesiology provided a lens for understanding the Church as a community in which all members were called to active involvement in its life and mission. Empowerment theory informed the analysis of how institutional practices either enabled or constrained meaningful participation by women and young people. The study was based on a documentary analysis of institutional reports, policy documents, and publications from the World Council of Churches, the All-Africa Conference of Churches, and the Uganda Joint Christian Council, as well as contemporary scholarly literature. Thematic analysis was used to identify key patterns across these sources. Findings indicated that women and young people contributed significantly through community mobilization, advocacy, peacebuilding, and interfaith dialogue, but their engagement was limited by patriarchal leadership structures and socio-economic constraints.

Keywords: *Ecumenism, Women's Participation, Youth Engagement, Participatory Ecclesiology, Empowerment*

1.0 Introduction

Ecumenism has increasingly emerged as a central expression of contemporary Christian identity and mission, particularly in relation to unity, peacebuilding, and social transformation. At the global level, the World Council of Churches has consistently affirmed that the Church is most authentically expressed when all its members, including women and young people, participate fully in its life, governance, and witness. Contemporary ecumenical scholarship strengthens this view by arguing that visible Christian unity cannot be sustained where structural, cultural, or symbolic forms of exclusion continue to limit meaningful participation (Phan, 2017: 45; Best, 2008: 112). Within this understanding, ecumenism is increasingly framed not only as institutional

cooperation, but as a lived reality of shared participation, mutual accountability, and co-responsibility within the body of Christ.

At the continental level, the All-Africa Conference of Churches has played a significant role in advancing justice, reconciliation, and holistic development across Africa. Its work has sought to integrate theological reflection with the lived socio-economic and political realities of African communities. However, scholarly perspectives suggest that African ecumenical practice continues to be shaped by enduring patriarchal traditions and generational hierarchies, which tend to influence the extent and depth of women's and youth participation in leadership and decision-making spaces (Kalu, 2008: 78; Gifford, 2015: 134). While their involvement is increasingly acknowledged, it is often experienced within constrained institutional pathways that may limit their broader influence on ecumenical direction and policy.

In Uganda, the Uganda Joint Christian Council provides a key national platform for fostering unity among Christian denominations and engaging public life from a shared Christian perspective. Nevertheless, scholars such as Bediako (2004: 201) and Mugambi (2003: 156) emphasize that African contextual theology must more deliberately engage questions of power, representation, and inclusion if ecumenism is to remain both credible and transformative. Similar realities are evident at the local level in Kampala and Jinja cities, where ecumenical engagement is expressed through community outreach, dialogue, and development initiatives. However, the participation of women and young people is still shaped by socio-cultural expectations, economic constraints and limited access to leadership structures (Orobator, 2018: 93; Kanyandago, 2010: 67). This study therefore, situated itself within these scholarly debates to critically examine how more inclusive, participatory and empowering forms of ecumenical life may be strengthened across global, continental, national and local contexts.

1.1 The Roles of Women and Young People in Shaping Ecumenical Activities

Ecumenical life in Uganda is best understood as a lived and evolving process in which women and young people are not merely participants in church programs, but active contributors to the shaping of ecumenical identity, practice, and direction. Their roles, when examined critically, reveal both the vitality of grassroots ecumenism and the persistent structural limitations that continue to

influence whose voices are most influential in formal church life. Across global, continental, and Ugandan contexts, the literature consistently affirms their importance, while also highlighting an ongoing imbalance between participation and decision-making authority.

At the global level, the World Council of Churches presents ecumenism as a shared calling in which the whole people of God participate in the Church's mission. Scholars such as Phan (2017: 45) argue that this vision requires a move towards participatory ecclesiology, where unity is expressed through inclusion, mutual responsibility, and shared discernment. Within this understanding, women and young people are not peripheral to ecumenism but integral to its authenticity, as they embody lived expressions of faith that continually renew the Church's public witness.

At the continental level, the All-Africa Conference of Churches has consistently promoted justice, reconciliation, and holistic transformation across African societies. However, scholars such as Kalu (2008: 78) and Gifford (2015: 134) observe that despite their visible presence in church life, women and youth are often situated within supportive or operational roles such as mobilization, caregiving, evangelism, and community outreach. While these roles are essential to sustaining church life, they frequently do not translate into equivalent influence in strategic leadership and decision-making processes.

In the Ugandan context, the Uganda Joint Christian Council provides a formal structure for ecumenical cooperation among Christian denominations. Within this framework, women and young people play an important role in shaping ecumenical activities through prayer movements, social outreach, peacebuilding initiatives, and interchurch collaboration. They contribute significantly to community mobilization and advocacy, particularly on issues such as poverty, education, health, and social cohesion. Nevertheless, as Bediako (2004: 201) and Mugambi (2003: 156) note, their participation is often more visible at the program level than within formal governance and policy-making spaces.

At the local level in Kampala and Jinja, this dynamic becomes more pronounced. Women and youth are frequently at the forefront of ecumenical engagement in practical terms, yet their influence is shaped by socio-cultural expectations, economic constraints, and inherited church

hierarchies. In many cases, they sustain the daily life of ecumenism while remaining underrepresented in its institutional authorship.

The literature presents a clear, nuanced argument that women and young people are indispensable to shaping ecumenical activities through mobilization, reconciliation, advocacy, and lived faith. However, there remains a significant gap between their active contribution and their formal inclusion in leadership and decision-making structures. Strengthening ecumenism in Uganda, therefore, requires not only recognizing their role but also intentionally integrating them into the governance and theological life of the Church, so that participation is matched by genuine influence.

1.2 The Contributions of Women and Young People in Promoting Ecumenism

Women and young people contribute to ecumenical cooperation and Christian unity in Uganda in ways that are both deeply practical and theologically meaningful. Their role extends beyond participation in organized church programs to shaping how ecumenism is experienced in everyday life. When examined closely, their contribution reveals that ecumenical unity is not primarily sustained through formal agreements or institutional frameworks, but through lived relationships, shared practices, and collective responsibility within communities.

A key dimension of this contribution lies in their ability to translate ecumenical ideals into lived experience. At the global level, Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001) argues that women express theology through lived realities, thereby grounding faith in everyday contexts. This insight is particularly visible in Uganda, where women across denominations often organize joint prayer fellowships, mothers' unions, and community care initiatives that bring together believers from Anglican, Catholic, Pentecostal, and Orthodox traditions. For example, in both Kampala and Jinja, interdenominational women's prayer gatherings are common, especially during national moments of crisis or communal need. These spaces, though informal, foster unity at a relational level, making ecumenism tangible in daily Christian life.

Young people similarly translate ecumenical ideals into practice through creative and contemporary forms of engagement. As Lovemore Togarasei (2016) notes, youth often reshape religious expression through innovation. In Uganda, this is evident in interchurch youth

conferences, gospel concerts, and social media platforms where young Christians from different denominations collaborate. For instance, youth-led online prayer meetings and WhatsApp fellowship groups frequently cut across denominational boundaries, creating spaces where theological differences are less emphasized and shared faith is foregrounded. In this way, young people ensure that ecumenism remains relevant within a rapidly changing social and technological environment.

Another important contribution lies in the building and sustaining of relational unity. Kalu (2008: 78) observes that African Christianity is rooted in relationships rather than rigid institutional systems. Within Uganda, this relational dimension is clearly visible in community-level interactions. Women often play a central role in nurturing these relationships through acts of hospitality, caregiving, and consistent fellowship. For example, during events such as weddings, funerals, and community gatherings, women from different church backgrounds frequently collaborate to organize and support these occasions, thereby reinforcing interdenominational bonds.

Similarly, young people contribute to relational unity through peer networks and shared activities such as sports ministries, campus fellowships, and community outreach programs. Local scholars such as John Mary Waliggo (2002) emphasize that African communal life is sustained through shared experiences and relationships. In this context, ecumenism is not only discussed but lived through everyday interactions that foster trust and mutual understanding.

Women and young people also play a vital role in peacebuilding and reconciliation, which are central to ecumenical unity. Orobator (2018: 93) notes that reconciliation in African contexts is often achieved through relational processes rather than formal mechanisms. In Uganda, this is particularly evident in post-conflict and community reconciliation efforts, where women frequently act as mediators within families and neighborhoods. For instance, in communities affected by political or social tensions, women's groups often facilitate dialogue and promote forgiveness at a local level.

Young people, on the other hand, participate in peacebuilding through interfaith and interdenominational dialogue platforms, particularly in urban centers like Kampala. Programs

organized by churches and ecumenical bodies often bring together youth from different backgrounds to discuss issues such as conflict, identity, and social cohesion. These initiatives not only promote understanding but also cultivate a shared sense of responsibility for unity.

Their contribution further extends to social transformation and advocacy. As Gifford (2015: 134) observes, African churches serve as important spaces for addressing social and economic challenges. In Uganda, women and young people are often at the forefront of initiatives related to education, health, and economic empowerment. For example, women's church groups frequently organize savings and credit associations, support vulnerable families, and engage in health awareness campaigns. Young people, meanwhile, lead initiatives addressing unemployment, substance abuse, and digital literacy within their communities.

Local scholars such as Emmanuel Katongole (2011) argue that the Church in Africa must respond to real social challenges in order to remain meaningful. In this regard, the involvement of women and youth ensures that ecumenism is not detached from lived realities but actively engaged in addressing community needs.

In addition, young people contribute significantly to innovation and renewal within ecclesial life. As noted by De Gruchy (2018) and Tienou (2014), youth often play a leading role in reshaping church practices. In Uganda, this is evident in the rise of digital ministry, contemporary worship styles, and interchurch youth fellowships that bring together believers across denominational lines. Women also contribute to renewal through leadership in informal ecclesial spaces, such as prayer groups, counseling ministries, and community outreach programs, where much of the Church's daily life is sustained.

These contributions can be understood in three interconnected ways: sustaining daily ecclesial life, strengthening relational networks across denominations, and ensuring that ecumenism remains socially responsive and contextually relevant. While their influence is often more visible at the grassroots level than within formal leadership structures, it is clear that the lived reality of ecumenical unity in Uganda is largely sustained through their presence, creativity, and commitment.

In essence, women and young people do not merely support ecumenical cooperation; they actively embody and sustain it. Through their everyday practices, relationships, and initiatives, they ensure that ecumenism is not only proclaimed in institutional frameworks but is continually enacted in the life of the Church and the wider community.

1.3 Challenges Faced by Women and Young People in Ecumenical Participation

Women and young people in Uganda make significant contributions to ecumenical cooperation and Christian unity; however, their participation is shaped by persistent, interconnected challenges. These challenges are not isolated, but are embedded within ecclesial governance structures, cultural expectations, socio-economic realities, and theological traditions. As a result, participation remains strong at the grassroots level but comparatively limited within formal authority and decision-making spaces.

(a) Structural Exclusion within Church Governance Systems

Although women and young people are actively involved in ecumenical programs, prayer initiatives, and community outreach, they are often underrepresented in decision-making structures. In many church councils, diocesan boards, and ecumenical committees, leadership positions are predominantly occupied by senior clergy, who are largely male.

This reflects a broader pattern within African ecclesiology. Kwame Bediako (2004: 201) observes that inherited ecclesial structures continue to shape authority in ways that limit inclusive participation, while Jesse N. K. Mugambi (2003: 156) highlights the persistence of hierarchical decision-making. Within Ugandan ecumenical platforms such as the Uganda Joint Christian Council, women and youth may actively participate in programs, yet their presence in strategic leadership spaces remains limited. For example, national ecumenical dialogues or policy consultations are often led by senior church leaders, with minimal direct representation of youth or women in decision-making roles.

(b) Patriarchal and Generational Cultural Expectations

Cultural norms continue to shape perceptions of leadership within both the church and society. Leadership is frequently associated with masculinity, age, and seniority, which indirectly sidelines women and young people.

Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001) critiques these gendered assumptions, noting that they restrict women's theological voice and leadership potential. Similarly, Kalu (2008: 78) and Lovemore Togarasei (2016) argue that youth agency is often undervalued within African ecclesial contexts. In Uganda, this is evident in the fact that women are often expected to lead choirs, hospitality, or caregiving ministries, while men dominate governance roles. Young people, particularly in established denominations, are frequently expected to "wait their turn," which limits their immediate contributions to leadership and innovation.

(c) Socio-Economic Limitations and Inequality

Economic constraints significantly affect the ability of women and young people to participate consistently in ecumenical activities. Many programs require resources for transport, accommodation, or participation fees, which can be prohibitive.

Philip Gifford (2015: 134) notes that socio-economic inequality directly influences levels of engagement within African churches. In practical terms, a young person from a low-income background in Kampala or Jinja may be unable to attend regional ecumenical conferences, while women with limited financial independence may struggle to sustain long-term involvement. This results in uneven participation, where those with greater economic means are more consistently represented.

(d) Institutional Fragility and Donor Dependency

Many ecumenical initiatives, particularly those targeting women and youth, rely on external funding. While such support enables programs to begin, it often affects their sustainability.

Kalu (2008) observes that donor-dependent initiatives frequently struggle to continue beyond funding cycles. Within institutions such as the UJCC, this can be seen in youth empowerment programs or women's leadership initiatives that operate effectively for a period but diminish once

funding is withdrawn. As a result, long-term transformation and continuity in leadership development are often compromised.

(e) Theological and Denominational Differences

While ecumenical bodies promote unity, denominational identities sometimes limit the depth of collaboration. Churches often maintain distinct doctrinal positions that shape participation and engagement.

Orobator (2018: 93) notes that African Christianity constantly negotiates the balance between unity and doctrinal integrity, while Stanley Hauerwas (2015) cautions that strong ecclesial identities may restrict shared expressions of faith. In Uganda, this is visible in situations where certain denominations may hesitate to fully engage in joint worship, sacramental sharing, or theological dialogue, thereby limiting the scope of ecumenical interaction.

(f) Limited Leadership Development and Mentorship Opportunities

Although training opportunities exist, they are often not systematically structured or equally accessible. Leadership formation for women and youth tends to be occasional rather than sustained.

Tienou (2014) emphasizes that effective ecclesial leadership requires intentional formation, while John de Gruchy (2018) highlights the importance of mentorship in leadership development. In Uganda, mentorship is often informal and dependent on personal relationships rather than institutional programs. This limits the ability of women and young people to transition from participation into leadership roles.

(g) Social Expectations and Identity Pressures

Social expectations further shape participation. Women are often expected to prioritize domestic and family responsibilities, which can limit their availability for leadership roles. Young people, on the other hand, may face pressure to conform to existing structures rather than introduce new ideas.

Local scholars such as Emmanuel Katongole (2011) highlight how social realities shape Christian practice in Africa. In this context, these expectations affect confidence, visibility, and willingness to assume leadership responsibilities. For example, a young leader proposing new forms of worship or digital engagement may face resistance from more traditional leadership structures.

These challenges demonstrate that while women and young people are indispensable to ecumenical life in Uganda, their participation is significantly shaped by structural, cultural, economic, and institutional constraints. They remain highly active at the grassroots level, more especially in organizing, sustaining, and embodying ecumenical unity, yet their influence within formal decision-making spaces remains limited.

Addressing these challenges, therefore, requires more than increased participation; it calls for intentional transformation of ecclesial structures, cultural assumptions, and institutional practices. Only through such changes can ecumenical life move towards genuinely participatory, inclusive, and equitable forms of leadership in which women and young people are recognized not only as contributors, but as co-shapers of the Church's unity and mission.

2.0 Strategies for Enhancing Participation in Ecumenical Activities

Enhancing the participation and influence of women and young people in ecumenical activities in Uganda requires a shift that goes beyond increasing numbers or involvement in programs. It calls for a more thoughtful transformation of how churches understand leadership, authority, and shared responsibility. While women and young people are already deeply involved in the day-to-day life of the Church through prayer groups, outreach work, fellowship activities, and community service, their influence is often limited in shaping decisions and setting direction. This gap between participation and influence is what the following strategies seek to address.

(a) Strengthen participatory church structures

Many ecumenical systems remain organized in ways that concentrate authority in the hands of senior leaders. This means that even when women and young people are actively involved, they are rarely present where key decisions are made. The vision of the World Council of Churches (1948) challenges this imbalance by affirming that the Church is only fully itself when all its

members participate meaningfully in its life and mission. In practical terms, this means creating governance systems in which women and youth are not just included but genuinely heard and able to influence outcomes.

(b) Leadership development and theological empowerment

Participation without preparation often limits long-term impact. Many young people and women are committed and active, but have not been systematically equipped for leadership roles. The All-Africa Conference of Churches (1963) emphasizes that the Church in Africa must be a transforming presence, shaped by the full participation of all God's people. This requires intentional investment in mentorship, theological education, and leadership training so that emerging leaders can grow in confidence and competence.

(c) Economic inclusion

In practical terms, financial limitations often determine the extent to which individuals can participate in ecumenical work. Many women and young people are unable to attend meetings, training sessions, or conferences due to transport costs or lack of resources. As Gifford (2015: 134) notes, poverty significantly shapes church participation in African contexts. Addressing this requires not only financial support for participation but also long-term empowerment initiatives such as income-generating projects within church communities.

(d) Institutional sustainability

Some ecumenical programs depend heavily on external funding, which can make them fragile and short-lived. The Uganda Joint Christian Council (1963) provides an important platform for unity and cooperation, but its programs involving women and youth must be embedded within sustainable structures rather than temporary projects. This ensures continuity and long-term impact.

(e) Cultural and theological reflection

In many contexts, leadership is still shaped by assumptions about gender and age, where men and older individuals are seen as natural leaders. Yet theologians such as Oduyoye (2001) remind us that women are not passive participants but active theological voices. Similarly, young people bring creativity and renewal that the Church cannot afford to ignore. Challenging these assumptions requires patient teaching, dialogue, and a willingness to re-examine long-held beliefs.

Another practical strategy is to create structured spaces for participation, such as youth forums, women's councils, and intergenerational platforms. Without such spaces, participation remains informal and easily overlooked. Structured platforms ensure that voices are consistently heard and represented within ecumenical processes.

And the ecumenical engagement must embrace innovation and collaboration, especially in ways that resonate with younger generations. Digital platforms, creative worship expressions, and joint community projects across denominations can make ecumenism more relevant and engaging. As Togarasei (2016) notes, young people are often at the forefront of innovation in African Christianity, and this energy should be harnessed rather than sidelined.

These strategies point to a simple but important truth: ecumenical renewal in Uganda will not come only from expanding participation, but from transforming how participation is valued and used. Women and young people are already central to the life of the Church; the challenge now is ensuring that their presence is matched by genuine influence, shared authority, and meaningful inclusion in shaping the future of ecumenical life.

3.0 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research design to explore the contributions and challenges faced by women and young people in shaping ecumenical activities in Uganda, with a particular focus on the cities of Kampala and Jinja. It is grounded in the understanding that ecumenism is not only an institutional framework but also a lived and relational reality expressed through everyday Christian practice, leadership structures, and community engagement.

The theoretical framework combines Feminist Theory, Participatory Ecclesiology, and Empowerment Theory. Feminist Theory, drawing on the work of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, offers a critical lens for understanding how gendered power relations within church and ecumenical structures often limit women's access to leadership, even though they remain highly active in ministry and community life. At the same time, it affirms women as active theological voices whose experiences shape the life of the Church.

Participatory Ecclesiology understands the Church as a communion in which all believers share responsibility for its mission and life. This is reflected in the vision of the World Council of Churches (1948), which emphasizes that unity is fully realized when all members participate meaningfully. In a similar way, the All-Africa Conference of Churches (1963) highlights a vision of the African Church that is engaged in justice, peace, and transformation through inclusive participation. These perspectives help to assess whether ecumenical practice in Uganda reflects its theological commitment to shared life and responsibility.

Empowerment Theory complements these perspectives by focusing on how individuals and groups gain access to resources, decision-making spaces, and leadership opportunities. It is particularly useful in understanding how women and young people move from active participation in church activities towards greater influence within ecumenical structures.

Methodologically, the study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive and interpretive orientation. Data were generated through document analysis of institutional policies, ecumenical reports, strategic plans, theological writings, and scholarly literature. Key sources included the WCC (1948), AACC (1963), and the Uganda Joint Christian Council (1963), which provides a national platform for Christian unity and coordinated action in Uganda.

The study was situated within the urban ecclesial contexts of the cities of Kampala and Jinja. Kampala reflects a more institutionalized, structured ecumenical environment shaped by national church bodies, while Jinja represents a more community-based, grassroots expression of Christian unity.

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), focusing on themes such as participation, leadership, gender, and generational dynamics, empowerment, and

institutional structures. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

The study shows that women and young people are central to ecumenical life in Uganda, yet their influence is often shaped and limited by structural, cultural, and institutional realities. It therefore calls for more intentional, inclusive, and participatory approaches within ecumenical practice.

4.0 Findings and Summary of the Study

This study examined the contributions and challenges of women and young people in shaping ecumenical activities in Uganda, with particular attention to the urban contexts of Kampala and Jinja Cities. Drawing on institutional documents, policy frameworks, and contemporary scholarly literature, and guided by feminist theology, participatory ecclesiology, and empowerment theory, the study sought to understand how ecumenical inclusion is both articulated in principle and experienced in practice.

The findings consistently demonstrate that women and young people are central to the lived expression of ecumenism in Uganda. Across documents from the World Council of Churches, All Africa Conference of Churches, and Uganda Joint Christian Council, as well as within contemporary scholarship, their contributions are particularly evident in peacebuilding, social advocacy, community mobilization, and interchurch collaboration.

Women, in particular, emerge as key agents within grassroots ecumenical life. Their roles in reconciliation processes, pastoral care, and community-based initiatives reflect a sustained and relational form of engagement. This finding resonates with the work of Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001), who argues that African women are not merely participants in ecclesial life but active bearers of theology shaped by lived experience. In a similar vein, Jesse N. K. Mugambi (2003) highlights the importance of social reconstruction within African Christianity, a process in which women play a vital role at the community level.

Young people also emerge as significant contributors, particularly through their creativity and adaptability. Their engagement in digital spaces, interdenominational dialogue, and outreach initiatives reflects what Lovemore Togarasei (2016) identifies as the innovative and transformative

role of youth within contemporary African Christianity. Their contributions often transcend institutional boundaries, pointing to a dynamic, responsive form of ecumenism attuned to changing social contexts.

However, despite this active participation, the study reveals a persistent gap between involvement and influence. While ecumenical bodies consistently affirm commitments to inclusion, leadership structures remain largely hierarchical, with authority concentrated among senior clergy. This observation aligns with Philip Gifford (2015: 134), who notes that institutional patterns within African Christianity often reproduce forms of inequality that limit broader participation in leadership.

The findings further indicate that cultural and generational norms continue to shape these dynamics. Patriarchal assumptions regarding leadership, alongside expectations linked to age and seniority, tend to position women in supportive roles and young people as learners rather than decision-makers. Oduyoye (2001) critiques such patterns for marginalizing women's voices, while Kwame Bediako (2004) underscores the need to engage critically with cultural contexts in shaping authentic African Christian identity.

Resource constraints also emerge as a significant factor. Many ecumenical initiatives depend on external funding, which often prioritizes short-term outcomes over long-term leadership development. As Ogbu Kalu (2008) observes, such dependency can undermine sustainability and limit meaningful institutional transformation.

These findings suggest that while women and young people are indispensable to ecumenical life in Uganda, their capacity to influence its direction remains constrained by structural, cultural, and economic factors. This reinforces the relevance of the study's theoretical framework. Feminist theology draws attention to gendered patterns of exclusion; participatory ecclesiology, as reflected in the visions of the WCC (1948) and AACC (1963), calls for inclusive and shared ecclesial life; and empowerment theory highlights the importance of access to resources and decision-making spaces (Zimmerman, 2000).

The study concludes that meaningful ecumenical inclusion requires a shift beyond symbolic participation towards genuine structural transformation. As John de Gruchy (2018) suggests,

authentic Christian community is realized through justice, inclusion, and shared responsibility. In this light, women and young people must be recognized not only as active participants but as co-shapers of ecumenical leadership, governance, and theological direction within the Church.

5.0 Conclusions

This study concludes that women remain indispensable to Uganda's ecumenical movement, particularly in areas such as peacebuilding, social advocacy, pastoral care, and community mobilization. Their contributions are consistently affirmed in institutional documents from the World Council of Churches, the All Africa Conference of Churches, and the Uganda Joint Christian Council, as well as in contemporary scholarly literature. At the grassroots level, women sustain relational networks of care and reconciliation that give practical expression to ecumenical unity. This aligns with the argument of Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001), who emphasizes that women are not peripheral to ecclesial life but are central to its theological and communal vitality.

However, the study also finds that women's leadership remains largely confined to informal and community-based spaces. Their progression into formal ecumenical governance structures is constrained by deeply embedded patriarchal norms and institutional hierarchies. As such, their contributions, while significant, are not matched by corresponding influence in decision-making processes. This reflects a broader pattern identified within African Christianity, where structural inequalities continue to shape leadership participation.

Young people are likewise shown to be dynamic and creative actors within ecumenical life. Their engagement in theological dialogue, digital evangelism, and community outreach reflects adaptability and innovation, particularly in responding to contemporary social realities. As Lovemore Togarasei (2016) observes, youth often drive renewal and transformation within African Christianity. Yet, despite this potential, their presence within formal leadership structures remains limited. Age-based hierarchies and expectations of deference to senior authority continue to restrict their participation in strategic decision-making, thereby limiting their ability to influence long-term institutional direction.

The study further concludes that the challenges faced by women and young people are systemic and interconnected. Ecumenical governance structures tend to remain male-dominated and

seniority-driven, reinforcing patterns of exclusion that are both cultural and institutional. These dynamics are compounded by practical constraints, including limited financial resources, insufficient leadership training opportunities, and a lack of sustained investment in capacity development. As Ogbu Kalu (2008) cautions, such structural limitations undermine long-term transformation and perpetuate existing inequalities.

Although ecumenical institutions, particularly the Uganda Joint Christian Council, have developed policy frameworks to promote gender equality and youth inclusion, the study finds that implementation remains uneven. Weak accountability mechanisms, limited institutional capacity, and insufficient resource allocation have hindered the translation of these commitments into practice. This gap between policy and lived reality reflects what Philip Gifford (2015) describes as the persistence of structural inequalities within ecclesial systems.

From a theoretical perspective, the study affirms the continued relevance of participatory ecclesiology and empowerment theory. Participatory ecclesiology, as reflected in the visions of the WCC (1948) and the AACC (1963), calls for a Church in which all members share responsibility for leadership and mission. Empowerment theory further highlights the importance of enabling individuals and groups to exercise agency and influence over decisions that shape their lives (Zimmerman, 2000).

The study underscores that authentic ecumenism in Uganda requires more than symbolic inclusion. It calls for deliberate structural transformation that addresses cultural assumptions, redistributes authority, and creates space for shared leadership. In line with John de Gruchy (2018), genuine Christian unity is realized not only in shared belief but in just and inclusive participation. Women and young people must therefore be recognized not merely as contributors to ecumenical life, but as essential partners in shaping its present realities and future direction.

6.0 Recommendations

(a) Policy and Institutional Reforms

Ecumenical institutions are encouraged to strengthen the implementation of existing gender and youth inclusion policies by moving beyond aspirational statements towards clear, enforceable

frameworks. While commitments to inclusion are evident in documents from the World Council of Churches, the All Africa Conference of Churches, and the Uganda Joint Christian Council, the study has shown that practical implementation remains uneven.

To address this, structured mechanisms such as representation benchmarks, quota systems, or affirmative action strategies should be considered to ensure that women and young people are meaningfully included in decision-making bodies. This aligns with the principles of participatory ecclesiology, which emphasize shared responsibility in the life and mission of the Church. As John de Gruchy (2018) argues, authentic Christian community is expressed through justice and inclusive participation. Strengthening institutional accountability would therefore enhance both the credibility and responsiveness of ecumenical governance.

(b) Capacity Building and Resource Allocation

There is a clear need for sustained and structured leadership development programs specifically tailored for women and young people. While participation is already evident, the study indicates that opportunities for leadership formation remain limited and inconsistent.

Ecumenical bodies, in collaboration with funding partners, should invest in long-term programs that develop competencies in leadership, theological reflection, advocacy, negotiation, and organizational management. This approach resonates with empowerment theory, which emphasizes equipping individuals with the skills and resources needed to exercise meaningful influence (Zimmerman, 2000).

Furthermore, dedicated and predictable resource allocation is essential. As Ogbu Kalu (2008) cautions, over-reliance on short-term, donor-driven initiatives often undermines sustainability. Long-term investment would ensure that capacity-building efforts are continuous, coherent, and capable of supporting progression from participation to leadership.

(c) Cultural and Theological Education

The study highlights the need for deliberate efforts to address cultural and theological assumptions that continue to shape exclusionary practices. Ecumenical institutions should therefore prioritize educational initiatives to transform patriarchal and age-based perceptions of leadership.

This may include theological workshops, reflective forums, and awareness programs that promote contextual and biblically grounded interpretations affirming gender equality and intergenerational participation. Such efforts are consistent with the work of Mercy Amba Oduyoye (2001), who advocates for a re-reading of theology that recognizes women as active contributors to the life of the Church. Similarly, Kwame Bediako (2004) emphasizes the importance of engaging critically with culture in shaping authentic African Christian identity.

Through such initiatives, ecumenical institutions can gradually reshape organizational culture, fostering more inclusive understandings of leadership and participation.

(d) Youth Engagement Strategies

Given the dynamic and innovative ways in which young people already engage in ecumenical life, institutions should intentionally integrate digital and contemporary forms of participation into their structures. The use of digital platforms and social media can enhance youth involvement in policy dialogue, program development, and advocacy initiatives.

As Lovemore Togarasei (2016) observes, young people play a critical role in driving innovation within African Christianity. Harnessing this potential requires creating flexible and accessible spaces for engagement that reflect their lived realities.

In addition, structured intergenerational dialogue should be strengthened. Creating opportunities for mentorship, shared learning, and collaborative decision-making between older and younger members of the Church can help bridge generational divides. This not only promotes mutual understanding but also ensures continuity in leadership and vision within ecumenical life.

These recommendations emphasize that enhancing the participation and influence of women and young people requires a holistic approach that integrates institutional reform, capacity

development, cultural transformation, and innovative engagement strategies. In line with the vision of the WCC (1948) and AACC (1963), ecumenism must be grounded in shared participation and collective responsibility.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that women and young people are central to the vitality and sustainability of ecumenical life in Uganda, particularly in the cities of Kampala and Jinja. However, their influence remains constrained by structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that limit their participation in leadership and decision-making. Grounded in feminist theology, participatory ecclesiology, and empowerment theory, the study highlights the need for intentional transformation towards inclusive and shared ecclesial practices. Ultimately, authentic ecumenism will be realized when participation is matched by meaningful influence and collective responsibility in shaping the Church's mission and unity.

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