

"Harnessing Religious Influence: Exploring Views of Adolescent Women and Religious Leaders in Supporting Family Planning Intentions within the Religious Community. A Qualitative Study in Kenya's Mombasa and Wajir Counties."

Background

Religion, deeply ingrained in our societal fabric, plays a pivotal role in shaping daily decisions, actions, and individual lifestyles. Serving as a cornerstone in human interactions, the intricate interplay between religious discourse and modern contraceptive use stands as a crucial subject, drawing attention from scholars across diverse disciplines. While existing research predominantly delves into the impact of religion on decision-making, often centering around the influential role of religious leaders, there has been limited exploration of harnessing religious influence by incorporating the views of young women into the discussion and comparing them with the perspectives of religious leaders. This research gap highlights the need to bridge the divide and effectively compare the perspectives of both groups. Additionally, there is a lack of research on how to tap into religious influence to support young women's family planning intentions. This paper aims to address these gaps by investigating perspectives from both young religious women on how the religious community can support women's contraceptive intentions. Drawing qualitative evidence from Kenya's Mombasa and Wajir counties, the study delves into the intricate dynamics of religious influence on family planning decisions among adolescent women and religious leaders, with a focus on understanding how the religious community can play a supportive role in this regard.

Methodology:

This qualitative study employed in-depth interviews (IDIs) to investigate the perspectives of two key groups: young users of modern family planning methods and religious leaders representing Christian and Islamic faiths. Participants were purposefully selected from Wajir and Mombasa counties in Kenya, chosen for their diverse religious demographics. Young women aged 18-24 who were users of modern contraceptive methods were recruited through health facilities and community health workers, ensuring representation from both Christian and Muslim communities. Religious leaders, (12 per site), were recruited through the Inter-Religious Council and religious associations, prioritizing those supportive of family planning and young people's reproductive health. Interviews were conducted in the local language, recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes within the data, ensuring comprehensive data collection while maintaining ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and participant compensation.

Results

The findings of the study reveal significant distinctions between the approaches taken by Muslim and Christian communities towards family planning (FP) education and acceptance. While both groups receive some level of FP teachings, they diverge in their dissemination and acceptance of FP practices. Muslim participants cite Islamic teachings supporting child spacing and note receiving FP information during religious gatherings and from healthcare providers. In contrast, Christian participants primarily receive FP education within church settings, with a focus on personal or marital decision-making. Both Muslim and Christian communities recognize mixed reactions to FP within their respective groups, reflecting a blend of support and objection rooted in religious teachings. Despite this, there's an acknowledgment of the significance of individual choice in FP use, though Muslim participants express heightened concerns about judgment and stigmatization, along with fears of divine consequences. Reluctance to engage in FP discussions with religious figures is

evident, signalling a preference for family-based advice and a lack of open dialogue in religious forums. However, Muslim women show a willingness to engage with religious authorities for clarity on FP, while Christian women approach the topic with caution. Suggestions for improving FP access are universal, with calls for increased awareness and education. There's an identified need for religious leaders to play a more proactive role in FP education, catering to religious sensibilities. Muslim respondents emphasize the importance of religious leaders clarifying FP's alignment with Islamic principles, while Christian participants suggest sensitization efforts through support groups and community networks.

A noticeable disparity was evident in the approaches adopted by religious leaders within the Muslim and Christian communities. In the Muslim community, religious leaders actively engage in activities to promote family planning (FP) and encourage birth spacing among women and youth, participating in seminars and campaigns focusing on the Islamic perspective of FP. They emphasize the importance of child spacing and preserving reproductive health, aligning FP discussions with religious beliefs derived from teachings in the Quran. However, challenges arise due to the sensitivity of the topic and cultural beliefs surrounding marriage and fertility. Conversely, in the Christian community, religious leaders take a more individualized approach, advocating for responsible FP practices and providing support for contraceptive use, especially among young women. They facilitate small group discussions and one-on-one counseling sessions to create nurturing environments for open dialogues on FP. This study highlights the cultural, behavioral, and religious nuances influencing FP uptake among youth in both communities, where the effectiveness of FP promotion strategies is shaped by factors such as cultural beliefs, religious teachings, community dynamics, and individual experiences.

Conclusion

In synthesis, the paper illustrates the complex interplay between religious convictions and FP practices among young women in Kenya's diverse religious landscape. It underscores the necessity of harnessing religious leader engagement to foster a supportive environment for FP, emphasizing informed, respectful, and culturally sensitive dialogues. This approach aims to cultivate a comprehensive framework for FP initiatives that resonate within faith-based communities, acknowledging the potential of aligned religious teachings and the pivotal role of individual autonomy.