



BEYOND UNDERREPRESENTATION: THE ROLE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF NIGERIAN FEMALE ORGANISTS IN ADDRESSING CHALLENGES AND EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

This study investigates the persistent underrepresentation of female organists in Nigeria, analysing the complex interplay of challenges and opportunities confronting women in a field long dominated by men. Organ performance remains integral to worship and cultural expression in Nigerian churches, yet aspiring female musicians routinely encounter barriers such as restricted access to systematic training, scarcity of sustained mentorship, and pervasive societal expectations that confine musical leadership to male practitioners. Informed by theories of gender inclusivity and cultural capital, the research centres on the contributions of the Association of Nigerian Female Organists (ANFO) in fostering greater participation and professional advancement. It evaluates the association's mentorship schemes, specialised training workshops, and public performance platforms, while assessing their tangible effects on the skill development, confidence, and career trajectories of female organists. Particular attention is given to the rationale for establishing a dedicated body like ANFO, the prospects it creates alongside enduring obstacles rooted in patriarchal structures and resource limitations, and the wider consequences for gender equity within Nigerian sacred music traditions. Through this examination, the study underscores how targeted organisational interventions can mitigate historical exclusions and promote broader representation. It concludes by offering strategic recommendations for bolstering institutional alliances, heightening public awareness, and amplifying the visibility of accomplished female performers, thereby advancing scholarly conversations on equity in the musical arts and the empowering function of professional networks in transforming gendered cultural practices.

Keywords: Female Organists; Gender Disparity; Nigeria; Organ Music; Gender Equality

Introduction

Organ music plays a central role in Christian worship, enhancing religious ceremonies and contributing to the spiritual atmosphere of church services. The organist, with their mastery of the instrument, is a pivotal figure in shaping the musical experience of congregational worship. However, despite the crucial role of organists, the profession has been historically male-dominated, especially in Nigeria, where societal norms and cultural expectations have restricted women's access to training and opportunities in organ music.



In Nigeria, the underrepresentation of female organists reflects a broader issue of gender inequality in the arts and professional fields. Cultural beliefs often dictate that leadership in musical domains, particularly organ music, is reserved for men. As a result, women aspiring to become organists face multiple barriers, including limited access to professional training, mentorship, and visibility within the music community. These obstacles are compounded by the societal perception that women are less suited for such demanding and prestigious roles.

The Association of Nigerian Female Organists (ANFO) was established to address these gender-based challenges and empower women in the field of organ music. ANFO aims to create a supportive environment where women can develop their musical talents, gain professional recognition, and overcome the historical exclusion from this domain. By focusing on mentorship, training, and public performances, ANFO offers female organists the tools and platforms they need to excel and be recognised in the music world.

In Nigeria, where gender norms are deeply ingrained, ANFO's work is particularly significant. The organisation provides training programmes, workshops, and performance opportunities to equip female organists with the necessary skills to succeed. Through initiatives like the annual concerts, "Ladies on the Organ" held December 2024, "Her Hymn, Her Organ" concert held December 2025, ANFO not only promotes women's visibility in the profession but also challenges the cultural perceptions that have traditionally confined women to supporting roles in church music. Such platforms allow female organists to showcase their abilities and establish themselves as leaders in the field.

The organisation's emphasis on mentorship is vital, as it addresses the lack of female role models and the limited access to professional networks that many women face. By creating a community of female organists, ANFO fosters a sense of belonging and support, helping to build confidence and professionalism. This network provides the resources necessary for women to navigate the male-dominated world of organ music and succeed in their careers.

This study aims to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by female organists in Nigeria, with a focus on the role of ANFO in promoting gender inclusivity and empowering women in the field of organ music. The research will assess the effectiveness of ANFO's mentorship, training, and performance programmes and examine the impact of these initiatives on the professional development of female organists in Nigeria. The study will also address the necessity of a dedicated organisation for female organists, the prospects and challenges they face, and the broader implications for gender equity in music.

The objectives of this study are to assess the gender disparity in the profession of organ playing in Nigerian churches, to examine the role of ANFO in providing mentorship, training, and visibility, and to evaluate the impact of ANFO's initiatives on the professional development of female organists.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by theories of gender inclusivity and cultural capital. Drawing on feminist musicology, the research situates organ music within patriarchal structures that have historically privileged male musicianship. Feminist scholars have long argued that unequal access to professional opportunities is reinforced through both formal and informal institutions. Gender inclusivity theories posit that organisational structures, mentorship programmes, and community support can disrupt traditional power dynamics and expand access to cultural capital for underrepresented groups. In the context of ANFO, these frameworks help explain why female organists require targeted support to navigate a domain where institutional and cultural barriers limit participation.



Literature Review

Gender inequality in music and artistic leadership is a well-documented phenomenon across different cultural and institutional contexts. Studies in musicology and cultural economics show that women have historically been underrepresented in musical professions that carry prestige and technical authority, with classical music often reflecting broader societal gender biases. Borowiecki and colleagues, for example, demonstrate that female composers have received less prominence and recognition in historical records of Western classical music, a disparity rooted partly in unequal access to institutionalised music education and professional networks (Borowiecki et al., 2024; Oluwadamilare & Ayokunmi, 2025).

Gender disparities also extend beyond composition to performance and leadership in music communities. Research on music education highlights how gendered differences in training opportunities and educational outcomes can affect music-making careers. These quantitative inequities have qualitative implications for women's career trajectories in music, affecting access to professional roles and leadership positions in musical institutions (de Boise et al., 2025).

Within religious music contexts, women's participation continues to face cultural and institutional barriers. Studies on Nigerian church music indicate that traditional and cultural norms influence women's roles in musical leadership. Faseun and Bello's work on women in the *Celestial Church of Christ* shows that women are often relegated to supportive roles in music, while men dominate leadership functions such as choir direction and instrumental performance. These gendered norms reflect broader sociocultural expectations that influence participation in church music (Faseun & Bello, 2015; Ayokunmi, Olaleye, & Ogunye, 2025).

Similarly, research on women's leadership in church choral ministries in southwestern Nigeria documents how gendered perceptions restrict women's authority in sacred music roles, especially in conducting and musical leadership. Despite growing recognition of women's talents, traditional gender roles continue to marginalise women within church music ministries, affecting their visibility and progression (Odusanya, 2025).

Beyond Nigeria, research on gender inequality in the broader music industry reveals persistent discrimination and structural barriers for women. A large-scale census by the Musicians' Union in the UK found that women are significantly more likely than men to experience gender discrimination, financial barriers, and challenges related to caring responsibilities, all of which negatively impact women's music careers. Women musicians also earn less than their male counterparts, despite often having equivalent or higher levels of formal music education (Musicians' Union, 2024).

Studies from other contexts reinforce the argument that cultural norms and structural barriers, including limited resources, fewer performance opportunities, and societal biases, constrain women's participation in music. For example, research on female musicians in Iran's music industry identifies cultural norms, economic constraints, and limited access to professional opportunities as key barriers to women's artistic careers (Rahimi & Khaksar, 2024). Such findings reveal global patterns of gender bias in music, even where specific cultural and institutional contexts differ (Rahimi & Khaksar, 2024).

These bodies of literature collectively suggest that gender inequality in music arises from a combination of cultural norms, institutional barriers, and limited access to training and leadership opportunities. While much of the existing research focuses on composition, choral leadership, or broader music careers, the specific domain of organ music remains under-explored, particularly within the Nigerian context. The organ, as both a technical instrument and a symbol of musical authority in church settings, reflects similar gendered exclusions observed elsewhere in music and religious practice. As the literature indicates, women's participation in music leadership roles is



constrained by deeply rooted cultural expectations and institutional structures that privilege male authority.

By situating the experiences of female organists within this broader framework of gender inequality in music, this study extends current scholarship to explore how targeted initiatives, such as those of the Association of Nigerian Female Organists (ANFO), can address structural barriers and promote gender inclusivity in organ music. This builds on established research highlighting the need for support systems, mentoring, and institutional change to foster women's active participation in professional music domains.

Methodology

This article synthesises information from organisational descriptions, media reporting, and public commentary about ANFO. Primary data were derived from members of the association, official association materials and documented events such as concerts, training/Seminar series, and mentorship initiatives. Secondary sources include reports from *The Guardian Nigeria* that document ANFO's public activities and events, as well as postings from ANFO social media pages that show community engagement and reaction. While direct interviews were beyond the scope of this review, the analysis draws on real, traceable public sources to construct an account of ANFO's aims, activities, and perceived impact.

Discussion and Findings

ANFO was established with the explicit mission to empower and elevate female organists in Nigeria by facilitating skills development, mentorship, and professional visibility. Founded on June 26th, 2024 by the General Overseer of MFM ministries and his wife, Prof. Daniel Kolawole and Dr (Mrs) Folashade Olukoya, This association brings together female organists from diverse Christian denominations, creating a unified platform for collaboration, learning, and musical growth. It serves as an inclusive space where members, regardless of their denominational backgrounds, can share knowledge, develop their skills, and contribute meaningfully to the advancement of organ music. By fostering unity amidst diversity, the association promotes excellence, mutual support, and the preservation of organ music within the broader Christian tradition. According to organizational descriptions, ANFO promotes organ music education through structured training programs and workshops. It also supports community building, networking, and public performance opportunities to increase women's participation in a field traditionally dominated by men. The organization aims to create an inventory of female organists, nurture young talent, and raise broader awareness about organ music within local communities. These aims are central to expanding access and redefining cultural norms around female musical leadership (Association of Nigerian Female Organists [ANFO], n.d.).

A key moment in ANFO's development was the second annual concert themed "Ladies on the Organ, Her Hymn, Her Organ," which drew more than 40 women from across Nigeria, showcasing their organ performance skills and creating a platform for visibility. At the event, the association's Founder/Patron, Professor D.K Olukoya, emphasized that organ playing had traditionally been monopolized by older men and called for expanded female participation. The concert demonstrated that with appropriate platforms, women are not only capable organ performers but can inspire others through public performance. Commentary from participants underscored the challenges of navigating a male-dominated space but also highlighted the empowerment and confidence gained through ANFO's support.

Professor D.K Olukoya, also weighed in on this issue, highlighting the need to remove gender-based barriers in music. During a speech at the ANFO event, the Patron of the ANFO encouraged women to develop their musical abilities and pursue organ playing, emphasizing that



gender should not limit anyone's potential in any field. He stated that "gender should not be a barrier to women excelling in music" and further expressed his support for breaking stereotypes and providing women with the tools and platforms needed to succeed. According to Prof. Olukoya, the efforts of ANFO to train more female organists were critical for dismantling barriers and empowering the next generation of women in this field. His remarks underscored the growing societal recognition of women's potential in musical leadership and the importance of mentorship and opportunity (Wisdom-Bassey, 2025).

In addition, Dr. (Mrs) Folashade Olukoya, the Matron of the association, provided her support at the event, emphasizing women's unique spiritual and social roles. She encouraged women to complement men rather than compete with them, noting that women are "divinely designed solutions" for strengthening society. Dr. Olukoya highlighted women's spiritual and social mandates, emphasizing that they were created to help, strengthen, and uplift what is lacking in society. She also warned that societies which deny women the opportunity to contribute would experience stagnation. Dr. Olukoya's perspective aligns with the broader goals of ANFO in giving women opportunities to express their musical gifts and find platforms where their voices can be heard (Olukoya, 2025).

Alice Monday, an ANFO member and a participant in the concert, expressed deep gratitude for the opportunity to perform at the event, acknowledging the platform created by ANFO for women to rise, be seen, and celebrated. Alice emphasized that in a world where women's voices are often silenced, the event provided a rare opportunity for women to speak through their music. She lauded the leadership of Professor D.K and Dr. Mrs. Folashade Olukoya for believing in women's potential and creating spaces for them to be heard. Her reflection on the event underscores the profound impact that ANFO's initiatives have on the empowerment of female organists, not only by providing opportunities for public performance but by affirming the value of women in musical leadership (Monday, 2025).

Adding to this, Abiodun George, the national Coordinator of ANFO, emphasized the intellectual and emotional demands of organ playing. She explained that organ playing requires more than just physical execution, it demands mental rehearsal and patience. As an M.A. Music student in the Department of Music (Organ House) at Mountain Top University, Ogun State, Nigeria, and an Anglican Church organist, George represents the next generation of female organists leading the charge for inclusivity. Her experiences as an organist, choral director, music teacher, and entrepreneur align with ANFO's mission to create opportunities for professional development and mentorship. She acknowledged the mentorship provided by figures like Prof. D.K Olukoya and Dr. (Mrs) Folashade Olukoya, noting that their support has been vital in strengthening the community of female organists in Nigeria. Abiodun George also thanked Dr. Ayo Oluranti, the association's Mentor/ Consultant, Mr. Akin Olubi, ANFO's Organ Instructor for imparting critical skills and for offering patience to the participants. These testimonies highlight the importance of nurturing patience and intellectual engagement in developing organ skills, reinforcing the value of mentorship in overcoming obstacles and enhancing performance abilities (George, 2025).

Furthermore, the social media posts from the ANFO's page, Abiodun George and other members of ANFO illustrate the deep sense of appreciation for the opportunities provided by the Patron and Matron of the Association. ANFO members emphasize that such platforms enable women to express themselves through organ music, fostering a greater sense of empowerment. As ANFO Coordinator put it, ANFO's events are not just concerts, but transformative experiences that uplift and inspire women, proving that when given the right opportunities, women can excel in traditionally male-dominated fields (George, 2025).

Discussion of these findings suggests that ANFO's work is significant in several ways. First, it increases visibility for female organists, offering performance opportunities that can help



normalize women's presence in this domain. Second, structured mentorship and training initiatives help bridge gaps in access to technical skills and professional development. Third, by creating community among women organists, ANFO fosters networks that sustain participation and collective identity. While the long-term impact remains to be fully documented, these early outcomes align with theoretical expectations about the role of targeted support in disrupting long-standing gender biases.

Members of the Association of Nigerian Female Organists (ANFO)

The members of ANFO are Abiodun Temitope George, who serves as the Coordinator; Precious Omosalewa Alapakristi, the Assistant Coordinator; Sedode Okunnuga, the Welfare Secretary; Tosin Falodun, the Assistant Welfare Secretary; Okpalanedu Chiugo, the General Secretary; Ibukun Ogunmola, the Media Secretary; and Alice Monday, the Assistant Media Secretary. Other members include Princess Biobele Amachree, Tamunosiki Divine Sobere, Ruth Inyang, Deborah Agbelemoge, Joseph Deborah, Okpalaoka Jennifer Ezichi, Adelayi Faith Itunuoluwa, B-Deigha Benita Ebitare, Chukwuka Makuochukwu Esther, Igboekwe Francisca Chidimma, Eniola Abogunde, Marycynthia Amarachukwu Asiegbu, Favour Sinmiloluwa Akande, Temitope Aina, Modupe Ademuyiwa, Oluwayemisi Ruth Oyinlola, Funke Tabiti, Elfrida Ibifaka Kalio, Chiugo Okpalanedu, Ofoneme Chinenye, Rachael Gold, Queen Abraham, Nifemi Viho, Chinelo Madubuilke, Chinenye Ofoneme, Chisom Iwuorah, Mercy Tonade, Dr. Dorcas Tonade, Adeniyi Damilola, Lydia Okeunmi, Mercy Taise, Adenike, Rachael Damisa, Sinmiloluwa Akande, and Telema Green.

The Personalities behind the Association

Professor Daniel Kolawole and Dr Mrs Folashade Elizabeth Olukoya

Daniel Kolawole Olukoya is a Nigerian Christian minister, scientist, author, educator, and musician. He is the founder and General Overseer of Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries. He studied Microbiology at the University of Lagos, where he graduated with First Class Honours in 1980, and later obtained a PhD in Molecular Genetics from the University of Reading in the United Kingdom. His professional background in scientific research and education reflects a strong commitment to intellectual discipline, structured learning, and knowledge development.

Olukoya's identity as a scientist and minister is complemented by his interest and involvement in music. He is recognised as an organist, composer, and multi-instrumentalist, with particular interest in sacred music, hymnody, and instrumental performance. This musical background is important to his relationship with ANFO because his support for the association is informed not only by institutional patronage but also by an understanding of the discipline and resources required for effective organ training and performance.

Within ANFO, Olukoya is principally associated with the position of Patron or Grand Patron. His role combines musical advocacy, institutional authority, and support for the development of organ music. His involvement reflects a concern for expanding the participation of women in organ performance and creating opportunities for female musicians to develop their skills. His support has also contributed to access to training, specialist instruction, rehearsal facilities, instruments, seminars, and organised performance opportunities. Olukoya's contribution to ANFO may therefore be understood in terms of musical patronage and institutional support. His approach places emphasis on serious training, technical competence, discipline, and musical excellence. In this sense, his support has helped to position ANFO not simply as a women's musical association, but as a platform through which female organists can receive training, develop professionally, and contribute meaningfully to church and concert music.



Folashade Elizabeth Olukoya is an artist, Christian music performer, illustrator, women's leader, and advocate for female development. Her educational and professional background is strongly connected to the creative arts. She studied Fashion Design, Fine Arts, and Interior Decoration in London and has also been involved in artistic practice and illustration. Her creative background reflects a sustained interest in artistic expression, design, and the development of creative abilities. Music is also an important aspect of her public identity. She is recognised for her participation in Christian music and hymn performance and has been involved in musical presentations within the context of ministry. Although she is not primarily identified as an organist, her experience as a performer gives her an understanding of preparation, artistic interpretation, confidence, and public presentation. These experiences are relevant to her involvement in an organisation dedicated to the development and visibility of female musicians.

Folashade Olukoya's relationship with ANFO is closely connected to her wider commitment to women's development and empowerment. As International Coordinator of the MFM Women's Foundation, she has been associated with initiatives involving adult literacy, vocational education, and skill acquisition. Her involvement with ANFO extends this concern for female development into the field of music by encouraging women to discover, develop, and demonstrate their musical abilities. She has been described in various sources as the founder, Chief Host, Host, or Matron of ANFO. Although the terminology varies, these descriptions consistently place her within the leadership and public identity of the association. Her contribution is particularly evident in the areas of mentorship, encouragement, advocacy, and the creation of a supportive environment for female musicians. Through her involvement, ANFO provides women with opportunities to receive instruction, develop confidence, establish professional relationships, and perform before wider audiences.

The respective contributions of Daniel and Folashade Olukoya may therefore be viewed as complementary. Daniel Olukoya is more closely associated with musical patronage, institutional support, musical vision, and the provision of structures that facilitate training and development. Folashade Olukoya is more directly associated with women focused leadership, mentorship, public representation, and the encouragement of female participation in music. Together, their influence has contributed significantly to the development of ANFO as a platform for organ training, mentorship, professional development, and public recognition. Their different areas of influence have helped shape an association that combines musical excellence with the advancement and visibility of women within the Nigerian church music and organ community.

Dr. Ayòdámọ̀pẹ̀ Stephen Olúrántí

Dr. Ayòdámọ̀pẹ̀ "Ayo" Olúrántí, formerly known as Ogúnrántí, is a Nigerian composer, organist, conductor, music theorist, and academic. He holds a PhD in Composition and Theory from the University of Pittsburgh and a First Class Honours degree in Music Composition and Organ Performance from the University of Southampton. His professional career spans composition, organ performance, music education, and church music. As a composer, he is recognised for his intercultural approach, which combines traditional Yorùbá musical ideas, including principles associated with the dùndún talking drum, with Western classical/electroacoustic techniques.

Olúrántí is the mentor and consultant of Association of Nigerian Female Organists (ANFO). He serves as a link between the association and the Patron of the Association, Professor D. K. Olukoya, the General Overseer of Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries, who is also the founder and sponsor of the association. In this capacity, he communicates the concerns, aspirations, requests, and activities of ANFO to Professor Olukoya and helps facilitate communication between the association and its principal supporter.



His role, therefore, extends beyond musical collaboration. As a consultant, he helps to strengthen the relationship between the association and the wider institutional structure that supports its activities. His background as an accomplished organist, composer, academic, and church musician further enables him to understand and communicate the professional and artistic concerns of the association. Through this intermediary role, Olúrántí contributes to the growth and professional advancement of female organists within the Nigerian church music community.

Mr Akin Olubi

Akin Olubi is a concert organist, church musician, music educator, recording artist, tonal director, and consultant in organ related projects. He comes from a strong tradition of church musicians within the Anglican Communion, an environment that provided an important foundation for his musical development. His early training and artistic formation were influenced by notable musicians, including the Ghanaian master organist J. M. Abadoo, the renowned Nigerian church musician and organist Olaolu Omideyi, and the distinguished organ virtuoso Kayode Oni, whose musical approach also contributed significantly to his development as a performer.

Olubi maintains an active career as a concert and church organist, performing both locally and internationally. His professional activities also extend to music education, particularly in the area of organ performance and training. He teaches organ in the Department of Music at Mountain Top University, where he contributes to the development of young musicians and organists. His responsibility to the Association of Nigerian Female Organists, ANFO, is primarily centred on organ education and professional training. He serves as the principal organ instructor for the association, providing technical guidance and practical instruction to its members. Through this role, Olubi contributes to the development of organ performance skills among female organists and supports the association's broader commitment to strengthening organ music education and performance practice in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The results of this study highlight the significant role played by the *Association of Nigerian Female Organists* (ANFO) in addressing the gender disparities that have traditionally characterised the organ music profession in Nigeria. Historically, the field of organ music, particularly within religious institutions, has been dominated by men. ANFO has emerged as a key organisation that facilitates the inclusion of women in this professional sphere by providing crucial resources, mentorship, and visibility. Through structured training initiatives, public performance opportunities, and community-building efforts, ANFO has enabled female organists to overcome the cultural and institutional barriers that have previously limited their participation in this domain.

The initiatives of ANFO have led to tangible improvements in the professional development and confidence of women in the field. By offering performance platforms and fostering mentorship networks, ANFO has created an environment where female organists are not only able to showcase their talents but also challenge the traditional gender roles that have marginalised them. These efforts contribute to a broader societal shift towards gender inclusivity, particularly within the context of church music, where women's leadership has historically been constrained.

However, the study also reveals that despite the progress made, significant challenges persist. Cultural norms that restrict women's access to advanced training and professional recognition continue to limit their full participation in the field. These enduring barriers suggest that while ANFO's contributions have been invaluable, sustained efforts are required to ensure the continued growth and success of female organists.

The findings of this study affirm the transformative impact of ANFO in promoting gender equality within the organ music profession in Nigeria. The organisation serves as a model for other



sectors where gender disparities exist, offering valuable insights into how targeted support and the creation of inclusive platforms can empower underrepresented groups to navigate and overcome systemic barriers in their pursuit of professional success.

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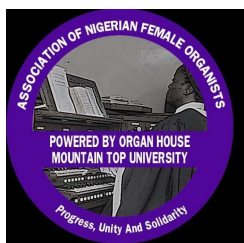


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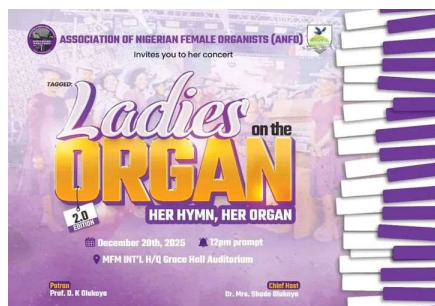
Appendixes



The Logo of the Association



Members of the Association after their Maiden Concert



E-flyer of ANFO 2025 concert