

# 1 **Reproductive autonomy in fertility research and evidence in sub-Saharan** 2 **Africa: a scoping review protocol**

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## 6 **Abstract**

7 **Objective:** The objective of this review is to clarify how the concept of reproductive autonomy has  
8 been assessed and applied in fertility research and evidence in sub-Saharan Africa. This clarification  
9 includes the sub populations studied and the role of gender and other power dynamics internal and  
10 external to couples.

11 **Introduction:** Reproductive autonomy is an important prerequisite for people to achieve their  
12 desired fertility in sub-Saharan Africa. However, individual, female-focused conceptualizations of  
13 reproductive autonomy tend to neglect the power dynamics both internal and external to a couple  
14 that shape a woman's reproductive autonomy. Furthermore, they disregard the reproductive  
15 autonomy of men, couples and potentially other sub populations as a unit of analysis.

16 **Inclusion criteria:** This review will consider studies that assess and apply reproductive autonomy in  
17 fertility research and evidence in sub-Saharan Africa. Study populations will include people of all  
18 genders, sexual orientations, and ages, both at individual and couple level. Eligible for inclusion are  
19 empirical peer-reviewed studies, including quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods research,  
20 published since 1994.

21 **Methods:** Articles will be obtained from a range of databases covering demography, public health and  
22 sociology disciplines. Titles and abstracts of all retrieved articles will be screened based on the  
23 inclusion criteria, after an initial limited search in Scopus and PubMed and the removal of duplicates.  
24 Iteratively, 2 reviewers will independently review full texts of potentially eligible studies, while eligible  
25 articles are extracted and charted. The results will both be tabulated and presented in a narrative  
26 summary to answer the research questions.

27 **Review registration number:** [Open Science Framework registration number to be added](#)

28 **Keywords:** reproductive autonomy; reproductive justice; reproductive rights; scoping review; sub-

29 Saharan Africa

30 **Abstract word count:** 248

31 **Total manuscript word count:** 2113 words (excluding abstract, references and appendices)

## 32 Introduction

33 In sub-Saharan Africa, fertility levels on average continue to be above population-replacement level,  
34 i.e. 4.6 births per woman in 2021. As such, fertility is an important driver of population growth in the  
35 region. The population in sub-Saharan Africa is projected to almost double between 2022-2050, and,  
36 in this same period, its relative share of the world population will increase from 14% to 22% (1). This  
37 rapid growth is of concern considering its consequences for population wellbeing and sustainable  
38 development (2).

39 Central to realized fertility is reproductive autonomy. Reproductive autonomy can be defined as 'the  
40 power to decide about and control matters associated with contraceptive use, pregnancy, and  
41 childbearing' (3), (p.20). This includes not only the right to decide whether, when and how to have  
42 children but also the right to make choices about one's body, sexual identity and behaviors (4). To  
43 increase empowerment and reproductive autonomy, of women in particular, the International  
44 Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) 1994 Program of Action stipulated the need for  
45 gender equality and access to health care and education (5).

46 Reproductive autonomy is an important prerequisite for people to achieve their desired fertility as  
47 well as other related reproductive health needs (6). Recent decades in sub-Saharan Africa have  
48 shown a strong correlation between declining desired and realized fertility at the aggregate level,  
49 although there is variation between countries (7). At the individual level, it can still mean that people  
50 are not realizing their ideal number of children under the conditions of their choice, even when  
51 declining fertility is observed (8). For instance, a study in rural Northern Ghana found that people  
52 were not having fewer children because of contraceptive uptake but because of outmigration of  
53 spouses and of environmental stress on livelihoods and as strategy to cope with food insecurity (9).  
54 As such, the ICPD Program of Action already acknowledged in 1994 that reproductive autonomy is  
55 an important end in itself, rather than only a means to influence population change through  
56 population policies (2,5).

57 In line with the ICPD Program of Action, studies on desired fertility in sub-Saharan Africa regularly  
58 focus on women and the need to increase their empowerment, level of education and access to  
59 contraception (10,11). However, such individual, female-focused conceptualizations of reproductive  
60 autonomy may neglect that reproductive reasoning and behaviors are highly contextual and that  
61 reproductive autonomy is shaped by power dynamics both internal and external to couples (12-14).  
62 Power dynamics internal to a couple may concern partners' communication about their fertility

63 desires and the extent to which joint decision-making is taking place (15). For instance, sociocultural  
64 norms may instigate male partners to have more say in the decision-making, and as such they may  
65 influence women's abortion trajectories or lead women to covert contraceptive use (16,17).

66 External power dynamics may refer to the influence of family members, social networks,  
67 sociocultural norms and governmental policies and regulations on both individuals' and couples'  
68 reproductive autonomy (13,18-20). Population policies in general, and pronatalist policies in  
69 particular, can be shaped by heteronormative and cisnormative norms and values that expect  
70 women to can and want to become mothers (14). Not only can such norms put pressure on women  
71 to have children, but they can also increase stigma around infertility and childlessness, and neglect  
72 the fertility desires of sexual and gender minority populations (2,21).

73 As fertility research informs population policies, it is important that studies address the reproductive  
74 autonomy of all populations, including men, sexual and gender minority populations, and couples as  
75 a unit of analysis (16,22-25). Therefore, there is a need to investigate the scope of studies being  
76 conducted on reproductive autonomy to clarify how the concept of reproductive autonomy has  
77 been assessed, and applied, in fertility research in sub-Saharan Africa. Neglecting sub populations  
78 and power dynamics at various interpersonal and societal levels perpetuates reproductive autonomy  
79 inequalities and may result in ineffective fertility policies and interventions (14,26). For instance,  
80 studies focusing solely on women may also develop recommendations focused on empowering this  
81 subpopulation, e.g. (27), thereby overlooking the interpersonal and contextual factors also affecting  
82 their ability to have reproductive autonomy.

83 A preliminary search of PROSPERO, the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, JBI Evidence  
84 Synthesis, Figshare, Open Science Framework (OSF) and Scopus was conducted and no current or in-  
85 progress scoping reviews or systematic reviews on reproductive autonomy in sub-Saharan Africa  
86 were identified. One scoping review on reproductive autonomy focused on justice-involved black  
87 women in the United States of America (4). Other studies we found researched related concepts  
88 such as reproductive empowerment, reproductive coercion, reproductive justice and reproductive  
89 health, most of them addressing high-income countries or not any region in specific. We found a  
90 couple of reviews focusing on sub-Saharan Africa, including studies on sexual and reproductive  
91 health, reproductive health care services and abortion, addressing various subpopulations including  
92 adolescents, men, women of reproductive age, vulnerable populations, persons with disabilities and  
93 young people living with HIV.

94 In our preliminary search, we found scoping reviews underscoring the importance of addressing  
95 interpersonal and contextual factors in relation to reproductive autonomy, such as a review on  
96 women's reproductive decision-making indicating the role of gender and pronatalist norms (12), a  
97 review on reproductive coercion underscoring the link to power and inequalities at interpersonal,  
98 community and institutional levels (14), and a review discussing the role of gender inequities at  
99 community and societal levels affecting reproductive health in Rwanda (13). The present scoping  
100 review will build upon these findings to advance research informing policies and interventions  
101 geared towards improving reproductive autonomy. A useful concept for this is reproductive justice.

102 The concept of reproductive justice, as posed by Loretta Ross in 2017, stipulates that each individual  
103 and couple has the right to have, or not, a child under their preferred conditions, and to parent a  
104 child in a safe and healthy environment. Reproductive justice also acknowledges that due to  
105 inequalities in society and policies, some individuals and sub populations have fewer opportunities  
106 to enjoy those rights compared to other sub populations. As a result, they may have less  
107 reproductive autonomy. The universality of the reproductive justice framework explicates that every  
108 person should have the same capability to enjoy reproductive autonomy (28,29).

109 The objective of this scoping review is to clarify how the concept of reproductive autonomy has been  
110 assessed, and applied, in fertility research and evidence in sub-Saharan Africa. This clarification  
111 includes the sub populations studied and the role of gender and other power dynamics internal and  
112 external to couples. Conducting a scoping review is the appropriate method for this study as it aims  
113 to clarify the application of a concept and to identify potential gaps in the literature, such as with  
114 regard to the representation of all sub populations (30).

115 Based on the findings of this scoping review, we endeavor to propose a holistic framework for  
116 studying reproductive autonomy in sub-Saharan Africa geared towards reproductive justice and,  
117 thus, accounting for the various power dynamics at play in the reproductive autonomy of couples  
118 and individuals.

## 119 **Review questions**

120 The following overall research question and related sub questions have been formulated: How is the  
121 concept of reproductive autonomy applied and assessed in fertility research and evidence in sub-  
122 Saharan Africa?

123 1. How is reproductive autonomy defined in fertility research and evidence in sub-Saharan

124 Africa?

125 2. Which sub populations at the individual and couple level are studied in reproductive  
126 autonomy research and evidence in sub-Saharan Africa?

127 3. How are gender and other power dynamics internal and external to couples taken into  
128 account in reproductive autonomy research and evidence in sub-Saharan Africa?

## 129 **Inclusion criteria**

### 130 *Participants*

131 This review will consider all human populations, meaning people of all genders, sexual orientations,  
132 and ages, both at individual and couple level.

### 133 *Concept*

134 This review will consider studies that assess and apply reproductive autonomy in fertility research and  
135 evidence.

### 136 *Context*

137 This review will consider studies that focus on sub-Saharan Africa and its countries and sub regions as  
138 classified by the United Nations (31).

### 139 *Types of sources*

140 This scoping review will consider empirical study designs for inclusion, including quantitative,  
141 qualitative, and mixed methods. Studies should be peer-reviewed, academic articles published since  
142 1994. The year 1994 was chosen because the importance of reproductive autonomy was globally  
143 acknowledged in the ICPD Program of Action in 1994. Due to language limitations of the authors,  
144 non-English studies will initially be included if they have an English title and abstract but excluded at  
145 the stage of full-text screening. A list of articles excluded due to language barriers will be provided as  
146 an annex to the review.

## 147 **Methods**

148 The proposed scoping review will be conducted in accordance with the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI)  
149 guidance for conducting scoping reviews (32) and the process principles as posed by Arksey and  
150 O'Malley, and as advanced by Levac et al. (33,34). The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic  
151 reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) extension for scoping reviews (PRIMA-ScR) checklist will be  
152 used to structure the scoping review (35).

### 153 *Search strategy*

154 The search strategy will aim to locate peer-reviewed published empirical studies. An initial limited  
155 search of Scopus and PubMed was undertaken to identify articles on the topic. The text words  
156 contained in the titles and abstracts of relevant articles, and the index terms used to describe the  
157 articles, were used to develop a full search strategy for Scopus (see Appendix 1). As all populations are  
158 included and we are only interested in one concept, i.e. 'reproductive autonomy', the development  
159 of the search strategy is mostly concerned with the inclusion of all relevant geographical locations.  
160 The search strategy, including all identified keywords and index terms, will be adapted for each  
161 included information source. The reference lists of articles selected for full text review will be screened  
162 for additional papers.

163 Fertility research is conducted in various disciplines. Therefore, we have selected databases covering  
164 this variety of disciplines, including demography, sociology, public health and psychology. The  
165 databases to be searched are Academic Search Premier (EBSCOhost), APA PsychInfo (EBSCOhost),  
166 CINAHL (EBSCOhost), EMBASE, IBSS (ProQuest), PubMed (NIH), Scopus, SOCIndex (EBSCOhost) and  
167 Web of Science (Clarivate). Additionally, we will do a search using only the key word "reproductive  
168 autonomy" in the African journal databases African Journals Online (AJOL), AfricaBib, catalogue of the  
169 African Studies Centre Leiden and Sabinet. Also, we will manually search for articles in the journal Pan  
170 African Medical Journal using the key word "reproductive".

### 171 *Study/Source of evidence selection*

172 Following the search, all identified articles will be collated and uploaded into the bibliographic  
173 citation management software Endnote version 21. After removal of duplicates, the citation details  
174 will be imported into Rayyan, which is a free web application to facilitate the screening process for  
175 researchers working together on a scoping review (36). Then, we will first conduct a pilot test, using

176 a random sample of 25 titles/abstracts to check for potential discrepancies in the selection by the  
177 team members and to make modifications to the eligibility criteria if needed. In the next step, titles  
178 and abstracts will be screened by 2 independent reviewers for assessment against the inclusion  
179 criteria for the review. Potentially relevant papers will be retrieved in full. The full texts of selected  
180 citations will be assessed in detail against the inclusion criteria by the same 2 independent  
181 reviewers. Reasons for exclusion of full-text papers that do not meet the inclusion criteria will be  
182 recorded and reported in the scoping review. Any disagreements that arise between the reviewers  
183 at each stage of the selection process will be resolved through discussion or with a third reviewer.  
184 The results of the search will be reported in full in the final scoping review and presented in a  
185 PRISMA flow diagram (37).

### 186 *Data extraction*

187 Data will be extracted from papers included in the scoping review by 2 independent reviewers using  
188 a data extraction tool developed by the reviewers. The data extracted will include key information  
189 relevant for answering the research questions, including how reproductive autonomy was defined,  
190 the inclusion of gender and other power dynamics internal and external to couples, and the  
191 populations studied. A draft extraction tool is provided (see Appendix II). The draft data extraction  
192 tool will be modified and revised as necessary during the process of extracting data from each  
193 included paper. Modifications will be detailed in the full scoping review. Any disagreements that  
194 arise between the reviewers will be resolved through discussion or with a third reviewer. Authors of  
195 papers will be contacted to request missing or additional data, where required.

### 196 *Data analysis and presentation*

197 The results will both be tabulated and presented in a narrative summary to respond to the review  
198 objective and answer the research questions. Based on the findings, implications will be discussed  
199 for future research, policy and practice.

### 200 **Acknowledgments**

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202 for their valuable input during the design of this protocol.

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## 205 **Author contributions**

206 Conception of work: BH. Design of work: BH, SD, AK. Drafting and revision of the protocol: BH, AK,  
207 SD; and final approval of the protocol: BH, AK, SD.

## 208 **Conflicts of interest**

209 The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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302

303 **Appendix I: Search strategy**

304 **Scopus**

305 Search conducted on May 2, 2024.

Search	Query	Records retrieved
#1	“reproductive autonomy”	2,609
#2	((Africa South of the Sahara) OR (Africa south of the Sahara) OR (sub-Saharan) OR (subSaharan) OR (Angola) OR (Benin) OR (Botswana) OR (British Indian Ocean Territory) OR (Burkina Faso) OR (Burundi) OR (Cape Verde) OR (Cabo Verde) OR (Cameroon) OR (Central African Republic) OR (Chad) OR (Comoros) OR (Congo) OR (Cote d'Ivoire) OR (Côte d'Ivoire) OR (Democratic Republic of the Congo) OR (DRC) OR (Zaire) OR (Djibouti) OR (Equatorial Guinea) OR (Eritrea) OR (Eswatini) OR (Swaziland) OR (Ethiopia) OR (French Southern Territories) OR (Gabon) OR (Gambia) OR (Ghana) OR (Guinea NOT guinea pig*) OR (Guinea-Bissau) OR (Kenya) OR (Lesotho) OR (Liberia) OR (Madagascar) OR (Malawi) OR (Mali) OR (Mauritania) OR (Mauritius) OR (Mayotte) OR (Mozambique) OR (Namibia) OR (Niger) OR (Nigeria) OR (Reunion) OR (Réunion) OR (Rwanda) OR (Saint Helena) OR (Sao Tome and Principe) OR (Senegal) OR (Seychelles) OR (Sierra Leone) OR (Somalia) OR (South Africa) OR (South Sudan) OR (Togo) OR (Uganda) OR (Tanzania) OR (United Republic of Tanzania) OR (Zambia) OR (Zimbabwe) OR (Central Africa*) OR (Eastern Africa*) OR (East Africa*) OR (Southern Africa*) OR (Western Africa*) OR (West Africa*) OR (Middle Africa))	5,213,719
#3	1 AND 2	743
Limited to January 1, 1994 – May 2, 2024		

306

307 **Appendix II: Data extraction instrument**

308

Key information	Extracted data
Authors	
Title	
Year of publication	
Journal	
Article type	
Country origin	
Aims of the study	
Participants/population (including age and gender)	
Sample size	
Methodology	
Key findings 1. Definition reproductive autonomy	
Key findings 2. Inclusion of gender and other power dynamics internal and external to couples	
Key findings 3. Which sub populations at the individual and couple level are included	
Notes	

309

