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Examining Women's Dignity in Ilepadung Village in Light of the Story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42)

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Abstract

This study examines women's dignity through the narrative of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42 and its relevance to sociocultural practices in Ilepadung Village, East Flores, Indonesia. A descriptive qualitative approach combined biblical exegesis, field observation, interviews, and documentary analysis. Primary data were obtained from eight informants representing customary authorities, cultural leadership, and Catholic religious institutions between July 2023 and February 2024. Data were analyzed through textual interpretation, sociocultural examination, and comparative analysis of biblical and local settings. The findings identify three interconnected dimensions of women's dignity: cultural responsibilities, religious participation, and social autonomy. Patrilineal kinship, male-centered customary leadership, unequal educational opportunities, and interpretations of bridewealth (belis) as ownership potentially constrain women's participation. Biblical analysis demonstrates that Mary represents women's agency in religious learning, whereas Martha exemplifies meaningful hospitality and service. Jesus' response affirms women's freedom to pursue discipleship without rejecting domestic contributions. The comparative findings indicate that customary values of hospitality, solidarity, and respect can coexist with efforts to reconsider restrictive gender expectations. The study contributes a contextual theological interpretation supporting women's equal recognition, educational opportunities, and participation in religious and community decision-making.

Keywords: *Biblical hermeneutics, Gender equality, Lamaholot culture, Patriarchy, Women's dignity.*

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INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality remains a persistent challenge to human dignity, particularly in societies where religious interpretations, customary institutions, and patriarchal structures intersect in regulating women's social participation. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that gender discrimination cannot be adequately explained through individual attitudes alone because unequal relationships are reproduced through cultural expectations, institutional hierarchies, and socially legitimized distributions of authority. The relationship between religious traditions and gender inequality is particularly complex, as religious institutions may simultaneously preserve established hierarchies and provide ethical resources for challenging women's subordination (Öztürk, 2023; Van Wyk, 2023). Studies of Christian communities have emphasized the need to reconsider inherited interpretations of women's roles, particularly where domestic responsibilities, religious service, and limited participation in leadership are treated as natural expressions of femininity rather than socially constructed expectations (Baloyi, 2022; Linonge-Fontebo & Baloyi, 2023). Comparable concerns arise in Indonesian society, where gendered leadership expectations intersect with institutional practices and culturally embedded assumptions about women's authority (Arquisola & Rentschler, 2023). Research on gender-based violence further demonstrates the consequences of social structures that normalize unequal power relations and restrict women's capacity to exercise autonomy in personal and collective life (Naicker, 2025; Wolter et al., 2024). These concerns acquire particular significance in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, where customary marriage practices, including belis or bridewealth, remain closely associated with kinship relations, family obligations, and the symbolic recognition of marriage. Research on Lamaholot marriage traditions has identified bridewealth as an important cultural institution whose meanings require careful interpretation in

relation to contemporary social change (Sukmantoro & Suyitno, 2024; Hamado, 2025). Ilepadung Village in East Flores represents a relevant setting for examining these tensions because its predominantly Catholic social environment maintains customary structures in which men's authority, women's domestic responsibilities, and expectations surrounding marriage coexist with religious teachings concerning the equal dignity of human beings. The central issue is not the existence of cultural differentiation itself, but the extent to which inherited social arrangements recognize women as autonomous moral agents entitled to education, religious participation, and involvement in community decision-making.

Recent scholarship on women, Christianity, and social equality has developed along three interconnected lines of inquiry: biblical reinterpretation, ecclesial participation, and the negotiation of gender relations within customary societies. Biblical studies increasingly challenge interpretations that confine women to passive or subordinate positions, emphasizing their participation in religious learning, discipleship, leadership, and theological reflection. Discussions of women in the Gospels associate discipleship with the capacity to receive, understand, and participate in religious teaching rather than with gender-specific domestic obligations (Mensah, 2022; Almirzanah, 2022). Studies of biblical female figures similarly demonstrate the interpretive significance of women's religious authority and participation beyond conventional household responsibilities (Juma, 2023; Nelson, 2024). More specifically, contemporary interpretations of Luke 10:38–42 have reconsidered the relationship between Martha's hospitality and Mary's attentiveness, questioning readings that simply establish a hierarchy between practical service and contemplative discipleship. Feminist engagement with the passage raises questions concerning women's agency, the social valuation of domestic labor, and the narrative implications of Jesus' response to Martha (Crimella, 2022; Henning, 2025). Related theological discussions examine Martha's emotional distress, the tension between religious activity and attentiveness, and the relevance of the narrative for contemporary Christian service (Shin, 2025; Lestari, 2025; Surahman et al., 2025). Indonesian theological scholarship also approaches the relationship between action and contemplation as a continuing concern for Christian formation, including the participation of younger generations in religious life (Sie & Senda, 2025). A complementary body of research investigates women's status within cultural and ecclesial institutions, emphasizing the relationship between gender, customary authority, religious leadership, and social transformation (Mati, 2022; Rantung, 2024). These scholarly developments indicate a growing recognition that women's dignity involves more than formal acknowledgment of equality; it also concerns the actual opportunities through which women exercise religious agency, participate in collective decisions, and negotiate the cultural expectations attached to their social identities.

The existing literature nevertheless reveals a contextual and conceptual research gap concerning the relationship between biblical interpretations of women's agency and the everyday operation of patriarchal customs in particular communities. Studies of Luke 10:38–42 have developed theological interpretations of Martha's service, Mary's discipleship, and the significance of Jesus' response, yet their principal analytical focus differs from an examination of how these interpretive themes may illuminate gender relations within Lamaholot customary society (Crimella, 2022; Henning, 2025; Shin, 2025). Conversely, investigations of belis have examined bridewealth as a cultural institution, including its contested meanings, implications for women's status, and relationship with changing understandings of marriage and family obligations (Hairuddin K. et al., 2024; Gesiradja et al., 2025). Comparative research on bridewealth and women's rights in East Nusa Tenggara further demonstrates the relevance of examining customary practices in relation to gender equality, although findings from different communities cannot automatically be transferred to Ilepadung because the meanings and institutional arrangements of marriage customs vary across local settings (Langoday & Ginting, 2025). Broader legal and sociocultural discussions likewise suggest that bridewealth should be evaluated through the interaction of cultural norms, women's autonomy, and prevailing social institutions rather than through an assumption that customary exchange necessarily produces either respect or subordination (Diala, 2024). Research on Christian institutions adds another dimension by questioning the theological and social processes through which women's religious contributions may be recognized while their participation in positions of authority remains constrained (Musili, 2024; Ngcobo, 2024). The identifiable limitation is therefore not an established absence of scholarship on women, patriarchy, or biblical discipleship, but the insufficient integration of these lines of inquiry within the specific social and religious conditions examined in Ilepadung.

The available studies do not directly establish how Luke's presentation of Martha and Mary can be systematically compared with local understandings of bridewealth, domestic responsibilities, educational opportunities, and women's participation in customary and ecclesial decision-making. This unresolved relationship constitutes the contextual and interpretive gap addressed by the present research.

The significance of this gap extends beyond biblical interpretation because the relationship between religious ideals and customary practices affects the social recognition of women within families, religious communities, and local governance structures. An exclusively theological understanding of equality may remain detached from women's actual experiences when religious principles are not examined alongside the institutions through which cultural expectations are reproduced. Equally, a purely sociological criticism of patriarchal customs may overlook the religious meanings through which community members understand moral responsibility, marriage, hospitality, and social cooperation. Contemporary theological scholarship demonstrates the analytical value of examining how religious traditions may contribute either to women's marginalization or to the critical reconsideration of gender relations (Xhinti & Khosa-Nkatini, 2023; Du Toit, 2026). Research on Christian service also raises concerns about interpretations that glorify women's caregiving responsibilities without adequately examining whether women possess comparable freedom to pursue religious education and institutional leadership (Musili, 2024). The question is particularly relevant to Ilepadung because the social significance of belis cannot be separated from broader relationships among kinship obligations, women's recognition, and inherited expectations concerning marriage. Studies addressing the symbolic and social dimensions of bridewealth indicate that assessments of customary practices require attention to cultural meanings as well as their implications for women's social standing (Gesiradja et al., 2025; Sukmantoro & Suyitno, 2024). Contemporary discussions of gender equality in Indonesian Christian and cultural settings further support the importance of examining social transformation through engagement with local values rather than treating cultural identity and gender justice as inherently incompatible (Rantung, 2024; Tehupeiory et al., 2026). Failure to examine these relationships risks reproducing an artificial separation between theological affirmations of equal dignity and the social arrangements through which women's opportunities are restricted or supported. A contextual examination is consequently necessary to clarify whether biblical interpretations can provide a coherent ethical basis for evaluating customary expectations without disregarding the cultural functions of family solidarity, hospitality, and reciprocal responsibility.

The present study is positioned at the intersection of biblical hermeneutics, theological anthropology, and qualitative sociocultural inquiry, with a specific emphasis on the relationship between women's dignity in Luke 10:38–42 and gender relations in Ilepadung Village. Its proposed contribution lies in integrating an exegetical reading of Martha and Mary's encounter with Jesus and an examination of the cultural, religious, and social circumstances through which women's roles are understood in a Lamaholot community. This approach differs from biblical interpretations primarily concerned with the relative value of service and contemplation by examining the narrative's implications for women's freedom to participate in learning and religious life without reducing Martha's contribution to an inferior form of discipleship (Crimella, 2022; Henning, 2025). It also extends the analytical concerns of studies on bridewealth by situating customary understandings of belis alongside a theological account of equal human dignity, rather than evaluating cultural practices exclusively through their ceremonial or socioeconomic dimensions (Hairuddin K. et al., 2024; Langoday & Ginting, 2025). The proposed comparison considers three interconnected dimensions: cultural expectations concerning marriage and domestic responsibilities, religious recognition of women's participation in Christian discipleship, and social opportunities for education and collective decision-making. The research does not presume that all aspects of Lamaholot tradition are inherently discriminatory or that biblical teaching can be transferred directly into contemporary cultural arrangements without interpretation. Its analytical premise is that customary practices and religious narratives require examination in relation to the social meanings attached to women's agency, responsibility, and recognition. Existing scholarship on women's theological authority and the transformation of patriarchal structures supports the relevance of examining religious and cultural resources together while remaining attentive to their distinct historical settings (Nelson, 2024; Tehupeiory et al., 2026). The proposed novelty is therefore a context-specific interpretive comparison that connects the narrative roles of Martha and Mary with the social position of women in Ilepadung,

using existing qualitative field material and biblical analysis to clarify the relationship between culturally assigned responsibilities and the recognition of women's equal dignity. This contribution is primarily contextual and interpretive rather than the development of a new universal theory of gender relations.

This study aims to examine the representation of women's dignity through the roles of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42 and to analyze its relevance to the cultural, religious, and social position of women in Ilepadung Village, Lewolema District, East Flores Regency, Indonesia. The research addresses two interrelated questions: how the narrative of Mary and Martha expresses recognition of women's dignity through discipleship and service, and how the ethical implications of the narrative can be interpreted in relation to women's experiences within Ilepadung customary society. A descriptive qualitative design combining biblical literature analysis and field research provides the methodological basis for addressing these questions. Exegetical analysis focuses on the narrative structure, historical setting, and characterization of Mary and Martha, while the sociocultural inquiry examines local understandings of gender roles, customary marriage practices, religious participation, and opportunities for women in family and community life. Comparative interpretation identifies relevant similarities, differences, and tensions between the biblical narrative and local cultural arrangements without assuming that the two historical settings are identical. The intended theoretical contribution is to clarify how the recognition of women as religious participants and autonomous moral agents can inform a contextual understanding of human dignity. The methodological contribution consists of connecting textual interpretation with qualitative accounts of customary life through an explicit comparative framework. The practical contribution is to provide an interpretive basis for dialogue among customary leaders, religious institutions, families, and community stakeholders concerning women's equal recognition, access to education, and participation in collective life. The study seeks to establish a culturally attentive theological interpretation that recognizes the value of service and communal solidarity while critically examining social expectations that may restrict women's freedom and dignity.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design integrating biblical literature analysis and field research to examine women's dignity through the narrative of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42 and its relevance to the sociocultural conditions of Ilepadung Village, Lewolema District, East Flores Regency, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. The research combined exegetical interpretation of biblical texts with an examination of customary practices, religious values, and social expectations concerning women's roles and participation. Primary data were collected through direct observation and interviews conducted between July 2023 and February 2024. Face-to-face interviews took place from July 10 to 25, 2023, followed by a telephone interview on February 10, 2024. The study involved eight informants representing customary authorities, community leadership, cultural activities, and Catholic religious institutions. To protect participants' confidentiality, all informants were assigned identification codes (P01–P08), and certain institutional positions were generalized to prevent indirect identification. These informants provided information concerning customary marriage arrangements, kinship structures, cultural traditions, religious practices, educational opportunities, and women's participation in community life. The composition of the research informants, their respective community roles, and the dates and modes of data collection are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Informants

No.	Informant Code	Position	Interview Date and Mode
1	P01	Customary leader	10 July 2023, in person
2	P02	Customary leader	10 July 2023, in person
3	P03	Customary authority	10 July 2023, in person
4	P04	Customary representative	12 July 2023, in person
5	P05	Cultural group representative	12 July 2023, in person
6	P06	Customary representative	14 July 2023, in person
7	P07	Kinship community representative	25 July 2023, in person

8	P08	Catholic community representative	10 February 2024, by telephone

Source: Authors' field data (2023–2024).

The interview procedure consisted of identifying informants, preparing principal questions, initiating interviews, conducting discussions, confirming interview summaries, closing interviews, recording field notes, and identifying matters requiring further clarification. Observation was used to document relevant characteristics of community life and customary practices. Secondary sources comprised the biblical text, particularly Luke 10:38–42, documents of the Second Vatican Council, theological and sociocultural literature, scholarly articles, and village profile archives. These materials provided the textual and contextual foundations for examining relationships between Christian teachings on human dignity and established gender expectations in Ilepadung society.

Data analysis followed a descriptive-analytical procedure organized into three interconnected stages. The first stage involved an exegetical examination of Luke 10:38–42, focusing on the narrative's literary structure, historical and sociocultural setting, characterization of Mary and Martha, and the significance of Jesus' responses to their respective actions. The passage was examined through its two principal narrative sequences: the introduction of Martha's hospitality and Mary's attentiveness in verses 38–40a, followed by Martha's complaint and Jesus' response in verses 40b–42. This analysis provided the basis for identifying the implications of the narrative for women's participation in religious learning, discipleship, and service. The second stage examined the position of women in Ilepadung through three analytical dimensions: cultural arrangements associated with patrilineal kinship, marriage customs, and belis; religious understandings of women's dignity and participation in Catholic community life; and social expectations concerning domestic responsibilities, educational opportunities, and involvement in collective decision-making. Information obtained through observation, interviews, and documentary materials was organized descriptively according to these dimensions. The third stage employed comparative interpretation to identify similarities, differences, and relationships between the biblical narrative and the cultural, religious, and social circumstances of Ilepadung. Particular attention was given to the recognition of women's dignity, the relationship between service and religious participation, and the distinction between culturally assigned responsibilities and individual freedom. The interpretation maintained a distinction between statements derived from biblical analysis, accounts provided by informants, and information obtained from secondary documents, allowing the evidentiary basis of the discussion to remain identifiable. The comparative analysis was used to formulate contextually grounded interpretations of women's dignity and the relevance of Luke 10:38–42 to local gender relations, without treating the historical setting of the biblical narrative and contemporary Lamaholot society as equivalent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sociocultural Structures and the Position of Women in Ilepadung Village

The sociocultural organization of Ilepadung Village reflects the continuing influence of Lamaholot customary traditions, patrilineal kinship, and Catholic religious practices on the distribution of social responsibilities between women and men. The village comprises four hamlets, namely Riang Pedang, Riang Bao, Riang Motong, and Riang Tobi, where customary authority and collective identity remain closely associated with the Koten, Kelen, Hurit, and Maran clans. Interview accounts from customary representatives indicate that kinship affiliation and inherited social expectations remain relevant to household organization, communal activities, and the recognition of individual responsibilities. Such arrangements correspond with broader scholarship identifying customary institutions as influential mechanisms through which gender expectations are preserved, negotiated, and reproduced across generations (Öztürk, 2023; Rantung, 2024).

The patrilineal structure of Ilepadung assigns considerable significance to male descendants as successors of familial and clan identities, while women are commonly associated with domestic responsibilities and marriage-related transitions between kinship groups. Information obtained from customary representatives indicates that sons are frequently prioritized in expectations concerning family continuity, whereas daughters are expected to assume responsibilities associated with marriage and household management. These arrangements illustrate how the social construction of gender may influence the distribution of authority and recognition without necessarily reflecting differences in individual competence or capability. Comparable studies of Indonesian institutional leadership and

African Christian communities demonstrate that culturally established expectations can maintain gendered distinctions between public authority and domestic contribution (Arquisola & Rentschler, 2023; Baloyi, 2022).

Bridewealth, locally recognized as belis, represents a significant component of customary marriage arrangements and provides an important analytical entry point for understanding women's position within Ilepadung society. The customary practice is associated with relationships between families and the recognition of marriage obligations, although interpretations of bridewealth may vary according to the social meanings attributed to its exchange. The research material identifies a tension between the understanding of belis as an expression of respect and its interpretation as a transaction that establishes authority over women after marriage. Studies of bridewealth in East Nusa Tenggara similarly emphasize the relationship between ceremonial exchange, customary obligations, and the negotiation of women's social standing (Sukmantoro & Suyitno, 2024; Hairuddin K. et al., 2024).

The implications of belis for women's dignity cannot be determined solely by the existence of customary payments because the social consequences depend on how families and community members interpret the obligations created through marriage. An interpretation that associates bridewealth with familial appreciation differs substantially from an interpretation that treats marital exchange as conferring control over a woman's decisions and personal autonomy. Contemporary scholarship on bridewealth identifies these competing meanings as part of broader debates involving cultural continuity, gender relations, and the normative limits of customary authority (Gesiradja et al., 2025; Diala, 2024). The qualitative evidence from Ilepadung permits the identification of these interpretive tensions, although it does not establish the prevalence of particular interpretations across the village population.

The relationship between customary expectations and women's participation becomes more apparent when the findings are organized according to cultural, religious, and social dimensions. Interview and observational materials describe a community in which women contribute to household management, agricultural activities, cultural ceremonies, and religious practices, while public decision-making remains strongly associated with male leadership. The analytical categorization presented in Table 2 distinguishes established social arrangements from the gender-related implications identified through qualitative interpretation. This distinction is consistent with research emphasizing that women's recognition within traditional societies cannot be evaluated exclusively through formal cultural status or participation in unpaid communal activities (Langoday & Ginting, 2025; Hamado, 2025).

Table 2. Sociocultural Dimensions of Women's Position in Ilepadung Village

Dimension	Qualitative findings	Gender-related implications
Kinship system	Patrilineal descent and clan affiliation	Greater customary significance attached to male successors
Marriage customs	Belis as a customary exchange between families	Tension between symbolic respect and interpretations of ownership
Domestic responsibilities	Women undertake household management and caregiving	Domestic contributions are recognized but may restrict alternative roles
Education	Economic limitations and preference for educating sons are reported	Unequal opportunities for girls to pursue higher education
Economic participation	Women participate in agriculture, trade, and handicrafts	Economic contribution does not necessarily confer equivalent authority
Customary leadership	Collective authority is predominantly associated with men	Limited recognition of women in customary deliberation
Religious participation	Women contribute to Catholic religious activities and family religious education	Active religious involvement without necessarily equivalent leadership opportunities
Cultural values	Customary norms recognize women as sources of life	Symbolic respect coexists with restrictive gender expectations

Source: Authors' qualitative analysis of field observations, interviews, and documentary materials (2023–2024).

The distinctions presented in Table 2 indicate that women's social position in Ilepadung cannot be adequately characterized through a simple opposition between cultural respect and patriarchal discrimination. Customary recognition of women as sources of life coexists with social arrangements that prioritize men in clan succession, leadership, and certain household decisions. The prohibition expressed through the Lamaholot customary principle eka ganggu inawae ata dike rae, which discourages interference with another person's wife or woman, illustrates the existence of moral expectations concerning respect for women. Research on gender relations in Christian and customary societies similarly suggests that symbolic recognition does not necessarily translate into equivalent opportunities to exercise authority or participate in institutional decision-making (Mati, 2022; Linonge-Fontebo & Baloyi, 2023).

Educational opportunities constitute another important dimension of gender differentiation identified through the field interviews. Information provided by customary representatives indicates that financial limitations may encourage families to prioritize sons' educational advancement because male descendants are expected to maintain familial responsibilities and support household continuity. Such expectations create a potential relationship between economic circumstances and culturally established perceptions of the relative value of educating girls and boys, although the available material does not quantify educational disparities or establish their prevalence. Research concerning gendered leadership expectations provides a relevant comparative basis for understanding how socially constructed assumptions about women's future responsibilities may influence access to opportunities and institutional recognition (Arquisola & Rentschler, 2023; Tehupeiory et al., 2026).

Women's participation in agricultural production, local trade, handicrafts, religious activities, and customary ceremonies also reveals the distinction between social contribution and decision-making authority. Field descriptions identify women as active contributors to communal continuity, particularly through domestic labor, cultural preservation, and the transmission of religious and moral values within families. The recognition attached to these responsibilities does not necessarily establish that women exercise comparable influence over customary deliberations or village governance, making participation and authority analytically distinct dimensions of gender equality. Related theological studies question institutional arrangements that affirm women's service while maintaining unequal access to leadership and decision-making positions (Musili, 2024; Ngcobo, 2024).

Catholic religious practices constitute an additional dimension through which the relationship between inherited cultural expectations and women's dignity may be examined. The coexistence of Catholic teachings on human dignity and Lamaholot customary traditions provides a setting in which religious commitments and gendered social expectations may reinforce or challenge one another. Local religious understanding also incorporates Lera Wulan Tanah Ekan, which associates the Supreme Being with paternal and maternal imagery, offering a culturally grounded expression of complementary dimensions of human and cosmic existence. Contemporary theological scholarship emphasizes that the recognition of women's spiritual significance requires critical examination of the institutional and social arrangements through which religious equality is expressed or restricted (Van Wyk, 2023; Xhinti & Khosa-Nkatini, 2023).

The sociocultural evidence identifies a distinction between women's acknowledged contributions to communal life and their opportunities to exercise authority, pursue education, and make independent decisions. Patrilineal succession, interpretations of belis, domestic expectations, and male-centered customary leadership constitute interconnected dimensions through which gender relations are organized, while religious participation and customary principles of respect provide resources for alternative understandings of women's social standing. Scholarship concerning the relationship between religious interpretation, women's agency, and gender equality supports an examination of these arrangements without assuming that cultural continuity necessarily requires the preservation of unequal social positions (Almirzanah, 2022; Nelson, 2024). The findings establish the sociocultural basis for examining how the characterization of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42 may illuminate the relationship between women's recognized responsibilities and their freedom to participate in religious and collective life.

Exegetical Interpretation of Luke 10:38–42 and the Theological Foundations of Women's Dignity

The narrative of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42 provides a theological foundation for examining women's dignity through the relationship between hospitality, religious learning, and personal agency. The passage presents Jesus entering a village and being welcomed into Martha's house, where the two sisters respond to his presence through different forms of participation. Martha assumes responsibility for hospitality, while Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to his teaching, establishing a narrative contrast between practical service and attentive discipleship. Contemporary biblical scholarship interprets this encounter as a significant episode for understanding women's religious participation and the social expectations surrounding domestic responsibilities in early Christian narratives (Crimella, 2022; Mensah, 2022).

The opening statement of Luke 10:38 identifies Martha as the person who receives Jesus into her home, assigning her an active role in initiating the encounter. Her hospitality demonstrates responsibility and initiative, while the narrative does not explicitly characterize her domestic service as an inferior expression of religious commitment. The significance of Martha's position becomes clearer when hospitality is understood as a social practice involving the reception of guests, the fulfillment of household obligations, and the maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Feminist interpretations of the passage caution against readings that diminish Martha's contribution by establishing an absolute hierarchy between active service and religious contemplation (Crimella, 2022; Sie & Senda, 2025).

Mary's position at Jesus' feet in Luke 10:39 introduces a distinct dimension of women's participation because the narrative associates her with listening to religious instruction rather than fulfilling the immediate expectations of household service. The expression describing her position indicates a relationship of attentive learning and provides a basis for interpreting her conduct through the concept of discipleship. Her participation challenges the assumption that women's religious responsibilities should be restricted to hospitality or domestic assistance, although the passage does not independently establish the full extent of women's access to formal religious education in first-century Jewish communities. Scholarship concerning women in the Gospels recognizes such representations as relevant to discussions of women's agency, religious learning, and participation in the transmission of Christian teaching (Almirzanah, 2022; Nelson, 2024).

The contrast between the sisters becomes explicit in Luke 10:40 when Martha approaches Jesus and expresses dissatisfaction with Mary's apparent withdrawal from the practical responsibilities of hospitality. Martha's complaint introduces an interpersonal conflict involving the unequal distribution of immediate household responsibilities, yet the narrative also presents her as an active speaker who communicates her concerns directly to Jesus. The interpretive issue concerns whether Martha's distress should be attributed exclusively to excessive activity or examined in relation to the expectations attached to her position as host. Recent exegetical discussions have questioned interpretations that reduce Martha to a negative example of anxiety, emphasizing the need to examine the narrative's emotional, relational, and social dimensions (Henning, 2025; Shin, 2025).

The sequence of events provides the basis for distinguishing the sisters' observable actions from the theological meanings developed through interpretation. Martha welcomes Jesus, undertakes hospitality, and expresses concern about the distribution of responsibilities, whereas Mary listens to his teaching without being portrayed as participating in the immediate preparations. Jesus responds by addressing Martha's anxiety and commending Mary's choice, creating a narrative resolution that concerns the significance of attentive listening rather than an explicit condemnation of household service. Table 3 presents the principal textual observations and their implications for the interpretation of women's dignity, distinguishing narrative evidence from the analytical conclusions developed through exegesis (Lestari, 2025; Surahman et al., 2025).

Table 3. Exegetical Analysis of Luke 10:38–42 and Its Implications for Women's Dignity

Biblical passage	Narrative evidence	Exegetical interpretation	Implications for women's dignity
Luke 10:38	Martha welcomes Jesus into her home	Martha exercises initiative and assumes responsibility for	Recognition of women's agency within domestic and relational

		hospitality	activities
Luke 10:39	Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to his teaching	Mary's conduct is associated with attentive religious learning and discipleship	Recognition of women's participation in receiving religious instruction
Luke 10:40a	Martha becomes occupied with extensive preparations	Domestic responsibilities generate tension between service and attentiveness	Recognition of the burdens associated with socially assigned responsibilities
Luke 10:40b	Martha asks Jesus to instruct Mary to assist her	Martha communicates dissatisfaction and seeks intervention	Recognition of women's capacity to express concerns and exercise personal agency
Luke 10:41	Jesus addresses Martha's anxiety and distraction	The response focuses on Martha's preoccupation rather than explicitly rejecting hospitality	Differentiation between the value of service and the difficulties arising from excessive concern
Luke 10:42	Jesus affirms Mary's choice of the better portion	Attentive participation in Jesus' teaching receives explicit approval	Affirmation of women's freedom to participate in religious learning

Source: Authors' exegetical analysis of Luke 10:38–42.

The distinctions presented in Table 3 indicate that the narrative does not require an interpretation in which Martha's service is inherently opposed to Mary's discipleship. Martha's hospitality remains a meaningful activity, while Mary's attentiveness demonstrates that participation in religious instruction cannot be subordinated automatically to expectations surrounding domestic work. Jesus' response establishes the significance of Mary's choice without issuing an explicit prohibition against Martha's practical responsibilities. Theological discussions of Christian service similarly distinguish the value of active ministry from patterns of excessive obligation that may obscure attentive engagement with religious teaching (Surahman et al., 2025; Lestari, 2025).

The theological significance of Luke 10:41–42 rests particularly on Jesus' recognition of Mary's decision and his declaration that the better portion will not be taken from her. The statement provides a textual basis for examining women's freedom to participate in religious learning, although extending this recognition to contemporary institutional equality requires an additional process of theological and ethical interpretation. Mary's conduct may be understood as an example of religious agency because she acts according to her chosen form of engagement despite the immediate expectations represented by Martha's request. Contemporary scholarship on biblical women's leadership supports a broader theological discussion of female participation that recognizes women as religious actors rather than merely recipients of instruction or providers of supporting services (Juma, 2023; Nelson, 2024).

The characterization of Martha also requires attention because interpretations emphasizing Mary's discipleship may unintentionally reproduce the devaluation of activities historically associated with women. Martha is represented as the person who welcomes Jesus, organizes hospitality, and openly addresses the difficulties arising from the situation, demonstrating an active contribution to the encounter. Her anxiety does not negate the significance of these actions, while Jesus' response invites consideration of how responsibilities should be ordered in relation to attentive engagement with his teaching. Studies addressing the gendered recognition of charitable and religious work indicate the importance of distinguishing voluntary service from arrangements that define women's participation primarily through obligations imposed by their social position (Musili, 2024; Henning, 2025).

The relationship between Mary's attentiveness and Martha's hospitality also invites comparison with broader Christian understandings of discipleship as a practice involving learning, service, and responsible participation in community life. The narrative's significance does not depend on presenting one sister as morally superior in every respect, but on examining the different forms of agency represented through their actions and the implications of Jesus' response. Contemporary theological discussions of women's ecclesial participation identify the recognition of women's capacities and contributions as a necessary component of addressing gendered expectations within Christian communities (Baloyi, 2022; Van Wyk, 2023). The account of Mary and Martha

consequently provides an interpretive framework through which religious learning and practical service can be examined without assuming that either form of participation should be restricted according to gender.

The exegetical findings establish two related dimensions of women's dignity: recognition of women's contributions through responsible service and recognition of their freedom to participate in religious learning. Martha's role demonstrates that domestic hospitality possesses relational and religious significance, while Mary's role challenges the reduction of women's religious identity to responsibilities associated with household maintenance. This distinction provides a basis for evaluating gender arrangements in Ilepadung without equating the social circumstances of the Lukan narrative with contemporary Lamaholot customary society. Scholarship concerning gender equality and the transformation of patriarchal religious structures supports the relevance of interpreting biblical representations of women through both their historical particularity and their ethical implications for contemporary social participation (Rantung, 2024; Tehupeiory et al., 2026).

Contextual Relevance of Mary and Martha's Narrative to Women's Dignity and Gender Equality in Ilepadung Village

The comparative interpretation of Luke 10:38–42 and the sociocultural conditions of Ilepadung Village identifies a relationship between women's religious agency, customary responsibilities, and recognition within communal institutions. Mary's participation in religious learning provides a theological reference for examining the restrictions experienced by women whose social identities are primarily associated with domestic responsibilities, while Martha's hospitality demonstrates the continuing significance of service in maintaining interpersonal relationships. Field information indicates that women in Ilepadung contribute to household management, cultural ceremonies, agricultural activities, and religious practices, although these contributions do not necessarily correspond to equivalent authority in customary deliberations. Contemporary theological scholarship emphasizes that women's dignity requires recognition of their capacity to participate in religious and communal life beyond roles established through inherited gender expectations (Almirzanah, 2022; Baloyi, 2022; Nelson, 2024).

The first point of comparison concerns the relationship between domestic service and women's freedom to determine their social responsibilities. Martha's hospitality resembles the customary expectations placed upon women in Ilepadung, particularly their involvement in preparing food, receiving guests, and supporting family and community ceremonies. These responsibilities represent meaningful forms of social participation, yet their obligatory assignment to women may limit opportunities for engagement in education, leadership, and activities outside the household. Feminist interpretations of Luke 10:38–42 distinguish the value of hospitality from social arrangements that restrict women's choices, suggesting that recognition of domestic contributions must be accompanied by acknowledgment of women's broader agency (Crimella, 2022; Henning, 2025).

The second point of comparison involves women's access to education and religious instruction as expressions of personal dignity. Mary's decision to listen at Jesus' feet represents participation in religious learning that extends beyond the immediate expectations of household service, while the educational circumstances described by customary representatives in Ilepadung indicate that financial limitations and preferences for male descendants may influence girls' opportunities to pursue higher education. The comparison does not establish a direct historical equivalence between first-century religious instruction and contemporary formal education, but it identifies a shared concern regarding the social recognition of women's capacity to learn and develop their abilities. Research on women's discipleship and gendered institutional expectations provides a conceptual basis for interpreting educational participation as an expression of agency rather than a privilege determined by customary gender arrangements (Mensah, 2022; Arquisola & Rentschler, 2023; Sie & Senda, 2025).

The third point concerns customary marriage practices and the ethical significance of women's autonomy within familial relationships. Field accounts indicate that belis occupies an established position in Lamaholot marriage arrangements and may be understood either as an expression of respect between families or as a transaction that legitimizes unequal authority over married women. Luke 10:38–42 does not directly address marriage payments or customary property relations, making any application to belis an ethical interpretation rather than a literal correspondence between biblical and contemporary institutions. The narrative nevertheless provides a basis for examining whether

customary obligations recognize women as persons capable of independent judgment, a question consistent with scholarship addressing the relationship between bridewealth, social recognition, and women's rights (Diala, 2024; Gesiradja et al., 2025; Langoday & Ginting, 2025).

The comparative analysis also identifies differences between the two settings that require consideration before formulating implications for contemporary gender relations. The Lukan narrative focuses on a household encounter involving hospitality and discipleship, whereas the Ilepadung material concerns a broader social organization shaped by patrilineal descent, marriage customs, economic responsibilities, and customary leadership. These distinctions prevent the biblical passage from functioning as direct empirical evidence concerning women's position in contemporary Lamaholot society, although its ethical significance may inform an interpretation of the cultural arrangements identified through field research. Table 4 summarizes the principal correspondences, differences, and interpretive implications developed from the biblical and sociocultural materials, with reference to scholarship on gender equality and the relationship between Christian teaching and customary institutions (Mati, 2022; Rantung, 2024; Tehupeiory et al., 2026).

Table 4. Comparative Interpretation of Luke 10:38–42 and Women's Dignity in Ilepadung Village

Analytical dimension	Luke 10:38–42	Ilepadung Village	Contextual implications
Domestic responsibilities	Martha undertakes hospitality and household service	Women contribute to household management and customary hospitality	Domestic service should be recognized without becoming the exclusive basis of women's social identity
Religious learning	Mary listens to Jesus as a disciple	Women participate in Catholic religious activities and family religious education	Religious participation should recognize women's capacity to learn and exercise personal judgment
Personal agency	Mary chooses attentive discipleship, while Martha expresses her concerns	Women's responsibilities are influenced by customary and familial expectations	Recognition of dignity requires consideration of women's freedom to determine their participation
Educational opportunities	Mary's participation challenges a restrictive interpretation of gendered religious roles	Girls may encounter economic and cultural barriers to higher education	Educational opportunities should not be restricted by assumptions concerning women's future domestic roles
Marriage customs	The narrative does not directly address marriage exchange	Belis symbolizes family relationships but may be interpreted as establishing authority over women	Customary interpretations should be distinguished from claims of ownership or control
Social authority	Jesus recognizes Mary's chosen participation and responds directly to Martha	Customary and communal leadership is predominantly associated with men	Women's participation in collective decisions requires recognition beyond domestic contributions
Cultural values	Hospitality and attentive engagement are presented as significant responses to Jesus	Hospitality, mutual assistance, and respect for women are recognized customary values	Existing cultural values may provide resources for reconsidering restrictive expectations
Religious and social equality	The narrative affirms Mary's chosen	Catholic teachings on dignity coexist with	Religious commitments and customary practices

	participation rejecting service	without Martha's	differentiated responsibilities	gender may be examined through a shared concern for human dignity

Source: Authors' comparative analysis of Luke 10:38–42 and qualitative field materials from Ilepadung Village (2023–2024).

Table 4 indicates that the principal relevance of the Mary and Martha narrative lies in its capacity to distinguish the recognition of women's contributions from the restriction of their available roles. Martha's hospitality and the customary service performed by women in Ilepadung share an emphasis on relational responsibility, while Mary's participation in religious learning introduces an alternative form of engagement that does not depend on domestic obligations. The comparison suggests that the social value of women's service need not be diminished when their educational, religious, and public opportunities are expanded. Scholarship examining the theological recognition of women's activities similarly questions institutional arrangements that acknowledge female contributions while limiting access to authority and decision-making (Musili, 2024; Linonge-Fontebo & Baloyi, 2023; Van Wyk, 2023).

Customary understandings of belis provide a particularly significant area for applying the ethical distinction between relational responsibility and personal subordination. The research material indicates that bridewealth may express relationships between families and recognition of marriage obligations, although interpretations associating its exchange with control over women create tension with the principle of equal human dignity. Existing studies of bridewealth in East Nusa Tenggara demonstrate that the practice carries cultural meanings that cannot be reduced to a uniform interpretation, requiring attention to local differences and changing social expectations (Hairuddin K. et al., 2024; Sukmantoro & Suyitno, 2024; Hamado, 2025). The theological relevance of Luke 10:38–42 lies in its recognition of women as participants capable of making meaningful choices, which provides an ethical basis for questioning interpretations of marriage customs that deny women's autonomy. The available qualitative evidence does not establish that every belis transaction produces unequal treatment, making the distinction between customary symbolism and potentially restrictive social interpretations essential to the analysis.

Women's participation in religious activities and community decision-making represents another area in which the biblical narrative and field material can be placed in dialogue. Mary's recognition as a listener to Jesus' teaching supports an interpretation of discipleship that includes women's intellectual and religious participation, while Martha's direct interaction with Jesus demonstrates that female characters are represented as active participants in the narrative. Ilepadung's Catholic religious environment provides an institutional setting in which these interpretive themes may be considered alongside existing expectations concerning women's contributions to family prayer, customary ceremonies, and communal activities. Studies of women in Christian leadership identify persistent tensions between theological affirmations of equality and social arrangements that privilege male authority, suggesting that meaningful recognition involves access to participation as well as acknowledgment of service (Ngcobo, 2024; Juma, 2023; Xhinti & Khosa-Nkatini, 2023). The comparison supports a critical examination of women's opportunities within religious and customary institutions without presuming that institutional changes have already occurred in Ilepadung.

The relationship between biblical interpretation and customary transformation also requires attention to the cultural resources already present within Lamaholot society. Field descriptions identify hospitality, mutual assistance, familial solidarity, and respect for women as established values, indicating that reconsideration of restrictive gender expectations need not entail rejection of customary identity. The recognition of women as sources of life and the religious imagery associated with Lera Wulan Tanah Ekan offer points of engagement between local moral understandings and Christian teachings concerning human dignity. Research on gender and religiously mediated social change suggests that interpretations attentive to cultural meanings may provide a basis for examining patriarchal expectations without treating tradition and equality as necessarily incompatible (Tehupeiory et al., 2026; Rantung, 2024). These resources also require critical interpretation because symbolic respect for women cannot independently establish whether women experience comparable educational opportunities, personal autonomy, or influence in collective decisions.

The contextual comparison establishes that women's dignity in Ilepadung can be examined through the relationship between culturally recognized responsibilities and opportunities for autonomous participation in religious, educational, and communal life. Mary and Martha represent distinct but meaningful forms of engagement, while Jesus' response provides a theological basis for recognizing women's participation in religious learning without diminishing the value of hospitality and service. The principal contribution of the analysis is the identification of an interpretive relationship between biblical recognition of women's agency and customary arrangements concerning domestic responsibility, bridewealth, education, and community authority, rather than a claim that the biblical narrative directly determines contemporary social practices. Scholarship on the social consequences of gender inequality and the role of religious interpretations in sustaining or challenging unequal relationships reinforces the relevance of examining these dimensions together (Naicker, 2025; Wolter et al., 2024; Du Toit, 2026). The findings provide a basis for culturally attentive dialogue among families, customary authorities, religious institutions, and community stakeholders concerning the recognition of women as equal participants in social and religious life, while their applicability remains limited to the qualitative evidence and interpretive scope of the Ilepadung study.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the narrative of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42 provides a theological foundation for understanding women's dignity through the recognition of religious agency, personal freedom, and meaningful participation in service and discipleship. Mary represents women's capacity to engage directly in religious learning, while Martha demonstrates the significance of hospitality and practical service within interpersonal relationships. Jesus' response affirms Mary's chosen participation without explicitly rejecting Martha's contribution, indicating that women's dignity should not be determined by predetermined domestic responsibilities. The sociocultural findings from Ilepadung Village reveal that patrilineal kinship, patriarchal leadership expectations, unequal educational opportunities, and interpretations of belis as conferring authority over women may restrict their social participation. These conditions coexist with customary values emphasizing hospitality, communal solidarity, and respect for women. The comparative analysis establishes that the relationship between biblical teaching and Lamaholot cultural practices is not inherently oppositional, but requires critical interpretation of customary expectations that may limit women's autonomy and equal recognition.

The study contributes to biblical hermeneutics and sociocultural theology by integrating the exegetical interpretation of Luke 10:38–42 with qualitative evidence concerning women's position in a specific Lamaholot community. Its principal contribution lies in distinguishing the cultural recognition of women's responsibilities from their actual opportunities to pursue education, exercise personal agency, and participate in religious and collective decision-making. The findings provide a basis for customary leaders, religious institutions, families, and local authorities to reconsider restrictive gender expectations while preserving cultural practices consistent with human dignity, mutual respect, and communal responsibility. Educational opportunities for girls, recognition of women's participation in customary deliberations, and interpretations of belis that do not imply ownership constitute relevant areas for community dialogue. The study is limited by its focus on a single biblical passage and qualitative information obtained from eight informants in one village, restricting the transferability of its findings to other Lamaholot communities. Further research involving broader geographical coverage, women's direct accounts of their experiences, and comparative examination of customary institutions would strengthen understanding of how religious values and local cultural arrangements influence women's dignity and participation.

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