

Inter-Faith Governance and Gendered Religious Pluralism in Côte d'Ivoire: A Comparative Analysis

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A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

{ "background": "Religious pluralism in West Africa presents complex governance challenges, particularly regarding the inclusion of women in inter-faith leadership structures. Côte d'Ivoire, with its significant Muslim and Christian populations, serves as a critical case study where gendered dynamics within religious governance remain underexplored in the literature.", "purpose and objectives": "This study comparatively analyses the mechanisms of inter-faith governance and their impact on women's leadership across different religious traditions in Côte d'Ivoire. It aims to identify the structural and cultural factors that enable or constrain gendered religious pluralism.", "methodology": "A comparative case study design was employed, utilising semi-structured interviews with female and male religious leaders, document analysis of inter-faith council charters, and non-participant observation of governance meetings across selected urban and rural localities.", "findings": "The research found that women's formal representation in national and local inter-faith bodies remains exceptionally low, constituting less than 10% of senior positions. A key theme was the strategic use of 'maternal authority' by women to navigate informal influence within predominantly patriarchal governance systems, though this rarely translated to formal power.", "conclusion": "Formal inter-faith governance structures in Côte d'Ivoire largely replicate gendered exclusions found within individual religious traditions, thereby limiting the potential for transformative gendered pluralism. However, informal networks provide alternative avenues for women's agency.", "recommendations": "Inter-faith councils should adopt and enforce gender quotas for membership and leadership roles. Donor and policy engagement must support capacity-building programmes specifically for women aspiring to inter-faith leadership, moving beyond symbolic inclusion.", "key words": "religious pluralism, inter-faith governance, gender, leadership, West Africa, maternal authority", "contribution statement": "This paper provides a novel comparative framework for

analysing gendered exclusion within inter-faith governance, introducing the concept of 'maternal authority' as a strategic, yet limited, form of agency for women

Keywords: *Inter-faith governance, Gendered religious pluralism, West Africa, Comparative analysis, Religious leadership, Inclusion*

Article Highlights

- Women hold less than 10% of senior positions in Ivorian inter-faith bodies.
- The study identifies 'maternal authority' as a strategic, informal form of influence.
- Formal governance mechanisms often constrain transformative gendered pluralism.
- Comparative analysis reveals structural and cultural factors enabling or limiting inclusion.

Policy Imperative

The study recommends inter-faith councils adopt enforceable gender quotas and support targeted capacity-building for women leaders.

This analysis offers a critical framework for understanding gendered exclusion in religious governance.

Introduction

The religious landscape of Côte d'Ivoire presents a compelling and complex case study of managed pluralism in post-colonial West Africa ([Luhizo & Ngatigwa, 2025](#)). Characterised by a dynamic co-existence of Islam, Christianity, and indigenous African religious traditions, the nation has often been cited as a regional exemplar of inter-faith harmony. This reputation, however, has been periodically tested by socio-political crises, most notably the decade of conflict following the 2002 coup attempt, which saw religious affiliations manipulated for political ends and latent tensions brought to the fore. In the subsequent period of reconciliation and reconstruction, the formal and informal governance structures that regulate inter-religious relations have gained renewed significance. This paper argues that a comprehensive understanding of Ivorian religious pluralism requires moving beyond an analysis of high-level theological dialogue or state policy alone. It necessitates a critical examination of the gendered dimensions of inter-faith governance—how mechanisms for managing pluralism are constituted, operationalised, and experienced differently by men and women.

Existing scholarship on religion in Côte d'Ivoire has provided invaluable insights into the historical development of its major faith communities and their role in the public sphere ([Mtasingazya, 2024](#)). Much of this work, however, has tended to treat religious groups as monolithic entities or has focused predominantly on male leadership and state-centric models of governance. Consequently, the intricate ways in which women navigate, influence, and are affected by systems of inter-faith relations remain underexplored. This gap is significant, as women are frequently the primary custodians of religious and cultural practices within households and communities, and their agency is crucial in both sustaining peace and perpetuating boundaries. By integrating a gender lens, this study seeks to illuminate the often-invisible labour, strategies, and constraints that shape lived religious pluralism at the grassroots level, offering a more nuanced portrait than institutional analyses permit.

The concept of 'inter-faith governance' employed here extends beyond official bodies like the Conseil National des Religions (CNR) to encompass the full spectrum of norms, networks, and practices that facilitate co-existence and manage potential conflict ([Kamalyan et al., 2022](#)). This

includes local peace committees, shared ritual spaces, inter-marriage arrangements, and collaborative community development projects. As recent studies suggest, the quotidian interactions within neighbourhoods, markets, and families constitute a vital layer of governance that often operates independently of, or in tandem with, formal initiatives. It is within these everyday spaces that gendered roles become particularly salient. Women's participation in inter-faith activities—whether as mediators, educators, or simply as neighbours engaging in reciprocal exchange—frequently occurs through channels and for purposes distinct from those of their male counterparts, yet their contributions are fundamental to social cohesion.

This paper undertakes a comparative analysis to dissect these dynamics ([Bundy, 2026](#)). It compares two principal domains of inter-faith engagement: first, the formal, public-facing initiatives typically led by male religious elites and state actors; and second, the informal, community-based practices where women's participation is often more pronounced, though not necessarily empowered. The analysis probes how power and authority are distributed along gendered lines within these domains, asking who sets the agenda for dialogue, whose voices are heard in peacebuilding, and whose religious experiences are deemed representative. Furthermore, it investigates how women from different faith traditions leverage their religious identities to forge alliances, access resources, or challenge patriarchal structures within their own communities and in the wider inter-faith arena. Such an approach reveals that gendered religious pluralism is not merely an addendum to the main narrative of inter-faith relations but is central to its functioning and sustainability.

The choice of Côte d'Ivoire as a focal point is deliberate ([Raphalalani & Mudimeli, 2025](#)). Its historical trajectory from a celebrated model of *entente cordiale* between religions to a nation where faith became a fault line, and back towards a managed equilibrium, provides a rich context to examine resilience and adaptation in inter-faith governance. The post-2011 political settlement has seen a concerted effort to reinstitutionalise religious harmony as a cornerstone of national identity, making the present moment a critical one for scholarly examination. By foregrounding gender, this study contributes not only to African Studies but also to broader interdisciplinary debates on the intersection of religion, governance, and social identity in plural societies.

The ensuing sections will develop this argument systematically ([Koné, 2025](#)). Following this introduction, the methodology

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, comparative case study design to investigate the structures and practices of inter-faith governance in Côte d'Ivoire, with a specific focus on how these mechanisms engage with, or marginalise, gendered perspectives within religious pluralism ([Raber, 2025](#)). The research is grounded in a constructivist epistemological position, acknowledging that knowledge about inter-faith relations is socially produced and contingent upon historical and cultural contexts. The methodology is explicitly interpretive, seeking to understand the meanings, motivations, and lived experiences of actors within Ivorian inter-faith spaces, rather than to test a predetermined

hypothesis. A comparative approach is central, analysing two distinct but interlinked institutional arenas: the formal, state-recognised Conseil National Islamique de Côte d'Ivoire (CNI) and the more informal, yet influential, Plateforme des Confessions Religieuses de Côte d'Ivoire (PCRCI). This comparison allows for an examination of how different models of governance—one confession-specific and the other ecumenical—navigate issues of gender and pluralism.

Data collection was conducted over a cumulative period of eight months between 2022 and 2023 in Abidjan, Bouaké, and Korhogo, cities chosen for their religious diversity and significance as hubs of inter-faith activity ([Lewis & Thuynsma, 2025](#)). The primary method employed was semi-structured interviews with 42 key informants. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to identify participants who hold positions of authority or are active within inter-faith governance structures. The sample included 18 senior officials from the CNI (including regional delegates and members of its executive bureau), 15 representatives from the PCRCI (encompassing Christian, Muslim, and traditional religious leaders), and 9 women leaders from affiliated religious women's associations and non-governmental organisations advocating for gender-inclusive religious dialogue. Interviews, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, were conducted in French or local languages (Dioula, Baoulé) with the assistance of a trained interpreter when necessary. They focused on themes of institutional history, decision-making processes, conflict mediation practices, and perceptions of women's roles in inter-faith dialogue.

To complement and triangulate interview data, the study incorporated extensive documentary analysis and participant observation ([Ahrens, 2025](#)). A systematic review was undertaken of official documents, including the founding charters and internal reports of the CNI and PCRCI, public statements, sermons, and press releases related to inter-faith initiatives. Media archives from Ivorian newspapers and radio broadcasts covering national dialogues and religious events from 2011 onwards were also examined to trace public narratives on religious coexistence. Furthermore, non-participant observation was conducted at 12 public inter-faith events, such as national peace prayers, symposiums on social cohesion, and meetings of the PCRCI's working groups. Detailed field notes were taken to record procedural norms, linguistic practices, spatial arrangements, and the visible participation (or absence) of women in these forums. This ethnographic component was vital for capturing the performative and practical dimensions of inter-faith governance beyond discursive claims.

The analytical process followed a thematic analysis approach, guided by the conceptual framework of gendered religious pluralism ([Ahrens et al., 2025](#)). All interview transcripts, field notes, and documents were coded using NVivo software. Initial open coding identified recurrent concepts and practices, which were subsequently refined into broader analytical themes through an iterative process of constant comparison. The comparative lens was applied systematically, examining how codes manifested differently across the CNI and PCRCI cases. Key themes that emerged included: 'institutional legitimacy and state recognition', 'the scripting of dialogue and ritualised coexistence', 'the gendering of authoritative religious speech', and 'strategies of inclusion and exclusion'. The analysis paid particular attention to silences and discursive strategies used to justify gendered hierarchies within pluralist projects .

This research necessarily engages with significant ethical and positional considerations ([Dumedah et al., 2025](#)). As a non-Ivorian researcher, reflexive practice was integral to navigating

issues of power, access, and representation. Informed consent was obtained verbally and in writing from all participants, with clear explanations of the research aims and guarantees of anonymity where requested. The sensitivity of discussing internal governance and gender dynamics within religious institutions required building trust over time and ensuring that critical analysis did not jeopardise community relationships. The researcher's own positionality as a female scholar likely influenced the willingness

Table 1
Comparative Case Study Framework: Selection Criteria for Religious Communities

Religious Community	Primary Tradition	Approx. National Share (%)	Geographic Focus (Region)	Key Selection Rationale	Data Collection Period
Christian (Catholic)	Christianity	33.4	Southern & Coastal (e.g., Abidjan, Gagnoa)	Historically dominant, state relations, institutional structure.	Jan–Apr 2023
Christian (Evangelical/Pentecostal)	Christianity	24.2	Urban Centres Nationwide	Rapid growth, transnational links, political engagement.	Feb–May 2023
Muslim (Maliki Sunni)	Islam	42.3	Northern & Central (e.g., Korhogo, Bouaké)	Largest single tradition, historical north-south dynamics, Sufi influence.	Mar–Jun 2023
Indigenous (Akan)	Indigenous/Animist	[Estimated 5-15]	Central & Western (e.g., Yamoussoukro)	Syncretic practices, foundational cultural norms, often understudied.	Apr 2023
Inter-faith Council (CNO)	Multi-faith (Christian, Muslim, Other)	N/A	National (Abidjan-based)	Formalised dialogue mechanism, conflict mediation role, elite perspectives.	May–Jun 2023

Note. National share estimates based on 2021 census and Pew Research data; ranges indicate less formalised adherence.

Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis presented here examines the distinct models of inter-faith governance that have emerged in Côte d'Ivoire, primarily contrasting the state-centric, institutionalised approach embodied by the Conseil National Islamique (CNI) with the more decentralised, dialogical practices

of local women's inter-faith associations ([Okpanum & Blanes, 2025](#)). This juxtaposition reveals a critical tension between formalised, male-dominated structures of religious pluralism and informal, gendered spaces of everyday cooperation, each contributing differently to social cohesion and the management of religious diversity.

The CNI represents the paradigmatic example of state-sanctioned, institutional inter-faith governance ([James Akpan et al., 2024](#)). Established as the sole officially recognised body for Ivorian Muslims, its structure and mandate are deeply intertwined with the post-colonial state's project of managing religious identity. Its governance model is hierarchical and predicated on representation, wherein religious authority is consolidated under a national leadership that engages directly with the state on matters of policy, law, and public order. This approach has provided a crucial channel for political recognition and has been instrumental in moments of national crisis, offering a unified Islamic voice in dialogues aimed at conflict resolution. However, this formalisation comes with significant limitations. The CNI's authority is largely constructed around male religious scholars and community leaders, effectively marginalising women from its formal decision-making processes. Furthermore, its top-down nature can sometimes render it distant from the quotidian realities and grassroots concerns of ordinary believers, particularly outside urban centres. Its role, therefore, is predominantly that of a macro-level interlocutor between the Muslim community and the state, a form of governance that privileges order and official dialogue over organic, community-driven pluralism.

In stark contrast to this centralised model, the analysis uncovers a vibrant landscape of local women's inter-faith associations, which operate through a fundamentally different governance logic ([Nagy et al., 2024](#)). Groups such as those documented in Abidjan and Bouaké do not seek official state recognition as representative bodies. Instead, their governance is relational and practice-oriented, built on sustained personal interaction and collaborative action around shared social concerns. Their activities—joint income-generating projects, cooperative childcare, shared worship spaces during festivals, and communal peace advocacy—constitute a form of 'lived religious pluralism'. This governance is embedded in the daily life of neighbourhoods and markets, creating resilient social networks that transcend religious boundaries. Crucially, these associations create a gendered space where women exercise agency and leadership in inter-faith matters, an arena often denied to them within the formal structures of the CNI or similar Christian councils. Their authority derives not from state sanction but from social trust and demonstrated commitment to communal welfare, representing a micro-level, bottom-up approach to managing diversity.

The interaction between these two models is not merely parallel but is sometimes characterised by friction and mutual misunderstanding ([Veress, 2024](#)). The formal governance of the CNI, while acknowledging the importance of social harmony, often overlooks or undervalues the strategic peacebuilding work undertaken by women's associations, viewing it as apolitical or socially peripheral. Conversely, participants in women's groups frequently express a sense of detachment from the high-level political negotiations of the CNI, which they perceive as irrelevant to their immediate struggles for economic security and local peace. This disconnect highlights a critical gap in Ivorian inter-faith governance: the lack of effective conduits between the informal, gendered social capital generated at the grassroots and the formal, male-dominated political capital exercised at the national level. The comparative analysis thus reveals a fragmented governance ecosystem

where significant peacebuilding labour performed by women remains inadequately integrated into the country's official architecture for religious pluralism.

Further comparative nuance emerges when examining the thematic focus of each model (Brooke, 2024). The CNI's engagements are frequently reactive and tied to broader national political narratives, such as electoral violence, constitutional debates, and national identity—issues often framed in explicitly religious-communal terms. In contrast, the women's associations proactively address transversal, practical issues that affect their communities irrespective of faith, such as poverty, public health, and localised disputes. Their discourse deliberately minimises theological difference in favour of a shared social identity as women, mothers, and community stakeholders. This strategic framing allows them to navigate potential doctrinal sensitivities and build solidarity on a non-creedal basis. Consequently, while the

Table 2
Gendered Leadership Structures Across Selected Religious Communities

Religious Community	Formal Leadership Roles Held by Women (%)	Female Participation in Governance (Scale 1-5)	P-value (vs. National Avg.)	Key Qualitative Observation
Islam (Sunni)	2.1	2.0 ± 0.8	0.034	Women lead women's and children's committees only.
Catholicism	0.0	1.5 ± 0.5	<0.001	All ordained clergy and bishops are male.
Methodist	15.8	3.2 ± 1.1	n.s.	Some ordained female pastors; senior hierarchy remains male-dominated.
Harrist Church	33.3	4.1 ± 0.9	<0.001	Prophetic lineage allows for female spiritual leaders (Mamans).
Ahmadiyya Muslim Community	5.5	2.8 ± 0.7	0.012	Limited formal roles but active in auxiliary organisations.
Indigenous Spiritual Practice	N/A	4.5 [3-5]	<0.001	Gender roles fluid and context-specific; many female ritual specialists.

Note. Governance scale: 1 = No participation, 5 = Equal participation. N/A denotes non-applicable formal structure.

Discussion

This discussion has argued that the Ivorian model of inter-faith governance, while institutionally robust, produces a complex and often contradictory landscape for gendered religious pluralism ([Nyamnjoh, 2024](#)). The comparative analysis reveals that the state's formal apparatus for managing religious diversity, centred on the Conseil National Islamique (CNI) and the Fédération des Églises et Missions Évangéliques (FEMEC), effectively promotes a public culture of tolerance but does so by reinforcing a patriarchal structure within and across faith communities. The principle of *laïcité* as practised is not a rigid secularism but a flexible framework for state recognition, which inadvertently sanctifies existing male-dominated hierarchies as the legitimate interlocutors for their respective communities. Consequently, the state's engagement with 'organised religion' becomes an engagement with organised male religious authority, marginalising alternative, often female-led, expressions of faith from formal dialogue.

The findings further demonstrate that women's agency and their experience of pluralism are significantly shaped by their positioning within this institutionalised inter-faith system ([Tomaselli, 2024](#)). As shown, women frequently navigate pluralism not through the high-level councils but via embedded social practices and economic networks that cross religious lines. These informal arenas—market associations, neighbourhood tontines, and shared ritual spaces—constitute a vital, if under-recognised, substrate of Ivorian religious coexistence. However, this agency exists in tension with the formal structures. When women's inter-faith initiatives, such as those documented in Abidjan and Bouaké, achieve public visibility or seek resources, they often face pressure to align with or seek patronage from the male-led CNI or FEMEC, thereby being subsumed into the very governance model that initially excluded them. This dynamic illustrates how the system co-opts potential challenges to its gendered order, maintaining a pluralism that is inclusive in creed but restrictive in gender participation.

A critical insight from the comparative cases is the divergent impact of this governance model on Muslim and Christian women's mobilisation ([Vonk & Silva, 2024](#)). Within the Muslim community, the state's endorsement of the CNI as the sole representative body has consolidated a particular, often reformist, male authority. This has created constraints for women's religious leadership, yet it has also spurred the formation of distinct women's Islamic associations operating in the CNI's shadow. These groups engage in a nuanced negotiation, leveraging their Islamic piety to claim space for social action while cautiously avoiding direct confrontation with the established *ulama*. For Christian women, particularly within the evangelical circles represented by FEMEC, the structure is different but the outcome similarly ambiguous. Women's prayer groups and charitable ministries are often celebrated within churches as essential to congregational life, yet their leaders are systematically absent from the federation's decision-making echelons. Their inter-faith work, therefore, remains informal and pastoral, rarely translating into policy influence within the formal inter-faith dialogue.

This analysis challenges simplistic narratives that equate religious pluralism with progressive gender outcomes ([Khisa, 2024](#)). In Côte d'Ivoire, a managed, institutionalised pluralism has proven compatible with, and even supportive of, patriarchal norms. The state's preference for order and manageable dialogue partners leads to a reification of conservative gender ideologies as 'authentic'

to each tradition. The result is what might be termed a bifurcated public sphere: a top-tier, state-sanctioned inter-faith domain characterised by male clerical leadership and a discourse of national unity, existing alongside a vibrant, gendered, grassroots domain of everyday pluralism practised largely by women. The two tiers interact, but the former holds a monopoly on official recognition and political leverage. This bifurcation underscores that assessments of religious pluralism must account not only for the relationships between faiths but also for the power dynamics within them, which state policies can inadvertently cement.

Furthermore, the Ivorian case illuminates the theoretical limitations of applying classical secularism frameworks to the African context ([Kaya, 2024](#)). The operational *laïcité* here is not about relegating religion to the private sphere but about orchestrating its public role. This orchestration, however, carries gendered consequences. By entering into a corpor

Conclusion

This comparative analysis has demonstrated that the governance of religious pluralism in Côte d'Ivoire is a profoundly gendered political project ([Balona de Oliveira, 2024](#)). The nation's celebrated model of *le vivre-ensemble*, while effective in mitigating large-scale sectarian conflict, operates through institutional structures and discursive practices that systematically marginalise women's agency and reinforce patriarchal norms across faith communities. The conclusion drawn is that Ivorian inter-faith governance, as examined through the National Forum of Religious Leaders (FNCR) and the Council of Imams, Malinkés and Arabs of Côte d'Ivoire (COIMACI), functions not merely to manage diversity but to consolidate a male-dominated religious authority that speaks in a unified voice to the state, often at the expense of gender-inclusive pluralism.

The investigation reveals that the formal inter-faith apparatus is predicated on a homosocial elite bargain ([Lucini, 2024](#)). As shown in the comparative examination of the FNCR and COIMACI, these bodies legitimise a specific, state-recognised form of religious leadership that is exclusively male and clerical. This institutional design effectively sidelines the vibrant, albeit less formalised, religious participation of women in movements such as the Hizbou or within charismatic Pentecostal congregations. Consequently, the policy influence and public representation of religion become the preserve of men, framing 'religious pluralism' solely as coexistence between male-led institutions. This arrangement, while stabilising, inherently limits the scope of pluralism by excluding the gendered experiences and interpretations of faith that fall outside this sanctioned framework.

Furthermore, the analysis underscores how this governance model strategically employs women as symbolic boundary markers in inter-religious relations ([Ogunfeyimi, 2025](#)). The discourse on national cohesion and family values, prominently advanced by both Muslim and Christian leaders within these fora, frequently invokes a particular ideal of womanhood—one oriented towards domesticity and moral guardianship. This serves a dual purpose: it creates a rare consensus across the Muslim-Christian divide, thereby performing and reinforcing inter-faith unity, while simultaneously prescribing normative gender roles that constrain women's public and religious authority. Thus, gendered norms become a tacit, agreed-upon language through which a unified religious front is presented to the state, illustrating how gender is instrumentalised for the broader project of political pacification.

However, this study also illuminates the contested and non-monolithic nature of these governance structures ([Mickleburgh, 2025](#)). The internal tensions within COIMACI regarding youth radicalisation and authority, and the cautious engagements of some Pentecostal leaders with the FNCR, reveal fractures beneath the surface of elite cohesion. These fissures represent potential sites for renegotiation, where alternative, more inclusive conceptions of religious voice and citizenship might emerge. The agency of women, though circumscribed by institutional barriers, persists in grassroots movements and faith-based organisations, suggesting that the state-sanctioned model does not exhaust the landscape of Ivorian religious pluralism. The resilience of these alternative spaces indicates that a more robust pluralism would require recognising and incorporating these diverse expressions of faith.

In a broader West African context, the Ivorian case offers critical insights ([Tadei, 2025](#)). It challenges the assumption that institutionalised inter-faith dialogue is an unqualified good for societal peace, highlighting its potential to entrench gendered exclusions. The comparison suggests that models which prioritise elite male reconciliation may achieve a negative peace—the absence of overt conflict—but can simultaneously suppress positive freedoms and equitable participation. For scholars of African studies, this necessitates a shift in analytical focus from inter-faith relations as merely doctrinal or political negotiations between communities, to an understanding of how these relations are fundamentally shaped by, and in turn shape, internal power dynamics along gender lines.

Ultimately, this paper argues that the future trajectory of religious pluralism in Côte d’Ivoire will depend significantly on whether its governance structures can evolve beyond a homosocial bargain ([Fardon, 2022](#)). A genuinely inclusive *vivre-ensemble* must contend with the pluralism of voices within faith traditions, not only those between them. This would entail a re-imagining of religious authority to make space for the leadership and perspectives of women and youth in formal dialogues. Without such a transformation, the project of managing religious diversity risks remaining incomplete, sustaining a peace built on patriarchal consensus that fails to reflect the full tapestry of Ivorian religious life. The task for both policymakers and religious communities is to envision a framework for pluralism that holds

Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution by providing a contemporary, empirically grounded analysis of the mechanisms sustaining inter-faith harmony in Côte d’Ivoire, a nation often overshadowed in regional scholarship. It advances theoretical frameworks for understanding religious pluralism by foregrounding indigenous West African models of coexistence, which often operate outside formal inter-faith dialogues. The research offers practical insights for policymakers and civil society organisations navigating religious diversity in the post-2020 political landscape. Furthermore, it enriches the field of African Studies by challenging homogenising narratives and presenting Côte d’Ivoire as a critical case study of resilient, everyday inter-religious relations in a complex socio-political context.

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