

**THE 4<sup>TH</sup> GLOBAL RESEARCH NETWORK CONVENING NAIROBI, KENYA.**

**Theme: Consecrated Women in Africa, Creating Global Impact Through Sustainable Development**

**FOREWORD**

In a world where the call to serve is matched only by the urgency of sustainable transformation, consecrated women across Africa stand as a beacon of hope, resilience, and practical wisdom. The Fourth Global Research Network Conference which convened in Nairobi, Kenya emerged as the Sisters' steadfast commitment to faith, community, and a future that is both just and thriving for all.

Africa's diverse tapestry of cultures, languages, and landscapes provides not only a rich heritage but also a profound opportunity: to translate spiritual conviction into tangible progress. The consecrated women who shepherd parishes, schools, hospitals, and rural communities bring a unique synthesis of compassion, leadership, and unwavering action. They model how development work is most effective when it is rooted in dignity, collaboration, and a deep respect for the dignity of every person.

Based on the principles of integrity, inclusivity, stewardship, and interdependence, the Consecrated Women of Africa reflect a shared understanding that sustainable development is less about grand plans and more about consistent, inclusive actions that elevate the well-being of families, communities, and ecosystems. It is about turning faith-inspired compassion into concrete outcomes: health research, climate action, equitable access to education and economic opportunities, and the empowerment of women and girls as agents of social change.

The journey described herein this special edition of the CERRA Africa conference proceedings is not a solitary one. It is a collective endeavour that invites partners, institutions, and communities around the world to walk alongside these women—learning from their insights, supporting their leadership, and co-creating pathways that bridge local needs with global actions. Such collaboration amplifies impact, ensuring that progress in Africa resonates beyond its borders and contributes to a more just and sustainable society.

These manuscripts are a manifestation of commitment born of the lived experiences of consecrated women in Africa who walk daily with communities across Africa—nurturing hope, tending to the vulnerable, and nurturing leadership that blends spiritual insight with practical action.

The guiding conviction here is simple yet powerful: genuine sustainable development is inseparable from human dignity. When development work is shaped by faith-led compassion, it becomes more than a set of projects; it becomes a way of aligning hearts and hands toward the flourishing of all creation. Across varied contexts—from bustling urban centres to remote rural parishes—these women demonstrate that lasting change is rooted in relationships, trust, and reciprocal learning.

We honour the gifts these women bring to the world: resilience in the face of adversity, courage to challenge inequities, and a steadfast commitment to inclusivity. It acknowledges the communities that welcome them as partners in co-creating solutions—solutions that are

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2

culturally informed, ecologically sound, and economically empowering. It also recognizes the role of allies—organizations, governments, academics, and practitioners—whose collaboration helps translate local wisdom into scalable, global impact.

As you read these manuscripts, may you be inspired by stories of perseverance and ingenuity, and may you be reminded that development is most effective when it is compassionate, culturally intelligent, and generously shared. May these manuscripts serve as a testament to what is possible when consecrated leadership meets principled action—creating global impact through sustainable development, rooted in Africa’s rich spirit and enduring hope. In this publication, you will encounter stories of grassroots innovation, strategic collaborations, and quiet perseverance that collectively illuminate a path toward sustainable development that is just, compassionate, and transformative. The preface invites reflection on how faith traditions can inform, motivate, and sustain efforts that uplift all people, safeguard the environment, and nurture future generations.

Dr. Joseph Ouma Oindo, PhD

Tangaza University

## CONTENTS

|                                                                                                                                                                              |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| FOREWORD.....                                                                                                                                                                | 1   |
| Consecrated Women as Agents of Climate Change Mitigation in Kenya .....                                                                                                      | 4   |
| Determinants of Life-Adjustment Challenges among Middle-Aged Consecrated Women Religious in Western Deanery, Nairobi Archdiocese, Kenya .....                                | 14  |
| How can the Montessori teaching method be applied in Handmaid's Secondary Schools in Nigeria?25                                                                              |     |
| Imagine a Church Without Nuns? A Pastoral Response to the Vital Mission of Consecrated Women in Kenya .....                                                                  | 41  |
| Navigating the Challenges of Women Religious Formation in the 21st century: Adapting to a Changing World .....                                                               | 57  |
| Influence of Psychological Stress Coping Strategies on the Psychological Wellbeing of Girls in Early Marriages in Silale Ward, Tiaty Sub-County, Baringo County, Kenya ..... | 79  |
| Reading the Signs of the Time in Africa: The Rise of Professional Catholic Sisters in Ministry .....                                                                         | 97  |
| Remarkable Impact of Consecrated Women Religious through Education for Sustainable Development in Africa .....                                                               | 113 |
| Students Disruptive Behavior and Management Approaches by Counsellors and Administrators in Public Secondary Schools in Elgeyo-Marakwet County in Kenya .....                | 126 |
| The Contribution of African Sisters' Education Collaborative-Higher Education for Sisters in Africa to Quality Education of Sisters in Kenya.....                            | 147 |
| The Role of Consecrated Women in Integral Formation in Africa.....                                                                                                           | 167 |
| Evaluation of Trace Elements' Concentrations in Nails: An Early Cancer Diagnostic Screening Tool .....                                                                       | 180 |

### Abstract

Climate change has been and is still an ongoing threat in society today, affecting various populations, including developing nations such as Kenya. This pressing concern poses significant challenges that affect the natural, socio-economic, and environmental factors on which humanity depends. When Pope Francis published the encyclical letter *Laudato Si*, which focuses on the care of the planet and addresses environmental issues as well as sustainable development, he called everyone to be an instrument of God for the care of creation. While extensive research on care for creation has focused on the efforts of several actors, including the government, civil societies, research organizations, legal activists, and other Church bodies and religions, there is limited academic inquiry into the role of consecrated women in climate change mitigation, and their voice is underrepresented in climate change discourse, policy-making, and academic research. Therefore, this research has explored consecrated women's contributions in Kenya towards climate change mitigation and sustainable development. Using qualitative research methods, specifically semi-structured interviews, the study examined the climate change mitigation activities led by consecrated women in Kenya. It has assessed the impact of these environmental initiatives on sustainability and societal resilience, explored the challenges faced by consecrated women in climate action efforts, and identified strategies for enhancing their contributions to climate mitigation. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify consecrated women actively engaged in climate change initiatives. A total of 20 participants were identified. The results evidenced that consecrated women have been engaged in climate change mitigation activities for decades. There has been increased collaboration with other actors carrying out the same roles in society. At the same time, there is an increased positive attitude towards care of creation, the consecrated women have tried to implement a lifestyle that is environmentally friendly, and have increased environmental community services. However, there is also a lack of interest among some consecrated women and poor sustainable action in environmental care. The research recommends that Major Superiors discuss climate change mitigation in their meetings and cascade this to the congregations to enhance active participation from all the sisters and raise increased awareness.

**Keywords:** Climate change, Consecrated women, Kenya, Mitigation

### Introduction

In September 2023, a Non-governmental Organization (NGO) dubbed the Faith For Our Planet (FFOP) held a conference alongside the 78<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to emphasize the contribution of women in faith to climate change mitigation (Faith For Our Planet, 2023). The conference highlighted how women of faith working at the grassroots level can encourage society to embrace sustainable practices by incorporating moral and ethical values. Another study exploring how religion influences women's perspectives on environmental stewardship suggests that women's approach can tap into the power of faith-based initiatives to support effective climate mitigation efforts (Roy & Roy, 2023). In the year 2015 when Pope Francis published the *Encyclical Letter 'Laudato Si'*, a Latin phrase which means 'Praise be to you,' and focused on the care of the planet while addressing environmental issues, challenges as well as sustainable development, he called everyone irrespective of gender, age, religion or race, to be God's instrument for the care of creation, (Francis, 2015).

In line with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13 on Climate Action, the member States of the United Nations (UN) acknowledge that the effects of climate change are being felt globally, with significant impacts on both human populations and the environment, thus demanding immediate and urgent attention from all individuals (United Nations, 2018). In response to this call from various stakeholders on environmental stewardship, extensive research has focused on the efforts of several actors, including government, civil societies, research organizations, legal activists, and other Church bodies and religions. Academic inquiry directly linking the contribution and dedication of consecrated women to climate change mitigation in Kenya remains insufficient and has yet to be realized.

According to researchers, climate change has a disproportionate impact, posing greater risks to vulnerable populations, including the poor and developing countries (Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre (ACLRC), 2022; Francis, 2015; Joseph & Doon, 2023; Ngcamu, 2023; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2018). Ngcamu (2023) asserts that climate change has significantly affected vulnerable populations through intensified weather patterns, resulting in prolonged droughts and an increased frequency of flooding. These populations rely heavily on agricultural production for their subsistence and economic stability. Coupled with financial constraints and limited adaptive capacity, they become even more vulnerable. Viewing climate change as both an ecological, moral, and social issue, Francis (2015) in the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* raises the same concern that “the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest” (p. 34). Additionally, the author of *Laudato Si'* notes that, “The poorest areas and countries are less capable of adopting new models for reducing environmental impact because they lack the means to develop the necessary processes and to cover their costs” (p. 38).

Over the years, consecrated women have consistently demonstrated a deep commitment to serving marginalized populations and improving the lives of the poor (Huriani et al., 2022). According to the Second Vatican Council’s document *Perfectae Caritatis*, consecrated women are called to respond to the “signs of the times” (Pope Paul VI, 1965). This directive continues to guide the mission of religious women and shapes how they serve the poor in the contemporary world. Similarly, Wakahiu et al. (2015) assert that consecrated women in Africa serve the disadvantaged at the grassroots level of society. Other researchers note further that consecrated women also engage in projects aimed at fulfilling the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to address the world's pressing needs, including economic, social, and environmental challenges, to end global poverty and fight injustices (Akruvala et al., 2020; United Nations, 2018).

Against this backdrop, researchers have pointed out that the poor and developing countries are the most affected by climate change. At the same time, consecrated women are widely recognized for their dedicated service to disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. In light of these realities, this paper examined the contribution of consecrated women to climate change mitigation and sustainable development in Kenya. Specifically, it explored the roles and initiatives undertaken by these religious women in addressing ecological and social challenges within the Kenyan context, which is one of the developing countries. The research focused on the following objectives:

1. To explore the climate change mitigation activities led by consecrated women in Kenya,
2. To assess the impact of environmental initiatives by consecrated women in Kenya,
3. To explore the challenges faced by consecrated women in climate action efforts,
4. To identify strategies for enhancing the consecrated women's contributions to climate mitigation.

### **Church and Climate Change**

Caring for and protecting God's creation is one of the Church's vital roles (Kwagwanji, 2021; Nche, 2012). Nche (2023) emphasizes that Churches can serve as effective platforms for ecological awareness programs and for nurturing environmental stewardship among the faithful. According to Kumar (2023), the Church teaches the idea of stewardship that human beings are entrusted with the care of creation, and they are called to responsibly protect and preserve the environment. At the same time, scholars note that the Church has long been recognized for its commitment to addressing societal issues that impact God's creation. Given that climate change represents a pressing global concern resulting in temperature variations, environmental disruption, and land degradation, among numerous adverse consequences, the Church is anticipated to lead efforts in meeting its stewardship responsibilities (Donozo et al., 2019).

Over the years, Mkandawire (2022) observes that Churches have promoted creation stewardship and ecological responsibility in their theological teachings, even though at times they turn a blind eye to implementing these ideals in their actual practices. But Pope Francis' global message in *Laudato Si'* clearly demonstrates the Church's commitment to and responsibility for environmental stewardship (Waterman, 2017). Researchers have noted that, as much as the Church has been advocating for climate change, for the first time, the release of Pope Francis' *encyclical* letter aroused the world's attention on the Church's concern about environmental care (Pou-Amérigo, 2018; Roccia, 2024). In the wake of Pope Francis' publication on care for creation, various actors, including faith communities, have experienced a spiritual awakening that has prompted many to begin numerous projects to address climate issues and fulfill their duty as guardians of divine creation.

Before the publication of *Laudato Si'*, the Church had been keen on care for creation. Pope Benedict XVI, who was nicknamed 'the green Pope,' was concerned about environmental justice and climate change. He played a key role in advocating for the Earth's integrity (Schaefer, 2013). Pope John Paul II, in his teaching on World Peace Day, noted, "We cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention to both the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations" (Pope John Paul II, 1990, no. 6).

In general, religious institutions are recognized as significant contributors to addressing social concerns from time immemorial. Simultaneously, they have played crucial roles in environmental advocacy, and particularly following the release of *Laudato Si'* over the past decade, numerous organizations and individuals have mobilized extensively for climate change mitigation efforts.

### **Significance of Care for Creation**

Environmental stewardship originates from the beginning of creation itself. According to a World Vision report, humanity was given dominion over all living beings and entrusted with the responsibility of serving as guardians and caretakers of the created world (Hyneman & Shore, 2013).

God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and

fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' (Genesis 1:27-28). As stewards, the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Genesis 2:15).

Right from creation, it goes without saying that humanity is the caretaker of the natural world. This implies, as Pope Francis highlighted in *Laudato Si'*, that everyone, irrespective of gender, age, religion, or race, is to be God's instrument for the care of creation (Francis, 2015). Furthermore, scholars affirm that humanity and natural ecosystems exist in a state of interdependence and reciprocal relationship (Chandler, 2021; Francis, 2015). Bouma-Prediger (2025) adds that "the disconnection of humans with nature is regarded as 'ecological homelessness,' which should be counteracted by developing the virtue of caring for creation" (p. 133). According to Aizenofe (2022), care of creation "contributes to human wellness, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally" (p.1). Besides, Chandler (2021) emphasizes that the protection and preservation of creation is a fundamental element within Christian spiritual development and the process of following Christ. From this literature review, humanity has a role to play in the sustainability of creation, failure of which results in a profound impact on the physical and mental well-being of all God's creation.

### **Challenges to Environmental Stewardship**

#### **Consecrated Women and Care for Creation**

Recent research has acknowledged the commitment of women religious to environmental care, noting that this group combines a theological understanding of climate change with practical grassroots experience (Shumbamhini & Chirongoma, 2024). Neo (2001) highlights that Christian baptism calls all believers, including consecrated women, to complete engagement in the life of the Church. According to Smith and Johnson (2024), since women religious serve as educators, healthcare providers, and community leaders, and interact with several people in society, it is a group that can be relied upon to implement the teachings on care of creation within their communities and institutions. Hence, the women religious are influential agents in promoting the care of the environment.

Given the central role that faith plays in shaping individual worldviews and ethical foundations, including how society relates to the environment, Roccia (2024) observes that Christianity, which women religious embrace, has been slow in promoting environmental care. On the flip side, in a report from Tangaza University published by Global Sisters, Pope Francis' *encyclical* on care for our common home has been deeply connected with women religious communities, who have traditionally shown a strong commitment to environmental stewardship through their spiritual charisms and communal way of life (Tangaza University, 2024).

Scholars have been and continue to conduct scientific research on the escalating global threat of climate change. They aim to establish the fundamental root causes and consequences of climate change, to establish effective best practices as a roadmap toward a sustainable future. In a report on how Catholic Sisters are committed promoters of sustainable development, scholars have noted that these women have extensive institutional networks, enabling them to effectively reach and mobilize local communities, making them crucial actors in tangible, grassroots climate change mitigation and resilience-building efforts (Petermann & Warner, 2020). Roy and Roy (2023) add that women religious serve as motivators for pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours.

According to researchers, Women's religious networks are effective channels for spreading environmental awareness and encouraging climate action. They utilize the wide reach and influence of faith-based communities to educate people about climate change and promote

sustainable lifestyle practices (Petermann & Warner, 2020; Roy & Roy, 2023). The scholars therefore recommend that “Policy makers, religious leaders, and civil society create enabling environments that facilitate engagement in climate advocacy” (p. 27).

### **Method**

This research was conducted in Kenya with a bias on consecrated women. Kenya is one of the developing countries heavily experiencing the effects of climate change. According to (AOSK, 2023), there are over 170 women congregations in Kenya representing over 8,000 religious sisters across the country. Given the research gap identified and discussed in the preceding section, this investigation employed a qualitative methodology to examine the issue at hand and to amplify the perspectives of consecrated women, ensuring that the study outcomes are rooted in participants' lived realities and experiences (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). The study employed purposive sampling as the primary technique for selecting consecrated women involved in climate change mitigation. This was a homogeneous population comprising individuals who shared identical subcultural backgrounds with similar traits (Kaur & Arora, 2021). This approach was deemed appropriate for a qualitative design, as it enabled the researcher to deliberately target participants who possessed direct experience and relevant knowledge on climate change mitigation.

Participants were all Catholic nuns in Kenya. Through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, data were collected face-to-face and through phone call interviews from 20 selected consecrated women on the research objectives, which focused on understanding the participants' views on climate change concerns and the contribution of consecrated women towards mitigation. The acquired data was interpreted by transcribing the recorded audio into a written format through precise listening and thematic analysis. The codes were grouped into broader categories where key themes were identified that reflected the patterns and meanings emerging from the participants' responses.

### **Results**

Data collected from 20 consecrated women across Kenya revealed that most participants were already engaged in climate change mitigation activities before the publication of *Laudato Si'* in 2015. However, a few began serious engagement in environmental mitigation after Pope Francis' call. This indicates there was a pre-existing awareness and commitment among the women religious to environmental stewardship, even before the formal call to ecological conversion by Pope Francis. The data analysis showed that most women religious committed to climate change mitigation collaborate with others to promote environmental stewardship, rather than working with their fellow women religious.

### **Mitigation Activities by Consecrated Women**

All participants disclosed their engagement in a wide range of practical, educational, and lifestyle-based activities to mitigate the effects of climate change. According to the responses from the participants, the mitigation approach combines direct environmental action, advocacy, community engagement, and personal lifestyle changes. Some of the activities include creating awareness through training and seminars, using the media, especially the radio, for sensitization, tree planting exercises with different groups, including the youths, school children, and parish members, promoting the use of indigenous seeds, environmental cleaning, promoting the use of renewable energy and organic farming, actively campaigning against the use of plastic bottles and papers. One participant noted that climate action is also about 'being' and not just 'doing.' In this case, some participants have adopted lifestyle changes aligned with eco-spirituality, including practicing eco-conscious living, such as caring for animals, and supporting marginalized groups by purchasing items from them to provide economic support and to promote environmental awareness.

Regarding advocacy, one participant shared, “I give workshops on *Laudato Si’* to priests and religious men and women, especially to those in formation and those preparing for final vows. I also give talks to different groups in the parishes.” On the same note, another participant responded, “I have weekly programs on one of the radios in the diocese, where I sensitize people on the care of creation.”

On other mitigation activities, another said, ‘Care of creation is not only about doing but also about being. Over time, I have changed my lifestyle in a way that is geared towards climate mitigation, and I practice eco-spirituality.’ Another participant added, “I mainly participate in tree planting exercises, especially in schools, and cleaning the environment with different groups.”

### **Collaboration with other Partners**

Some participants appreciated the collaboration with other partners, such as religious associations, diocesan structures, educational institutions, and special interest groups that support their climate change mitigation efforts. This networking helps the consecrated women expand the reach and impact of their environmental activities. These participants shared how collaboration has strengthened their efforts. One participant said, “I work closely with the association of sisterhoods, and recently I partnered with 17 different organizations to form a consortium under the theme *‘Raising Hope for Climate Justice’* during the 10th anniversary celebration of *Laudato Si’*.” Another participant highlighted working with the office of the Commission for Justice, Peace, and Development (CJPD) in the Archdiocese to promote climate awareness and advocacy. Additionally, school-based partnerships proved to be an important collaboration channel, with some respondents working directly with teachers to educate young people and support environmental initiatives. Furthermore, one participant emphasized working specifically with People With Disabilities (PWDs) in her climate action efforts.

### **Attitudinal Transformation**

Research findings revealed a significant attitudinal shift within society. According to one respondent, there has been a notable “mentality shift towards the urgent need to respond to the climate crisis not only among the religious but also the society at large.” A sign that environmental awareness is increasing. Some participants noted that the transformation began with a deep awareness of the interconnectedness of creation and the moral duty to protect the environment as a reflection of their faith. The incorporation of eco-spirituality into daily life has influenced their attitudes, leading to the adoption of sustainable practices such as reducing plastic use and adopting simple living. Additionally, exposure to climate-related disasters revealed another significant drive to attitudinal change. A participant described being motivated by extreme weather patterns, including floods, wildfires, and droughts that affected vulnerable populations, particularly “children and women.”

“I witnessed floods and wildfires when I was growing up. This displaced many people, and the most affected were children and women. This followed a disastrous drought that swept away animals in our area. I therefore wanted to understand the possible causes of these extreme weather patterns and how to prevent future harm,” a participant said.

Another echoed a similar concern, “I experienced the 1984 famine where people had money but there was no food to be bought because of drought. Our teachers engaged us in tree planting and explained to us that the trees were to attract rain in the future.” Later, after joining religious life, I remember a symposium where Wangari Maathai shared about her efforts to reclaim Karura forest. I admired her vision, and in my undergraduate studies, I opted for Geography to further my desire to care for the environment.”

There was consensus among most participants that the people they have interacted with and shared about environmental care have been inspired and are willing to do more on climate change mitigation. “What we are doing has inspired the minds of people. We insist on planting fruit trees, and many have done so. They have spared part of their land and planted different types of fruit trees. Some also use solar for lighting instead of cutting trees to use for fuel,” a participant narrated.

### **Increased Community Service**

Most participants highlighted increased involvement in community services, where they organize tree-planting exercises in parishes, schools, and the broader society. They facilitate different groups on environmental cleaning of various sections like the market, shopping centers, neighbourhood streets, schools, hospitals, waste collection points, drainage systems, beaches, and riverbanks, among others. One participant responded, “The involvement of various community groups in fruit tree planting initiatives has not only contributed to environmental conservation but also provided economic benefits, with some communities reporting increased income through the sale of harvested fruits.” Meanwhile, the participants also expressed the challenges they encounter in their efforts to mitigate climate change.

### **Lack of Interest**

As much as consecrated women are committed to the care of creation, participants testified how members of the population in this study are not so much interested in addressing climate change issues. Some of the participants' testimonies seem representative. “The sisters in the community are not interested in supporting climate action, so most of the time I collaborate with other partners,” one of the participants shared. Another one testified, “The sisters say it is a good initiative I am doing, but they are not all zealous in participating, so some join me and we work together, but others are not interested.”

### **Time Factor**

Most of the consecrated women interviewed identified time constraints as a barrier to meaningful engagement in climate change mitigation efforts, despite recognizing care for creation as integral to their spiritual mission. “At times when we organize for a meeting to share a way forward on environmental care, people seem not to prioritize this with urgency; instead, they have so many excuses, and we keep postponing our activities,” a participant shared and added, “Even the sisters tend to be busy with other apostolates and have little time to care for creation.”

### **Poor Sustainable Action in Environmental Care**

Another challenge identified in the study was the inconsistent implementation of sustainable practices among consecrated women in their environmental efforts. While many religious women acknowledge the importance of ecological stewardship rooted in their faith and charism, the actual translation of this awareness into concrete, long-term actions remain weak. One participant shared her observation, “I have witnessed many times when trees are left untended after planting, and they eventually die. People tend to be enthusiastic on the day of tree planting, but afterwards, nobody cares about the growth of these trees.” The findings also revealed the lack of resources and institutional support to sustain environmental actions. With this challenge, most participants called for a change of attitude from their colleagues.

### **Discussion**

This study revealed that consecrated women demonstrate a significant level of awareness regarding climate change as a pressing global crisis on society and humanity. The data collected shows that prior to the publication of Pope Francis' *encyclical Laudato Si'* in 2015, most participants in this study were already engaged in climate change mitigation activities, which they

disclosed had been inspired by the effects of extreme weather patterns, including floods, and droughts, while other participants were moved to action by their congregational charisms. Some other participants were motivated by the Pope's call after reading and reflecting on the *encyclical*. Since temperature disparity has been realized for several decades in society, and the participants in this study have been experiencing this as they were growing up, even before Pope Francis' clarion call to ecological conversion, this could partly justify the finding that some consecrated women have been engaged in climate change mitigation for decades. The fact that the faith in which consecrated women believe has shaped their worldview that God tasked humanity to care for creation, it would seem normal that they justify their belief and be stewards of creation. Even though consecrated women are engaged in various apostolates, the findings show their commitment to climate change mitigation through educational and lifestyle-based activities.

As the findings reveal that consecrated women have increased collaboration with various partners, a gesture that has expanded the impact on environmental activities they carry out for climate justice, this could be as a result of increased engagement by various actors on climate change mitigation after heeding to Pope Francis' appeal as researchers note, (Koehrsen et al., 2022; Pou-Amérigo, 2018). However, the participants in this study have expressed concern that some consecrated women lack interest in environmental stewardship, which should not be the case given that this is a call from God and the Catholic teachings emphasize the same. This, therefore, calls for those who are not interested in environmental care to rethink their faith.

Overall, considering these findings and their interpretations, the sampled consecrated women demonstrate measurable engagement in climate change mitigation activities and are taking ecological responsibility into their theological teachings. Additionally, they have also adopted lifestyle changes aligned with eco-spirituality.

## Conclusion

Data analysis has demonstrated both positive engagement of consecrated women in climate change mitigation and also challenges they face. Their dedication to the various mitigation activities in the country is a clear indication that the sisters are fulfilling their responsibility as environmental stewards. Future studies would be relevant to apply a quantitative research design to help obtain statistics of how often and to what extent consecrated women are involved in climate change mitigation. The study also recommends that Major Superiors for the different congregations in Kenya discuss climate change mitigation concerns in their meetings and cascade this to their specific congregations to enhance active participation from all the sisters and raise increased awareness.

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**Determinants of Life-Adjustment Challenges among Middle-Aged Consecrated Women Religious in Western Deanery, Nairobi Archdiocese, Kenya**

Lucia Mwikali .K. Mutuku<sup>1</sup>, Sr Dr Sabina Mutisya<sup>2</sup> Dr Maria Ntarangwe<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya

<sup>2</sup> Department of Psychology, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya

<sup>3</sup> Department of Educational Psychology, Maasai Mara University, Kenya

[Lmmutuku@gmail.com](mailto:Lmmutuku@gmail.com) +254-721306710/ +254-758985294

**Abstract**

Consecrated Women Religious (CWRs) in the Roman Catholic Church are women who have taken vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, dedicating their lives entirely to God through service in various apostolic and contemplative ministries. They play a vital role in preserving their congregations' charisms and serving as the living memory of the Church. In Africa, however, middle-aged CWRs (aged 40–65) increasingly face developmental, vocational, and psychosocial pressures that are rarely documented or systematically studied. The Association of Consecrated Women in Eastern and Central Africa (ACWECA) has noted growing concerns about burnout, intergenerational tension, chronic health conditions, and financial strain among sisters in this age group. This phenomenological study explored the life-adjustment challenges faced by middle-aged CWRs in Nairobi's Western Deanery. Grounded in Erikson's theory of generativity versus stagnation and Jung's concept of individuation, the research employed purposive sampling to select ten perpetually professed sisters from diverse ministries. Semi-structured interviews (45–70 minutes) were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic approach. Six key themes emerged: Physical health limitations, where aging-related ailments impaired ministry and were often misunderstood; Emotional Vulnerability, linked to menopause and spiritual dryness; Role overload, from accumulated leadership and caregiving responsibilities; institutional Gaps, such as neglect after final vows and insensitive transfer practices; neglected formation, revealing a lack of ongoing emotional and spiritual support; and economic and family tensions, due to conflicting demands of poverty vows and extended family obligations. The findings highlight the need for lifelong, stage-appropriate formation, resilience training, sabbaticals, spiritual support, and financial planning. Aligning these strategies with Sustainable Development Goals 3, 4, and 5 promotes a broader vision of dignity, well-being, and inclusive pastoral care for aging sisters in African religious communities.

**Keywords:** Middle age, Consecrated Women Religious, life adjustment, resilience, lifelong formation.

**Introduction**

Middle-aged Consecrated Women Religious (CWRs), aged 40 to 65, play a crucial dual role in African Catholicism: they preserve their congregations' charisms and serve as living repositories of institutional memory. In this study, the terms “consecrated women religious” and “sisters” are used interchangeably to refer to this group. Despite their significant contributions, many of these sisters face developmental and transitional pressures that are not well documented in the African context. International research on aging in religious life, such as the studies by Crea and Francis (2015) and Le and Snodgrass (2019) has explored how vowed life affects physical, psychological, and spiritual aging; however, similar data from Africa remains limited. This gap persists despite African sisters continuing to face challenges such as chronic resource shortages and extended family obligations (Hilton Foundation, 2020).

In Nairobi's Western Deanery, superiors have raised increasing concerns about mid-life struggles among sisters, including chronic health issues, vocational stagnation, and the lingering effects of caregiving during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent findings by the Association of Consecrated Women in Eastern and Central Africa (ACWECA, 2021) also highlight widespread burnout, intergenerational conflict, and financial difficulties among sisters in this age group. Despite ongoing pastoral reflections, there is still a lack of systematic research examining the specific factors that affect life adjustment during this crucial stage of religious life.

In this study, life adjustment refers to the ability to sustain behaviors, thoughts, and spiritual practices that promote well-being despite changing personal, community, and socio-religious demands (Jiya & Ndanusa, 2022; Vya, 2021). Middle adulthood is usually characterized by a drive toward generativity, a desire to nurture the next generation and purpose in life (Walker et al., 2023). However, for CWRs, this developmental task occurs within the limits of communal vows, fidelity to charism, and emerging health challenges. Global research shows mid-life increases in loneliness, role strain, and identity reassessment among religious sisters (Fitzpatrick & O'Connor, 2002; O'Leary & Smith, 2011), but little is known about how these stressors intersect within Kenya's church context, where access to health insurance, geriatric care, and spiritual guidance is inconsistent. Addressing this gap is essential for creating context-specific pastoral interventions and protecting the vitality of female religious life throughout East Africa.

This study explores the factors influencing life-adjustment challenges among middle-aged CWRs (40–65 years) in Nairobi's Western Deanery. By examining their lived experiences across physical, psychological, spiritual, and socio-economic domains, the research aimed to (a) identify key stressors and adaptive resources and (b) develop empirically supported recommendations to guide congregational policies, diocesan support systems, and future research on aging in African religious communities.

### **Research Question**

What factors determine life adjustment challenges among middle-aged Consecrated Women Religious in Western Deanery, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya?

### **Literature Review**

Globally, an increasing body of research has examined the well-being and life adjustments of Consecrated Women Religious (CWRs), highlighting shared challenges related to aging, ministry, and community life. In the United States, Kreis (2021) conducted a large-scale qualitative study with 1,116 participants, revealing widespread dissatisfaction among sisters who struggled to balance ministerial duties with spiritual practices. Many described "squeezed prayer lives," linking this pressure to decreased emotional and spiritual well-being.

In Poland, Teodorczyk et al. (2024) surveyed 463 sisters from 34 countries to examine lifestyle and health behaviors among CWRs. They found that balanced nutrition, adequate rest, and regular physical activity were key factors associated with positive self-rated health, with higher levels of religiosity further improving these perceptions; especially among those aged 65 and over. However, the study did not explore the distinct experiences of middle-aged sisters, nor did it consider the specific context of Africa, particularly the Western Deanery of the Nairobi Archdiocese.

In Italy, Crea and Francis (2015) studied burnout prevalence among 194 consecrated women religious, using the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the Big Five personality model, and the Index of Community Satisfaction. They found that higher community satisfaction was linked to lower emotional exhaustion; however, 37% of participants still reported feeling "used up" by the end of the day. Long-term research further suggested that well-structured convent routines may slow

cognitive decline (Snowdon, 2001) and that generativity provides a protective effect against late-life distress (Hastings, 2000). Despite this extensive research, Western studies rarely consider the additional socio-economic pressures and family obligations that shape the lives of consecrated women religious in sub-Saharan Africa.

Across Africa, although data are limited, several studies report similar concerns. The Association of Consecrated Women in East and Central Africa (ACWECA, 2021) documented increasing burnout, intergenerational tension, and inadequate stipends among sisters aged 40–65. Adeyemi (2018), in Nigeria, linked community conflicts to emotional distress in 55% of respondents, recommending the introduction of structured counseling services. Ogu et al. (2022) observed that mature interpersonal relationships and access to spiritual direction significantly enhanced psychosocial well-being among 86 sisters in Ibadan, although receptivity to corrective feedback remained challenging.

Kenyan research further emphasizes the interaction of spirituality, community, and socio-economic insecurity. Gitau and Wambua (2023) found that social support was a modest but statistically significant predictor of positive living scores among continuously professed sisters. Mutuku et al. (2021) noted that higher emotional intelligence helped with better community adjustment, while Njinu (2022) connected mid-life transitions to changes in psychological well-being. Ethnographic reports by Wanjiru (2018) and Odhiambo (2019) reveal that prayer, Eucharistic participation, and communal rituals are key resilience supports, but heavy vocational duties and strained community relations often weaken these supports.

In a correlational study of 238 CWRs, Kiplagat et al. (2019) reported a weak but statistically significant association between psychological well-being and happiness ( $r = .033$ ,  $p > .01$ ), and a stronger correlation between educational level and happiness ( $r = .184$ ,  $p < .01$ ), suggesting that relying solely on quantitative metrics may hide more complex narrative insights. Similarly, the Hilton Foundation's multi-country survey (2020) identified stipend inadequacy as the primary mid-life stressor, despite limited qualitative follow-up.

While global, regional, and Kenyan studies have highlighted aspects of CWR well-being, burnout, social support, emotional intelligence, spiritual resilience, and stipend inadequacy, none have systematically explored the full range of life-adjustment factors (physical health, emotional vulnerability, role overload, institutional gaps, neglected formation, and economic/familial tensions), particularly among middle-aged (40–65) sisters in Nairobi's Western Deanery.

In particular, existing surveys rarely break down data for the 40–65 age group or examine sub-Saharan African contexts, let alone the specific realities of Nairobi's Western Deanery. No study has combined physical, psychological, spiritual, social, and economic factors that together shape mid-life adjustment. Additionally, relying on quantitative correlations (for example, between happiness and education) risks missing the nuanced, lived experiences that a phenomenological approach can reveal, while the unique interactions of Kenyan church structures, intergenerational dynamics, and African kinship obligations remain mostly under-documented.

### Method

The study used a descriptive phenomenological design to explore CWRs' subjective experiences of mid-life adjustment. This qualitative approach provided an in-depth understanding of their lived realities. Using criterion-based purposive sampling, ten consistently professed sisters were recruited to ensure diversity in age, ministry, and vocational tenure. Semi-structured interviews, each lasting 45–70 minutes, were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-stage thematic analysis: familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and write-up. Ethical rigor was maintained through informed consent,

ensuring anonymity, and participants' right to withdraw at any stage. This methodological framework offered reliable insights into the unique factors influencing mid-life challenges among CWRs.

### Findings

This section outlines the key findings of the study based on the participants shared subjective experiences as well as their insights. These are organized to highlight common themes and patterns that emerged from the data

### Demographics

The section below provides an overview of the participants' background information, which includes their age, years in religious life, and their ministerial roles. These details offer context for understanding their subjective perspectives and experiences in the study.

**Table 1**

**Demographics of Age, Years in Religious Life and Ministry**

| Participant | Age | Years in Religious Life | Ministry                    |
|-------------|-----|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| P1          | 53  | 25 years                | Student                     |
| P2          | 47  | 24 years                | Teaching                    |
| P3          | 45  | 18 years                | Teaching                    |
| P4          | 42  | 9 years                 | Teaching                    |
| P5          | 51  | 20 years                | Psycho spiritual counsellor |
| P6          | 52  | 19 years                | Formator                    |
| P7          | 52  | 24 years                | Leadership                  |
| P8          | 65  | 43 Years                | Retired pastoral worker     |
| P9          | 62  | 30 years                | Retired social worker       |
| P10         | 64  | 44 years                | Retired secretary           |

Table 1 shows demographic details of the study participants, identified by pseudonyms P1–P10 to keep their identities confidential. Their ages ranged from 42 to 65 years old, and their years in religious life and ministry varied, reflecting a range of experiences and responsibilities. Among them were three teachers, one student, a formator, a psychospiritual counselor, a leader, and three retired sisters.

### Emerging Themes

The study's findings are presented according to the themes that emerged from the qualitative data analysis, guided by the research question: what factors determine life adjustment challenges among middle-aged Consecrated Women Religious in Western Deanery, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya? These themes highlight the key factors shaping participants' experiences and provide insight into their life adjustment challenges faced by middle-aged, consecrated women religious. Six core areas of concern were identified: Physical Health Challenges, Emotional Vulnerability, Role Overload, Institutional Gaps, Neglected Midlife Formation, and Economic and Familial Tensions. Each of these areas represented a significant factor influencing participants' experiences with life adjustment.

### Determinants of Life Adjustment Challenges

The research study aimed to explore the determinants and factors influencing life adjustment challenges among middle-aged, consecrated women religious. This detailed qualitative analysis identified six prominent themes that highlight the specific difficulties faced by this group. Among these, Physical Health Challenges emerged as the most frequently cited issue. A significant portion of participants reported a wide range of health-related concerns, which they identified as major and pervasive sources of difficulty during their middle-aged years. These findings emphasize the

crucial role that physical well-being plays in shaping the overall readiness and lived experiences of consecrated women religious during this stage of life.

### **Physical Health Challenges**

The findings from the study showed that physical health concerns are a major factor in the life adjustment challenges faced by middle-aged, consecrated women religious. Participants repeatedly reported experiencing various chronic health issues, such as back pain, joint and knee problems, as well as nutritional deficiencies like anemia. These conditions often require personalized care, including specific dietary needs, adequate rest, or a reduction in physical activity, which are not always easy to manage within the communal structure and lifestyle of religious life. Additionally, the communal living environment, which often involves shared responsibilities and duties, can worsen these health challenges, making it harder for individuals to prioritize their health needs. This adds a layer of complexity to their ability to fully participate in both their spiritual and daily tasks, further contributing to the life adjustment difficulties they face experience.

The failure of community routines and structures to accommodate these health needs became a source of tension and misunderstanding. Participants shared experiences where their physical limitations were often mistaken for laziness, disobedience, or a lack of spiritual devotion, leading to feelings of judgment, isolation, and lowered self-esteem. One participant (P3) explained, "I have issues with my back, and currently both of my knees are problematic. It affects how long I can sit, stand, and even walking has become a challenge." Similarly, P1, tearfully recalled: "I had a disc separation in my spine... but they insisted I go to the farm... I was told, 'You are lazy.' It hurt deeply... I was judged. They didn't want to understand my condition. It was seen as disobedience."

Beyond mobility issues, nutritional deficiencies added another layer of difficulty. P6 remarked, "I have anemia now... I feel so weak. And yet I have a lot of responsibilities." Dietary restrictions also caused subtle forms of exclusion. P2 noted, "I altered my diet, which requires the community's understanding... I have to forego certain foods and prepare others for myself. Some members accept this, yet others view it as special treatment." (P1, P2, P3, P6, personal communications, April 2025).

These personal stories highlight the urgent need for compassionate, health-aware frameworks within religious communities. Without proper support or recognition, physical health issues are often mistaken for moral or spiritual faults, which worsens the emotional strain and adjustment challenges faced by middle-aged women in faith communities.

### **Emotional Vulnerability**

Emotional vulnerability emerged as a key theme in the participants' experiences of midlife transition, characterized by important physiological, psychological, and spiritual changes. Hormonal fluctuations, especially around menopause, were often identified as causes of emotional instability, showing up as mood swings, increased sensitivity, reduced self-esteem, and spiritual confusion.

Participants shared experiences of unexplained sadness and inner turmoil. P5 reflected, "Sometimes there is that feeling of... worthlessness... I am not as good as I imagine I am." Similarly, P7 recalled, "I started crying over small things... I thought I was losing my faith." Others, like P8 and P10, spoke of increased irritability and emotional unpredictability, while P4 emphasized the pain of being misunderstood: "I feel people do not understand me... especially when someone tells me, 'You just go and sleep.'" (P5, P7, P8, P10, personal communications, April 2025).

Although many felt emotionally unsupported, some, like P2, described a shift toward solitude and inner peace: “I want to be mostly alone... I feel joy to be alone.” These experiences significantly impacted the sisters’ emotional well-being, spiritual identity, and community relationships, highlighting the need for religious institutions to recognize and address the emotional and psychological realities of aging (P2, personal communications, April 2025).

### **Role Overload**

Another notable theme identified in the participants’ narratives is the experience of role overload during midlife. Many consecrated women religious reported being stretched thin by multiple responsibilities, including formal leadership roles, caregiving, mentoring, and administrative duties, which often left little room for personal rest, renewal, or growth. This constant pressure resulted in physical fatigue, emotional strain, and a sense of vocational tiredness. As P4 explained, “Leadership is exhausting. You are expected to be strong all the time, even when your body and spirit are tired. Similarly, P2 described her changing vocational focus, saying, “I had a lot of passion teaching the children, but now I feel that I want something different... even if it is teaching differently, but I don't want to be in a structured program.” (P2, P4, personal communications, April 2025).

Participants like P6 and P7 had taken on a series of demanding leadership positions, such as community superior, principal, formator, and regional vicar. While these roles provided valuable experience and influence, they often came at the expense of personal growth. P6 reflected, “Most of the time, I’ve not had time for myself... I missed many scholarships... the congregation kept asking me, ‘Not this time.’ I think I have delayed in terms of my personal development.” (P6, P7, personal communications, April 2025).

The constant expectation of availability and resilience often conflicts with the natural slowdown that occurs with age. Without intentional opportunities for rest, reflection, and renewal, many sisters risk burnout, reduced effectiveness, and emotional withdrawal.

### **Institutional Gaps**

Another important theme identified was the lack of institutional support for aging sisters during midlife transitions. Many reported feelings of abandonment due to the absence of clear systems for gradual role adjustment or personal guidance. As P5 noted, “They say we should rest, but there is no system in place.” For another participant, unconsulted transfers and redeployments further deepened feelings of grief and isolation. P1 shared, “Forced transfers felt like ‘exile.’ It provoked grief.” Generational disconnection also emerged, with older sisters feeling dismissed by younger members. P8 remarked, “When younger sisters disregard our experience, it makes one feel irrelevant,” while P6 and P7 observed that elders are often “there but not truly present.” These experiences call for institutional reforms, including midlife support structures, sensitive transfer protocols, and intentional intergenerational dialogue to rebuild trust and community cohesion for effective ministry. (P5, P6, P7, P8, personal communications, April 2025).

### **Neglected Midlife Formation**

Another theme identified was the lack of ongoing formation and structured support during midlife. While many sisters experience significant physical, emotional, and vocational changes at this stage, formal guidance often ends after the final profession. As P6 stated, “Formation ends after final vows for many. But this stage, midlife, is when we need it most... We graduate from the only school that should never close.” Without continued spiritual direction or peer support, midlife can feel disorienting. P2 reflected, “It’s like we’re just gathered in a community for the sake of being

there... I've really disliked it for some time." In contrast, renewed accompaniment was described as transformative. P1 shared, "At 40, I realized you have a voice... affirmations helped me release the bitterness." Participants strongly supported lifelong formation that includes midlife renewal, emphasizing the need for emotional resilience, vocational recommitment, self-care, and intergenerational mentoring. (P1, P2, P3, P6, personal communications, April 2025).

### **Economic and Familial Tensions**

The final theme identified was the economic and family tension experienced by mid-life sisters, arising from the intersection of the vow of poverty and African kinship expectations. Many participants expressed deep guilt and frustration when unable to support aging parents or extended family due to institutional restrictions. As P9 shared, "At home, my family rely on me... I feel guilty when I cannot help them. The tension never abates." (P9, personal communications, April 2025).

The limited resources within the community worsened the challenges faced by participants. P2 highlighted, "Sometimes even soap is a luxury, yet my mother's diabetes medication costs more than I earn in three months." In response, some sisters used personal gifts to meet immediate needs, balancing their responsibilities with self-care. As P1 explained, "Why should I receive 500 from a friend and then give it to you? I reminded myself, self-care, God comes before time." Participants called for more sensitive leadership and culturally aware financial policies that recognize family obligations without undermining religious commitments. As P2 further noted, "Even those in leadership positions need to be more aware of how we are assigned to apostolates to address these needs." (P1, P2, personal communications, April 2025).

These findings emphasize the need for congregations to reevaluate financial frameworks in ways that honor both the vow of poverty and cultural kinship responsibilities, ensuring compassionate support for mid-life sisters navigating these complex matters obligations.

### **Discussion**

This study aimed to examine the factors contributing to the life adjustment challenges faced by middle-aged Consecrated Women Religious (CWRs) in the Western Deanery of the Archdiocese of Nairobi. The findings reveal a complex range of difficulties experienced during this transitional phase, including physical health issues, emotional vulnerability, role overload, institutional neglect, inadequate ongoing formation, and rising economic and family pressures. These themes are closely connected to spiritual, psychological, and communal factors, all of which significantly affect the sisters' overall well-being.

Participants consistently reported experiencing chronic health issues, including joint pain, anemia, specific dietary needs, and conditions commonly linked to the menopausal transition. These findings align with the World Health Organization's (WHO, 2024) recognition of menopause's physiological and psychological effects on women's health, emphasizing its impact on physical well-being and mental health. Despite the validity of these health concerns, participants expressed frustration that their needs were often misunderstood or minimized within their religious communities. Particularly, dietary accommodations, which were essential for managing health conditions, were frequently viewed as signs of entitlement or favoritism, rather than necessary health measures. As one participant (P2) shared, the emotional distress caused by these misinterpretations contributed to feelings of isolation, exclusion, and stigma, especially regarding aging and physical decline. These insights echo the recommendations put forward by ACWECA (2021) and CERRA-Africa & CARA (2022), which call for implementing comprehensive institutional health support systems that not only protect the dignity of aging Consecrated Women Religious but also promote their inclusion and well-being within the community. By addressing

these issues, religious institutions can create an environment where the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of aging members are recognized and compassionately addressed.

Participants also reported episodes of unexplained sadness, emotional distress, and feelings of loneliness, especially during hormonal shifts. These experiences align with the findings of Kiplagat et al. (2019), who emphasize a lack of menopause education and pastoral care for East African religious women, often leading to the misdiagnosis of spiritual crises. Similarly, studies by Adeyemi (2018) and Njinu (2022) confirm that role conflicts within communities and mid-life transitions greatly affect psychological health. The emotional and spiritual struggles shared by participants reflect the frameworks proposed by Johnson (1992) and Schneiders (2000), who see mid-life as a spiritual crossing that offers the potential for deeper connection with God. This process often develops through the physical and emotional experiences linked to aging.

The study found that leadership responsibilities are widely viewed as emotionally and physically exhausting. Participants expressed frustration over the lack of renewal opportunities and emotional support. These findings support research by Mutuku et al. (2021), which highlights the importance of emotional intelligence in boosting satisfaction in religious life. Additionally, Crea and Francis (2015) demonstrated that many religious leaders experience daily fatigue due to the demanding nature of their roles. This underscores the urgent need for structured leadership training, regular sabbaticals, and intentional support to prevent burnout and promote sustainable service.

A recurring theme in the study was the feeling of abandonment after final profession. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of consistent spiritual, emotional, and vocational support, highlighting systemic failures in ongoing formation. One participant (P6) aptly stated, “We graduate from the only school that should never close,” underscoring the disconnect between initial formation and real-life application. This sentiment mirrors the critiques put forth by Ogunu (2019), who advocates for a non-linear, lifelong formation model. The findings also align with the work of Imoloamen et al. (2023) and Ntarangwe (2021), who identify neglect, poor communication, and intergenerational tensions as key factors undermining community trust and stability.

Participants additionally expressed that their voices were marginalized by younger, digitally native members, leading to feelings of alienation and a loss of identity. This generational gap aligns with the observations of the Hilton Foundation (2020), which documented similar dynamics within global religious communities. The sidelining of elder voices, along with the decreasing value placed on experiential wisdom, contributes to a breakdown in community cohesion and spiritual heritage, weakening the unity and continuity of the religious community.

Financial struggles were identified as a major source of stress, especially when trying to uphold the vow of poverty while managing family responsibilities. Many sisters discussed the moral conflict of being expected to support relatives financially despite having limited or inconsistent incomes. These findings align with those of ACWECA (2021) and the Hilton Foundation (2020), which highlight that financial insecurity and family obligations are significant burdens for Consecrated Women Religious (CWRs) aged 40–65. Le and Snodgrass (2019) also observe how these mid-life financial pressures, though sometimes eased by faith and religious commitment, remain very challenging and emotionally taxing draining.

## **Conclusion**

This study shows that middle-aged Consecrated Women Religious (CWRs) face a complex range of life adjustment challenges caused by personal health concerns, spiritual shifts, community interactions, and institutional systems. Participants consistently expressed a strong need for better support, especially in areas such as emotional resilience training, menopause education, new leadership models, and ongoing spiritual growth. Their testimonies highlight the importance of

providing comprehensive support to sisters in midlife, stressing that such support is not optional but vital for preserving the vitality and vibrancy of religious life.

These findings reflect broader calls within the Church and academic literature for moving away from the idea that religious women become self-sufficient after their initial formation. Instead, congregations should implement stage-specific support that includes psycho-spiritual care, leadership renewal, and healing spaces like sabbaticals. Moreover, regional organizations such as ACWECA and CERRA-Africa play a vital role in establishing systems that provide access to healthcare, financial planning, and supportive networks for sisters balancing both community and family responsibilities.

This study highlights how religious institutions can directly contribute to global goals in health, education, and gender equality (SDGs 3, 4, and 5) if they invest in the well-being of their members. Theological educators and trainers are also challenged to enrich their programs with tools for emotional intelligence, embodied spirituality, and lifelong vocational discernment elements vital for maintaining religious commitment into later life.

The recommendations from this study suggest practical and transformative changes. By taking deliberate actions such as providing confidential health support, financial literacy training, and establishing inclusive leadership structures, congregations can help middle-aged women not just cope, but thrive.

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## How can the Montessori teaching method be applied in Handmaid's Secondary Schools in Nigeria?

<sup>1</sup>Olayode Agnes Eponge, <sup>2</sup>Prof Heather Franci, <sup>3</sup>Dr Kim Han Gil

<sup>1</sup>Masters Graduate, Department of Global Perspectives: Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Environments, Boston College, Boston, USA.

<sup>2</sup>Senior Lecturer, Department of Global Perspectives: Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Environments, Boston College, Boston, USA.

<sup>3</sup>Lecturer, Department of Global Perspectives: Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Environments, Boston College, Boston, USA.

\*Corresponding author: AGNES EPONGE OLAYODE, Email: [agnesolayode@gmail.com](mailto:agnesolayode@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Secondary school education in Nigeria has predominantly relied on teacher-centered methods, raising concerns about their effectiveness in equipping students with essential skills. The traditional approach has resulted in academic challenges, diminished motivation, and inadequate emphasis on moral values. This study examined integrating Montessori-inspired learner-centered teaching methods in Handmaid's secondary schools to address these challenges. This is to align with the global Sustainable Development Goals, which will address some goals by 2030. The study used a mixed-methods approach, incorporating questionnaires, interviews, observations, and interventions. The participants included 35 Senior Secondary Two Biology students and seven teachers from a girls' day school in Calabar, Nigeria. Quantitative data revealed low familiarity with Montessori principles among teachers (Mean = 1.08, SD = 0.29) and a reliance on traditional methods (Mean = 2.75, SD = 0.62). Resource constraints posed significant barriers to implementation. Gradual adaptation to Montessori-inspired practices improved student engagement (Mean = 2.58, SD = 1.51) and collaboration. The intervention showed that targeted professional development workshops significantly shifted teachers' roles from information providers to facilitators, aligning with Mezirow's transformative learning theory. Qualitative findings highlighted initial resistance to change among students and teachers, which diminished over time. Teachers noted increased critical thinking and problem-solving skills among students through interactive projects and group activities. Collaboration enhanced teacher support, while student autonomy fostered responsibility and deeper learning. The study concludes that integrating Montessori principles into traditional settings requires incremental implementation. Recommendations include prioritizing teacher training, creating parental involvement, and adapting assessment methods to align with learner-centered practices.

**Keywords:** *Learner-centered education, Montessori principles, professional development, student engagement, educational reform.*

### Introduction

In recent years, secondary school education has predominantly employed a teacher-centred method of teaching, characterized by lengthy lectures with minimal student participation. According to Smith and Johnson (2020), the traditional approach to education has sparked concerns regarding its effectiveness in ensuring students acquire essential skills. These concerns highlight potential consequences such as challenges in academic performance, inadequate emphasis on moral values,

increased rates of student dropouts, diminished motivation, and reduced interest in learning. These factors have collectively hampered schools' ability to achieve their educational objectives.

As a consequence, there is a pressing need to reconsider and revitalize teaching methods to address these challenges and promote a more effective and engaging learning environment for students especially to meet up with the global Sustainability Development Goals (SDG) agreed upon in 2015 by world leaders, aimed to create a better, fairer, world by 2030 – ending poverty, urgently addressing climate change and ending inequality. “The Sustainable Development Goals are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address the global challenges we face, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice. The 17 Goals are all interconnected, and to leave no one behind, we must achieve them all by 2030” (UN 2015). The key to achieving these goals is education at all levels, be it formal or informal.

Mother Mary Charles Magdalene Walker, the mother foundress of the Religious Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus (HHCJ). Educated women and children in Calabar and its environs using the Montessori teaching method. She used this teaching method to develop a pedagogy that the Handmaids now call: “Mother Foundress’ Pedagogy”. This pedagogy was built from the Montessori teaching methods. The Montessori approach to education encourages children to learn independently and engage in self-directed activities. This method aims to nurture critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making abilities while promoting holistic development, including moral, cultural, and, when appropriate, religious values (Montessori, 2004), and by extension, for adolescents.

Adolescence is a period of significant growth and transformation, encompassing changes in physical development, emotional regulation, social relationships, and cognitive abilities. During this time, individuals often become more self-aware, seek greater independence, and are more influenced by their peers. They also display increasing creativity, critical thinking, courage, and a natural inclination to question and reason about the world around them. These are the leaders of our world by 2030, when our present leaders expect global change through the SDGs.

A hundred years after our Mother Foundress arrived in Calabar, Nigeria, the teaching method she handed down to the Handmaids is no longer practiced. All the Handmaid secondary schools still use the traditional teacher-centred teaching method, as most secondary schools in Nigeria do. This research concerns “How can the Montessori teaching method be integrated into Handmaid's secondary schools in Nigeria?” It could be viewed as a change of methodology process that presents an alternative to the established teacher-centred, centralized methodology. It introduced teachers to the initiative to address the concerns about the teacher-centred teaching method in Handmaid's secondary schools, rather than waiting for the government to initiate the change.

The study assessed how this student-centred approach enhances the internalization of pious Christian values and life skills among adolescents in a context marked by traditional teacher-centred teaching methods, inadequate teaching aids, poor parental guidance, a shortage of quality teachers, and a predominant emphasis on result-oriented education. In the Montessori method, teachers adopt the role of facilitators, providing guidance, encouragement, and assistance to support activities initiated and led by students, while maintaining a less direct and more observational role (Montessori, 2004).

To guarantee successful implementation, this fundamental shift in teaching philosophy ought to be carefully considered and planned by redirecting teachers to the learner-centred teaching approaches through modifications to teacher preparation programs, resource allocation, classroom management techniques, and assessments. Advancement and innovation in teaching approaches

can be hampered by resistance to change, administrative restraints, and outside influences like mandates for standardized testing. Working together, including stakeholders, and having a common goal of promoting student-centred learning environments are necessary to overcome these obstacles.

The successful integration of Montessori principles into secondary schools is significantly influenced by factors such as the institution's structure and the cultural context in which it operates. (Montessori, 2012). Integrating Montessori teaching principles into Handmaid's secondary schools in Nigeria posed a significant challenge for educators and administrators, and calls for careful analysis of the challenges and complexities associated with modifying Montessori principles to fit the current pedagogical framework.

The goal of introducing this approach in secondary programmes was to equip self-confident adolescents with the skills they need to become contributing adult citizens equipped to address social injustices, moral decadence, and other challenges prevalent in society. Furthermore, the research delved into the potential of the pedagogy to address societal vices, nurture holistic development in young learners, and contribute to positive societal growth. By examining the outcomes of integrating the Montessori approach in Handmaid's secondary schools in Nigeria, focusing on the complexities of adapting student-centred methodologies to traditionally teacher-centred environments warranted a thorough investigation.

Nigeria was under British colonial rule but gained its independence in 1960. Since then, it has managed its school system and curriculum. The schools are structured into two: Junior and Senior secondary. The main method of teaching is the traditional teacher-centred method. The lack of facilities is the contributing factor to the choice of this method of teaching. The present education system is centralized, as the school curricula and methodology for primary and secondary education levels are designed and coordinated at the national level by the Ministry of Education of Nigeria. These are implemented in most schools in the country. Redefining the teacher's position in a teacher-centred setting was a difficult task.

This research introduced the initiative to teachers to address the concerns about the teacher-centered method of teaching in Handmaid's secondary schools in the city of Calabar, which is predominantly English-speaking since its inhabitants are from diverse cultures and ethnicities; thus, English is their first language, and they also speak their tribal dialect. The students are smart and ready to learn. This study aimed to provide valuable insights and recommendations that can inform educational practices and policies for educators, policymakers, and researchers by examining the challenges and opportunities of merging Montessori principles with established pedagogical approaches in secondary schools, ultimately fostering the holistic development of young learners and contributing to a better society. The following research questions were used:

- 1) How can the Montessori learner-centred workshop affect teachers' teaching approaches in the classroom?
- 2) What professional development support mechanisms are required to assist teachers at Handmaid's secondary schools in implementing the Montessori teaching method effectively?

### Literature review

Montessori teaching methods, characterized by a learner-centered approach that emphasizes self-directed learning and the fostering of independence, continue to receive recognition in diverse educational settings. Recent studies confirm that Montessori pedagogy supports personalized learning trajectories and remains relevant in contemporary classrooms (Lillard, 2021). Research

further indicates that Montessori students often perform as well or better than their peers in mathematics and language, while demonstrating enhanced independence and responsibility (Culclasure et al., 2022). While much of the evidence has historically focused on early childhood, there is increasing interest in extending Montessori principles to secondary school environments, where they have shown potential in enhancing engagement, collaboration, and academic performance (Courtier, 2022).

Handmaid's secondary schools in Nigeria has been traditionally operating within more rigid, teacher-centered frameworks, thus, Montessori-inspired approaches offer opportunities to address challenges of limited learner autonomy and inflexible curricular structures. Studies suggest that adopting learner-centered strategies fosters holistic student development, nurturing creativity, social-emotional skills, and intrinsic motivation (Shapiro & Dacus, 2023). Moreover, integration of Montessori elements has been linked to improvements in classroom climate and reductions in behavioral challenges (Esquivel et al., 2020). This makes the exploration of Montessori applications in Handmaid's secondary education timely, aligning with broader educational reforms enhancing learner-centered environments (UNESCO, 2023).

Globally, learner-centered approaches have shifted the teacher's role from knowledge transmitter to facilitator, engaging students more actively and promoting critical thinking and self-directed learning (Weimer, 2023). Evidence from the United States and Europe suggests that such approaches enhance deeper understanding and long-term retention of knowledge (Prince & Felder, 2021). Nonetheless, challenges persist, including educator resistance, curriculum rigidity, and limited resources, particularly in systems with entrenched teacher-centered traditions (Beaudoin, 2022). Even so, learner-centered methods consistently demonstrate positive outcomes in student engagement and performance across multiple contexts (Froehlich et al., 2020).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, learner-centered teaching has gained traction as governments align with global education reforms and local priorities. South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana have introduced competency-based learning policies, yet systemic barriers such as limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient teacher preparation remain significant (Mtika & Gates, 2020). Cultural norms that privilege authority and teacher-dominant classrooms also complicate implementation, but research shows that when adequately supported, learner-centered approaches increase motivation, confidence, and academic outcomes (Ampiah, 2022).

In Nigeria, secondary education continues to rely heavily on teacher-centered methods, with a strong emphasis on examinations and rote memorization. Although national policies encourage more interactive practices, the lack of resources, minimal teacher training, and resistance to change have hindered widespread adoption (Okeke & Okoye, 2022). Teachers frequently cite challenges such as large class sizes, rigid syllabi, and insufficient support in transitioning to learner-centered strategies (Adu & Olatundun, 2021). Moreover, students themselves may resist active learning, given their familiarity with passive roles (Akinyemi, 2020). Despite these constraints, pilot programs demonstrate that learner-centered pedagogy can enhance engagement and critical thinking, provided schools invest in sustained teacher development and parental/community collaboration (Olibie & Eze, 2021), aligning with cultural and educational goals. The findings from the Educator Journal generated several key insights, aligning the literature as follows:

*Resistance to Change:* Students initially resisted learner-centered methods due to their familiarity with teacher-centered approaches. This reflected Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, which explains that questioning ingrained practices is often uncomfortable. Recent studies (Taylor & Cranton, 2013) similarly affirm that transformative learning requires time, reflection, and supportive structures.

*Resource Constraints:* Limited access to digital tools, power shortages, and poor internet access posed significant barriers. Students often relied on shared textbooks or parents' mobile phones. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory helps explain how environmental limitations shape learning experiences. UNESCO (2023) also notes that resource scarcity remains a major hindrance in many low-resource contexts.

*Communication and Peer Support:* Teachers created a WhatsApp group to exchange challenges, successes, and strategies. This finding mirrors Guskey's (2002) assertion that professional collaboration enhances adoption of innovative methods. More recent work by Thomas and Goodyear (2021) similarly demonstrates how digital peer communities sustain pedagogical innovation.

*Engagement Through Practical Work:* Practical activities, including video lessons and student-led projects, boosted enthusiasm and comprehension. This aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and is reinforced by Darling-Hammond et al. (2020), who found that active learning strategies improve both engagement and achievement.

*Professional Development and Growing Interest:* Teacher workshops on learner-centered methods built confidence and practical competence. Avalos (2019) affirm that professional development is critical for sustaining instructional change.

*Collaboration Among Students and Teachers:* Students and teachers alike adapted to resource constraints by sharing materials and ideas. Vygotsky's (1978) theory underscores that learning is inherently social, and recent studies (Brown & Knowles, 2023) confirm that collaborative practices foster deeper understanding.

*Innovation and Adaptability:* Teachers and students developed innovative solutions using locally available resources. Action research literature stresses adaptability as central to contextual problem-solving (Stringer & Aragón, 2020).

*Gradual Acceptance of Change:* Over time, both teachers and students embraced the new pedagogy. A history teacher who initially resisted later joined after witnessing improved student outcomes. This reflects Taylor and Cranton's (2013) finding that gradual reflection and evidence of success encourage acceptance.

*Enhanced Student Confidence and Performance:* Students' confidence and academic performance improved as they engaged more actively in their learning. Teachers observed higher test scores and stronger presentations. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) affirm that learner-centered practices directly support academic growth when teachers are well-supported. It was a challenging yet successful transition to learner-centered education in a traditional school.

Hugo (2018) highlights that Action Research facilitates gradual, collaborative changes, helping educators adapt new methods to unique contexts. Through communication, peer support, and incremental adaptation, teachers and students were able to embrace a more active, resourceful learning environment, showcasing the potential of learner-centered methods even in settings with limited resources.

## Method

This study employed a mixed-methods action research design. Action research allowed iterative reflection and adaptation in response to observed challenges, while the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches ensured a holistic understanding of the pedagogical shift (Stringer & Aragón, 2020). The research targeted 35 teachers and 734 female students in an all-girls secondary school. From this population, a sample of 7 teachers, was randomly selected by gender, except for the lone JS2 biology teacher who was purposively included, and 35 JS2 biology students aged 14–

16, purposively chosen as direct beneficiaries of the intervention. The class represented four ethnic groups (Efik, Anang, Ogoja, and Igbo) and primarily came from middle- and upper-class families able to afford school fees.

Four primary data sources were used:

- Educator Journal documenting reflective observations throughout the process.
- Questionnaires administered to teachers to collect structured data on perceptions and challenges (Zohrabi, 2013).
- Interviews with teachers and students, using semi-structured guides to explore experiences and reflections.
- Observations in classrooms and the broader school environment.

The Data analysis included the Quantitative Data from questionnaires analyzed using SPSS version 20, generating descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) to summarize teacher responses and the Qualitative Data from interviews, observations, and journals analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step framework. Themes such as resistance to change, collaboration, and professional development emerged from coding and interpretation.

Ethical considerations for Academic research were done as approval was obtained from the school administration. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent from teachers and parental consent plus student assent for student participants. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing all responses.

## Results

### Data sources

The data sources for this research has been the educator Journal done during the action research process, Interviews done with the teachers and students of the school, Observation in the classrooms and the school environment in relation to the attitude and change towards the learning-centered teaching method, and Questionnaires given to the teachers with questions related to the process of change from the teacher-centered to the learner-centered approach, the implication, challenges and recommendations.

### Data analysis

*Resistance to Change:* Before starting this action research (AR), Interviews were conducted with seven teachers to gain insights into their teaching methods and perspectives on adopting learner-centered approaches. Teachers reported familiarity with the concept but indicated that they primarily employed teacher-centered strategies in their classrooms. With a response with a low score of Mean: 1.8, and Standard Deviation: 0.29, teachers indicated that they prefer employing the traditional assessments in their classrooms.

They highlighted several factors critical to meeting their student's academic needs, including support from parents, access to financial resources, emotional stability, peer influences, a conducive learning environment, personalized coaching, access to an equipped library, availability of computers for research, and other educational materials. The teachers' recognition of students' needs reflects an understanding of the complex factors influencing learning. This reflects the need for structured approaches to facilitate gradual change, allowing educators to adapt their practices within their specific contexts.

Students were reluctant to change. The initial reluctance from students to embrace the learner-centered approach, largely due to familiarity with teacher-centered methods. Students and teachers gradually embraced the learner-centered method over time. Student's self-assurance, confidence and improved academic performance was noticeable as the learner-centered approach became more ingrained because they gained deeper understanding and recall of the material through presentations and group work.

*Resource Constraints:* Implementing learner-centered pedagogy faced multiple logistical challenges, including limited access to digital devices, power shortages, inadequate internet connectivity and no library. The lack of critical resources, such as a school library, limited internet access, and scarce personal textbooks, restricted the potential for independent student learning. This underscores the infrastructural constraints, emphasizing how Action Research can guide educators in testing resource-sensitive solutions in real-time.

The responses to the questionnaire had a Mean of 3.58, Standard Deviation of 2.43 on Challenges of Implementing Montessori Principles indicating mixed perceptions of challenges, including the need for new classroom management skills, lack of resources, power shortage, student resistance, and adapting to student-led activities. The students had to use the available resources like using their parent's mobile phones and sharing textbooks for their research and projects.

*Adaptability And Innovation:* Although initially hesitant, students showed enthusiasm for hands-on learning activities, such as video-based lessons, interactive projects research, and presentations. The progress noted among both students and teachers following the workshop highlights a gradual adaptation to student-centered learning. A moderate score of mean: 4.08 and Standard Deviation of 2.35 indicates that there was some level of openness to adapting to Montessori, though some hesitations remained.

Students began to take on more responsibility for their learning. Both the teachers and students stated responding to resource limitations by using locally available materials and creatively adapting projects. Innovation in this setting enabled continued engagement, as students and teachers became more adept at navigating constraints and creating relevant, hands-on learning experiences.

*Student Reactions and Skill Development:* The initial unfamiliarity with the learner-centered methods highlights a necessary adjustment period, but the eventual engagement with of Mean: 2.58, and Standard Deviation: 1.51 demonstrates the effectiveness of this pedagogical shift. The teachers reported student's positive responses to the learner-centered approach, noting improvements in critical thinking and problem-solving skills through collaborative efforts.

This active, experiential form of learning encourages students to engage with content more deeply and develop essential skills that are critical for success in higher education and beyond. However, they faced challenges, such as students' initial discomfort with the new approach, the time it took for students to articulate their thoughts, and resource shortages like computers, textbooks, and internet access. It was a great challenge though the teachers and students try to make do with some locally available materials. The teachers noted that learner-centered approaches provided opportunities for hands-on learning, which improved comprehension through active participation.

*Communication and Peer Support:* The successful transition to a learner-centered method was bolstered by communication and collaboration among teachers, initiated by the workshop. To facilitate the new methodology, a WhatsApp group was created which provided teachers with a platform for sharing challenges, successes, and collaborative problem-solving.

The ongoing exchange of ideas and feedback among teachers contributes to the sustainability of the shift to learner-centered teaching practices. This kind of professional development enhances

the implementation of new teaching strategies, as supportive networks allow educators to share their experiences and challenges. This was notable in the responses from teachers indicating their changing perspective and role with a mean of 4.25 and a standard Deviation of 2.05.

*Professional Development and Growing Interest:* The responses for teacher Training stands at Mean: 2.17, and Standard Deviation: 0.94. The low mean score indicates a significant need for training programs to aid in the transition. Most of the teachers advocated for more professional training in the learner-centered teaching method. A workshop introducing the principles of learner-centered methods provided teachers with practical strategies and fostered interest in the approach. The introduction of a workshop aimed at learner-centered teaching which led to a shift in how teachers perceived their roles. They began to view themselves not merely as providers of information but as facilitators of student learning.

The workshop laid a foundation, with some teachers quickly adopting learner-centered methods while others observed and joined as they felt more comfortable. The shift is significant because it empowers students to take charge of their own education through active participation and collaboration. By encouraging students to lead discussions and undertake research projects, teachers foster an environment where learners can explore and construct their own understanding of the materials.

*Collaboration Among Students and Teachers:* Students reported that many teachers had begun integrating learner-centered strategies, including peer discussions, group projects, and presentations. Student groups adapted to resource limitations by sharing materials and collaborating on projects, which fostered a sense of community and accountability. Teachers also engaged in peer support, exchanging ideas to overcome challenges together.

These methods enhanced their ability to collaborate and interact with their peers, fostering the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Students expressed enthusiasm for their learning experiences, noting that they felt more creative and engaged as they conducted research and collaborated with classmates. Teachers also felt empowered through collaboration with their colleagues.

*Positive Outcomes and Ongoing Challenges:* Teachers observed that the transition to learner-centered teaching improved classroom dynamics, allowing students to come prepared with prior knowledge and actively engage in discussions. The teacher's responses indicated a mean of 2.42 and Standard Deviation of 1.08 in challenges in adapting assessment methods and low parental involvement ( $M = 2.08$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ).

Despite the benefits of the learner-centered approach challenges still persist. Addressing these challenges is essential for realizing the full potential of learner-centered pedagogy. Continuous problem-solving and resource-sharing among teachers and parents can help overcome these barriers, ensuring that both educators and students have the necessary tools for effective learning.

### **Presentation of Findings**

The findings are from three data sources; interviews, observations, and questionnaires, designed to address the central research questions. The findings reveal a complex yet promising transition from teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogical practices. Key themes include initial resistance, resource limitations, teacher role transformation, student reactions, professional development, and ongoing challenges. The integration of these findings demonstrates both the potential of Montessori-inspired approaches and the supports required for sustainable implementation.

### Research question(s) addressed by this data source

1. Considering their unique educational goals and values, how can the principles of Montessori education be effectively applied to the pedagogical approach of Handmaid's secondary schools?
2. What professional development support mechanisms are required to assist teachers at Handmaid's secondary schools to effectively implement the Montessori teaching method?

### Key Findings

#### *Initial Resistance and Resource Limitations.*

Across interviews, observations, and questionnaire responses, resistance to pedagogical change emerged as a consistent theme. Teachers expressed familiarity with learner-centered concepts but noted reliance on teacher-centered practices due to insufficient resources and limited institutional support. Observations confirmed this challenge, showing that students were initially reluctant to leave the comfort of teacher-directed instruction. Questionnaire data further revealed minimal familiarity with Montessori pedagogy ( $M = 1.08$ ,  $SD = 0.29$ ), highlighting a significant training gap.

Teachers and students initially resisted the learner-centered approach due to reliance on familiar teacher-centered practices and limited resources such as textbooks, internet, and digital devices. This is consistent with findings by Kanjee and Hardman (2024), who observed that resource gaps and entrenched practices make pedagogical change difficult, particularly in under-resourced schools. Similarly, Altinyelken and Hoeksma (2021) argue that such constraints hinder the effectiveness of active learning in secondary schools, stressing that adaptation and creativity are essential for sustainability.

#### *Changing Perspectives and Roles of Teachers.*

Professional development workshops played a pivotal role in transforming teachers' perspectives. Interview data revealed that teachers began to redefine their roles, moving from knowledge providers to facilitators of learning. Observations corroborated this shift, particularly when teachers engaged students in research projects and collaborative activities. Questionnaire responses highlighted that teachers increasingly recognized the strengths of Montessori methods ( $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ), despite concerns about practical challenges.

The introduction of professional development workshops initiated a shift in teacher roles from knowledge transmitters to facilitators of learning. This aligns with Desimone and Garet (2015), who emphasize that collective, content-focused professional development drives pedagogical change. A recent Ugandan study (Teacher Educators' Professional Learning and Pedagogical Change, 2023) similarly shows that teacher-educators developed more learner-centered orientations when supported with sustained training opportunities.

#### *Student engagement and Skill Development*

Students responded positively to learner-centered practices, though not without initial hesitation. Interview and observation data indicated that group work, presentations, and research projects enhanced collaboration, creativity, and problem-solving. Questionnaire data suggested moderate engagement levels ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ), pointing to gradual but promising adaptation.

Teachers reported that students gradually embraced learner-centered practices, showing improvements in critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. This echoes Scippo (2024), who found Montessori approaches enhance academic outcomes, particularly in language

and mathematics, by fostering student engagement and autonomy. Lillard (2019) also highlights how Montessori's emphasis on experiential learning nurtures higher-order skills.

#### *Professional Development and Teachers' Collaboration*

Teacher collaboration and professional development emerged as critical enablers of change. Interviews revealed that workshops encouraged communication and peer support, creating networks for exchanging strategies and feedback. Observations showed teachers experimenting with learner-centered practices post-training, while questionnaire results highlighted strong demand for continued training ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ).

Collaboration among teachers, facilitated by workshops and communication platforms, proved crucial for sustaining learner-centered methods. This finding resonates with Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), who stress the importance of collaborative professional communities, and with the Journal of Montessori Research & Education (2023), which reports that peer collaboration helps teachers sustain fidelity in learner-centered pedagogy despite systemic challenges.

#### *Positive Outcomes and Ongoing Challenges*

Resource shortages significantly hindered the transition. Students lacked access to computers, updated textbooks, and dedicated library spaces, which limited opportunities for independent research. Furthermore, questionnaire results indicated challenges in adapting assessment methods ( $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) and low parental involvement ( $M = 2.08$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ). These barriers highlight the importance of holistic support systems that include material investment and stakeholder engagement.

Despite resource barriers, learner-centered practices improved classroom dynamics, enabling students to engage more actively with prior knowledge and discussions. This supports Abiodun (2024), who found that adapting Montessori methods in Kenyan schools improved student engagement but required contextual adjustments for sustainability. Teachers in this study echoed the same by noting gradual but noticeable gains in academic performance and student confidence.

#### *Questionnaire Insights*

Survey data revealed low familiarity with Montessori principles but openness to adaptation. Teachers acknowledged strengths such as independence and collaboration (mean = 4.25) while identifying weaknesses like resource shortages and assessment challenges. These mixed perceptions align with Murray and Peyton (2020), who highlight that shifting to Montessori requires both mindset change and structural support. Additionally, Mavrič (2020) stresses that adapting assessment methods to learner-centered approaches requires targeted training, consistent with the teachers' feedback in this study.

### **Integration of Findings**

Taken together, the findings suggest that Montessori-inspired, learner-centered teaching holds significant potential for Handmaid's secondary schools in Nigeria. Teachers are increasingly open to adopting facilitative roles, and students are demonstrating greater creativity and engagement. However, the success of this pedagogical shift depends heavily on addressing resource gaps, increasing parental involvement, and providing sustained professional development.

The integration of interviews, observations, and questionnaires illustrates both convergence and divergence: while all data sources highlight enthusiasm and gradual progress, they also reveal persistent barriers such as resource shortages, assessment challenges, and resistance to change.

Action Research, as emphasized by Coghlan & Brannick, (2014), provides a practical framework for navigating these complexities through iterative cycles of planning, action, and reflection.

The findings show that the transition toward Montessori-inspired, learner-centered teaching at Handmaid's secondary schools is underway but requires significant structural and professional support. While teachers and students are beginning to embrace new pedagogical practices, the journey remains constrained by contextual challenges. Sustained investment in professional development, materials, and stakeholder engagement will be crucial for embedding learner-centered approaches and realizing their full educational benefits.

## Discussion

The questionnaires were distributed to seven teachers, interviews were done by 7 teachers and 10 students from the sampled population, observations were done with 7 teachers and 35 JS2 biology students in a Handmaid secondary school. The response rate results revealed that the questionnaires distributed were all filled and collected, thus constituting a 100% return rate. A 100% return rate was considered appropriate in this study, allowing the data analysis to proceed following the findings.

The data collected had a general hesitancy toward fully adopting Montessori methods, with mixed opinions on its benefits, challenges, and required adaptations. Hugo (2018) underscores the importance of gradual mind shifts, effective professional development, and differentiated assessments as foundational steps to make Montessori integration successful. Ensuring teacher support through comprehensive training, involving parents, and investing in appropriate materials may foster a smooth transition from traditional to learner-centered practices, ultimately benefiting students through increased engagement and autonomy.

Reflecting on these findings provided a deep understanding of the complexities and rewards of transitioning to a learner-centered approach. The journey highlighted the interconnectedness of pedagogy, resources, and human dynamics in shaping educational experiences. The initial hesitation from students was a reminder of how deeply ingrained traditional methods can be. It showed that change is not just about introducing new strategies but also about addressing the emotional and psychological comfort people have with familiarity. It reinforced the importance of patience and creating a safe space for questioning and growth. The challenges of limited technology and infrastructure resonated with the researcher. It was inspiring to see how creativity and resourcefulness turned obstacles into opportunities. For instance, using shared phones or textbooks underscored the power of collective effort and adaptability in education. It's a lesson in resilience to apply to the researcher's own work. The use of a WhatsApp group to share experiences and solutions was particularly insightful. It's a reminder of how crucial collaboration and open communication are important for professional and personal growth. Being part of a community that supports and learns together is invaluable when navigating new challenges.

Seeing students' growing excitement for practical tasks reinforced the researcher's belief in experiential learning. When students actively participate and see the real-world applications of what they learn, their engagement and understanding skyrocket. It is important to design activities that connect theory with practice in meaningful ways. The workshops that introduced learner-centered methods highlighted how essential it is to equip educators with tools and confidence. It appreciated that professional development isn't just about learning techniques, it's about empowering educators to embrace new ways of thinking and teaching. Students and teachers working together to overcome challenges indicates the strength of the community. Whether it was sharing resources or brainstorming solutions, collaboration fostered a sense of ownership and

accountability. This reinforced the importance of teamwork in achieving collective goals. The innovative approaches to overcoming resource limitations were inspiring. Teachers and students adapted by using locally available materials and creative problem-solving. Thus, indicating that constraints can often drive some of the most effective and innovative solutions. Overall, these findings are reminders of the value of combining action with reflection. It is possible to try new approaches, learning from what works, and continuously adapting, to achieve meaningful change for the best achievements. This process can be applied not just in education but in any area of growth and development.

### **Conclusion with recommendations for future research and practitioner implications.**

To conclude, the well-considered recommendations suggest practical measures for addressing the challenges identified and enhancing the effectiveness of the issues examined. In addition, this subsection provides suggestions for further research, identifying gaps and areas that could benefit from more in-depth research to expand the understanding of the topic and contribute to future developments in the field.

The literature suggests that while Nigeria faces unique challenges in adopting learner-centered methods, a gradual and well-supported transition can yield substantial educational benefits. Lessons from both global and regional research indicate the importance of addressing structural and cultural barriers through sustained professional development, adequate resource allocation, and a shift in teaching mindsets (Tabulawa, 2013). Providing teachers with targeted training and ongoing support can build the confidence needed to implement learner-centered practices effectively. Fostering collaboration and communication between educators, parents, and the community can help promote broader acceptance and understanding of the learner-centered approach. Engaging parents and community members can foster a supportive framework that aligns with cultural expectations while also advocating for educational reforms that prioritize student engagement and skills development. As Nigeria's educational system evolves to meet both local needs and global standards, a learner-centered approach offers a promising path to enhance learning outcomes and prepare students for future challenges (Oyewumi, & Jabaar, 2018).

Furthermore, several implications arise from the analysis of the four data sources, for reshaping the intervention in the second action cycle. The insights gained from the initial action cycle will guide adjustments to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of the transition toward learner-centered methods. Key implications include the need for strengthened support systems, enhanced resource allocation, targeted professional development, and increased stakeholder involvement.

#### *1. Addressing Resistance Through Incremental Implementation*

The analysis indicates that initial resistance is a common barrier, but it gradually diminishes with sustained effort. To manage this, the second action cycle will introduce learner-centered practices more gradually, allowing teachers and students to adapt progressively. By incorporating small, manageable changes, the intervention can reduce the sense of disruption, easing resistance. This phased approach will help teachers build confidence with learner-centered strategies without feeling overwhelmed by a complete shift.

#### *2. Allocating Additional Resources*

The lack of adequate resources has emerged as a critical challenge in implementing learner-centered methods. In the second cycle, the intervention will prioritize resource allocation by

ensuring teachers have access to necessary materials, tools, and technology that support active, learner-centered learning. Providing resources will not only facilitate the transition but also demonstrate institutional commitment to learner-centered approaches, potentially reducing resistance and increasing buy-in from teachers and students alike.

### 3. *Fostering Effective Communication and Collaboration*

Open communication was highlighted as essential for building trust and encouraging collaboration. In the second cycle, regular meetings and open forums will be established to maintain transparent communication channels among teachers, students, and administrators. Encouraging teachers to share challenges, successes, and strategies will create a collaborative environment, allowing them to learn from each other and strengthen their commitment to learner-centered practices. Additionally, by involving students in feedback discussions, they can feel more ownership of the process, which may lead to higher engagement.

### 4. *Enhancing Professional Development*

The analysis underscores the need for targeted professional development to support teachers in adapting to new teaching roles. The intervention will expand training opportunities, offering workshops and peer-learning sessions focused on practical strategies for learner-centered instruction. This training will focus on equipping teachers with skills to facilitate student autonomy, manage learner-centered activities effectively, and assess student progress in non-traditional ways. Continued professional development will provide teachers with the tools they need to navigate challenges confidently and adapt to changing classroom dynamics.

### 5. *Increasing Community and Parental Engagement*

Community involvement, including parents, was identified as an important factor in ensuring continuity in students' learning environments. The second action cycle will include outreach to parents and the broader school community, educating them on the benefits and goals of the learner-centered approach. Parent workshops or informational sessions can provide them with insights into the new methodologies and ways to support students' development at home. Building this support network will help create a more cohesive environment for students, aligning the home and school settings to reinforce learner-centered values.

### 6. *Implementing Differentiated Montessori-Inspired Practices*

While there was some hesitancy about fully adopting Montessori principles, aspects of this approach can be selectively incorporated. In the second cycle, Montessori-inspired practices will be adapted incrementally, starting with elements that teachers find manageable, such as growth-oriented feedback and differentiated assessments. This approach allows teachers to experiment with learner-centered techniques, making adjustments based on classroom dynamics and student needs. Gradual exposure to Montessori elements can help teachers feel more comfortable and competent, promoting sustained engagement with learner-centered methods.

The second action cycle will generally focus on a more adaptive, resource-supported, and collaborative approach to learner-centered teaching. By addressing resistance through incremental implementation, enhancing communication, investing in resources, providing targeted professional development, involving parents, and selectively incorporating Montessori-inspired

practices, the intervention will be more responsive to the needs and concerns of teachers and students. This strategic reshaping of the intervention is expected to build a stronger foundation for sustainable change, fostering an educational environment where teachers and students can thrive in a learner-centered setting.

All the above can be easily implemented with collaboration of the stakeholders of the Handmaids secondary schools. Therefore, the researcher will have a conference with the teachers and principals of all the Handmaid's secondary schools, the education committee members, and the major superiors (Leaders) of the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus. It will be held online with a Google Meet link because Handmaid's secondary Schools are in different countries (Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and Cameroon). There may be network issues in some places but online will still be the best means to reach out to many of the intended conference participants. A PowerPoint document will be made and shared screen during the presentation. Proper communication to all concerned will be made to work out the best possible time (since the time zones are different).

The researcher intends to publish this work to propagate the reality and open a forum for many great minds out in the globe who will like to support the venture to make this research work come to a reality as a way of working towards the implementation of the SDGs. Many educators and education stakeholders want to make education expand for a better world. Suppose these students in Handmaids' secondary schools in the above countries are educated using the learner-centered Montessori methods, with all the advantages that this system of education holds. In that case, they will be highly educated to embark on and implement the SDGs, especially numbers 1, 2, 4, 5, 9, 10, and 17 towards the realization of the UN global sustainable development goals by 2030.

This research aimed to improve the education standard of the young generation to meet up with the essential aim of the sustainable development goals, which is to attain economic development that will allow future generations to live a fulfilled life. Beginning with the fourth SDG (Inclusive and equitable quality education) this research aims to provide inclusive and equitable quality education through the learner-centered method of teaching, which builds essential skills in the youth for them to develop the economy of the world by 2030. Africa faces the biggest challenge in providing quality education due to lack of basic resources. African Promise's aim isn't just to improve a child's school environment, but their capacity to learn. When the world's economy, especially in Africa, is developed and improved, poverty will eventually be eradicated as every human will have access to their basic needs of health, education, and sanitation. Thus, taking care of the first SDG (No Poverty). With quality education, graduates will have all the skills necessary to generate employment and income through innovation to cater to the ninth SDG (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure). Their innovative skills will provide new ways to produce food for humanitarian relief towards Zero Hunger, the second SDG. This particular research was done in a Handmaids' Girls' secondary school. Girls need to have quality education especially in Africa, where their culture oppresses the girls and women. This takes care of the fifth SDG (Gender equality). Improved economy in Africa and gender equality will breed Reduced Inequality (the 10<sup>th</sup> SDG) within and between countries. With all these, this research work is heading to revitalizing strong global partnerships for sustainable development goals (the 17<sup>th</sup> SDG). All the 17 SDGs are interconnected and they are essential to provide productivity for future generations.

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## Imagine a Church Without Nuns? A Pastoral Response to the Vital Mission of Consecrated Women in Kenya

Sr. Jane Wanjiru Kairu (DSH)  
Email: [kjanekairu@gmail.com](mailto:kjanekairu@gmail.com)

### Abstract

This study examines the vital role of consecrated women in the Catholic Church of Kenya, investigating the implications of their often-overlooked presence, despite their indispensable contributions to the Church's ecclesial and social mission. While consecrated women serve on the frontlines of healthcare, education, pastoral ministry, and advocacy, they remain largely invisible in Church leadership and decision-making. The research problem centers on the pastoral and ecclesial neglect of religious women, which undermines their vocation and silences their prophetic voice. Guided by the objectives of recognizing, intensifying, and affirming the role of nuns in the Church, this qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, drawing on the lived experiences of religious sisters, pastoral agents, and theological texts. Thematic analysis revealed five core findings: (1) religious women embody the Church's compassionate and prophetic presence, (2) they reflect the maternal face of the Church, (3) contemplative sisters sustain the Church through hidden prayer, (4) they face systemic challenges including financial precarity, vocational decline, and exclusion, and (5) there is an urgent call for ecclesial collaboration and co-responsibility. Theologically, the findings affirm that consecrated women embody incarnational discipleship, while pastorally, they challenge the Church to embody synodality through inclusive leadership. The study concludes that imagining a Church without nuns is not only unthinkable but also unimaginable. It recommends integrating religious women into decision-making structures, strengthening their pastoral support, promoting theological reflection on their vocation, and fostering a culture of mutual respect and collaboration. Ultimately, the Church must not only appreciate the mission of nuns but actively support and include them, as they remain the heartbeat of the Church's evangelizing mission in Kenya and beyond.

**Keywords:** *Consecrated women, Imagine, Unthinkable, Church, Seclusion*

### Introduction

The Catholic Church has historically depended on the dedicated witness of consecrated women whose lives reflect radical discipleship, selfless service, and unwavering commitment to the Gospel. In Kenya, religious sisters serve as pastoral agents, educators, healthcare workers, spiritual guides, and advocates for social justice in diverse contexts, ranging from rural missions to urban slums, hospitals, schools, etc. Their ministry is particularly significant in addressing the needs of the marginalized, including orphans, teen mothers, the sick, victims of social injustice, etc. Despite their indispensable contribution to the life and mission of the Church, the vocation and mission of consecrated women often remain underappreciated, underrepresented, and structurally excluded in ecclesial leadership and decision-making spaces (Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya (AOSK), 2022; Francis, 2013).

This study arises from a pressing pastoral concern about the persistent undervaluing and invisibility of religious women within the Catholic Church in Kenya (Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, 2020; Akaranga & Ongong'a, 2014). The study addresses the pastoral concern that, despite their vital contributions in education, healthcare, and social outreach, Catholic women

religious in Kenya remain undervalued and largely invisible in church leadership and decision-making. Evidence from the Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya (AOSK) and regional studies highlights both their ongoing advocacy for recognition and the systemic marginalization they face, making questions of gender, leadership, and visibility central to this research.

Drawing on the lived experiences of consecrated women and grounded in a qualitative research design, this study aims to explore their mission, highlight the challenges they face, and propose theological and pastoral responses that affirm their dignity and leadership. This inquiry seeks to address a critical question: *What would the Church look like without nuns?* In exploring this, it becomes evident that envisioning such a Church not only exposes a significant pastoral gap but also unveils a profound theological contradiction, one that challenges the very nature of the Church as a relational, nurturing, and mission-oriented community shaped by the diverse gifts of all its members, including consecrated women. By uncovering the voices of religious women and their prophetic presence in Kenyan society, the study ultimately calls the Church to embody a more synodal, inclusive, and participatory model of mission, where consecrated women are not merely helpers but co-creators of ecclesial life and pastoral transformation.

### Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences and challenges faced by consecrated women in Kenya?
2. How does the Church's structure support or hinder its mission?
3. What theological and pastoral strategies can promote greater inclusion and support for religious women in Kenya and beyond?

### Method

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The target population consisted of Catholic religious sisters ministering in Kenya, as well as pastoral agents and social workers collaborating with them in education, healthcare, and community development. From this population, a purposive sample of 20 participants was selected to capture a diversity of experiences across congregations, ministries, and regions. The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, whereby interviews were conducted until no new significant insights emerged (Guest et al., 2020). Data collection involved in-person, semi-structured interviews and limited participant observations. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and conducted with participants' informed consent. Field notes were taken to capture contextual observations. In addition, document analysis was performed on ecclesial reports, theological texts, and sociological studies relevant to women religious in Kenya.

For the literature review, academic databases (e.g., ATLA Religion Database, JSTOR, Google Scholar) and local church repositories were searched using key terms such as *Catholic sisters in Kenya*, *women religious*, *ecclesial recognition*, and *pastoral ministry*. Inclusion criteria required that sources directly addressed women religious in Kenya or sub-Saharan Africa, were published in peer-reviewed journals, church reports, or academic theses, and were available in English. Exclusion criteria included works outside the African context or those lacking empirical or theological relevance. Selected sources were synthesized thematically to situate the study within existing scholarship.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis: (1) familiarization with data through repeated readings, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes for consistency, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing

the report. Coding was conducted manually, and patterns were refined in dialogue with research questions. To enhance trustworthiness, strategies such as peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, and member checking with selected participants were employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and participants' confidentiality was safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage, in accordance with the American Psychological Association's (2020) ethical guidelines.

### **Rationale**

This study emerges from the urgent need to recognize and affirm the indispensable role of consecrated women in the life and mission of the Church in Kenya. At a time when global and local Church structures call for deeper synodality, collaboration, and inclusivity, the role of religious women must not be overlooked. Kenya, a country with a rich Catholic presence, is served by thousands of religious sisters who operate in rural missions, urban slums, hospitals, schools, and orphanages. Their lives embody the compassionate, nurturing, and prophetic face of the Church. However, despite their visible contributions, consecrated women often remain invisible in ecclesial discourse, pastoral planning, and institutional decision-making. This paradox warrants a critical pastoral and theological response.

### **Identified Gaps**

#### **1. Lack of research grounded in the lived experiences of Catholic sisters in Kenya**

While there is a growing body of African theological scholarship, studies specifically centering the voices and everyday realities of Catholic sisters in Kenya remain limited (Mwaura, 2005; Phiri & Nadar, 2006). Much of the available literature focuses on general women's roles in the Church or African Christianity broadly, leaving a gap in localized, experience-based research. Addressing this absence ensures that the voices of women religious themselves inform both theological reflection and pastoral practice.

#### **2. Exclusion from leadership roles and Decision-Making forums**

Research and Church reports have documented that women religious, despite leading schools, hospitals, and community initiatives, are underrepresented in formal ecclesial leadership and governance structures (Okure, 2007; James, 2012). This exclusion raises questions of justice, participation, and co-responsibility, which the Church itself has emphasized in synodal processes. Justifying this gap underscores the need for an empirical study to inform pastoral responses that enhance inclusivity.

#### **3. Vocational Crisis among Women Religious**

Recent studies and pastoral reports have highlighted the decline in vocations to religious life in Kenya and East Africa, attributed to socioeconomic pressures, shifting cultural values, and generational changes (Chitando & Chirongoma, 2012; AOSK, 2024). However, few studies propose context-specific pastoral strategies to address this decline. Investigating this gap is vital for the sustainability of religious life and for supporting women discerning vocations in contemporary Kenyan society.

#### 4. Limited implementation of Church documents affirming co-responsibility

Although Church teachings, including *Vita Consecrata* (John Paul II, 1996) and synodal reflections, call for greater participation of women religious, research shows uneven or minimal implementation at diocesan and parish levels (Hilton Foundation, 2020; AOSK, 2024). This gap highlights the need for practical, pastoral frameworks that translate ecclesial ideals into lived practice within local Kenyan contexts. These gaps collectively reveal that while Catholic sisters in Kenya play indispensable roles in pastoral and social life, their experiences, leadership, and challenges are under-documented and under-acknowledged in scholarship and practice. These gaps highlight the need for this study; by attending to them, the Church can more faithfully recognize and integrate the prophetic witness and pastoral gifts of consecrated women in ways that enrich and strengthen the life of faith communities.

##### The Statement of the Problem

The persistent underrepresentation of consecrated women within the Catholic Church in Kenya remains a pressing pastoral and theological concern. Despite their indispensable contributions to education, healthcare, and pastoral ministry (Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya (AOSK), 2024), women religious are consistently underrepresented in leadership structures, excluded from decision-making forums, and their voices are often unheard in ecclesial discourse (James, 2012; Okure, 2007). This marginalization is further evident in the decline of vocations to consecrated life, shaped by economic, cultural, and societal pressures, yet inadequately addressed through contextually grounded pastoral strategies (Hilton Foundation, 2020).

The seriousness of this problem is highlighted in ecclesial documents such as *Vita Consecrata* (John Paul II, 1996) and recent synodal reflections, which affirm the need for co-responsibility and greater inclusion of women religious. However, the gap between these ideals and their limited implementation at diocesan and parish levels underscores the disconnect between the Church teaching and practice. Scholars likewise point out that, although African women religious play critical roles in social and pastoral life, their lived experiences of exclusion and invisibility within ecclesial structures remain under-researched (Mwaura, 2005; Okure, 2007; James, 2012).

Addressing this gap is therefore not only of pastoral significance, ensuring the Church fully benefits from the gifts and prophetic presence of consecrated women (AOSK, 2024; Hilton Foundation, 2020), but also of theological importance, since it touches on the Church's witness to justice, inclusivity, and credibility in society. By centering the experiences of Catholic sisters in Kenya, this study seeks to contribute to contextual theology and pastoral practice, affirming the dignity, vocation, and mission of consecrated women as vital to the flourishing of the Church and its Gospel witness.

##### The Key Findings

Thematic analysis of the data collected through interviews, observations, ecclesial documents, and theological reflections revealed five core themes that highlight the indispensable mission and challenges faced by consecrated women in Kenya.

#### 1. Embodiment of the Church's Compassionate and Prophetic Presence

The findings of this study affirm that consecrated women are often perceived as the "heart and feet" of the Church, embodying Christ's compassionate love and carrying His healing presence to the most vulnerable and marginalized. Their pastoral engagement spans multiple sectors, including

education, healthcare, social work, counseling, and pastoral ministry, especially in challenging environments such as informal settlements, refugee camps, remote villages, and under-resourced hospitals. Their presence among orphans, street children, teen mothers, victims of gender-based violence, the elderly, and the terminally ill bears witness to the Gospel imperative in (Mt 25:35–36), which calls the faithful to serve the least among us (personal interview, March 2025). Pope Francis (2013) likened the Church to a “field hospital after battle,” a metaphor profoundly embodied in the mission of consecrated women. Often working in silence and without public acclaim, they bring healing, dignity, and hope, making tangible the Church’s vocation as a sacrament of Christ’s mercy.

Consecrated women in Kenya exemplify the Church’s dual vocation of contemplation and mission (John Paul II, 1996; Francis, 2016). Their holistic ministry integrates spiritual depth with social commitment, extending the Church’s reach far beyond institutional confines. Their work in education, healthcare, evangelization, and social justice addresses not only immediate needs but also challenges structural injustices, affirming the Church’s prophetic role in society (Instrumentum Laboris, 2012, no. 114). Through this incarnational presence, they bear the Gospel to places where the Church’s voice is most needed and where human dignity is most threatened.

Theologically, their ministry reflects the incarnational identity of the Church, where Christ’s love is made visible through compassionate action. Their pastoral presence in marginalized communities, such as slums, refugee camps, and underserved regions, makes the Church’s call to accompany the suffering a reality. Their prophetic role is seen in their advocacy for the voiceless, such as teen mothers, trafficked individuals, and abandoned children. This not only reveals the depth of their commitment but also challenges the Church to confront systems of exclusion (International Union of Superiors General, 2019). Interview data further highlighted the sisters’ responsiveness during crises. One sister described how she regularly moves from house to house in informal settlements (Kawangware slums), identifying and assisting vulnerable young mothers (Personal interview, April 22, 2025). Such testimonies reveal a Church that listens, accompanies, and responds with tenderness and justice. This is not mere charity, but a profound pastoral presence rooted in Gospel values.

Yet, despite their transformative ministry, many religious women face pastoral invisibility and systemic exclusion from decision-making spaces (Driciru, 2023; Obiero, 2023). Still, their silent yet resilient witness remains vital. Their advocacy, solidarity with the suffering, and presence in the margins exemplify what a truly synodal and inclusive Church looks like. They do not simply support the Church’s mission; they embody it. Therefore, the study concludes that consecrated women are indispensable to the life and witness of the Church in Kenya. Without their presence, the Church would not only be diminished in action but also impoverished in its theological identity. Recognizing their voices, leadership, and pastoral authority is not merely a matter of justice; it is essential to the Church’s credibility, compassion, and prophetic witness in today’s world.

## 2. The Feminine and Maternal Face of the Church

The Church, as both *Mater Ecclesiae* and the Bride of Christ, finds a living expression of its feminine and maternal identity in the vocation and mission of consecrated women. In Kenya, religious sisters embody this maternal face through their ministry of nurturing, healing, and spiritual accompaniment, particularly to the most vulnerable, abandoned children, teenage mothers, the sick, and those on the margins of society. Their daily witness is a tangible expression of God’s maternal love, echoing the prophetic tenderness of (Isaiah 49:15) “Can a mother forget her nursing child?” Without the presence of these women, the Church would lack this nurturing embrace that restores dignity and heals wounds. Consecrated women manifest this maternal love

through caregiving, advocacy, and spiritual presence, affirming the Church's vocation to be a field hospital (Francis, 2013; Johnson, 2011). Spiritual motherhood emerged as a central theme in interviews with sisters ministering in orphanages and informal settlements, where their lives reflect God's unwavering fidelity (Isaiah 49:15; Luke 13:34). One sister serving in the Kibra slums recounted: "I go door to door. I listen to their pain, and we offer them hope and a future" (personal communication, March 2025). This maternal presence reveals the Church's call to protect and affirm life where human dignity is most fragile.

Theologically, this reality is rooted in Marian ecclesiology. As Mary, the first disciple and Mother of the Church, consecrated women extend her vocation by spiritually mothering the People of God through prayer, teaching, caregiving, and advocacy (John Paul II, 1996). They embody what Johnson (2011) describes as the "theology of maternal fidelity," a steadfast, compassionate presence especially in times of suffering. In the Kenyan context marked by poverty, displacement, and social fragmentation, religious women, as one respondent noted, "bring the Church's maternal compassion to life" (personal communication, March 2025). Pastorally, this maternal role is made visible in ministries within orphanages, health centers, informal settlements, and schools. Interview data reveal that sisters are often the first, and sometimes the only, source of comfort for those in distress. As one sister in the Mukuru slums expressed: "I visit them in their homes, I listen to their cry, offering them hope and a future because sometimes I may not have finances" (personal communication, April 2025). Their ministry reinforces the Church's commitment to the sanctity of life and the dignity of every person.

This maternal vocation is not limited to emotional support but encompasses a deeply pastoral and transformative presence. Through catechesis, psychosocial support, mentoring of young girls, and formation of faith communities, religious women accompany others toward healing and empowerment. Their maternal witness represents a pastoral theology in action, a Church that not only proclaims doctrine but also lives it through relational compassion and spiritual accompaniment. Therefore, we assert that, the feminine and maternal identity of the Church, embodied by consecrated women, is not merely a poetic image, it is a theological and pastoral imperative. Their presence ensures that the Church remains not only structurally functional but also relationally compassionate. To imagine a Church without nuns is to envision a Church without a mother, a Church that may teach but does not nurture, that may preach but does not embrace. In Kenya's ecclesial context, where wounds from poverty, injustice, and abandonment run deep, the maternal witness of religious women serves as a vital balm of healing and hope.

### **3. The Silent but Powerful Mission of Contemplative Life**

A significant finding of this study is the recognition of contemplative religious life as a vital, though often hidden, apostolate. In an age dominated by noise, urgency, and the relentless pursuit of productivity, the contemplative vocation of religious women stands as a countercultural and prophetic witness. Within the Kenyan ecclesial context, contemplative nuns offer an indispensable spiritual contribution to the Church's mission. Through silence, prayer, and solitude, they intercede for the needs of the Church, the world, and humanity (personal interview with a Dominican nun, April 2025). To envision a Church without these women is to imagine a Church disconnected from its spiritual roots, active yet not contemplative, serving yet lacking interior depth.

These women serve as the Church's spiritual engine. Their lives of hidden prayer sustain the Church's outward mission, offering a witness that challenges contemporary values of visibility and efficiency. Pope Francis (2016) described cloistered nuns as the "spiritual engines" of the Church, while Cardinal Sarah (2017) emphasized that silence is "God's first language," underscoring the theological and pastoral richness of contemplative life. As one contemplative sister shared, "Our silence is not emptiness; it is filled with intercession, with bearing the world

before God” (personal communication, April 2025). Another participant described this vocation as a “wellspring of grace” (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life [CICLSAL], 2018), where hidden intercessory prayer nourishes the entire Body of Christ.

Theologically, the contemplative vocation is rooted in the mystery of communion with God. Imitating Christ, who frequently withdrew to pray (Luke 5:16), contemplative women embody the biblical invitation to “be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). As articulated by Pope Francis (2016) in *Vultum Dei Quaerere*, contemplative life is “the womb where the Word grows” (no. 3), affirming that prayer and mission are inseparably united. These women serve the Church not merely through action, but through their total self-offering in silence, intercession, and sacrificial love. In Kenya, contemplative communities remain relatively few and largely hidden, yet their spiritual impact is immense. One cloistered sister described her vocation as “carrying the world in prayer,” highlighting that “our silence is full of intercession and hope” (personal communication, April 2025). In a Church that risks becoming overly pragmatic or focused on external success, contemplative nuns remind the faithful that true mission flows first from communion with God.

Pastorally, their vocation provides a wellspring of grace that nourishes all other ministries. Their quiet fidelity upholds priests, religious, and lay ministers who serve at the forefront of mission, educators, healthcare workers, pastoral agents, and social workers. Their presence anchors the Church’s apostolic efforts in deep spiritual soil. As Sarah (2017) affirms, “In silence, God speaks,” and in this sacred silence, contemplative women become instruments of divine presence and healing. In a country like Kenya, marked by poverty, insecurity, rising living costs, and spiritual fatigue, the contemplative vocation offers a source of resilience and interior renewal. It critiques consumerism and activism devoid of contemplation and reminds the Church that its strength lies not only in activity but also in fidelity to God’s presence and will. A Church without contemplative women risks becoming spiritually barren, busy yet disconnected from its source. Their hidden yet essential mission nurtures the Church’s capacity to pray, discern, and be transformed. Therefore, the contemplative vocation is not marginal but foundational to the spiritual vitality of the Church in Kenya and beyond.

#### 4. Challenges in Mission and Ministry

Consecrated women in Kenya, though at the heart of the Church’s outreach, face profound challenges that threaten the vitality of their mission and ministry. A primary concern is the persistent limitation of financial resources, which significantly restricts their pastoral outreach and institutional sustainability. As Sr. Catherine recounted, “Sometimes I walk for hours in the slums with nothing to offer except hope” (personal interview, March 22, 2025). Many sisters, particularly those engaged in marginalized communities, such as supporting teenage mothers or running informal schools, struggle daily with overwhelming needs and limited support. The overdependence on dwindling Western donations further exacerbates these hardships, reducing access to training, medical care, and spiritual renewal programs. Sr. Catherine’s words echo this reality: “Visiting the slums and supporting young mothers is overwhelming; we barely have enough for our own basic needs” (personal interview, March 2025). A second pressing concern is the vocational decline among young women, which is intricately linked to economic hardship, the allure of secular careers, and shifting cultural values (Tangaza University College, 2021; AOSK, 2022). While God’s call remains constant, many young people are unable to discern or respond due to competing voices in society. As Sr. Margaret poignantly remarked, “We are losing vocations not because God stops calling, but because the world drowns out His voice” (personal communication, March 2025). Media portrayals and societal pressures often discourage religious

vocations, painting consecrated life as outdated or burdensome. Sisterhoods of Kenya (AOSK) in 2022 highlighted that many young women are hesitant to embrace religious life because it is perceived as “limiting” compared to careers in law, business, or technology (AOSK, 2022). Families often prefer daughters to seek education and employment that can support the family financially, making religious life, which traditionally offers no direct economic returns, less desirable. For example, in a 2021 survey conducted by Tangaza University College in Nairobi, 68% of young Catholic women cited “family financial needs” as a key reason for not pursuing religious life (Tangaza University College, 2021). Sr. Mary Lilly Driciru emphasized, “Even isolated incidents of misconduct are magnified and discourage vocations” (Driciru, 2023). Yet, amidst this crisis lies an opportunity for spiritual renewal, creative vocational promotion, and a deeper engagement with the youth.

### **5. A Call for Ecclesial Collaboration, Recognition, and Co-responsibility**

A persistent challenge within the Kenyan Catholic Church is the lack of ecclesial recognition of consecrated women and their exclusion from leadership and decision-making processes. Despite their undeniable contributions in evangelization, education, healthcare, peacebuilding, and pastoral ministry, many religious sisters remain on the periphery of ecclesial governance. This marginalization not only diminishes their dignity but also impoverishes the Church’s capacity for holistic discernment. As Sr. Angeline affirmed, “We are not just helpers; we are carriers of the mission” (personal communication, March 2025). Her words resonate deeply with the call of Pope Francis for a synodal Church where “all the baptized walk together,” contributing their diverse gifts to the life and mission of the Church (Francis, 2015).

The lived experiences of religious sisters across Kenya demonstrate that this call to synodality must be more than rhetorical. For instance, Sr. Joy, a social worker through her work in conflict resolution and trauma healing in Turkana, embodies a prophetic presence in areas often neglected by the institutional Church. Yet, when critical decisions are made concerning diocesan pastoral priorities, her voice is rarely solicited. Sr. Joy stands on behalf of many religious in Kenya. Sr. Rose Akinyi, on the other hand, speaking during an Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya (AOSK) assembly, captured this irony poignantly: “We evangelize, we educate, we heal, but when leadership is discussed, suddenly, we are silent partners. This silence is neither gospel nor justice.” Her lament reflects a theological tension between the Church’s professed commitment to collaboration and its continued hierarchical and clerical inertia.

This concern is not new because Kenyan sisters have long advocated for structural inclusion. Sr. Dr. Esther Obiero (2023), during a national synodal consultation, warned: “Until the Church reflects the diversity of her members in leadership, we will continue to preach a Gospel that we do not fully live.” This statement underlines the inconsistency between the Church’s ecclesiology of communion and its practices of exclusion. When women religious are denied platforms of leadership, the Church forfeits the wisdom and insights born of grassroots ministry, intercultural engagement, and the lived experience of the poor. This gap compromises not only pastoral planning but also ecclesial authenticity.

In many dioceses, sisters manage parish-based institutions, coordinate catechetical programs, and oversee spiritual direction and youth ministry etc. In several places in Kenya, especially in urban areas as well as remote places, for example, sisters have been instrumental in mobilizing faith-based responses to gender-based violence. Despite this frontline role, they remain underrepresented in diocesan synodal teams and pastoral councils. This disconnect reveals an urgent need to reimagine ecclesial structures in ways that are inclusive, transparent, and justice-driven (personal interview with Sr. Joy).

Theological and pastoral coherence demands more than token inclusion. It calls for a reconfiguration of ecclesial paradigms, where consecrated women are not merely implementers of pastoral agendas but shapers of the very vision and structures of mission. As Wakahiu (2022) rightly emphasizes, “Religious women are the backbone of the Church’s service, but when decisions are made, we are too often invisible. Recognition must go beyond gratitude to real participation.” Such recognition must take practical form, in appointments to parish councils, diocesan advisory boards, synodal teams, and episcopal conferences, etc. It is also imperative that canon law be interpreted and implemented in ways that affirm women’s agency and charisms.

This reimagining of the Church requires a synodal conversion, marked by listening, dialogue, and shared discernment. Pope Francis (2013) urges the Church to be “bold and creative in rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in (its) respective communities” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 33). This boldness must include the ecclesial willingness to acknowledge and empower the voices of those who have sustained the mission in hidden yet profound ways, namely, the religious women of Kenya. Their deep-rooted presence in the peripheries of life and faith, their prophetic action, and their theological insight offer the Church a compass for pastoral renewal and ecclesial authenticity.

#### 6. Spiritual Resilience and the Hope of Renewal

Amid these systemic challenges, the spiritual resilience of consecrated women remains a profound witness to the enduring vitality and relevance of religious life in the Kenyan Church. This resilience is not primarily sustained by structural or institutional support, but by a profound interior life rooted in prayer, sacramental longing, communal living, and an unshakable commitment to mission. Their presence in marginalized communities, such as informal settlements, conflict zones, and remote pastoral areas, exemplifies a spirituality of perseverance, nurtured through daily fidelity to the Gospel.

Pope Francis’ metaphor of the Church as a “field hospital” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, no. 49) is made tangible in the lives of these women who, despite scarce resources and occasional ecclesial neglect, continue to serve as frontline ministers of healing and hope. For instance, in northern Kenya where access to the sacraments is limited due to a shortage of priests, religious sisters often animate the faith communities through the Liturgy of the Word, catechesis, and organized prayer gatherings. Sr. Salome’s testimony illustrates this: “Even when we lack the sacraments, especially the Holy Mass, we continue to pray, serve, and hope” (personal communication, March 2025). This expression reflects a spirituality of longing, particularly Eucharistic longing, which sustains their commitment in the face of sacramental deprivation.

Furthermore, their pastoral strategies often reflect a holistic theology of mission. In many parts of Kenya, religious women run dispensaries, rescue centers for victims of gender-based violence, and schools for children in hard-to-reach areas. These ministries are not simply acts of charity but are deeply rooted in a theology of incarnation, where Christ is encountered in the wounded, the poor, and the neglected (cf. Mt 25:40). Their daily lives witness to a kenotic spirituality, marked by self-giving love and deep solidarity with the suffering Body of Christ in the world.

This quiet, often invisible fidelity constitutes a theological locus, an embodied reflection of the Church’s essence as servant and mother. It points to a Church whose vitality is not measured by clerical authority or institutional status, but by witness, compassion, and transformative presence. As Cardinal Kasper (2014) notes, “the Church becomes credible when she becomes transparent to the mercy of God” (pg. 93), and consecrated women in Kenya, through their lives of hidden service, embody this credibility. In this way, they function as agents of hope and renewal, not only

within the peripheries they serve, but for the wider Church community, calling it back to its deepest identity and mission.

**Theological and Pastoral Analysis of the Findings**  
**Table 1**

| <b>Theme</b>                                                       | <b>Theological Analysis</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>Pastoral Implications</b>                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Embodiment of the Church's Compassionate and Prophetic Presence | Reflects the Incarnational nature of the Church. Religious women mirror Christ's compassion (cf. Mt 25:35–40), participating in His mission to the marginalized. Their prophetic role reveals the Church as servant and sacrament (cf. <i>Lumen Gentium</i> , 1). | Consecrated women offer a human and compassionate presence in underserved contexts (e.g., schools, hospitals, slums), demonstrating a synodal Church that walks with the people.    |
| 2. The Feminine and Maternal Face of the Church                    | Rooted in Marian ecclesiology, religious women embody the Church as mother and bride. They echo Mary's spiritual motherhood (cf. Jn 19:27) and reaffirm the <i>Imago Dei</i> in feminine vocation.                                                                | In places marked by trauma, religious women often serve as maternal figures, offering healing, care, and evangelization that reveal God's tender mercy.                             |
| 3. The Silent but Powerful Mission of Contemplative Life           | Reflects the theology of contemplation and redemptive suffering. Drawing from monastic tradition and Christ's solitude (cf. Lk 5:16), contemplative life highlights mission as communion with God. Pope Francis describes it as "the womb where the Word grows."  | Contemplative nuns support the Church's mission through hidden prayer and intercession. They are spiritual "powerhouses" sustaining priests, laity, and society in times of crisis. |
| 4. Persistent Challenges in Mission and Ministry                   | Raises ecclesiological questions about justice and equal dignity (cf. Gal 3:28; <i>Lumen Gentium</i> , 32). Financial insecurity weakens the Church's preferential option for the poor.                                                                           | These challenges call for structural reform. Marginalization undermines synodality and silences vital contributors to Church life and mission.                                      |
| 5. Call for Ecclesial Collaboration, Recognition, and Reform       | Rooted in Vatican II ecclesiology and the synodal Church (cf. <i>Lumen</i>                                                                                                                                                                                        | Inclusive leadership and decision-making strengthen the Church's pastoral                                                                                                           |

|                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                 | <i>Gentium</i> , 9). Pope Francis affirms the need for a “more incisive female presence” ( <i>Evangelii Gaudium</i> , no. 103).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | response and ensure a more just, participatory, and listening Church.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| 6. Spiritual Resilience and the Hope of Renewal | Spiritual resilience among consecrated women reflects the Paschal Mystery at the heart of Christian life—the capacity to endure suffering while holding onto the hope of resurrection (cf. Rom 8:18–25). Their perseverance in adversity embodies the theological virtue of hope and echoes the faith of biblical women who stood at the foot of the Cross (cf. Jn 19:25). This theme is rooted in the theology of grace and eschatological promise, affirming that God brings life from death and renewal from brokenness. Such resilience signifies a lived theology of redemptive endurance, grounded in trust in God’s providence. | In pastoral practice, the spiritual resilience of religious women becomes a source of strength and healing for wounded communities. Despite systemic challenges, burnout, and marginalization, these women continue to radiate hope, joy, and stability—often becoming anchors of faith in volatile contexts. Their witness calls the wider Church to cultivate a spirituality of endurance and renewal, especially in the face of despair. Strengthening their formation and emotional well-being is essential to sustaining this prophetic hope. |

### Synthesis

Theologically, the findings affirm that consecrated women embody a living theology not in abstract terms, but through concrete acts of mercy, prophetic witness, maternal love, and contemplative intercession. They incarnate the Gospel through lives of radical discipleship. Their exclusion, discrimination, being silenced, underrepresentation in leadership, etc, however, reflects a theological contradiction, i.e, a Church that honors their witness in word but excludes them in structure.

Pastorally, these themes demand a renewed ecclesial culture of mutual respect, recognition, and support. Religious women are not accessories to mission; they are its core agents. Their integration into leadership and decision-making is not a privilege but a pastoral necessity for the Church to be credible, inclusive, and authentically synodal.

### Discussion

The findings of this study affirm the irreplaceable pastoral, theological, and spiritual contribution of consecrated women to the life and mission of the Catholic Church in Kenya. In alignment with previous research (AOSK, 2022; Johnson, 2011; John Paul II, 1996), this study highlights that religious sisters are not peripheral figures but central agents of evangelization, social

transformation, and ecclesial vitality. Their ministries as educators, healthcare providers, spiritual mothers, and advocates for the marginalized reveal a Church that is incarnational, maternal, and prophetically engaged with the realities of suffering and injustice.

Consistent with existing literature on women religious globally (Francis, 2013; Schneiders, 2000), this study reinforces that consecrated women in Kenya embody a theology of radical discipleship and sacramental presence. Particularly notable is their dual vocation to active and contemplative life, where pastoral care is seamlessly interwoven with deep prayer and spiritual intercession. This mirrors what Pope Francis (2016) described as a Church that “walks with its people” while being nourished by “the womb where the Word grows.” By operating in under-resourced and often invisible spaces, these women animate the Church’s mission to be “a field hospital after battle” (Francis, 2013).

However, the study also reveals a striking paradox. While religious women are indispensable to the Church’s mission, they remain largely excluded from decision-making roles, theological discourse, and strategic pastoral planning. This contradiction, where the Church benefits from their labor yet fails to fully recognize their leadership, echoes previous critiques (Driciru, 2023; Obiero, 2023; Wakahiu, 2022) and points to a theological and structural inconsistency within ecclesial practice. Such marginalization undermines the principles of synodality, co-responsibility, and the equal dignity of all the baptized (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964, no. 32).

The findings further affirm the maternal and prophetic dimensions of consecrated life. Religious women offer a pastoral presence that is not only compassionate but also confrontational of systemic injustices, both in society and within the Church itself. As caregivers to the vulnerable and spiritual mothers to the abandoned, they reflect the feminine face of God and the maternal identity of the Church (Johnson, 2011; Bøckmann, 2014). Their ministries are a living testimony to (Isaiah 49:15 and Mt 25:35–40), where God’s justice and mercy meet in concrete acts of service and solidarity. Furthermore, the study underscores the crisis of vocation and institutional sustainability faced by religious women in Kenya, aligning with recent reports by AOSK (2022) and Tangaza University College (2021). Economic challenges, cultural shifts, and lack of institutional support were identified as major deterrents for young women considering religious life. Despite these obstacles, the spiritual resilience displayed by many sisters remains a testimony to their deep-rooted faith and commitment.

In light of the above, this study echoes Pope Francis’s (2022) call for “a more incisive female presence in the Church” and provides evidence-based pastoral and theological justification for structural reform. To imagine a Church without nuns is not merely to ponder a diminished workforce, but to envision a Church that is theologically impoverished, pastorally impaired, and spiritually unbalanced. The Church must move from appreciation to inclusion, from gratitude to empowerment.

In conclusion, this discussion affirms that the presence of consecrated women is not optional but essential. Their full integration into the life, leadership, and mission of the Church in Kenya is both a theological mandate and a pastoral necessity. Future studies should continue to explore how the Church can foster greater inclusivity in decision-making, particularly in ways that are contextually meaningful for African communities. They should also examine the evolving role and identity of religious women, both within the Church and in the wider African society.

## Recommendations

1. **Integrate Religious Women in Leadership and Decision-Making:** Diocesan and parish authorities should actively create formal roles and committees that include religious women in leadership and decision-making processes. This can be done by revising statutes and guidelines to ensure their participation in pastoral councils, planning committees, and administrative bodies. Providing leadership training and mentoring will equip them to contribute effectively, ensuring that their perspectives and experiences inform Church policies and pastoral initiatives.
2. **Providing Support and Resources for Consecrated Women:** The Church and relevant institutions should prioritize providing adequate support and resources for consecrated women. This includes ensuring access to quality healthcare, ongoing formation, psychosocial support, fair remuneration, and safe living and working conditions. Strengthening institutional frameworks and partnerships can help sustain their mission and enhance their well-being, enabling them to serve more effectively in diverse pastoral and social contexts. A Church that values and supports its consecrated women is a Church that truly embodies the Gospel of Christ.
3. **Promote Theological Reflection on Consecrated Life:** The Church and academic institutions should establish regular forums, workshops, and conferences within seminaries, universities, and diocesan gatherings dedicated to exploring the identity, challenges, and mission of religious women today. Encouraging research, publications, and open dialogue will deepen understanding and appreciation of consecrated life, informing pastoral practice and promoting greater inclusion of religious women in the Church's mission.
4. **Foster a Culture of Mutual Respect and Co-Responsibility:** The Church is called to actively promote a collaborative spirit among clergy, religious, and laity by creating structures that reflect shared leadership and decision-making. This includes involving consecrated women in pastoral planning, leadership roles, and ecclesial decision-making bodies at parish, diocesan, and national levels. Practical steps such as joint formation programs, inclusive consultations, and clear policies affirming co-responsibility can help build a more synodal and participatory Church rooted in mutual respect.
5. **Spiritual Resilience in the Face of Crisis:** Religious women demonstrate spiritual resilience by relying on prayer, faith, and community support to stay hopeful and committed during times of hardship, such as poverty, rejection, or social challenges. To nurture this resilience, the Church and communities should provide regular spiritual formation, counselling, and communal support, enabling them to sustain their mission and well-being despite difficulties.

## Conclusion

In imagining a Catholic Church without nuns, we confront a silent void that echoes far beyond empty convents. The Church would lose not only a vital arm of pastoral care, education, and service to the poor, but also a powerful, often quiet witness to the Gospel. Without nuns, the heart of the Church would lose one of its deepest pulses of love and service. Nuns embody a life radically dedicated to Christ through prayer, service, and contemplative silence that speaks more loudly than words. Their presence brings tenderness to the wounded, stability to the vulnerable, and spiritual depth to the Church's mission.

Without them, the Church would be less nurturing, less prayerful, and less prophetic. Their hidden lives illuminate the world; their silence intercedes for it. In his writing, JP II made it very clear that such a Church would lack a vital sign of holiness, radical Gospel witness, and spiritual richness without nuns. Pope Francis makes it unmistakably clear: a Catholic Church without religious sisters is not just hard to imagine, it is incomprehensible. They are foundational to its identity, vitality, and mission in the world. “The consecrated life... is a precious and necessary gift for the present and future of the People of God, because it belongs deeply to his life, holiness, and mission” (Vita Consecrata).

To imagine the Church without this witness is to imagine the Church forgetting its radical roots in Christ's life. To imagine the Church without nuns is to imagine a Church with a missing heart. A Church with less silence, less compassion, less radical love. A Church more visible perhaps, but less deep. More active perhaps, but less prayerful. Nuns do not draw crowds or headlines, but they draw heaven down to earth. Let us, then, not only imagine but appreciate. Let us support and pray for nuns, and encourage young women to discern this beautiful, demanding, joy-filled path. For as long as there are nuns, the Church will have its heartbeat of love, sacrifice, and unceasing prayer. Truly, the Church without nuns would not only be different, but it would be incomplete, and to imagine a Church without nuns is unthinkable, unimaginable, and incomprehensible, and if we ever have such a Church, for sure it will not be a Catholic Church.

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## Navigating the Challenges of Women Religious Formation in the 21st century: Adapting to a Changing World

Bibiana Ngundo

Email: [bibianangundo@gmail.com](mailto:bibianangundo@gmail.com)

### Abstract

This study focused on the formation of women Religious in Kenya. The central objective was to examine the experiences of religious congregations in Kenya as they navigate the challenges of formation in the 21st century. The purpose was to find recurring trends, important issues, and areas for reform in the formation practices. According to the literature reviewed, formation plays a vital role in nurturing the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual development of individuals preparing for religious life. However, the effects of secularization, individualism, and changing cultural norms, among others have significantly impacted religious vocations and formation. Additionally, the literature reviewed shows that, today the formation of women religious faces numerous obstacles, including declining vocations, aging members, limited resources, and the need to remain relevant in an increasingly modernized and individualistic society. Consequently, these facts necessitate the revision of the current formation programs in order to stay spiritually and contextually relevant. In light of these current issues, this study examined how Kenyan women's religious congregations are implementing their formation programs and whether they align with current needs. It aims to comprehend how candidates can be better prepared for meaningful and resilient engagement with the Church and society through formation. For data collection, the researcher concentrated on desktop research and supplemented it with a questionnaire distributed to twenty (20) sisters. To analyze data, the findings were organized in thematic areas, while the presentation included the use of frequencies and percentages. The findings highlighted several setbacks facing formation processes, including the influence of secularization and social media. Among other recommendations, the study recommended revision of the formation curriculum and the use of modern technology. It is anticipated that the results will guide the application of contextual and more appropriate formation initiatives that enhance the identity, mission, and resilience of Kenyan women's religious communities.

**Key Words:** Women Religious, Navigating Challenges, Adaptation, Congregation and Formation

### Introduction

Religious formation refers to the structured process of preparing new Entrants for religious life as well as ongoing programs for strengthening the vocations of professed members. The researcher uses the term "formation" to describe the information and abilities that are taught and learnt as a person progresses through the various phases of formation, initial and ongoing, for personal growth and development. Learning about and experiencing religious life is the first step in the formation process in religious communities. Thus, both early and continuing formation comprise the conceptualized information in this study. This article provides pertinent information regarding the formation of women religious in Kenya and the challenges they currently experience in the wake of a rapidly changing society. The main focus of this survey is on how to navigate the difficulties that Kenyan women's religious formation processes face.

The mission of the Catholic Church has always been deeply rooted in religious life, with women religious playing key roles in social justice, education, healthcare, and evangelization. In recent

decades, this profession has experienced significant change on a global scale. Women religious were once heavily involved in the Church's mission and ministry, but they now face issues like dwindling careers, rising secularization, changing social norms, and a greater focus on materialism and individualism (Johnson, 2019). Formation is organized to cover pastoral, developmental, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of religious life. Communities are reevaluating formation models to stay true to their charisms while addressing modern realities, as many institutes in North America and Europe have closed or merged as a result of aging memberships and fewer entrants (Ebaugh, 2018).

According to Wamuyu (2020), young women entering religious life today often arrive with different experiences and expectations than earlier generations, leading to tensions between traditional formation models and modern realities. Although this happens, it doesn't mean that what they upheld before was an evil that would never be repeated. Instead, the challenge for formation houses is how some modern elements, such as ownership of phones and computers, can be encouraged for individual and general growth.

This paper is organized into the following sections: an **abstract**, which provides a concise summary of the study; an **introduction**, which presents the background and objectives; a **literature review**, which situates the study within existing scholarship; a **methodology** section, outlining the research design and approach; **study findings**, which present the results of the research; **recommendations**, offering practical and theoretical insights; and finally, a **conclusion**, which summarizes the key points and implications of the study. The following questions guided the study:

- 1) What are the main challenges faced in the formation of women religious in Kenya?
- 2) What formation strategies can be adopted by Congregations in Kenya?
- 3) How do cultural shifts like globalization, individualism, and secularization affect Kenyan women's religious formation programs?
- 4) Are there programs that would be included in the formation curriculum to make it more relevant?

## Literature Review

Due to the influence of numerous socio-cultural, religious, and economic factors, women's religious vocations have grown more complex in the twenty-first century. Women have traditionally held important positions in social services, healthcare, and education (Heffernan, 2016). However, the number of women entering religious life has drastically decreased, especially in the Western world, as secularization, individualism, and broader societal shifts occur (McNulty, 2017). To shed light on the difficulties faced by women religious and investigate possible avenues for adaptation within religious formation programs, this literature review combines theoretical viewpoints with empirical research. With an emphasis on the necessity of adaptation in religious formation, this literature review investigates these issues by looking at the historical background as well as the current circumstances that women religious face.

### The Church's Perspective on Religious Formation

The Catholic Church has consistently emphasized the central role of religious formation in ensuring the vitality and authenticity of consecrated life. Formation is regarded not merely as an academic exercise or structural requirement but as a holistic and transformative journey of discipleship. Rooted in Christ and animated by the Gospel, it seeks to shape the whole person spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and pastorally to foster authentic witness and readiness for mission. This process is understood as a lifelong pilgrimage of conversion and growth, where

candidates and professed members alike are continually conformed to the image of Christ and equipped to serve the Church and society with faithfulness and creativity.

The Second Vatican Council brought significant renewal to the understanding of religious life and formation. *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965), the Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life, called for the revision of formation programs to better reflect the original spirit of the founders while addressing the needs of the modern world. The document encouraged religious institutes to update their constitutions and formation practices to meet "the demands of the apostolate and the requirements of contemporary life" (Vatican Council II, 1965, §2). This emphasis on both fidelity to charism and adaptability continues to shape the Church's approach to formation. The Council affirmed that formation must foster human, spiritual, doctrinal, and pastoral development in an integrated way, preparing individuals to live a life of evangelical counsels with authenticity and joy.

Following Vatican II, the Church deepened its reflection on religious formation through a series of post-conciliar documents that sought to renew consecrated life in light of contemporary challenges. Among these, Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (1996) is especially foundational. It describes formation as a "process of becoming conformed to the image of the Son for the mission" (John Paul II, 1996, §65). This understanding emphasizes that formation is not merely a preparatory stage but a transformative journey rooted in discipleship and mission. The document affirms that formation must be ongoing, extending beyond initial stages to encompass lifelong spiritual, intellectual, pastoral, and professional development. In this perspective, consecrated persons are continually invited to deepen their relationship with Christ, renew their commitment to community life, and adapt their mission in response to the signs of the times. By highlighting the dynamic and holistic nature of formation, *Vita Consecrata* provides a framework that continues to shape the way religious institutes design programs that balance spiritual growth, human maturity, and apostolic service.

Pope Francis has added a pastoral and experiential dimension to the Church's teaching on formation. In his address to formators (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life [CICLSAL], 2015), he described formation as an "artisanal process," not a factory-line production. It requires personal accompaniment, discernment, and patience. He emphasized the importance of integrity, community life, discernment, and joy in religious formation. Francis challenges religious institutes to form members capable of engaging the "peripheries," both geographic and existential. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), he speaks of a Church that must "go forth," and this missionary impulse must be part of the formation experience. This aligns with his call for a Church of encounter, where consecrated persons are grounded in prayer but open to the world.

The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) has provided comprehensive guidance on religious formation in documents such as *Starting Afresh from Christ* (2002) and *New Wine in New Wineskins* (2017). These texts emphasize that renewal in consecrated life requires formation processes that are dynamic, contextually grounded, and responsive to contemporary challenges. In particular, they highlight the need for formation to be attentive to:

- **Cultural shifts**, which shape values, attitudes, and worldviews in an increasingly globalized and pluralistic society.
- **Psychological and emotional maturity**, ensuring that candidates cultivate inner freedom, resilience, and self-awareness.

- **Intercultural and intergenerational dynamics**, which are essential in communities that bring together members from diverse backgrounds and age groups.
- **Integration of professional and pastoral competence**, so that consecrated persons are well-prepared for mission in educational, healthcare, social, and pastoral contexts.

According to *New Wine in New Wineskins* (CICLSAL, 2017), “initial and ongoing formation must prepare consecrated persons to live their vocation in today’s human, ecclesial, and social context with evangelical authenticity and courage” (§33). This guidance frames formation as both personal and communal, shaped by lived context, guided by the Holy Spirit, and oriented toward ever-deeper discipleship and mission. It stresses that consecrated life must remain a prophetic witness in rapidly changing times, requiring formation that is lifelong, adaptable, and rooted in fidelity to the Gospel.

### Addressing Contemporary Challenges in Formation

To address the challenges of social justice in formation, Phiri and Njoroge (2021) emphasize that contemporary formation programs increasingly embed in the Catholic Social Teaching principles, helping candidates to develop a deep sense of commitment to justice, peace, and care for the marginalized. The study on African religious congregations highlights how formation involves community engagement and advocacy as part of spiritual and pastoral preparation.

Orobator (2018) discusses the growing emphasis on ecological awareness within African religious congregations, particularly following the teachings of *Laudato Si’*. His research outlines how environmental justice and sustainability are becoming key components of formation programs, encouraging a spirituality that includes the care for God’s creation. This shift reflects Pope Francis’ call for an “ecological conversion,” whereby religious life integrates concern for the environment with faith and pastoral mission. In many congregations, this has translated into practical initiatives such as tree planting, promotion of renewable energy, responsible waste management, and advocacy for climate justice. Beyond the physical practices, ecological awareness is also being incorporated into prayer life, theological reflection, and community living, fostering an integral ecology that connects care for the earth with the dignity of human life. Consequently, formation programs are shaping future religious leaders not only as spiritual guides but also as stewards of creation, capable of addressing pressing environmental challenges that disproportionately affect African communities.

Addressing economic inequality is another critical issue emphasized in religious formation. Candidates are taught to critically examine the structural and systemic root causes of poverty, including historical injustices, poor governance, and unequal access to education and resources. They also engage with the ethical dimensions of wealth distribution, drawing on Catholic Social Teaching to understand the moral responsibility of individuals and institutions in fostering justice. In particular, formation programs highlight the Church’s principle of the preferential option for the poor, reminding candidates that authentic discipleship demands concrete action in promoting equity and social inclusion (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2004). Candidates are encouraged to live in solidarity with the poor, practice frugality, and embrace lifestyles of simplicity rather than consumerism. This ethos not only reflects Gospel values but also provides a prophetic witness against widening social disparities. Practical engagements often include pastoral outreach to marginalized groups, active involvement in income-generating projects, and advocacy for policies that promote fair access to resources, dignified labor, and opportunities for all. By cultivating both critical awareness and compassionate action, formation prepares future religious leaders to address not only immediate material needs but also to design and support long-term

strategies for social and economic empowerment within their communities (Njoroge, 2019; Johnson, 2019; *Rerum Novarum*, 1891; *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009).

To combat economic disparities, women's religious congregations are increasingly adopting innovative and sustainable approaches. One such initiative is the **Sisters' Blended Value Project (SBVP)**, spearheaded by Strathmore University Business School in partnership with the Association of Consecrated Women of Eastern and Central Africa (ACWECA). This project empowers Catholic Sisters to transform their traditional ministries, often dependent on donations into self-sustaining social enterprises that combine both spiritual mission and economic viability.

Through the SBVP, sisters receive training in social entrepreneurship, financial management, leadership, and impact measurement, equipping them with the skills necessary to manage institutions such as schools, hospitals, dispensaries, and agricultural projects more sustainably. In doing so, the project not only ensures long-term institutional survival but also enhances the sisters' ability to create jobs, provide affordable services, and directly contribute to poverty reduction within their communities. Beyond financial sustainability, the SBVP reflects a broader shift in formation and ministry that integrates faith with practical solutions to pressing socio-economic challenges, enabling women religious to become catalysts of social transformation in line with the Church's mission of justice and integral human development (Strathmore University Business School & ACWECA, 2021).

In summary, contemporary religious formation in Kenya is becoming increasingly holistic, addressing not only the spiritual growth of candidates but also their responsibility toward the wider society and environment. The integration of ecological awareness, as inspired by *Laudato Si'*, highlights the call to care for creation as an essential expression of faith. At the same time, the emphasis on addressing economic inequality grounds formation in the Church's social teaching, encouraging solidarity with the poor and a commitment to justice. Innovative initiatives such as the Sisters' Blended Value Project further demonstrate how women religious congregations are embracing sustainable models of ministry that blend faith with social entrepreneurship. Together, these dimensions form a comprehensive approach to formation, preparing future religious leaders who are spiritually grounded, socially conscious, and equipped to respond to the pressing challenges of inequality, environmental degradation, and systemic injustice in Kenya and beyond.

### Global View of Religious Life and Formation

Over the past few decades, religious life has changed significantly on a global scale. Many congregations have merged or closed completely as a result of a significant drop in vocations, especially in North America and Europe (Ebaugh, 2018). Secularization, the emphasis on personal freedom, and the lure of financial success are some of the causes of these trends (Johnson, 2019). As a result, in order to stay true to religious tradition while also being relevant to modern society, formation programs have had to change. The steady decline in occupations, especially in Western nations, is one of the most urgent global trends.

Regarding the number of sisters in congregations, research indicates that the average age of current members is still increasing. So to speak, the number of those pursuing religious life has significantly decreased in many regions of North America and Europe over the past 50 years (Ebaugh, 2018; Pew Research Centre, 2015). The average age of a woman religious in the United States is over 70, according to a study conducted by the Centre for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Sisters under 40 make up less than 1% of the total (CARA, 2021). Many congregations have had to rethink their apostolic roles, sell properties, and combine formation programs as a result of this demographic reality. This study gears towards examining the problems that are being

experienced in congregations and how the use of modern formation strategies can assist in maintaining the present numbers.

The continuous decline in vocations, particularly in the Western world, is of major concern and a contributing factor to the difficulties faced by women religious. A common explanation for the decline in religious vocations is the secularization theory, which holds that religious institutions and practices lose their influence as societies modernize (Wilson, 2018). Although it is not a new phenomenon, the decline in religious vocations, especially among women, has intensified in recent decades. The wider trend of secularization has led to a change in societal values, with religious commitment becoming less important, particularly in the Western world, according to studies by Chaves and Anderson (2019). At times, the decline in vocations is linked to the adoption of secular attitudes and practices in congregations such as disregarding the religious habit. The link between secularism and what is happening in religious communities is of great concern to this study.

According to the secularization thesis, societies are becoming more and more detached from traditional religious institutions as they modernize, which results in fewer people choosing to pursue religious careers (Wilson, 2018). Accordingly, women religious who were once regarded as important figures in both the religious and social domains now struggle to stay relevant in a society that is becoming more and more focused on individualism and financial success (Heffernan, 2016). This decline has been further supported by empirical research from the US and Europe. For instance, McNulty (2017) conducted a longitudinal study that monitored the number of women in the US joining religious orders over forty years. According to the study, vocations have been steadily declining, with fewer women joining convents and those who did having more diverse personal backgrounds and ages. The question is how congregations can navigate such challenges facing them.

Numerous organizations that were previously run by women religious, including hospitals and schools, have closed as a result of this decline in occupations, underscoring the trend's wider ramifications for religious communities (McNulty, 2017). Additionally, schools, hospitals, and social service organizations that were previously run by religious women have closed, making the institutional decline especially noticeable (McNulty, 2017). In addition to reflecting dwindling numbers, this decline suggests a larger cultural shift that prioritizes personal and professional goals over the communal, selfless aspects of religious life. Particularly in the Western context, the declining role of women religious in public life has prompted existential concerns about the long-term viability of religious orders (Baumann, 2020). The question that one may ask is how congregations faced with this challenge remain relevant in terms of the services they offer to society. This study is interested in coming up with proposals regarding how congregations can remain relevant in the face of secularization that often drives the religious towards a contrary direction.

A significant shift in the vocation of women religious has been the changing expectations of those entering religious life. The new generation of women religious is increasingly focused on social justice, environmental sustainability, and global economic inequality (Smith, 2019). Empirical studies have examined the motivations and values of young women entering religious life, revealing that they are more likely to seek active engagement with the world rather than withdrawal from it. In a study conducted by Boulad (2021), interviews with young women entering religious communities in Europe highlighted a desire to address global issues such as climate change, poverty, and political unrest. The study found that many of these candidates viewed their religious life not only as a spiritual calling but also as a form of social activism.

Likewise, a study by Heffernan (2016) explored the evolving role of women religious in a globalized world. The study, which involved interviews with members of religious communities

across multiple continents, revealed a shared concern for social justice and global issues. Participants in the study expressed a desire to engage with the world in more direct and impactful ways, particularly in the areas of social service and advocacy. This highlights a fundamental shift in the expectations of new religious vocations, with candidates increasingly desiring to make a tangible impact in the world rather than remaining secluded within traditional religious settings.

The global outlook on religious life reveals a noticeable decline in both appreciation and commitment to this vocation. In many regions, particularly within the Western world, this trend has been strongly influenced by the spread of secularism, individualism, and modernization ideologies, which often prioritize personal autonomy, material success, and scientific rationalism over spiritual values and communal commitments. As a result, traditional vocations such as priesthood and consecrated religious life are increasingly perceived as less attractive or even outdated in the face of contemporary social and cultural expectations. This decline is further compounded by shifting societal values, declining church attendance, and a growing emphasis on alternative lifestyles that appear more compatible with the fast-paced, consumer-driven culture of the modern age. In some contexts, religious institutions are also challenged by scandals, diminished credibility, and reduced visibility in public life, all of which weaken the appeal of lifelong consecration. However, it is important to note that while Western societies report the sharpest decline, the global picture remains uneven. In parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, religious vocations still show signs of vitality, even though they, too, are gradually being affected by globalization and the spread of secular ideologies.

### **African View of Religious Life and Formation**

In contrast to North America and Europe, where religious vocations have been steadily declining, Africa has seen a relative increase in religious vocations. Particularly in nations like Nigeria, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Uganda, numerous congregations report stable or even rising numbers of postulants and novices (CARA, 2021; Orobator, 2018). The youthful population of Africa adds to the vibrancy of professions. Between the ages of 18 and 30, many women begin their religious journeys, bringing with them vitality and a desire to interact with others (Phiri & Njoroge, 2021). However, there are drawbacks as well, including difficulties with emotional development and career judgment. It is possible that some young women who enter religious life early won't have the discernment necessary to stick with it for very long.

Sub-Saharan Africa and other regions of the world share some similarities with the difficulties faced by religious women in the West. For instance, research on Kenyan religious communities emphasizes the challenges of adjusting to contemporary life, especially the growing secularization of society and the shifting demands on candidates (Ochieng, 2022). Religious congregations in Kenya deal with problems like the diminishing number of vocations and the requirement to address the emotional and psychological difficulties faced by those aspiring to religious life. Nevertheless, these communities also confront particular difficulties like poverty and political unrest, which can make it more difficult for them to carry out successful formation initiatives.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, Kenyan religious communities are also coming up with creative ways to innovate in religious formation, addressing the larger cultural changes at work while customizing programs to the unique requirements of their candidates. For instance, a lot of communities are implementing more locally appropriate spiritual practices and formation methods that prioritize social interaction and personal growth (Ochieng, 2022). These communities' experiences offer important insights into how religious orders can remain true to their fundamental mission while adjusting to modern challenges. Particularly in Kenya and Africa, religious life remains essential to community development, particularly in the areas of social services,

healthcare, and education. Religious institutions still face particular and urgent difficulties in spite of this beneficial contribution. The study proposes ways of enhancing the positive practices of modern ways of evangelization in congregations for purposes of inclusiveness.

Although there are comparatively more apostolates on the continent than in the West, their sustainability and quality are being threatened (Njoroge, 2019; Orobator, 2018) by modern trends. Additionally, both domestic and foreign congregations have seen a sharp decline in vocations in recent years. Some local congregations that once admitted five to ten candidates a year now report only one or two new candidates annually, and in some years, none at all, due to a decline in entrants (ICRG, 2020). Research indicates that spiritual calling, a desire to serve, educational opportunities, and personal development are frequently cited as reasons for entering a religious life. If the response to a religious calling is motivated by secular gains other than spiritual benefits, then congregations run the risk of dying vocations. If secularism is a threat to the sustainability of vocation to religious life, then new formation strategies may need to be adopted.

Socioeconomic factors, such as poverty or the prospect of a structured life and educational opportunities, can, however, occasionally have an impact on people's decisions to enter the religious community (Wamuyu, 2020; Njoroge, 2019). A poor decision is the result of poor motivation. According to academic records, Kenyan society is increasingly being impacted by consumerism, globalization, and individualism (ICRG, 2020). These elements usually conflict with the altruistic and communal character of religious life. Furthermore, unemployment, shifting family structures, and economic instability all affect the stability and motivations of those entering formation. Since many young women who visit formation houses have psychological scars, educational gaps, or unreasonable expectations, formators need to take a more thorough and tailored approach (Wamuyu, 2020). Candidates' increasing use of digital technology and social media has also sparked questions about their identity, discipline, and prayer life. Formation houses are now required to integrate digital formation and ethical media use into their programs to maintain the contemplative and communal character of religious life.

In addition to addressing new concerns like gender equality, mental health, intercultural dynamics and digital literacy, formation programs nowadays are supposed to help candidates make career decisions (Phiri & Njoroge, 2021). Religious institutions usually find it difficult to make these programs relevant to younger generations, even though the Church continues to work to maintain formation as a sacred and transformative journey (ICRG, 2020). Similar and distinct challenges exist in the African context, especially in Kenya. Religious women continue to play an important role in community development, frequently working in underdeveloped areas with few resources. Global cultural changes, economic hardship, and the impact of globalization on religious values, however, are having an increasing impact on local congregations (Njoroge, 2019; Orobator, 2018).

The formation process is made more difficult by political unpredictability, joblessness, and shifting family dynamics (ICRG, 2020). There are conflicts between traditional formation models and contemporary realities because young women entering religious life today frequently have different expectations and experiences than previous generations (Wamuyu, 2020). It is essential to comprehend these dynamics to create formation programs that are both contextually appropriate and spiritually based. This study looks into how Kenyan religious communities are dealing with these issues. While investigating sustainable methods for fostering thriving, pertinent religious communities in a world that is changing quickly, this study seeks to produce insights that will guide more flexible, resilient, and context-sensitive formation strategies.

### **Role of Religious Formation in Adapting to Contemporary Realities**

Empirical research has looked at how religious formation programs have changed to accommodate candidates' psychological, emotional, and spiritual needs in response to these shifting expectations. Many religious orders have shifted towards more integrated models of formation, which integrate intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development, according to a study by Doyle (2017) on religious formation in the US. The study emphasized the value of community support, counseling, and mentoring, pointing out that the demands of modern religious life necessitate a more thorough approach to formation than in earlier generations.

Similar findings were made by Ochieng (2022) in Sub-Saharan Africa, who discovered that religious formation programs in Kenya are changing significantly to meet the various needs of fresh candidates. Ochieng conducted interviews with members of religious communities for his study and discovered that social engagement, leadership development, and emotional resilience are becoming more and more important components of formation programs. This change is a result of the realization that religious life cannot only concentrate on spiritual growth; it also needs to equip students to deal with the difficulties of a world that is changing quickly. The significance of a comprehensive approach to religious formation that promotes candidates' spiritual development while taking into consideration their psychological and emotional health is highlighted by this empirical data.

Furthermore, research on European religious communities has revealed that social justice and environmental consciousness are increasingly being incorporated into formation programs. For instance, Baumann's (2020) study looked at how religious communities can support social justice and ecological sustainability. According to the study, these themes were being incorporated into the curricula of formation programs in a number of European nations, preparing candidates to tackle urgent global issues. This strategy is a reflection of religious communities' increasing recognition that their adherents need to be prepared to tackle global issues in addition to possessing spiritual knowledge.

### **Adapting Religious Formation to Contemporary Challenges in Kenya**

Ochieng (2022) carried out a thorough investigation into the difficulties faced by Kenyan religious communities, regarding religious formation, and the formation experiences in the country. According to the study, religious vocations in Kenya still face many obstacles, even though they have not seen the same sharp decline as in Western nations. These include the need for a more comprehensive formation process that takes into account the psychological, emotional, and spiritual aspects of religious life; the changing expectations of candidates; and the growing desire of young women to actively participate in global social issues like poverty, human rights, and environmental sustainability. According to this study, a large number of Kenyan women who are pursuing religious life are doing so to address urgent issues facing both their communities and the wider world. This study opines that rather than avoiding the world's problems, many Kenyan women who enter religious life are doing so to address their communities and the world's pressing issues. In order to prepare candidates for successful interactions with the Church and society, the study emphasized the significance of modifying formation programs to incorporate social justice education, psychological counseling, and leadership development.

Mutonyi (2019) conducted another study that focused on the process of religious formation in Kenya, specifically within the Catholic Church. The study looked at how hard it is to draw and keep people interested in religious life, and how hard it is for women religious to run their social service, healthcare, and educational institutions. According to Mutonyi's research, a growing number of young Kenyan women who are pursuing religious activities are challenging

conventional religious formation models that emphasizes disengagement from the outside world. According to the study, there is increasing interest in integrating more modern concerns into the religious formation process, such as social justice, environmental advocacy, and active community involvement. The study also emphasized the emotional and psychological difficulties that candidates face, especially the pressure to fit in with customs and the seclusion that can accompany a religious life. According to Mutonyi's research, religious communities must offer more comprehensive and encouraging formation programs, such as counseling, mentoring, and all-encompassing spiritual direction. This proposal concurs with the central objective of this study on the idea of establishing how congregations are navigating the problems that face them in regard to formation.

Njoroge (2018) looked at trends in religious vocations in Kenya and found that while the number of vocations is stable, new applicants frequently have more education and are active in international social justice movements. However, the lack of resources in religious communities hinders their ability to form effectively. The study highlights the necessity of modernized formation programs that take into account the psychological, social, and spiritual needs of contemporary candidates, such as social engagement, identity, and resilience.

In a different study, Wambugu (2020) examined the emotional health of Kenyan religious women and found that many of them experience mental health issues like stress, burnout, and loneliness, especially when they are in leadership positions. In order to foster emotional resilience and promote general well-being, the study suggests incorporating professional counseling and mental health support into formation programs.

### Summary of existing gaps

Despite a growing body of literature on religious life in Africa, there remain significant gaps in empirical research on the formation of Kenyan women religious. First, longitudinal studies that trace the long-term experiences of women in religious life are notably scarce. Most existing research captures only snapshots of the formation journey, leaving limited understanding of how sisters navigate vocation, community life, and ministry over decades.

Secondly, intersectional factors such as ethnicity, class, and geographical location are insufficiently explored in the context of religious formation. These dimensions play a critical role in shaping vocation experiences, influencing access to resources, and affecting how religious identity is lived out in diverse Kenyan contexts, yet they remain largely overlooked in current scholarship.

Another gap lies in the post-formation experiences of women religious, especially in ministry and leadership roles. While much attention is given to initial and ongoing formation processes, there is little empirical focus on how sisters transition into active ministry, assume leadership responsibilities, or balance community life with the demands of modern apostolates.

Additionally, the impact of digital technology on vocation and formation is still poorly understood. With the rapid growth of social media, online communication, and digital learning, technology has become an unavoidable part of religious life, influencing both recruitment and formation practices. However, few studies have critically examined how these tools are reshaping spiritual development, discernment, and community engagement among Kenyan women religious.

### Method

This study employed a **mixed-methods survey design**, combining the use of questionnaires with desktop research to capture both empirical and documented insights. The questionnaires were

designed to elicit direct responses from participants regarding their experiences and perspectives, while desktop research provided a foundation of secondary data drawn from academic literature, institutional reports, and historical records. This dual approach enabled the researcher to integrate **firsthand field data with established knowledge**, thereby generating a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by women religious communities in Kenya and the strategies adopted to adapt their training programs to contemporary realities.

The desktop research entailed a systematic review of literature related to religious vocation, formation processes, and the evolving role of women religious in Kenya. Sources included scholarly articles, Church documents, policy reports, and prior research on religious life. This review not only framed the study within existing scholarship but also helped to identify recurrent patterns and contextual factors influencing religious formation in Kenya.

Complementing this, a **structured survey** was administered to a diverse sample of women religious. The survey targeted different categories of participants to ensure representation across levels of responsibility and experience. The sample comprised **20 sisters from varied backgrounds**, including:

- **Superiors**, who serve as key decision-makers and policy shapers within congregations.
- **Formatters**, who directly implement the formation curriculum, guide candidates from initial stages through to ongoing formation.
- **Other sisters**, some of whom had previously held leadership or formation roles, thus bringing valuable reflective perspectives.

The use of **both convenience and snowball sampling techniques** facilitated participant selection. Convenience sampling was employed to identify and engage with superiors already known to the researcher, thereby ensuring accessibility and willingness to participate. Snowball sampling was then applied to broaden the network, allowing the identified participants to recommend additional respondents, particularly formatters and community members who could contribute diverse insights. This approach enhanced inclusivity and reduced the limitations of relying solely on one sampling method.

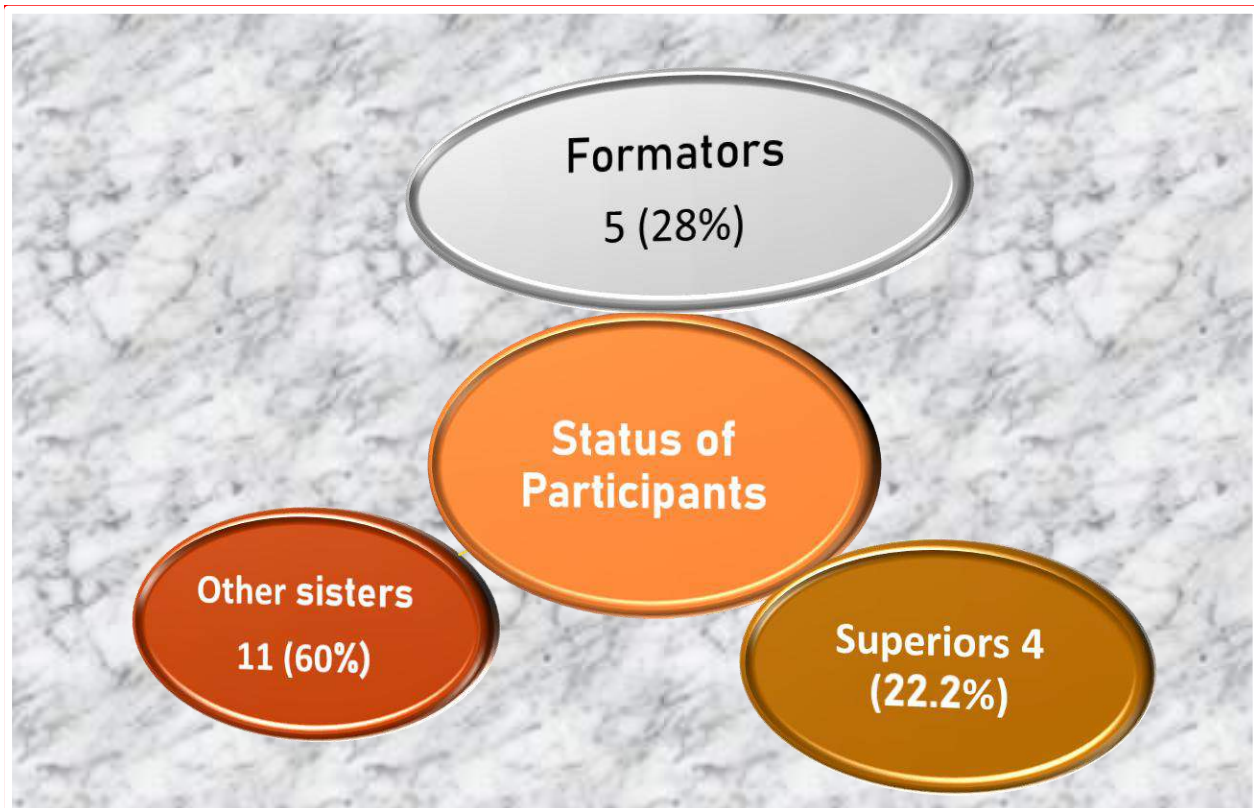
Data collected from the questionnaires were subjected to **statistical analysis**, primarily through the use of descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages. These methods allowed the researcher to quantify patterns in responses, highlight trends, and make meaningful comparisons across groups. Where relevant, qualitative insights from open-ended responses were analyzed thematically to capture nuanced experiences and contextual details that numbers alone could not convey. By combining **quantitative rigor with qualitative depth**, the methodology ensured a holistic analysis of the dynamics of religious formation among Kenyan women religious communities, highlighting both the challenges encountered and the adaptive strategies that have emerged in response to societal change.

### **Presentation and Discussion of Findings**

In this study, responses were submitted by each of the twenty participants who were selected for this study. Respondents, however, chose not to respond to at least one question or the other meaning that not all respondents answered every question that was asked. This explains why the total number of responses for various questions varies in the analysis.

### Status of Respondents

Nine (50%) of the 18 respondents who answered the question about their status were sisters with various responsibilities within their congregation. Five (28%) were active formators, and the remaining four (22%) were identified as superiors. This indicates that a wide variety of sisters are represented in the responses to the question, "Navigating the Challenges of Women Religious Formation in the 21st Century."



*Figure 1 shows the status of respondents*

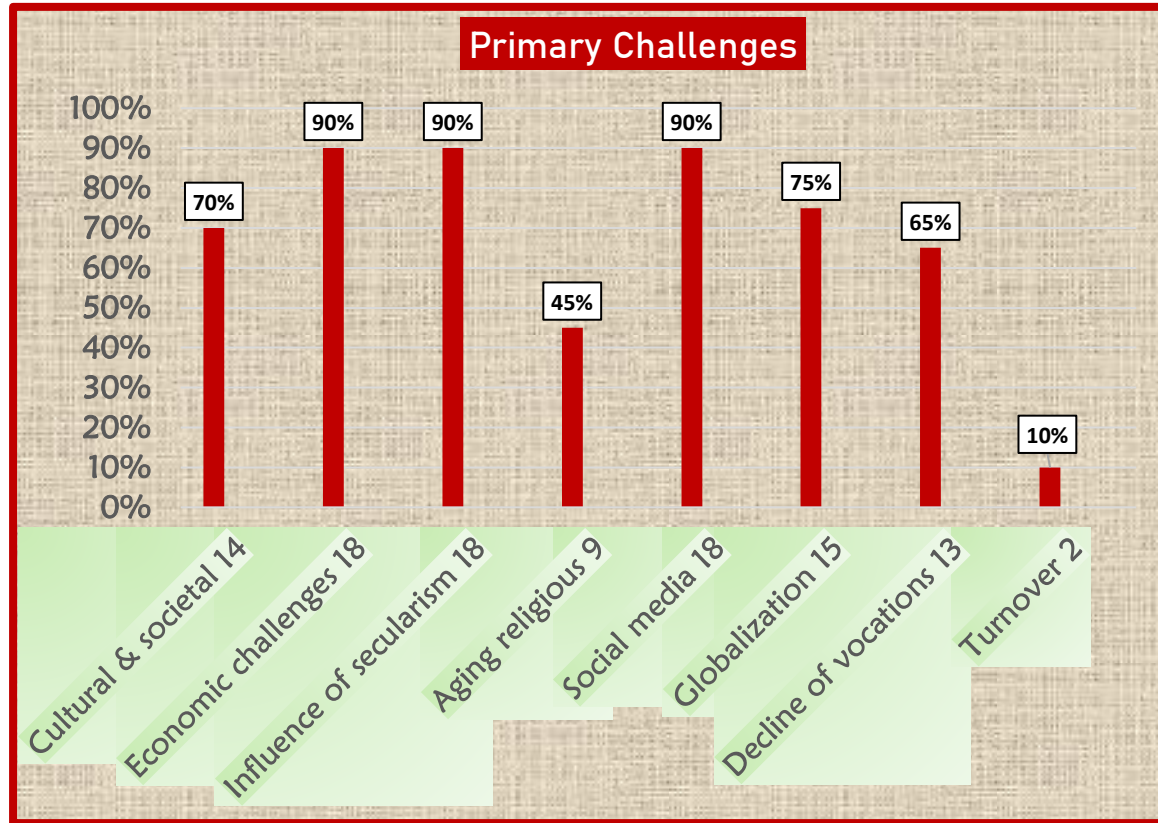
### Primary challenges faced by women's religious communities in Kenya

The findings of the study indicate that women's religious communities in Kenya face several key challenges when it comes to vocations, which impact both the immediate sustainability and long-term vitality of religious life. This question was answered by each of the 20 responders. Respondents had to check the answers that best fit the question from a range of challenges.

Among the primary responses recognized were economic challenges (90%), as one of the main setbacks facing women's religious formation in Kenya. For instance, economic difficulties, including poverty and limited access to education, play a big role in the decline of vocations. Many young women face financial pressures that may discourage them from pursuing a religious vocation, as they may view religious life as financially limiting or feel compelled to contribute to family income. Additionally, religious communities face financial difficulties, making it harder to maintain formation programs, provide adequate resources, and ensure the long-term sustainability of their missions. Existing research indicates that economic challenges, such as poverty and limited educational opportunities, have a major influence on the decline in religious careers among Kenyan women (Anderson, 2020). Financial pressures may deter many young women from choosing a religious career because they believe that religious life is expensive or because they feel compelled to support their families (Williams, 2019). Those who are already struggling

financially may find religious life less appealing as a result of this financial strain, which can overshadow the potential spiritual and communal benefits of religious life.

**Chart 1: Primary Challenges in Formation Processes**



Another high response among the Sisters is the mention of secularism by 18 (90%) of the respondents. Many young women now place a higher value on their own success and independence than on their community or spiritual calling due to the growing influence of secularism, individualism, and the globalized culture of consumerism. This action runs counter to how religious life is understood and practiced, which places a greater focus on communality. Religious life, with its vows of celibacy, poverty, and obedience, may seem less alluring as society's values change in light of the opportunities and freedoms that are thought to be offered by a secularized society. This may deter young girls from becoming involved in religious activities.

Similarly, social media 18 has a high response rate of 90%, which presents another challenge. WhatsApp, LinkedIn, YouTube, and social media, which encompasses both digital and print content, are excellent ways to stay in touch with people around the world. However, these paths are sometimes perceived as adversely affecting the sacredness of religious calling because of the somewhat conservative character of religious life.

Globalization, cited by 15 (75%) respondents, was another challenge pointed as an influential factor in the formation processes, both initial and ongoing. The growing influence of secularism, individualism, and the globalized culture of consumerism has led many young women to prioritize personal success and independence over communal life or spiritual calling. Globalization brings a mix of cultural exchanges and economic interdependencies, impacting local traditions and values (Adams, 2020). In Kenya, this phenomenon can lead to the allure of consumerism and secular lifestyles, complicating the pursuit of religious vocations. Formation programs may address these

influences through: As societal values shift, religious life, with its commitments of celibacy, poverty, and obedience, can seem less attractive compared to the perceived freedoms and opportunities available in a secularized society.

Similarly, cultural and societal factors mentioned by 14 (70%) respondents were reported as a challenge to the formation of religious women in Kenya. In many Kenyan communities, societal expectations place a high value on marriage and family life. Vocations to religious life are sometimes misunderstood or undervalued, especially among young women who, in some ethnic communities, are often encouraged to pursue more traditional roles within the family and society. This cultural preference for marriage over religious life makes it harder to attract new vocations.

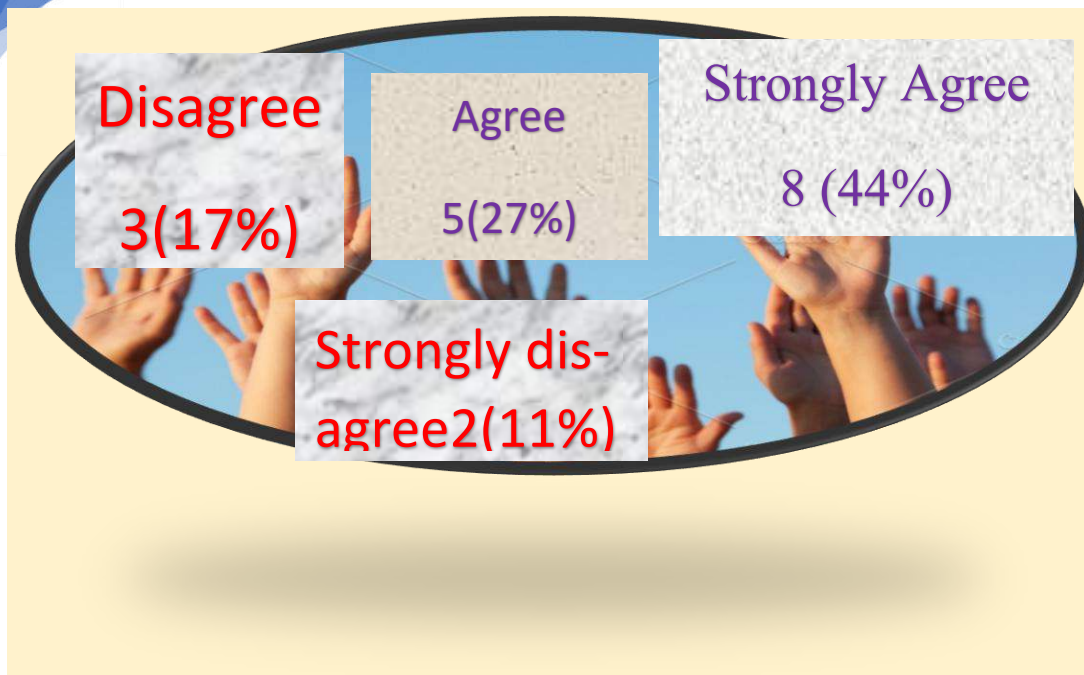
The problem of aging religious communities was cited by 9 (45%) participants. As the older generations of sisters age, there are fewer new vocations to replace them, which affects the capacity of religious communities to sustain their ministries, especially in areas like education, healthcare, and pastoral work.

Another challenge cited is that of Sister turnover. While turnover of sisters was mentioned by only 2 (10%) respondents, it remains an important concern within the context of religious vocations in Kenya. Although this percentage is small compared to other challenges identified in this study, the fact that it was raised by two distinct congregations indicates that it is a relevant issue deserving attention (Atuma & Ngugi, 2023). Turnover of sisters can disrupt the continuity of ministry and formation efforts, impacting the ability of religious communities to maintain their missions.

To ensure the sustainability of religious life, communities are focusing on strengthening their vocational outreach, emphasizing the joy and fulfillment found in religious life, and providing more opportunities for young women to experience and understand the value of consecrated life.

### **Contribution of secularism and globalization to the decline in Vocations**

All participants indicated that they either agree and strongly agree or disagree and strongly disagree with the statement that globalization and secularism are two of the main causes of the decline in religious vocation. The figure illustrates that the majority of respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement that globalization and secularism are two of the main causes of vocational decline, with 8 (44%) and 5 (27%). This response attracted 13 respondents.



*Figure 2 demonstrates responses on a scale of 1-5*

According to the responses, globalization and secularism are having an impact on Kenyan religious formation. Formation programs emphasize spiritual depth, prayer, and community life to help candidates stay rooted in their calling as secular values gain traction. Globalization, on the other hand, presents fresh chances for education, digital interaction, and cross-border cooperation, enhancing development via international connections, internet resources, and exposure to more general social concerns.

### **Modern technology and social media, and their influence on vocational**

Among the obstacles to more thorough interrogation were the media and technology. This question was answered by every participant. On a scale of 1 to 5, respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with this question. 16 (80%) of them responded that they either agree or strongly agree with the claim that social media and contemporary technology have an impact on career decisions. Conversely, one participant (5%) is neutral, and three (20%) disagree with this viewpoint.

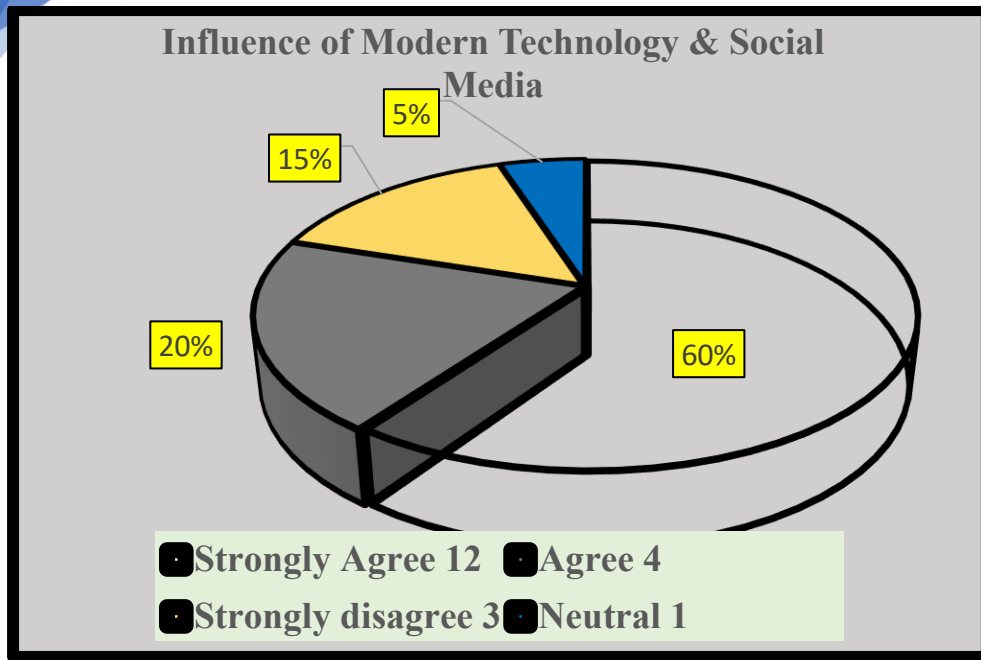


Figure 3 shows the level of influence of modern Technology and Social Media

These answers demonstrate that globalization and secularism are more responsible for the decline in religious careers. In order to help candidates of religious life stay rooted in their calling, formation programs emphasize spiritual depth, prayer, and community life as secular values gain traction. But occasionally, exposure to digital content exposes religiously active young people and older adults to novel ideas and content that could persuade some people to embrace beliefs or behaviours that go against their religious calling.

This question had 18 respondents out of 20. Interestingly, this question only attracted two response types, i.e., “Agree and Disagree.” In response, 2 (11%) “agreed” while 16 (89%) participants strongly agreed on the need to integrate Holistic Human Development in the formation curriculum. The response presented in Table 1 shows the importance of a holistic formation curriculum.

**Table 1: How Congregations can address their Formation challenges**

| Item                                                                                                                      | Percentage responding 100% |     |                  |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----|------------------|----|
|                                                                                                                           | “Agree”                    | %   | “Strongly Agree” | %  |
| Holistic human Development, e.g. self-self-awareness, emotional intelligence & health and emotional intelligence & health | 2                          | 11  | 16               | 89 |
| Embrace New Models of Formation, such as blended formation programs and intergenerational programs                        | 7                          | 39% | 11               | 61 |
| Emphasis on training for empowerment                                                                                      | 7                          | 39  | 10               | 56 |

|                                                                        |    |    |   |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|----|---|----|
| Embrace Creativity and Innovation in Ministry                          | 9  | 50 | 9 | 50 |
| Focus on contemporary issues, e.g., social justice, technology & media | 9  | 50 | 8 | 44 |
| Adapt to vocational shifts                                             | 14 | 78 | 4 | 22 |

- Another item that is high in response is emphasis on empowerment training, where 7 (39%) participants say they agree, while 10 (61%) say they strongly agree.
- About focus on contemporary issues, e.g., social justice, technology & media, (50%) say they agree, while 8 (44%) say they strongly agree.
- Those who report to agree and strongly agree with the statement that “embracing creativity and innovation in ministry” would be a solution to the ongoing challenges in religious formation are half 9 (50%) and half 9 (50%) respectively.
- Those recording a lower response are those who strongly agree 4(22%) and “14(78%) agree that adapting to vocational shift is also a possible solution.

Generally, these “agree” and “strongly agree” responses show that these elements are potentially acceptable as part of possible ways of addressing current gaps in the formation of women religious in Kenya.

### **An assessment of the Relevant Formation Program**

The researcher went further to establish the kind of programs that would best prepare candidates for a more authentic formation to religious life. Table 2 presents responses based on a four-level response. This question attracted 17 responses.

**Table 2: Proposed content for a relevant formation program**

| Item                                                                                                   | Agree | strongly agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|----------------|----------|-------------------|
| Training in stress management, coping strategies, and the development of a healthy sense of self-worth | 3     | 16             | 0        | 0                 |
| Technology and current emerging issues                                                                 | 6     | 13             | 0        | 0                 |
| Spiritual exercises                                                                                    | 3     | 16             | 0        | 0                 |
| Moral aspects of life                                                                                  | 5     | 15             | 0        | 0                 |
| Human needs                                                                                            | 5     | 14             | 0        | 0                 |
| Holistic spiritual formation                                                                           | 3     | 16             | 0        | 0                 |
| Experiential learning practices                                                                        | 8     | 10             | 1        | 0                 |
| Counseling and emotional support                                                                       | 4     | 15             | 0        | 0                 |
| Collaborative and interactive formation                                                                | 6     | 13             | 1        | 0                 |

### **Majority responses**

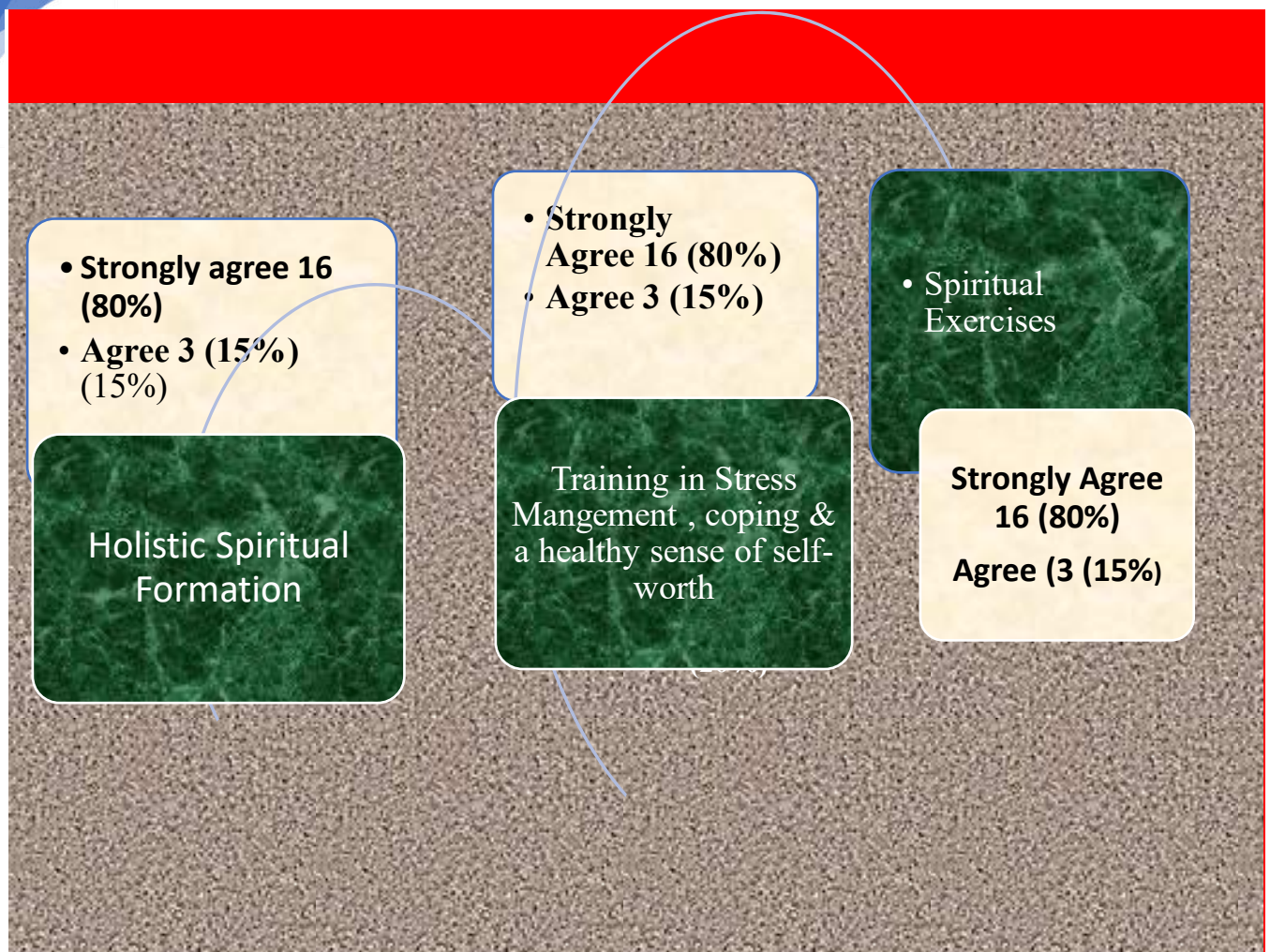


Figure 4: *Presenting the highest scores*

According to these findings, three content elements are more prominent, namely, holistic spiritual formation, training sisters in stress management skills, and an emphasis on spiritual exercises which include attending Mass and personal and private prayer.

#### **Responses to an open-ended question**

When asked to mention any further insights to help congregations navigate current formation challenges, respondents mentioned the following:

- The need for family counseling to enhance the mental well-being of members
- Proper selection and formation of formators at all levels
- Use of formation skills that promote better discernment and that enhance the creation of a conducive environment for formation to take place.
- Mentorship into self-awareness of candidates for religious life
- Training younger sisters for formation ministries should be encouraged in congregations, for they would understand younger generations better.
- Promotion of a clear understanding of the individuals' background or initial experiences and upbringing.
- Establishment of better formation models of formators as well as sustainability strategies for houses

## Recommendations

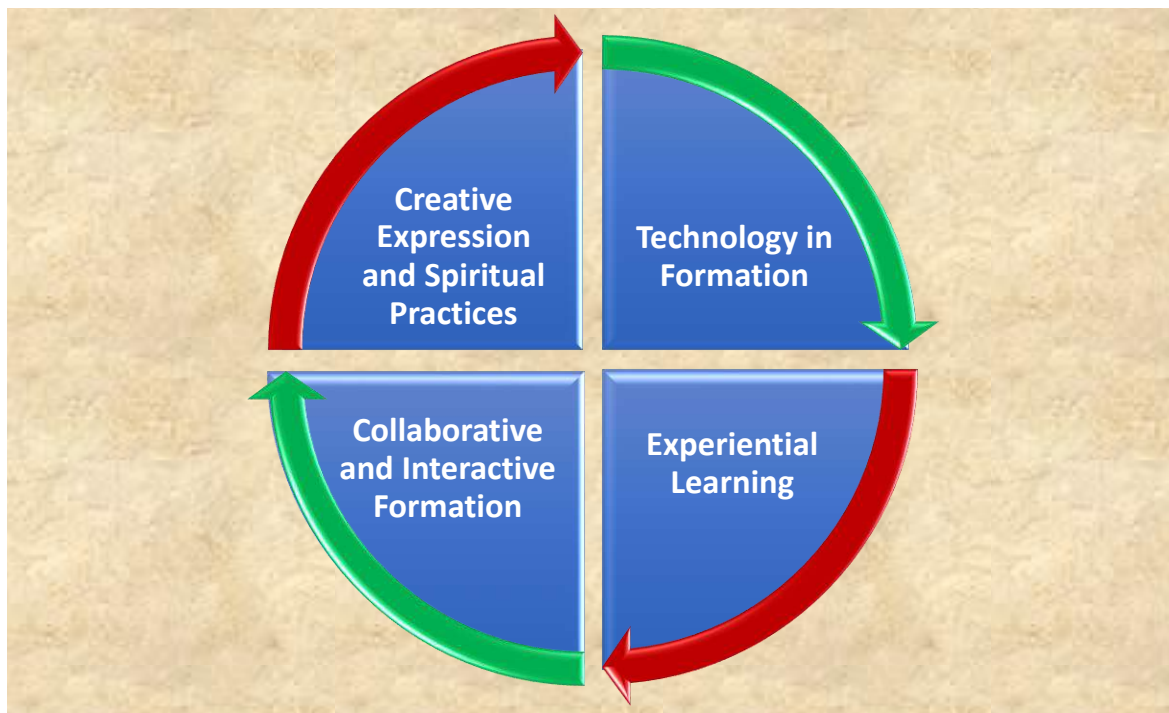
The study recognizes the importance of adapting formation programs to meet the needs of today's world while remaining faithful to the core charism and mission of the congregation. In this respect, the following recommendations have been advanced:

**Technology in Formation:** In the increasingly digital world, modern technology should be utilized to supplement traditional formation practices. This includes virtual retreats, online courses, and digital resources like e-books, podcasts, and videos on spiritual formation, theology, and social justice. These tools provide a wider range of learning experiences and connect formées to global networks of religious communities and resources.

**Experiential Learning:** Formatters at all levels should incorporate innovative, hands-on experiences to complement traditional classroom instruction. Formées should actively be involved in community service, social outreach, and immersion programs that give them direct exposure to the needs of society. These experiences allow them to live out the values of the charism in real-world settings and deepen their understanding of the congregation's mission.

**Collaborative and Interactive Formation:** Employment of more collaborative and interactive learning methods, such as group discussions, peer-led workshops, and role-playing scenarios. These methods foster a deeper level of engagement and community-building while allowing formées to express their unique insights and experiences. They also promote critical thinking and active participation, encouraging formées to bring their personal gifts into the communal life.

**Creative Expression and Spiritual Practices:** The study encourages innovative approaches to spiritual practices, such as incorporating art, music, and movement into prayer and reflection. This helps formées engage with spirituality in diverse and creative ways, nurturing both their emotional and spiritual well-being while remaining rooted in the spiritual heritage of the congregation.



*Figure 5 presents a summary of the study recommendations*

These innovations ensure that the formation process remains relevant and dynamic without compromising the integrity of the congregation's charism.

To address the challenge of the decline in vocations, the study recommends the following:

- Reviving Vocational Outreach: By providing easily accessible "Come and See" experiences through school visits, retreats, and social media, congregations can improve their interaction with young women. In order to improve vocational promotion, Gautier & Gaunt (2014) suggested collaborations between diocesan structures and congregations.
- Enhancing the Formation Process. In order to prepare sisters for modern ministry, modern formation places a strong emphasis on intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth. Mentorship and flexibility (such as online or part-time training) are being included more and more (Phiri & Njoroge, 2021).
- Emphasizing the Joy and Fulfilment of Vocation: Dispelling myths and demonstrating the value of religious life in contemporary society can be accomplished by showcasing happy testimonies and significant apostolates.
- Rooting Vocational Revival in Prayer: Prayer continues to be a key component of vocational initiatives. Through Eucharistic adoration, spiritual accompaniment, and organized prayer initiatives, communities are encouraged to support vocations.

Adapting to the difficulties of women's religious formation in the twenty-first century was another area of concern for the study. Given the level of changes in the world, congregations must adapt to changing religious, cultural, and societal dynamics. To achieve this, the study proposes the following strategies:

- Focusing on Holistic Development- Inclusion of emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and health and well-being content into the formation curriculum.
- Promotion of cultural sensitivity and diversity in selecting candidates, considering varied backgrounds.
- Engaging with Contemporary Issues. Need to address topics like social justice, environmental care, and the digital age within the curriculum.
- Offering Leadership Formation to new entrants as well as older members of the institute. Prepare women religious for pastoral, educational, and administrative leadership through mentorship and training.
- Fostering Community and Solidarity. Build strong community bonds via shared prayer, meals, and service, including online networks.
- Adapting to Vocational Shifts to remain relevant. Welcome candidates with non-traditional backgrounds and integrate new forms of commitment and ministry.
- Promoting ecumenical and Interfaith Dialogue- Equip sisters to engage with people of other faiths, deepening understanding and promoting peace.
- Encourage creativity and Innovation. Inspire new ministries and spiritual practices grounded in the Catholic tradition but responsive to today's needs.

## Conclusion

According to this study, the declining vocations in the West, changing societal expectations, and the increasing demand for comprehensive religious formation have all influenced the critical juncture of women's religious vocation in the twenty-first century. Religious communities still

need to address the changing expectations of candidates as well as the emotional and psychological well-being of their members, even though Kenya's vocational decline is not as severe as it is in Western nations. Empirical research conducted in a variety of locations, such as the US, Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa, offers important insights into the opportunities and difficulties encountered by religious communities. These studies highlight how crucial it is to modify religious formation to accommodate candidates' changing needs, especially by adding social, psychological, and emotional components to the process. As long as religious formation programs can adapt to the needs of a new generation of candidates, women's religious vocation remains a crucial force for social change and spiritual development as they continue to navigate the difficulties of contemporary life. This means that congregations in Kenya need to invest in integrating new content and formation techniques to remain visible and relevant in a rapidly changing world. How this is done has to be a collaborative endeavor within and among congregations.

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**Influence of Psychological Stress Coping Strategies on the Psychological Wellbeing of Girls in Early Marriages in Silale Ward, Tiaty Sub-County, Baringo County, Kenya**

**Mose, P.O and Njonge, T.**

**Egerton University. Department of Psychology, Counselling and Educational Foundations.**

**Email: [tnjonge@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:tnjonge@yahoo.co.uk)**

**Abstract**

Positive psychological wellbeing is linked to happiness, enjoyment, pleasure and fulfillment in life as well as potency in regard to coping, emotion regulation and healthy problem solving skills. Negative psychological wellbeing on the other hand leads to dysfunctional thought patterns, emotional disorders, and behavioral challenges that may lead to significant distress that is considered aberrant in that person's culture or society. Tiaty Sub-county experience high prevalence of early marriages at 27% of all girls below 18 years resulting into psychological challenges such as chronic stress, depression, trauma, social phobia and anxiety disorder. The purpose of the study was to establish the influence of physiological stress coping strategies on psychological wellbeing of girls in early marriages in Tiaty Sub-County, Baringo County, Kenya. The study used descriptive research design. The accessible population was 530 girls in early marriages between the age of 13 years and 17 years who are registered in educational or rehabilitation programs in Tiaty Sub-county. The study used snow-ball sampling techniques to select a sample size of 106 girls in early marriages in Tiaty Sub-county. The study used questionnaire adopted from Ryff's Scales of Psychological Wellbeing to collect data from the girls in early marriages. The study further revealed that there is statistically significant influence of psychological stress coping strategies on the psychological wellbeing of girls in early marriages. A unit increase in psychological stress coping strategies would lead to 0.540 units increase in psychological wellbeing of girls in early marriages with other variables held constant. The study recommends that girls in early marriages to engage in psychological stress-coping strategies such as professional guidance and counselling services, meditation, breathing exercises, behavior change mindfulness and journaling in order to improve their Psychological Wellbeing.

**Key Words:** Psychological Coping strategies, Psychological Wellbeing, Early Marriages

**Background of the Study**

According to Braimah (2020) early marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 years and an adult or another child. There are numerous studies that have been carried out to outline the prevalence and causes of early marriages (Chybuikem, 2019; Symonds et al., 2021). Globally, approximately one in five girls get married before the age of 18 years. In Africa, before the year 2030, more than 100 million girls are expected to marry before their eighteenth birthday (Burgess et al., 2022). According to UNICEF (2020), 720 million women alive were married before attaining the age of 18 years and 12 million girls get married every year before they attain the age of 18 while 12% before they attain 15 years of age. Despite numerous initiatives against early marriages and ratification of international and regional policy frameworks as well as development of laws, conventions, treaties, and international agreements that criminalize

early marriages, the vice is still rampant in several regions and communities. In Kenya and according to a 2020 UNICEF study, 64% of girls of Pokot origin got married before reaching the age of 18, followed by 54% of Rendille girls, 38% Somali girls and 28% of Maasai girls. 38% of Pokot boys and 14% of Somali boys got married before reaching the age of 18. Tiaty Sub- County is dominantly occupied by the Pokot tribe who engages in retrogressive practices such as FGM and early marriage (Wambu, 2019). According to UNICEF and World Vision (2021), 27% of the girls in Silale Ward of Tiaty Sub-County are in early marriages and this made Silale Ward the choice of the study area.

Girls in early marriages experiences high prevalence of negative psychological wellbeing. Psychological wellbeing is defined as the level of enjoyment, pleasure (hedonic) and extent of fulfillment and meaning in life (eudaimonic) and happiness, as well as resilience in life such as ability to cope with different situations, ability to regulate emotions as well as having healthy problem solving skills (Gao, 2020). According to De-Juanas et al.(2020), when people have positive psychological wellbeing, they are able to have healthier lives and live longer. According to the Six-factor Model of Psychological Well-being by Carol Ryff, psychological wellbeing is measured in terms of purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance and positive relations (Gao, 2018a). High prevalence of early marriages in Tiaty Sub-County necessitates girls to develop stress coping strategies in order to improve their psychological wellbeing. Psychological coping strategy is one of the strategies used to cope with stress. Psychological stress coping strategies are emotion-focused attempts to reduce negative emotional responses associated with stress such as embarrassment, fear, anxiety, depression, excitement and frustration (Khalili et al., 2018). Psychological stress coping strategies include, counselling, mental engagements, distraction (that is, keeping one's mind occupied with other things in order to take the mind off the issue) and emotional disclosure (that is, expressing strong emotions by talking or writing about negative events that resulted to stress. Meditation, breathing exercises, behavior change mindfulness, journaling, cognitive reappraisal and suppressing negative thoughts and emotions also comprise of psychological stress coping strategies (Kumanova & Karastoyanov, 2019; Roming, 2018).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Silale Ward in Tiaty Sub- County experience high prevalence of early marriages at 27% of all girls below 18 years. These girls experience challenges that threatened their psychological wellbeing such as chronic stress, depression, trauma, social phobia and anxiety disorder. Girls in Silale Ward portray these psychological challenges through thinking, extreme highs and lows in mood, long-lasting sadness, irritability, and withdrawal from family and social events, excess fear, anxiety, a lot of worrying and dramatic changes in eating and sleeping habits. Others manifest strong feelings of anger, hallucinations and delusions, thoughts of suicide and inability to cope with their daily problems and activities. These girls in early marriages in Silale Ward might have been using various strategies to cope with their psychological challenges which might have affected their psychological wellbeing negatively or positively. There have been limited conclusive studies that have been conducted to show how girls in early marriages cope with stress and thus a research gap. The current study therefore, sought to establish the influence of psychological stress coping strategies on the psychological wellbeing of girls in early marriages in Silale Ward, Tiaty Sub-County, Baringo County, Kenya.

### **Objective of the Study**

This study was guided by the following objective;

- i) To determine the influence of psychological stress coping strategies on the psychological wellbeing of girls in early marriages in, Tiaty Sub-County, Baringo County, Kenya.

### **Research hypothesis**

H<sub>01</sub>: There is no statistically significant influence of psychological stress coping strategies on the psychological wellbeing of girls in early marriages in, Tiaty Sub-County, Baringo County, Kenya

### **Literature Review**

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping to explain how individuals experienced, appraised and coped with stress. The Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping was developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and defines psychological stress as an encounter between an individual and environment that is cognitively appraised and exceeding the available resources and pose threat to the persons' wellbeing. According to the proponents of the theory, psychological stress undergoes two phases; cognitive appraisals and coping. Cognitive appraisals refer to the process in which an encounter is evaluated as potentially stressful or threatening the wellbeing of a person (Esia-Donkoh et al., 2020).

Cognitive appraisals have two cognitive appraisal stages. The first stage is primary appraisal stage which seeks to assess an encounter on whether it is threatening or challenging through asking the self "am in a trouble?" If the answer to the question is "yes", then the encounter is appraised as either a threat or challenge (Berjot & Gillet, 2021). A threat refers to an encounter that may lead to negative effects on one's self esteem or psychological wellbeing. A challenge on the other hand refers to an encounter that may lead to personal growth or new lessons. An encounter can be both a threat and a challenge and are often not mutually exclusive (Goh *et al.*, 2010). The second stage of appraisal is secondary appraisal. This stage evaluates the ability of an individual to cope with the situation. It seeks to answer the question "Am I able to cope with the situation"? The available resources for coping might be physical, Social, psychological and religious (Dillard, 2019).

The second phase of Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping is coping. Coping refers to the behavioural and cognitive processes in which an individual master, reduce, or tolerate the internal and external demands that are created by the stressful transaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Coping can be passive or active. Two major types of coping to stress are emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping. Emotion-focused coping refers to the process in which one regulates the emotions and responses towards a stressing situation while problem-focused coping refers to the process of management of stressors with a view of eliminating the stressors (Dillard, 2019). The method of coping used by individuals depends on the appraisal on the encountered situation. Problem-focused coping is mostly used when the stressors cannot or are less changeable while emotion-focused coping is used when the stressors can be changed or eliminated (Berjot & Gillet, 2021).

### **Psychological Wellbeing of Girls in Early Marriages**

In London, Burgess et al. (2022) carried out a study in United Kingdom to assess the present literature on early marriages in terms of treatment of its mental health. One mixed-methods research and fifteen quantitative studies (14 cross-sectional and one longitudinal) were used to compile the final sample, which comprised data from 12 nations, mostly from the global South. It was therefore found from the study that those girls who were married as children cited domestic abuse, poverty, difficulties in child bearing, and social isolation as contributing causes to their emotional anguish. Most people who sought treatment for mental illness were depressed. On the other hand, fears, phobias and psychological distress were mentioned less frequently while substance abuse was also less common. While early marriage is associated with emotional discomfort and specific mental health disorders, there are still gaps in the understanding. The study further recommended that to better understand the mental health needs of young males and those working in humanitarian settings, more research was needed.

In Ghana, Sarfo et al. (2020) did a study where adolescent married had their psychological wellbeing examined in order to determine what factors contributed to early marriage and what its repercussions were. In respect to this, 21 married girls, 8 parents, and 7 elders from various communities in Ghana's northern region were subjected to in-depth interviews in order to learn more about the likely causes and effects of adolescent female marriage. Results from the study depicted that early marriage had both negative and positive implications on the psychological health of the young girls. John et al. (2022) carried out a study on child marriage and psychological well-being in Niger and Ethiopia. Cross-national quantitative study using nationally representative survey data (Demographic and Health Survey) with mixed-method supplements was used to examine associations between age at first marriage and multiple domains of psychological well-being (depression, anxiety, vitality, general health, and positive well-being) in Niger and Ethiopia. The findings of the study indicated that very early marriage (marriage at  $\leq 15$  years) and marriage before 18 were significantly associated with poorer scores on most psychological-wellbeing subscales (higher depressive and anxiety symptoms, lower vitality and general health) in both countries; the association remained after basic adjustments. One subdomain (self-control) showed weaker or no association. The paper documents consistently worse psychosocial outcomes for women married very early. The study called for policy and program attention to mental-health consequences of child marriage, recommending integration of psychosocial services into programs for married adolescents, targeted mental-health screening, and longitudinal research to unpack causal pathways

In the context of Ethiopia and Niger, International Women's Research Center (2021) conducted a study that sought to examine whether and how early marriages affected women's mental health and wellbeing. A subset of women who answered all questions about their mental health were used in this study (2,463 women in Niger and 3,501 women in Ethiopia). It was depicted from the study that women who married at a young age were more likely to suffer from poor mental health and wellbeing as a result of early marriages. In Niger, getting married before the age of 15 had a considerable negative impact on the woman's overall psychological wellbeing, with those who got married before the age of 18 experiencing the most negative impact. On the other hand, only individuals who got married before the age of 12 in Ethiopia were shown to have a statistically meaningful association.

Mwangwa et al. (2024) did a study on anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress and associated risk factors among out-of-school girls in western Kenya. The study used community-based cross-sectional survey (n = 904 out-of-school girls), nested within KEMRI HDSS. The study was done to estimate prevalence of common mental-health problems (depression, anxiety, PTSD, suicidal

ideation) among out-of-school girls in rural western Kenya and identify associated risk factors. The study found high prevalence of mental-health problems: large proportions screened positive for anxiety, depression, PTSD and suicidal ideation (e.g., ~29% reported recent suicidal thoughts; substantial proportions had positive screens on GAD-7, PHQ-A, PCL-C). Mental-health problems were strongly associated with exposure to sexual/physical violence, menstrual-health problems, poverty, and markers of school dropout / early transition (including being married or promised in marriage). The study recommended for multi-level, multi-sectoral responses: scale accessible psychosocial services for out-of-school girls (task-sharing with trained lay workers), strengthen GBV prevention and response, address menstrual-health needs and poverty, create referral pathways and age-appropriate mental-health screening in community programs (Mwangwa et al., 2024).

### **Psychological Stress Coping Strategies and Psychological Wellbeing**

Psychological stress coping strategies are emotion-focused attempts to reduce negative emotional responses associated with stress such as embarrassment, fear, anxiety, depression, excitement and frustration (Khalili et al., 2018). Psychological stress coping strategies include, counselling, mental engagements, distraction (that is, keeping one's mind occupied with other things in order to take the mind off the issue) and emotional disclosure (that is, expressing strong emotions by talking or writing about negative events that brought stress. Meditation, breathing exercises, behavior change mindfulness, journaling, cognitive reappraisal and suppressing negative thoughts and emotions also comprised of psychological stress coping strategies (Kumanova & Karastoyanov, 2019; Roming, 2018).

Dimunová et al. (2021) carried out a study among nurses to examine how personal wellbeing is affected by the various coping strategies to stress in Slovakia. The study used a sample of 509 nurses who were given structured questionnaires to fill. Using descriptive and inductive statistics, the study found that the nurses used both adaptive and maladaptive stress coping strategies. In respect to this, the study revealed that most nurses coped with stressing job demands by disengaging from stressful tasks and few self-blamed themselves for the stress encountered. It was further revealed that there was a negative correlation between self-blame and personal wellbeing. The study also noted that a proportion of the nurses engaged into personal meditation that led to improvement on the personal wellbeing index. The study recommended personal management training and initiatives such as team building, effective conflict resolution, counselling services and promotion of effective stress coping strategies. The reviewed study measured psychological wellbeing in terms of personal wellbeing while the current study will focus on purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance and positive relations as measures of psychological wellbeing and thus broad scope.

Focusing on University academic staff, Shen and Slater (2021) sought to determine the effect of coping strategies on the emotional wellbeing in Northern Ireland. The study adopted cross-section online research design and sampled 87 academic staff at the university in Northern Ireland. The findings of the study revealed that the academic staff experienced moderate stress and coped majorly by adopting distractive behaviours. In respect to this, it was noted that distraction behaviours had a negative effect on the emotional wellbeing of the staff. It was also found that the academic staff who adopted acceptance coping styles and positive reframing had higher scores on emotional wellbeing. It was noted that there was a positive significant correlation between acceptance coping styles, positive reframing and emotional wellbeing of academic staff. For improved emotional wellbeing and increased productivity of academic staff, the study recommended development of reliable methods and policy frameworks of coping to stress. Since

the reviewed study only focused on emotional wellbeing, the current study focuses on psychological wellbeing as a whole; there exists a conceptual research gap to be filled.

Using systematic literature review, Johari (2020) outlined some of the psychological stress coping strategies adopted by employees in stressing environments. The study obtained its conclusions from 14 articles on western literature. The main stressors established through the systematic literature review were high workload, lack of independence at workplace, poor interpersonal interactions and conflicts and harsh physical environment. Psychological stress coping strategies adopted by workers included behavioural disengagement, denying the stressors, self-distraction, mental disengagement, self-blaming, trying to forget everything, and hopeful thinking. The study recommended employees not to use suppression and avoidance methods of stress coping such as behavioural and mental disengagement, denial, distraction, self-blame and procrastination. Since the study was based on western literature in a meta-analysis approach, there is biasness and thus the current study will focus on African and specifically Kenyan Literature on empirical evidence.

Nungo et al. (2025) carried out a study on mental distress among early married adolescent girls and young women in Kenyan settings. Girls who should be in school but were not, were the primary focus of the study. The study employed Cross-sectional survey with mixed methods to estimate the prevalence of mental distress among adolescent girls/young women in high child-marriage prevalence counties and to describe coping strategies and service access. According to the findings, high levels of depressive symptoms and anxiety were observed among girls who had experienced early marriage compared with never-married peers. Common coping strategies were religiosity, emotional suppression/avoidance, relying on family or older women, and limited use of formal counselling. Barriers included stigma, low awareness of services, financial and geographic barriers. The study recommended that Integration of mental-health screening into maternal and adolescent health services, expansion of community-based psychosocial interventions such as safe spaces and peer support, and inclusion of mental-health indicators in child marriage prevention program evaluations would help improve the girl's psychological wellbeing.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

The study used descriptive survey research design. The target population of the study was 1025 girls in early marriages between the age of 13-17 years. However, due to the illegalities of early marriages, the 1025 girls were not practically accessible. Thus, the accessible population was 530 girls in early marriages who were registered in educational and rehabilitation programs such as; primary and secondary schools, Girls Not Brides program, local authorities and other organizations that sought to help girls in early marriages. The study used snowball sampling techniques to select a sample size of 106 girls in early marriages in Tiaty sub-county. The study used questionnaire adopted from Ryff's scales of psychological well being to collect data from the girls in early marriages. The psychological wellbeing was assessed using a modified 18 item version adopted from Ryff's scale of psychological wellbeing which has reported Cronbach's alpha Coefficient of more than 0.7 and was widely used in psychological studies (Costea-Bărluțiu et al., 2018).

## Results and Discussion

### Psychological Stress Coping Strategies of Girls in Early Marriages

The study examined the various psychological stress coping strategies of girls in early marriages and whose percentages (%), mean and standard deviation (SD) are presented in Table 1.

*Table 1: Psychological Stress Coping Strategies of Girls in Early Marriages (n = 98)*

| Psychological Stress Coping Strategies               | Percentages |      |      |      |      | Descriptives |      |
|------------------------------------------------------|-------------|------|------|------|------|--------------|------|
|                                                      | SD          | D    | NAD  | A    | SA   | Mean         | SD.  |
| I seek psychological counselling.                    | 48.0        | 34.7 | 10.2 | 4.1  | 3.1  | 1.80         | 0.99 |
| I get personal time for meditation.                  | 60.2        | 33.7 | 4.1  | 1.0  | 1.0  | 1.49         | 0.72 |
| I blame myself for getting married as a child        | 37.8        | 46.9 | 6.1  | 6.1  | 3.1  | 1.90         | 0.98 |
| I maintain positive attitude through it all          | 27.6        | 37.8 | 12.2 | 15.3 | 7.1  | 2.37         | 1.24 |
| I have given up trying to make things better         | 34.7        | 36.7 | 11.2 | 13.3 | 4.1  | 2.15         | 1.16 |
| I have accepted that am a Wife                       | 37.8        | 43.9 | 9.2  | 6.1  | 3.1  | 1.93         | 1.00 |
| Psychological Stress Coping Strategies               | Percentages |      |      |      |      | Descriptives |      |
|                                                      | SD          | D    | NAD  | A    | SA   | Mean         | SD.  |
| I keep wishing I was not Married                     | 3.1         | 5.1  | 5.1  | 31.6 | 55.1 | 4.31         | 1.00 |
| I keep trying to forget everything that happen to me | 2.0         | 6.1  | 28.6 | 37.8 | 25.5 | 3.79         | 0.97 |
| I have hope that I will excel in life                | 2.0         | 0.0  | 12.2 | 31.6 | 54.1 | 4.36         | 0.85 |
| I find meaning in everything that has happened to me | 49.0        | 30.6 | 10.2 | 6.1  | 4.1  | 1.86         | 1.09 |
| Composite Scores                                     |             |      |      |      |      | 2.60         | 1.00 |

In regard to psychological stress coping strategies, the study established that on average

majority of the girls disagreed that they sought psychological counselling as evidenced by a mean score of 1.80 and a standard deviation of 1.00. This did not agree with the study done by Wainaina et al. (2021) which revealed that most of the girls in early marriage sought out for guidance and counselling in efforts to overcome their depression. The divergence of the results may be occasioned by lack of professional counselling services in Silale Ward, Tiatiy sub-county or treating early marriage as a norm thus increasing the level of psychological challenges. The study further revealed that on average majority of the girls in early marriages (strongly disagree = 60.2%, disagree = 33.7%) disagreed with the statement that they got personal time for meditation, as indicated by a mean score of 1.49 and a standard deviation of 0.72. Girls perceived that personal time for meditation would only cause them more stress (Amangbey et al., 2019).

The findings further established that majority of the girls in early marriages disagreed that they blamed themselves for getting married as a child (strongly disagree = 37.8%, disagree = 46.9 %). This is further evidenced by a mean of 1.90 which is less than 3.00. The study also noted a unanimity in the responses obtained from the girls regarding to whether they blamed themselves for getting married early, as shown by a standard deviation of 0.978. The study done by Rehn-Mendoza (2020) indicated that most girls blamed their parents for making them marry at an early age because they are the ones who forced them to the early marriages. In Silale Ward, the girls are forced by parents to get married early because the parents get bride price to make themselves wealthy. It was indicated that on average, majority of the girls disagreed that they maintained a positive attitude throughout as revealed by a mean score of 2.37 and a standard deviation of 1.24. The study done by Offorma (2019) revealed that having a positive attitude makes the mind to focus on the good and makes one view life with hope and possibilities. In Silale Ward, this is just but a mirage.

The results established that on average majority of the respondents (strongly disagree=34.7%, disagree=36.7%) disagreed that they had given up trying to make things better as evidenced by a mean score of 2.15 and a standard deviation of 1.16. Ridzuan et al. (2018) noted that most of the girls in early marriage had given up in life. In Silale Ward, the girls in early marriages were at the verge of losing hope and thus experienced negative psychological wellbeing. The study found out that on average, majority of the girls disagreed that they had accepted to be wives as shown by a mean score of 1.93 which is less than 3.00. Kosimbei et al. (2023) revealed that only a few girls accepted that getting married was a step towards independency. The forced marriages of girls in Silale Ward, only resulted into negative psychological wellbeing. The study further revealed that on average majority of the girls in early marriages affirmed that they kept wishing that they were not married as indicated by a mean score of 4.13 and a standard deviation of 1.00. A study done by Dankyi et al. (2019) revealed that most of the girls in early marriages kept regretting why they became the victims of early marriages. However, their regrets only became a source of negative psychological wellbeing.

The study established that on average majority of the girls in early marriages tended to agree (agree = 37.8%, strongly agree = 25.5%) that they tried to forget everything that had happened to them as pointed out by a mean score of 3.79 and a standard deviation of 0.97. The study done by Gobindgarh (2022b) indicated that girls in early marriages engaged themselves with various practices that will help them forget their situation. Avoidance by trying to forget may also be associated with high psychological challenges of girls in early marriages in Silale Ward. The study found out that majority of the girls agreed that they had some hope that one day they will excel in life (agree = 31.6%, strongly agree = 54.1%, a mean score of 4.36). National Research Council (2019) indicated that most of the girls in

early marriages kept themselves with the thought of being able to succeed in life one day. This implied that girls in early marriages in Silale Ward lived in hope, which is far from reality hence psychological wellbeing is far-reaching. The results found out that on average majority of the girls in early marriages disagreed that they found meaning in everything that had happened to them as shown by a mean of 1.86 and a standard deviation of 1.09. Gobindgarh (2022a) revealed that only very few girls who were married at an early age were able to find the meaning in their situation. In Silale Ward, the girls can't find any meaning in misery and suffering caused by forced marriages thus low psychological wellbeing.

### Psychological Wellbeing of Girls in Early Marriages

The study further sought to establish the psychological wellbeing of girls in early marriages. The study used six constructs of psychological wellbeing, namely; self- acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, positive relations with others, and personal growth. Table 2 shows the descriptive results for positive relations of girls in early marriages.

*Table 2: Positive Relations of Girls in Early Marriages (n = 98)*

| Positive Relations                                                       | - | Percentage |      |      |     | Total |      |      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|------------|------|------|-----|-------|------|------|
|                                                                          |   | SD         | D    | NAD  | A   | SA    | Mean | SD   |
| Maintaining close relationships has been easy for me.                    |   | 45.9       | 39.8 | 10.2 | 3.1 | 1.0   | 1.73 | 0.84 |
| People would describe me as person willing to share my time with others. |   | 37.8       | 53.1 | 6.1  | 1.0 | 2.0   | 1.77 | 0.78 |
| I have experienced warm relationships with others.                       |   | 55.1       | 37.8 | 4.1  | 3.1 | 0.0   | 1.55 | 0.72 |
| Composite Scores                                                         |   |            |      |      |     |       | 1.68 | 0.78 |

In regard to positive relations as a psychological wellbeing coping strategy, the study found out that on average majority of the girls disagreed on all aspects of positive relations as evidenced by a composite mean score of 1.68. This implied that the girls in Silale Ward, had difficulties in maintaining close relationships, were unwilling to share their time with others and did not experience warm relationships with others. Kosimbei et al. (2023) revealed that keeping positive and close relations were helpful in overcoming stressful situations. Amangbey et al. (2019) noted that girls who were married early secluded themselves from others due to the fear of being ridiculed. Iris Group (2021) noted that most of the girls in early marriages experienced loneliness since girls in their age group didn't like being associated with them.

Table 3 shows the frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviations on the level of self-acceptance among girls in early marriages in Silale Ward, Tiaty Sub-County.

Table 3: Self-Acceptance of Girls in Early Marriages (n = 98)

| Self-Acceptance                                                                           | Percentage |      |      |      |      | Descriptives |       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|------|------|------|------|--------------|-------|
|                                                                                           | SD         | D    | NAD  | A    | SA   | Mean         | SD.   |
| I like most parts of my personality.                                                      | 7.1        | 4.1  | 10.2 | 41.8 | 36.7 | 3.97         | 1.135 |
| When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out so far. | 31.6       | 59.2 | 4.1  | 2.0  | 3.1  | 1.86         | .837  |
| In many ways I feel encouraged by achievements in life.                                   | 66.3       | 23.5 | 3.1  | 4.1  | 3.1  | 1.54         | .965  |
| Composite Scores                                                                          |            |      |      |      |      | 2.46         | 0.98  |

Overly, the study revealed that on average majority of the girls disagreed that self-acceptance was a psychological coping strategy as evidenced by a mean of 2.46. This therefore indicated that girls in early marriages in Silale Ward, Tiaty Sub-County had self-acceptance challenges and when they looked at the story of their lives, they were not pleased with how things had turned out so far and they felt discouraged by the achievements of their lives. A Study done by Reza et al. (2020) indicated that accepting one's personality led to having a positive attitude towards one's situations. Dina (2020) revealed that most girls in early marriages were not pleased with the life they lived. Amangbey et al. (2019) noted that most girls in early marriage were faced with a challenge of low self-esteem and thought of themselves as unsuccessful in life.

In Silale Ward, the girls had seen that the world had turned upside down for them. Table 4 shows the descriptive results on the level of independence of the girls in early marriages in Silale Ward, Tiaty Sub- County.

Table 4: Autonomy of Girls in Early Marriages (n = 98)

| Autonomy                                                                               | Percentage |      |      |      |      | Descriptives |      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|------|------|------|------|--------------|------|
|                                                                                        | SD         | D    | NAD  | A    | SA   | Mean         | SD.  |
| I tend to be influenced by people with strong opinions.                                | 30.6       | 14.3 | 7.1  | 17.3 | 30.6 | 3.03         | 1.67 |
| I have confidence in my own opinions, even if they are different from those of others. | 48.0       | 16.3 | 11.2 | 15.3 | 9.2  | 2.21         | 1.42 |

I judge myself by what I think is important, not by the values of others. 4.1 3.1 3.1 42.9 46.9 4.26 .98

Composite Scores 3.17 1.35

The study found out that on average the girls in early marriages agreed to using autonomy as a psychological coping strategy as revealed by a composite mean score of 3.17. However, the results pointed divergent opinions in which a proportion of girls were indifferent to whether they got influenced by people with strong opinions and yet another proportion of girls judged themselves by what they thought was important and not by the values of others. A different paradigm was also expressed by those who did not have confidence in their own opinions, even if they were different from those of others. Shahan (2021) indicated that girls were able to make and uphold their decisions. A study done by Gesora (2018) revealed that girls in early marriages were more individualistic. A study conducted by Kumar et al. (2018) noted that most girls in child marriages were able to evaluate themselves through the situation without being influenced by others. The personal growth metrics for the girls in early marriages in Tiaty are presented in Table 5 in terms of percentages, mean and standard deviations.

Table 5: Personal Growth of Girls in Early Marriages (n = 98)

| Personal Growth                                                                                        | Response in percentage |      |      |      |      | Total |      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|------|------|------|------|-------|------|
|                                                                                                        | SD                     | D    | U    | A    | SA   | Mean  | SD   |
| For me, life has been a continuous process of learning, changing, and growing.                         | 38.8                   | 42.9 | 11.2 | 3.1  | 4.1  | 1.91  | 1.00 |
| I think it is important to have new experiences that challenge how I think about myself and the world. | 50.0                   | 23.5 | 16.3 | 6.1  | 4.1  | 1.91  | 1.13 |
| I did not give up trying to make big improvements or changes in my life a long time ago.               | 2.0                    | 4.1  | 16.3 | 31.6 | 45.9 | 4.15  | 0.98 |
| Composite Scores                                                                                       |                        |      |      |      |      | 2.66  | 1.04 |

Generally, the study revealed that on average majority of the girls in early marriages disagreed in regard to personal growth as a psychological coping strategy as evidenced by a mean score of 2.66. This therefore implied that the girls in Silale Ward, Tiaty Sub-County did not consider learning, change, and growth and also did not think it was important to have new experiences that challenged how they thought about themselves and the world. A composite standard deviation of 1.04 implied that each girl experienced a unique

experience with respect to personal growth and thus the divergence of opinions. Wainaina et al. (2021) stated that the girls in early marriages couldn't accept that their life was a continuous process of learning. Ridzuan et al. (2018) noted that girls in early marriages found it hard to accept that it was important to have new experiences that challenge their thinking about themselves and the world. A study by Hajihasani and Sim (2019b) revealed that victims of early marriages who had accepted their situation were able to realize that they had been expanding and developing.

Table 6 presents the study findings with respect to the level of environmental masterly among the girls in early marriages in Silale Ward, Tiaty Sub- County.

*Table 6: Environmental Masterly of Girls in Early Marriages (n = 98)*

| Environmental Masterly                                              | Response in percentage |      |      |     |     | Total |       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|------|------|-----|-----|-------|-------|
|                                                                     | SD                     | D    | U    | A   | SA  | Mean  | SD    |
| The demands of everyday life do not often get me down.              | 33.7                   | 32.7 | 26.5 | 5.1 | 2.0 | 2.09  | 1.00. |
| In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live. | 42.9                   | 36.7 | 10.2 | 9.2 | 1.0 | 1.89  | 1.00  |
| I am good at managing the responsibilities of daily life.           | 52.0                   | 30.6 | 11.2 | 6.1 | 0.0 | 1.71  | 0.90  |
| Composite Scores                                                    |                        |      |      |     |     | 1.90  | 0.96  |

Overall, the study revealed that on average majority of the girls in early marriages in Silale Ward, Tiaty Sub- County had poor environmental masterly as evidenced by a composite mean score of 1.897. This implied that on average, the demands of everyday life often got them down and they felt that they were not in charge of the situation in which they lived. In addition, they were not good in managing the responsibilities of daily life. A study done by Kosimbei et al. (2023) showed that most of the respondents disagreed with the statement that the demand of life got them down. Masselink et al. (2018) noted that the girls and women who were married at an early age found it hard to be in charge of the situation they were living in. A study done by Gobindgarh (2022b) noted that most of the girls in child marriages were able to manage well the responsibilities of day-to-day life.

Descriptive results for the study with regard to purpose in life among girls in early marriages in Silale Ward, Tiaty Sub- County are shown in Table 7.

*Table 7: Purpose in Life of Girls in Early Marriages (n = 98)*

| Purpose in Life              | Response in percentage |         |      |      |      | Descriptives |      |
|------------------------------|------------------------|---------|------|------|------|--------------|------|
|                              | SD                     | D<br>SD | U    | A    | SA   | Mean         |      |
| Some people wander aimlessly | 2.0                    | 4.1     | 18.4 | 28.6 | 46.9 | 4.14         | 1.00 |

through life, but I am not one of them.

I live life one day at a time, not really thinking about the future.

I sometimes feel as if I've done all there is to do in life.

Composite Scores 4.20 0.91

In general, the study noted that on average majority of the girls in early marriages agreed to the realization of their purpose in life as evidenced by a composite mean of 4.20. This further implied that majority of girls in early marriages did not wander aimlessly through life. Ridzuan et al. (2018) revealed that most of the girls in early marriages had a sense of direction as well as possession of goals for their lives. A study done by Amangbey et al. (2019) indicated that only few girls who got married early had a feeling that there was a meaning to the present and the past life.

### **Influence of Psychological Stress Coping Strategies on the Psychological Wellbeing**

The objective of the study sought to find out the influence of psychological stress coping strategies on the psychological wellbeing of girls in early marriages in Silale Ward, Tiaty Sub-County, Baringo County, Kenya. To achieve this objective, the study performed simple linear regression to predict psychological wellbeing using psychological coping strategy as the predictor variable. Table 8 shows the model summary.

*Table 8: Model Summary for Influence of Psychological Stress Coping Strategies on the Psychological Wellbeing*

| Model | R    | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|-------|------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| 1     | .826 | .682     | .679              | 0.12542                    |

The study found out that there was a strong correlation between the observed and predicted values of psychological wellbeing of girls in early marriages as shown by R value of .826. This is an indication that the model provides a good fit for the data. The R Square value of .682 implied that 68.2% of the variance in psychological wellbeing is attributable to the variance in stress coping strategies. The adjusted R Square value of .679 on the other hand implied that significant predictors of the model contribute 67.9% of the variance in the psychological wellbeing of girls in early marriages. The model attained a high precision since the standard error of the estimate was 0.12542 (below 1.0).

The study further sought to find out whether the model was statistically significant and whose results are shown in Table 9.

*Table 9: The ANOVA results of regressing Psychological Stress Coping Strategies on the Psychological Wellbeing*

| Scale      | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F-ratio | p-value |
|------------|----------------|----|-------------|---------|---------|
| Regression | 3.246          | 1  | 3.246       | 206.340 | .000    |
| Residual   | 1.510          | 96 | 0.016       |         |         |
| Total      | 4.756          | 97 |             |         |         |

The results indicated that the model provided a better fit for the data than a model with zero predictors as shown by  $F(1,96) = 206.340$  and  $p < .05$ . The results further implied that the model was significant in predicting psychological wellbeing of girls in early marriages. Table 10 shows the model coefficient in the influence of psychological stress coping strategies on psychological wellbeing for every unit change in psychological stress coping strategies.

*Table 10: Model Coefficients regressing Psychological Stress Coping Strategies on the Psychological Wellbeing*

| Scale                           | Unstandardized Coefficients |            | Standardized Coefficients | t-value | p-value |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|---------|---------|
|                                 | B                           | Std. Error | Beta                      |         |         |
| Constant                        | 0.890                       | 0.097      |                           | 9.148   | .000    |
| Psychological Coping Strategies | 0.540                       | 0.038      | 0.826                     | 14.365  | .000    |

The study revealed that psychological stress coping strategies was a significant predictor of psychological wellbeing as shown by  $t = 14.365$  and  $p < .05$ . The study further revealed that for every one unit increase in psychological stress coping strategies, psychological wellbeing of girls in early marriages increases with 0.540 units, with other factors held constant. With variance assumed to one, for every unit increase in psychological stress coping strategies, psychological wellbeing of girls in early marriages increases with 0.826 units. Therefore, the second hypothesis was rejected at 5% significance level. The study therefore established that there was statistically significant influence of psychological stress coping strategies on the psychological wellbeing of girls in early marriages in Silale Ward. Tiaty Sub-County Marais-Opperman (2020) revealed that psychological stress coping strategies is a significant predictor of psychological wellbeing. In addition, Niewiadomska and Szot (2021) noted in their study that there was a high preference of psychological stress coping strategies and helped individuals in improving their psychological wellbeing.

### Conclusion

The study concluded that Psychological stress coping strategies significantly influenced the psychological wellbeing of girls in early marriages in Silale Ward, Tiaty Sub-County, Baringo County, Kenya. The study further revealed that psychological stress coping strategies was a significant predictor of psychological wellbeing.

### Recommendation

The study therefore recommends that community organizations that deal with girls in early marriages, rescue centres and schools with girls in early marriages should offer psychological stress coping strategies such as professional guidance and counselling services for the girls with a view of encouraging them not to give up but have hope that they will excel in life despite their unfortunate state of early marriages. The counsellors should encourage the girls to have time to meditate and reflect on their dreams and aspirations in life. This will help them to change their negative attitudes and perceptions about life and their marriage status as well as improve their psychological wellbeing.

### Policy Implications and Significance of the Study

Integration of Mental Health into Child Marriage Interventions: The findings highlight that girls in early marriages often rely on maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., silence, withdrawal, resignation). Policies should integrate mental health services into programs that prevent and respond to child/early marriage. Ministries of Health and Education can mandate routine mental-health screening and psychosocial counselling for married adolescents. Evidence from this study will also guide policymakers, NGOs, and community organizations in tailoring mental health and social programs for married adolescents. The study contributes to SDG Targets. It links directly to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3,4 and 5 that is; Good health and Wellbeing, Quality Education, and Gender Equality respectively. It underscores the importance of addressing early marriage not just as a rights issue but also as a mental health and wellbeing issue.

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**Reading the Signs of the Time in Africa: The Rise of Professional Catholic Sisters in Ministry**

**Lead Author:** Nyakwama Joyce K., SSND<sup>1</sup>,

**Co-Author:** Dr. Mokua Elias N., SJ<sup>2</sup>

**Corresponding Author:** Nyakwama Joyce Kwamboka, SSND

[jnyakwama@asec-sldi.org](mailto:jnyakwama@asec-sldi.org)

**Abstract**

This study situates the emergence of professional Catholic Sisters in Africa within the broader theological imperative to read and respond to the signs of the times. Grounded in the integration of vocation, education, and institutional agency, the qualitative case study investigates how professional education delivered through the African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC) is reshaping the identity, roles, and institutional presence of Catholic Sisters to meet the complex demands of contemporary African society and the Church. The locale was Kenya, with perspectives from other countries reflected in participants' current ministries. The target demographic consisted of 1,427 ASEC alumnae in Kenya; from this group, a purposive sample of 25 alumnae from various congregations and ministries engaged in semi-structured online interviews. The analysis utilized Creswell and Poth's data-analytical spiral and integrated narrative inquiry to examine the development of identity. Results indicate a shift from narrowly defined spiritual servanthood to competency-based leadership in education, healthcare, government, finance, communication, and social innovation. Professional formation enhanced spiritual vocation, allowing Catholic Sisters to merge contemplation with institutional governance, mentorship, and digital evangelism. Respondents indicated enhanced autonomy in strategic planning, policy involvement, resource administration, project implementation, and activities including environmental stewardship, youth media, educational reform, and maternal health. These changes have helped the church grow, improve its institutions, and have a positive effect on the community while showing how to lead in a way that is collaborative and sensitive to the needs of the community, in line with synodality. Based on Vatican II's mandate to "read the signs of the times," the Church's synodal vision, and African feminist theology, the research finds that ASEC's focused programs create a sisterhood that is professionally based, prophetically visible, and theologically sensitive. Recommendations include integrated formation pairing theological depth with technical competence, structural inclusion of Sisters in governance and synodal processes, and sustained investment in higher education and leadership development. Future research should examine how professional formation reconfigures theological understandings of vocation and authority and map long-term outcomes for institutions and communities served.

**Keywords:** Sisterhood, professional formation, signs of the time, ministerial identity, ecclesial transformation.

**Introduction**

The historical trajectory of sisterhood in Africa revealed a paradox of indispensable service and systemic marginalization. Women religious played visible roles in the Church's liturgical, pastoral, and social life, yet they traditionally operated within missionary-imposed and patriarchal ecclesiastical structures. Their ministries, though revered, were narrowly defined by ideals of humility, sacrifice, and vowed obedience, effectively confining them to roles of spiritual servanthood. Scholars such as Phiri and Nadar (2006) noted that this Eurocentric and male-dominated framework often rendered Catholic Sisters invisible in institutional governance and

theological leadership, despite their vital contributions. Their identity was largely symbolic, valued more for supporting male clergy than for exercising theological or administrative agency. This symbolic vocation gradually evolved into institutionalized subordination. Although Catholic Sisters managed schools, clinics, and social programs across Africa, they were systematically excluded from higher education, decision-making positions, and access to theological or professional formation. Their training was often restricted to caregiving and domestic service, while intellectual resources and authority remained concentrated in male religious orders. Oduyoye (2001) and ASEC (2023) documented how deeply gendered perceptions of vocation curtailed Sisters' leadership potential and denied them the capacity to shape the very institutions they sustained.

By the 1980s, however, the emergence of feminist theology, postcolonial perspectives, and heightened self-awareness within religious communities began to open avenues for greater agency. The founding of the African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC) in 1999 represented a significant turning point. Through initiatives such as the Sisters Leadership Development Initiative (SLDI) and the Higher Education for Sisters in Africa (HESA), ASEC broadened educational opportunities, fostered professional capacity, and promoted leadership development among African Sisters. Nevertheless, the tendency to undervalue Sisters' theological insight and professional expertise persisted. Their contributions in education, healthcare, social justice, and pastoral service continued to be viewed primarily through a devotional framework that prioritized obedience and charity rather than competence and institutional leadership. This ongoing challenge, deeply embedded in ecclesial traditions and congregational systems, constrained the full transformative impact of their ministries.

ASEC's targeted programs responded to these challenges by equipping Sisters with tools for professional formation, institutional leadership, and social innovation. Testimonies from alumnae indicated a profound shift: from silence to voice, invisibility to recognition, and marginalization to mission-centered professionalism. These accounts highlighted the ways in which education and leadership training enabled Sisters to challenge systemic barriers, assume recognized positions of influence, and contribute more strategically to Church and society.

Accordingly, this study examined how professional education offered through ASEC transformed the identity, roles, and institutional presence of Catholic Sisters in Africa. Guided by the theological imperative to read the signs of the times, it explored how structured academic and leadership formation empowered Sisters to respond to contemporary ecclesial, societal, and developmental demands with renewed agency, competence, and vision. By documenting this transformation, the study contextualized the lived experiences of Sisters who embodied and redefined empowered sisterhood in the face of Africa's evolving pastoral and sociopolitical realities. It further contributed to theological, policy, and gender justice discourses by affirming professional formation's prophetic and strategic role in building a vocationally grounded, intellectually capable, and socially responsive sisterhood.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Ideally, Catholic Sisters in Africa are called to serve as credible leaders and development professionals within both Church and society. Rooted in spiritual vocation, their ministries are expected to be complemented by professional competence, enabling them to contribute strategically to governance, social development, and community transformation (CARA, 2021). This vision reflects ecclesial documents affirming the indispensable role of consecrated women in the Church's mission (Lumen Gentium, 1964; Francis, 2013). In reality, however, the

contributions of Catholic Sisters are still largely framed through spiritual servanthood rather than acknowledged as leadership (Phiri & Nadar, 2006). Despite increasing educational empowerment, Sisters encounter structural and cultural barriers that constrain decision-making roles, undervalue intellectual contributions, and reinforce organizational invisibility (Beattie, 2020; Fernando, 2013). Such marginalization weakens the transformative potential of their ministries and diminishes their visibility in wider society.

Although initiatives such as the African Sisters Education Collaborative's (ASEC) SLDI and HESA programs have expanded access to education and leadership formation, a critical knowledge gap persists. Limited empirical evidence demonstrates how these programs translate into tangible influence within Church and community structures (ASEC, 2023). Without such documentation, Sisters' leadership risks being undervalued, their voices muted, and their agency marginalized in synodal and institutional processes. This study was therefore undertaken to examine how, in Africa, education empowers Catholic women religious to transition from silence to voice, and from subordination to influence.

### **Purpose**

This study set to investigate the degree to which ASEC programs have facilitated the empowerment of Catholic Sisters, enabling their transition from supportive religious workers to recognized agents of change within ecclesial, social, and developmental contexts, and thereby redefining their identity, leadership, and societal roles.

### **Research Questions:**

The following questions framed the focus of the study:

1. How are ASEC programs redefining Catholic Sisters ministerial identity through professional education?
2. How have Catholic Sisters in Africa transitioned from traditional roles of spiritual servanthood to professional identities in response to the signs of the time?
3. What are the emerging forms of leadership, collaboration, and innovation as a result of their empowerment through Education.

### **Review of Related Literature**

Education for the empowerment of Catholic Sisters in Africa - particularly through ASEC - is grounded in ecclesial theology that understands religious life as both contemplative and apostolic. The Second Vatican Council re-defined Sisterhood by affirming women religious as co-constructors of mission whose apostolate integrates contemplation and action (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964; Flannery, 1996/2014). *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) extended this vision by urging the Church to "read the signs of the times," discerning God's presence in social, political, and cultural realities (O'Malley, 2008). For African Sisters, this mandate catalyzed renewed charisms and apostolates oriented to ecological justice, women's empowerment, and peacebuilding (Njoroge, 2018). African theologians further developed this framework by challenging inherited models of formation and advocating dynamic vocations that affirm spiritual depth and institutional competence (Phiri & Nadar, 2020). Recent ecclesial texts reinforce the trajectory: Pope Francis emphasizes women's leadership (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013), CICLSAL calls for new forms of communion and mission (2017), and the Synod on Synodality highlights Sisters as prophetic leaders in a participatory Church (Francis, 2021). Within this context, ASEC's programs function not merely as development projects but as ecclesial renewal, framing professional formation as both theological mandate and social necessity.

Historically, however, Sisterhood in Africa reflected missionary models that emphasized submission and service. Eurocentric ideals of obedience and humility confined Sisters to supportive roles and often excluded them from governance (Phiri & Nadar, 2006). As Wall (2007) and Ebaugh (1993) note, Sisters staffed education, healthcare, and welfare—ministries vital yet organizationally invisible. This framing of “spiritual labour” foregrounded visible service while obscuring intellectual and theological contributions (Fernando, 2013). Contemporary scholarship therefore argues for reconceptualization, positioning Sisters as institutional leaders whose vocation integrates contemplative depth with professional competence at the intersection of faith, justice, and development.

Nevertheless, a disconnect persists between ecclesial discourse and lived realities. Oduyoye (2001) contends that women religious have long been treated as implementers rather than thinkers, while Ayanga (2017) shows how patriarchy and cultural norms restrict agency. Beattie (2020) reframes Sisters’ ministries in health, education, and justice as theological witness, and Baawobr (2022) underscores their role in interpreting Africa’s socio-political realities. Visibility remains limited, though initiatives such as Kenya’s Communication Network for Catholic Sisters demonstrate how media and digital literacy help reclaim narrative authority (Brigham, 2015; Abraham, 2024).

Debates also concern professionalization and formation. Fernando (2013) warns that secular leadership training may erode spiritual depth; intergenerational tensions surface between Sisters embracing higher education and those favouring long-standing norms. Beattie (2020) recommends collaborative governance and intergenerational dialogue to balance tradition and innovation. Formation reform is similarly contested: Ngundo (2019) advocates integrative models blending theology, psychology, and culture, while some congregations defend traditional novitiate structures. Empirical work indicates that modern formation enriched by mentorship better equips Sisters and attracts new entrants (Isingi et al., 2021). Abraham (2024) cautions that visibility without structural reform risks leaving leadership marginalized.

Evidence of educational impact is strongest. Programs by AOSK and ASEC build leadership, financial, and digital competencies (CARA, 2021). ASEC’s SLDI and HESA have enabled thousands to assume leadership in schools, hospitals, dioceses, and community organizations; evaluations report improved student outcomes and increased enrolments (ASEC, 2020, 2021, 2023). Beyond institutional performance, higher education equips Sisters for advocacy, policy engagement, and reform (Akruvala et al., 2020), advancing ecclesial mission and social transformation.

The literature depicts a shift from marginalized service to educated, mission-driven leadership (ASEC, 2023; Phiri & Nadar, 2006). Yet tensions endure between tradition and innovation, spirituality and professionalization, and visibility and authority (Beattie, 2020; Fernando, 2013). Much evidence remains in grey literature, with limited peer-reviewed analysis of theological and ecclesial implications (Akruvala et al., 2020). In response to this gap, the current study explored the ways in which education has transformed the identity, vocation, and leadership of Catholic Sisters, empowering them to interpret the signs of the time with a revitalized sense of prophetic and pastoral agency.

### **Method**

This study employed a qualitative case study design, complemented by narrative inquiry elements. The case study framework was appropriate because the African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC) constituted a bounded system for examining the transformation of Catholic Sisters in Africa, while narrative inquiry captured the personal stories through which Sisters articulated identity transitions and empowerment. Case studies allow for in-depth exploration of contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts (Yin, 2018), and narratives illuminate meaning-making and identity construction (Ampofo et al., 2022; Hnit, 2025).

The target population comprised 1,427 ASEC alumnae in Kenya. A purposive sample of 25 alumnae voluntarily participated in the study. These participants, graduates of ASEC's HESA and SLDI programs, represented diverse congregations and ministries. While most were ministering in Kenya, others were serving in neighbouring African countries, thereby enriching the study with regional perspectives. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate for accessing information-rich cases with direct experience of the phenomenon (Campbell et al., 2020; Bouncken et al., 2025).

Data were collected through semi-structured online interviews, allowing the sisters to articulate their experiences in their own voices, while providing the researcher with the flexibility to explore and clarify emerging themes. The interview guide was validated by experts and pilot tested to ensure clarity and cultural relevance. Data analysis followed the Data Analysis Spiral recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018), involving organization of transcripts, immersion in the data, systematic coding, categorization, and iterative theme development. Narrative elements were analyzed to trace identity construction, while the case study lens highlighted ASEC's institutional role. Theological and philosophical interpretation further deepened engagement with concepts such as vocation, spirituality, agency, and collaborative leadership (Finley & Seachris, 2021; Coyle, 2024).

Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of participant contexts, member checking, and peer debriefing, ensuring credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was secured, and confidentiality was ensured through anonymization and secure data storage.

### **Presentation, and Interpretation of Findings**

The findings presented are interpreted through theological, ecclesial, and philosophical frameworks, revealing a reconstituted Catholic Sisterhood identity that is embodied, dynamic, and socially transformative.

### **How are ASEC programs redefining Catholic Sisters' ministerial identity through professional education.**

The findings revealed that ASEC programs significantly redefined the traditional image of Catholic Sisterhood in Africa. Alumnae consistently reported a transition from service-oriented roles to leadership-oriented, competency-driven identities. Professional formation was described as the key driver of this transformation, equipping Sisters with pastoral agency, innovative capacity, and collaborative mentorship. These changes expanded their ministerial identity beyond spiritual servanthood to include institutional leadership, organizational management, and social transformation. Respondents emphasized that education enhanced both technical skills and self-perception. For instance, one alumna noted, "*ASEC came and changed all that for me. It equipped*

*me with vital leadership skills,*” highlighting the connection between competence and confidence. Another explained that academic qualifications made her a “*more confident, informed leader,*” demonstrating how education complemented, rather than replaced, spiritual vocation. These testimonies resonate with literature critiquing the historical framing of Sisters as passive servants and advocating their repositioning as institutional actors (Phiri & Nadar, 2006; Beattie, 2020).

The findings also indicated that Sisters increasingly assumed multidimensional leadership roles. Respondents described responsibilities such as managing schools, supervising teams, evaluating staff, producing structured reports, and overseeing resource allocation. One school principal explained that her role demanded “*policy engagement, equity promotion, and conflict resolution - requiring both spiritual maturity and structured organizational leadership.*” Such accounts underscored a redefinition of identity that integrated faith with professional expertise.

Internal transformation was equally evident. Sisters reported a reshaped sense of confidence, accountability, and vocational maturity. One participant affirmed, “*ASEC programs have enhanced my sense of responsibility,*” reflecting the link between professional growth and vocational depth. Another emphasized that theological training deepened her scriptural understanding and strengthened her ability to mentor younger Sisters, illustrating that professional formation enriched rather than diluted spirituality. These findings challenge concerns that education might erode religious identity (Fernando, 2013) and instead affirm that it fosters spiritual maturation alongside professional competence.

The expanded roles of Sisters as administrators, finance managers, educators, and pastoral leaders reflected not only individual growth but also institutional strengthening. Enhanced capacity in financial management, reporting, conflict resolution, and team supervision improved the effectiveness of schools, healthcare facilities, and pastoral ministries. This finding addressed long-standing concerns about underprepared leadership in Church institutions (ASEC, 2021) and aligned with scholarly arguments for education as both empowerment and a strategy for addressing structural inequities (Akruvala et al., 2020). The findings demonstrated that ASEC programs redefined Catholic Sisters’ ministerial identity from service-based roles to multidimensional leadership. This shift integrated professional mastery with spiritual vocation, enabling Sisters to emerge as dynamic leaders who influence institutions, transform communities, and contribute to the Church’s mission with renewed agency, competence, and vision.

### **How Catholic Sisters in Africa Have Transitioned from Traditional Roles of Spiritual Servanthood to Professional Identities in Response to the Signs of the Times**

The study revealed that ASEC programs significantly redefined Catholic Sisterhood in Africa, enabling a transition from service-oriented roles to leadership-oriented, competency-driven identities. Alumnae consistently described professional formation as central to this transformation, fostering pastoral agency, innovation, and collaborative mentorship. This marked a clear departure from the traditional framing of Sisters as spiritual servants, positioning them instead as credible institutional leaders. Respondents emphasized that education enhanced both technical competencies and self-perception. One alumna explained, “*ASEC came and changed all that for me. It equipped me with vital leadership skills,*” underscoring the relationship between professional training and confidence. Another added that her qualifications made her a “*more confident, informed leader,*” illustrating that academic advancement complemented, rather than undermined, spiritual vocation. These testimonies aligned with scholarship critiquing the historical

marginalization of Sisters and calling for their repositioning as institutional actors (Phiri & Nadar, 2006; Beattie, 2020).

A major pathway of transformation was Sisters' increasing involvement in governance. Many engaged actively in policy development, strategic planning, and resource management. Respondent 5, serving as a school principal, described her role as "*overseeing resource management, policy engagement, equity promotion, and conflict resolution—requiring both spiritual maturity and structured organizational leadership.*" Such accounts demonstrated how Sisters expanded from pastoral service into institutional leadership.

Another dimension of change concerned technological empowerment. Respondents reported that ASEC programs equipped them with communication and media skills that amplified their ministries. For instance, Respondent 2 worked as a social communicator for Capuchin Television Network, hosting *Missions of Hope*, a program showcasing Sisters' contributions. Likewise, Respondent 3 covered continental gatherings and papal visits as a church communicator, illustrating how Sisters increasingly occupied public platforms once beyond the scope of religious life.

The professionalization of formation also emerged as a significant area of transition. Respondent 4 noted that she had initially underestimated the demands of formation but, after completing the HESA program, developed theological, pedagogical, and leadership skills that enhanced her effectiveness as a formator. Her subsequent appointment as Superior General underscored the link between professional education and leadership effectiveness. She credited her competence and empathetic approach to the training received through ASEC, demonstrating how professional skills reshaped spiritual and organizational responsibilities.

The findings further indicated that professional identity was not perceived as undermining spirituality. Rather, Sisters described education as enriching their vocation. Respondent 7 explained that her theological training deepened her understanding of Scripture and strengthened her ability to guide younger Sisters, while Respondent 4 reflected that her nursing and leadership background enabled her to "*guide the congregation's mission to make the presence of Jesus real.*" These reflections challenged earlier concerns that professionalization might dilute religious identity (Fernando, 2013) and instead affirmed that it nurtured spiritual maturity.

Moreover, the findings demonstrated that ASEC programs strengthened institutional effectiveness. Enhanced capacity in financial management, structured reporting, conflict resolution, and team supervision improved the functioning of schools, healthcare facilities, and pastoral ministries. This addressed concerns about underprepared leadership (ASEC, 2021) and echoed scholarly calls for education as both empowerment and a response to structural inequities (Akruvala et al., 2020). Overall, the study showed that ASEC programs enabled Catholic Sisters in Africa to move from limited, service-based roles to empowered, multidimensional leadership. This redefinition integrated professional mastery with spiritual vocation, allowing Sisters to emerge as dynamic leaders capable of transforming institutions, influencing public discourse, and strengthening the Church's mission in Africa.

### **Emerging Forms of Leadership, Collaboration, and Innovation among Empowered Catholic Sisters**

The findings of this study revealed a significant transformation in how Catholic Sisters in Africa, particularly alumnae of ASEC programs such as SLDI and HESA, embraced new forms of leadership, collaboration, and innovation. These developments reflected a reimagined religious life in which Sisters were no longer confined to traditional roles of spiritual servanthood but emerged as institutional leaders, social innovators, and credible agents of community empowerment. The data showed that Sisters initiated structured, community-driven programs that addressed institutional development and social needs. These were not isolated projects but integrated initiatives embedded within congregational and community life. Examples included renewable energy projects, updated formation manuals, youth-centered media programs, and maternal health interventions. Such programs were mission-driven, grounded in practical contexts, and responsive to pastoral and social demands.

A notable feature of this evolving leadership was the strategic use of digital technology and artificial intelligence. Respondents reported employing tools such as Google Forms, AI-based writing platforms, and digital databases to enhance ministry efficiency. Respondent 4 noted that AI-supported tools improved her capacity to prepare reports, deliver presentations, and manage information. These examples demonstrated how Sisters leveraged technology to expand the reach and effectiveness of their ministries without compromising their spiritual mission.

Collaboration consistently emerged as a defining feature. Respondents described building networks, mentoring colleagues, and partnering with civil society actors to implement impactful programs. These collaborations extended beyond congregational boundaries into diocesan, civic, and international arenas. Sisters reported contributing to proposal development, engaging in policy discussions, and leading inter-congregational initiatives, thereby positioning themselves as credible actors in education, health, peacebuilding, and community development.

Mentorship and capacity building were also central to this leadership evolution. Sisters intentionally supported novices, guided students, and nurtured community capacities with pastoral sensitivity and strategic foresight. Respondent 1 exemplified this integrated leadership approach by establishing student mental health advocacy programs, peer counselling initiatives, and safe spaces such as prayer gardens. This demonstrated a style of leadership that addressed both spiritual and psychosocial needs in holistic and community-centered ways.

Entrepreneurship and environmental stewardship further illustrated how Sisters redefined religious leadership. Respondent 5 led the introduction of solar and biogas energy in her institution, initiatives that promoted sustainability, reduced costs, and generated income through catering and poultry farming. Her establishment of an organic demonstration farm and life skills training center underscored leadership grounded in sustainability, youth empowerment, and gender-responsive development. These projects reduced institutional dependence on external aid and aligned with wider Church calls for environmental justice and social transformation (Akruala et al., 2020).

Education and professional advancement emerged as key enablers of these shifts. Respondent 5's progression from student to faculty member at a medical college illustrated how academic empowerment enabled Sisters to contribute directly to community development. She reflected that *"the education of a Catholic Sister, in turn, is education that will resound in the hearts of students and others,"* capturing the ripple effect of investing in Sisters' education.

Collectively, the findings demonstrated that Catholic Sisters constructed multidimensional identities integrating spiritual, professional, entrepreneurial, and technological competencies. They now identified as mental health advocates, digital innovators, educators, environmental stewards, and institutional leaders. This evolution aligned with scholarly discourse on the need for contextually responsive religious leadership in navigating complex pastoral and social challenges (Beattie, 2020; Baawobr, 2022). The implications were far-reaching. Leadership was expressed through innovation, grassroots problem-solving, and sustainable service delivery. Entrepreneurial projects promoted resilience, technology enhanced ministry effectiveness, and investment in youth and community development fostered gender-responsive progress. Empowered by ASEC programs, Catholic Sisters in Africa redefined religious identity and demonstrated the transformative potential of empowered Sisterhood within the African Church and society.

### Summary of Findings

The findings of this study revealed three central conclusions. First, Catholic Sisters in Africa redefined their ministerial identity not by abandoning their spiritual charism but by integrating professional education into their vocation. Through ASEC programs, they acquired competencies in planning, leadership, budgeting, communication, and strategic ministry design. This professionalization transformed Sisters from passive implementers of the Church's mission into confident institutional leaders, reformers, and mentors. Their evolving roles reflected renewed understandings of vocation, identity, and agency in contemporary ecclesial and societal contexts.

Alumnae narratives demonstrated a profound reading of the signs of the times (Luke 12:56; Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*). Sisters discerned societal realities not as threats but as invitations to renew their vocation. Their shift from symbolic spiritual figures to strategic institutional actors embodied the Church's call to be historically attentive and missionally responsive. Equipped through theological and professional formation, they viewed poverty, inequality, digital culture, and governance gaps as sites of grace where the Gospel could be proclaimed through competence and innovation. This vocational shift echoed Paul's image of the Church as "*one body with many parts*" (1 Corinthians 12:12–27). Sisters increasingly entered spaces once assumed to belong to clergy or male laity. Their emergence as administrators, educators, health directors, and digital communicators illustrated an integrated vision where spiritual vocation, professional expertise, and institutional stewardship coexisted harmoniously.

The findings also resonated with African feminist theology, which critiques patriarchal ecclesiology that marginalizes women's voices. Alumnae testimonies showed that education enabled Sisters to reclaim theological and administrative spaces, not as a rejection of religious life but as an expansion of its meaning. By embodying pastoral and strategic leadership, they enacted a theology of empowerment rooted in African communal values. Their leadership emphasized mentoring, networking, and institutional transformation, echoing womanist commitments to justice, nurture, and social harmony. The Synod on Synodality (2024) emphasized recognizing charisms from those at the margins. The Sisters' professional presence in strategic planning, policy drafting, and digital evangelization embodied synodality in practice. Their contributions extended beyond ecclesial structures into schools, health facilities, and community initiatives, thereby expanding the social mission of the Church.

With regard to the first research question, professional education emerged as a theological site of vocational transformation. Sisters no longer defined themselves by passive servanthood but as purposeful disciples shaped by academic and spiritual formation. Rather than diluting

commitments, professionalization deepened them, aligning with Pope Francis's (2013) call for an incarnational spirituality - faith expressed through leadership, mentoring, and communication. Addressing the shift from internal roles to public ministries, was evident in Sisters' visibility in governance and institutional leadership. Their engagement in provincial planning, resource management, and multimillion-shilling projects reflected not ambition but prophetic witness. In embodying Matthew 5:15's call not to hide one's light, Sisters demonstrated credible public discipleship rooted in competence and service. Strategic innovation and collaboration were also emphasized. Sisters initiated environmental stewardship projects, digital learning platforms, and healthcare interventions for marginalized communities. These initiatives embodied *Laudato Si'*'s vision of integral ecology, linking spirituality, sustainability, and reform. Mentorship also emerged as a consistent theme. Alumnae highlighted forming novices, guiding students, and empowering lay staff. Their inclusive, relational leadership echoed synodal spirituality and African feminist values of interdependence.

Overall, the study revealed a quiet disruption of ecclesial power dynamics. Without rejecting clerical authority, Sisters' competence and credibility exposed structural gaps and highlighted the unrealized potential of women's leadership. Their transformation was not a departure from tradition but a recovery of Gospel authenticity. Through the integration of professional competence and theological depth, Catholic Sisters in Africa demonstrated that the future of religious life is communal, courageous, and creative.

## Conclusion

The results of this study indicated that the professionalization of Catholic Sisters in Africa is a transformative response to the Church's call to "read the signs of the times." Through structured formation, especially ASEC's SLDI and HESA, Sisters moved beyond traditional roles of spiritual servanthood to assume leadership, innovation, and public ministry. They now serve in strategic planning, policy development, education and healthcare administration, digital communication, and sustainable development, reflecting a renewed ministerial identity rooted in spiritual depth and professional competence.

This transformation signalled not a departure from vocation but a deepening of it. Education emerged as a theological and pastoral resource, enabling Sisters to integrate spirituality with professional excellence. Their academic and leadership formation contributed directly to ecclesial renewal, institutional strengthening, and wider social transformation. The findings further highlighted the importance of synodality and inclusion. Catholic Sisters embodied collaborative and contextually responsive leadership, showing how women religious shape a more participatory Church. ASEC's mission was pivotal in nurturing this shift, seeding a new era of Sisterhood that is professionally grounded, prophetically visible, and theologically responsive. Continued investment in such initiatives remains vital for sustaining future generations of competent, courageous Sisters who will animate the Church's mission in Africa.

## Recommendations

Given the evolving ministerial identity of Catholic Sisters, it is imperative that congregations re-evaluate their formation frameworks to integrate theological depth with professional and technical competencies. This integrated approach will guarantee that Sisters are holistically prepared for contemporary ecclesial and societal demands.

The Church is encouraged to recognize Catholic Sisters as co-responsible agents of ecclesial mission. The Church's synodal journey, as emphasized by Pope Francis, calls for inclusive participation of all vocations; hence, the structural integration of professionally trained Sisters into Church governance, pastoral planning, and synodal processes is both timely and necessary. The central role of education in transforming Catholic Sisterhood in Africa demands sustained and strategic investment. ASEC and national religious women conferences are encouraged to expand and diversify their programming.

### Recommendations for Further Research

This study recommends further research to explore how professional education influences the theological understanding of vocation among Catholic Sisters. This includes examining how professional competence and spiritual commitment are negotiated, synthesized, and expressed in ministry.

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### Appendix 1: Direct Quotes from Respondents

**Table 1**

**Redefining Ministerial Identity through Professional Education and Formation**

| Respondent   | Direct Quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Respondent 1 | I was in leadership before but without adequate professional skills and I felt always lost and not sure of what I was doing. ASEC came and changed all that for me. It equipped me with vital leadership skills, such as project management, Resource mobilization and administrative skills, which have enhanced my ability to coordinate programs effectively and to serve with professionalism and purpose.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Respondent 2 | The academic qualifications I obtained have strengthened my critical thinking and communication skills as well as my ability to engage, educate, and empower others. These experiences have transformed me into a more confident, informed leader. I am more professional in my role, able to address situations and to be compassionate servant leader in the Church and society.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Respondent 3 | ASEC programs have enhanced my sense of responsibilities. I now approach planning, reporting, monitor implementation, and compile reports in collaboration with my administrator to ensure programs run smoothly. My communication skills have greatly improved enabling me to send information promptly to the head office regarding all activities, which is a clear indicator of my improved skills after training.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Respondent 4 | The finance knowledge acquired has really helped a lot in better serving in the apostolate. I can now manage the finance office by sourcing more funds and reducing costs in maximizing our operations.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Respondent 5 | I am now a principal of the school, a role I never imagined I could assume, and I am involved in ensuring a supportive learning environment for all students. I have enhanced my communication skills/strategies with the parents, staff and the students in order in order to foster collaboration and support, I have improved my understanding in education policies and effective resource management, have acquired more skills in financial planning and resource allocation, and a deeper understanding of equity issues, promoting inclusive practices that support all students and skills in mediation and conflict management in order to create a more harmonious school environment. |
| Respondent6  | I am in administration, and I handle parents, teachers, support staff, admin staff and students on daily basis. There are several issues that I am able to deal with because of the background of psychology that I received during my masters' program. The issues are varied from behavioural, those that needs listening and counseling skills, academic guidance and some sensitive aspects that any of the parties mentioned above bring to my attention.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Respondent 7 | I completed a diploma in Spirituality and Religious Formation, which profoundly transformed my ministry as a formator by broadening my perspective and deepening my understanding of the Word of God. This enriched insight has empowered me to guide young sisters toward a more integrated and authentic religious life, rooted in conviction and a heartfelt response to God's love. Additionally, the course equipped me with valuable knowledge and resources that enhanced our formation program and resolved longstanding                                                                                                                                                                  |

|  |                                                                                                                                                 |
|--|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | questions such as identifying the five charisms of our congregation, enabling us to nurture a stronger, more united group of the young sisters. |
|--|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

**Source: Field Data (2025)**

**Table 2:**

**Transitioning from Traditional Roles to Professional and Public-Facing Identities**

| <b>Respondent</b>   | <b>Direct Quote</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Respondent 1        | Before, I joined ASEC, my responsibilities were around the usual community service. They did not require any professional skills. Now, in my congregation, I participate in policy discussions on education and resource use, Formation manual preparation as well as Human Resource manual. I also write proposals focused on farming initiatives to enhance sustainability, and the education of sisters. I am happy that I can contribute to the long-term growth plans and impact of our future mission                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|                     | I knew nothing about technology, and I never knew, I could ever become IT savvy. With the Technology and Web Design skills I obtained from the SLDI program, I can today create a website from scratch and to manage it. I can comfortably design and create professional graphics quickly and easily including cards, logos, posters, and business cards among other things. I believe, I am keen on using the social media to evangelize. and to bring change to my congregation, my community, my apostolate, and the society. Aware of that I live in a world that is wounded, I will use the skills I obtained to create positive impact.                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Respondent 2</b> | It has improved stakeholders' engagement where our fundraising event has over year grown. We started with raising 1.2 million, 2.5 million, 3.6 million this year we expect 5 million. The donor trust has really increased thus now we sign a 3- multiyear project with full cash allocation where initially it was on a yearly basis. Employee capacity building to trainings and policies engagement awareness has led to low turnover and increased customer trust and satisfaction in the services we offer.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                     | I longed to merge my religious vocation with media, inspired by icons like the late Catherine Kasavuli. Through ASEC, my dream came to pass. I was empowered with communication skills. This was proof that delayed dreams are not lost but merely awaiting the right moment to flourish. Now a social communicator at Capuchin Television Network, I host Missions of Hope, amplifying the voices of Catholic sisters and showcasing their transformative apostolates.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Respondent 3        | My understanding of my responsibilities as a Catholic communicator has been greatly enhanced. The training equipped me with practical skills in ethical storytelling, strategic messaging, and digital. My service delivery has notably improved. In my work as a communicator, I have had the opportunity to cover regional, international, and universal events and publish them. I have covered Plenaries for the Bishops of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa, I have covered events like the Synod at the continental level, and also Universal events like the Pope's visit in the AMECEA region, among others. Refer to the publications on the AMECEA website: <a href="https://communications.amecea.org/">https://communications.amecea.org/</a> |
| Respondent 4        | I used to imagine that formation does not require much professionalism. But ASEC has changed the narrative for me. Through the HESA program, I gained a                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

|  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | lot of enlightenment that enhanced the formation skills I thought I possessed, as well as materials that strengthened our formation programme. I also gained knowledge about the scriptures that assist me in the facilitations that I provide to congregation leaders. From this experience of acquiring knowledge and being able to benefit individual sisters, my congregation, other congregations, and other groups of lay people, I have come to appreciate what ASEC is doing to develop sisters professionally.                                                                                         |
|  | After my nursing education through the HESA program, I was chosen as the Superior General of my congregation. This role brought immense responsibility and an opportunity to lead with empathy and vision. My passion to embrace my key role of guiding the Congregation's mission to make the presence of Jesus real was ignited by the skills I acquired as a HESA student, pursuing my nursing degree. My nursing background, and understanding of human behaviour through ASEC programs have enabled me to embrace an empathetic approach, blending my passion for nursing with a commitment to leadership. |

Source: Field Data (2025)

**Table 3:  
Emerging Forms of Leadership, Collaboration, and Innovation**

| Respondent   | Direct Quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Respondent 1 | Before, I joined the HESA program, I knew very little about counselling. I have since handled girls with suicidal thoughts and even some antisocial practices like drug abuse, in a healthier way including referring them to experts in the required field. I also developed a prayer garden where students can get quiet time when they need it or some safe space to have a serious chat with their fellows to share any worrying issues...Other than this, through involvement of experts, I have also introduced peer counselling in the primary and Junior school section and we have had the student peer counsellors trained. This has assisted in improving the mental health of the learners and developed their trust further in sharing their issues for help. |
| Respondent 4 | I actively use digital technology in my work to enhance efficiency and communication. I use Microsoft office very innovatively. Creation of google forms has helped me organize and analyze programs participants needs, collect feedback, and share resources. I manage information through digital databases which makes work easier instead of heaping papers in the office. I use AI tools for writing support, preparing reflections, report summaries and creation of PowerPoint presentations with icons as well as cards. These tools have greatly improved the quality and speed of my work.                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Respondent 5 | I wrote a proposal on Solar power system and Biogas energy system to improve farming to reduce the expenses on items such vegetables, milk and maize products for the use of the students.<br>I initiated a solar and Biogas energy solution that are environmentally friendly and taught the school community some of the environmental sustainability practices both inside and outside the school. This has also promoted the health and safety of the students and the staff.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|              | Through skills obtained through SLDI, I established a business plan that led to successful entrepreneurial ventures leading to a catering service unit which generated KES 450,000 in its first year and a chicken-rearing initiative producing a steady income and inspiring local farmers. These projects have                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

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|--|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | created jobs for youth, fostered economic sustainability, and empowered my congregation, to integrate business with mission-driven service. Beyond technical skills, the SLDI program strengthened my leadership, enabling me to foster collaboration and innovation among sisters within my congregation and beyond, and the youth of the community.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|  | ASEC's educational programs have empowered me to navigate leadership succession, mobilize resources, and expand networks, ultimately reinforcing the resilience and growth of my congregation and the broader community. With the support of my congregation, I have successfully established a demo farm for organic farming for healthy food security and environmental conservation that offers training in life skills, vocational skills, and leadership. Our Centre empowers young people especially indigenous women farmers to break the cycles of poverty and take active roles in their communities. By offering such training, we ensure that the congregation's work is not limited to the present but is laying the groundwork for a more sustainable future. |
|  | I never imagined that I could ever become the sister I am today. Upon graduation with B.Sc. Degree in Nursing, I immediately joined the faculty of a medical training college to offer my knowledge and skills among student nurses. This was a great experience - seeing young men and women aspiring to be future nurses, full of enthusiasm and big dreams and empowering them to achieve those dreams is satisfying! I truly believe that, education of a sister, in turn, is education that will resound in the hearts of students and others to create a ripple effect.                                                                                                                                                                                              |

**Source: Field Data (2025)**

## Remarkable Impact of Consecrated Women Religious through Education for Sustainable Development in Africa

Elizabeth M. Muli

Email: [elizabethmbithe@gmail.com](mailto:elizabethmbithe@gmail.com)

### Abstract

History has it that Consecrated Women Religious in Africa are at the heart of evangelization, responding daily to those who stand in need of their help be it through pastoral care, social justice and other social services, healing ministry, youth ministry, care for the elderly or even through education, creating a global impact on sustainable development. It is in the light of this gap having much done and accomplished through Catholic Sisters yet it goes unnoticed that this paper aims to address. The research is a qualitative narrative study, with two success stories from participants within the peripherals of Kipini Sub-County, Lamu County, Kenya. The first narrative highlights the place of Catholic Sisters in the participant's life, family and their impact to the society through education. The second one focuses on Sisters' advocacy on Justice through corridors of power and of legal law searching for justice on the learner's rights in education. The study aims at bringing to light a comprehensive impression and reality of Catholic Sister's impact on evangelization that leaves legacy even when they are long gone, contributing to the mission of Christ in his pilgrim church. In-depth interviews were used for quality information. The findings highlight remarkable impact of a religious sister in education sector that not only bring light to the student (learner) but to the entire family. Sisters turn to be voice for the voiceless learners in terms of justice and rights, they are fearless when it comes to protecting the rights of the learners against sexual abuse by relatives and guardians in exchange for fee favors, a topic that is never discussed outside family whispers. Data analysis used thematic analysis and was presented using narratives and direct quotes. Participants' consent was sought with guaranteed confidentiality of the identity and answers.

**Key Words:** Consecrated Women Religious, Catholic Church in Africa, Education Sector, Empowerment, Impact of Catholic Sisters in Africa.

### Background of study

Based on African traditions that date back to ancient times, knowledge (education) was informal and generated within the communities. In the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, burning with zeal for evangelization and responding to the command of the gospel, (Mt 28: 19, Mk 16 : 15) 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit', a theologian and scholar Gustav Warneck, protestant missionary sculptured a missionary motive understanding Christian Mission to mean 'the totality of a action which is aimed at planting and organizing the Christian church among non-Christians'. Influenced by Warneck missionary motive, some Catholic theologians and scholars among them, Joseph Schmidlin developed missionary theories and principles of their own. Schmidlin directed his interest on conversion of individual and personal pagan as well as organisation of independent local churches.

Based on African traditions, education was informal and rooted in communities. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, missionaries were filled with zeal for evangelization. They followed the gospel command to go and make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15). Gustav Warneck, a Protestant theologian, described mission as planting and organizing the church among non-Christians. His ideas influenced Catholic scholars such as Joseph Schmidlin. Schmidlin emphasized the conversion of individuals and the building of independent local churches.

This call of local churches led to the need for systemic measures to create social, cultural backgrounds from which indigenous leadership, the native clergy, catechists and teachers would be drawn. Their objective would be realized through formal education. Based on this missionary attitude, Pope Benedict XV, (1919) in his encyclical urged the missionaries to make the education of the indigenes, the primary purpose of their missionary enterprise. Speaking in similar veins, his successor Pope Pius XI in his encyclical (1922) highlighted the need to build hospitals and schools instead of magnificent churches and palaces that would be taken care of latter in their appointed time. Both Pope Benedict XV and Pope Pius XI are known as missionary popes since it is during their time when many African (indigenous black sisters) congregations were established.

Even though much interest was for Asia, a minority of Superiors among them, Spiritans, Missionaries of Africa, Holy Ghost Fathers, Mill Hill Fathers, Society of African Missions, White Fathers among others, felt that the time had come to ordain indigenous priests and create black sisterhoods.

Seemingly, Propaganda Fide favored development of an indigenous clergy, than indigenous sisters, for making the new churches independent from their colonial masters and sustainable in the long term. However, still five congregations of black sisters were established on the eve of the First World War. This was for pastoral collaboration with the clergy especially in schools and hospitals, three by the Missionaries of Africa in Tanzania (Sisters of our Lady of Africa, 1903), Uganda (Bannabikira Sisters, 1908), and Rwanda (Benabikira Sisters, 1913) one by the Spiritans in Gabon (Little Sisters of Saint Mary of Gabon, 1911) and one by the Society of African Missions in Dahomey, current-day Benin (Denis, 2022)

For instance, in Kenya, the Mill Hill Fathers (MHF) sought the collaboration of the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of St Joseph (FMSJ) in 1936 along the southern part of Nyanza. They saw the need of the girl-child education that was neglected over the males. Hence, they started the Asumbi Girls High School (AGHS) that saw great development of girl-child education. This promoted gender equity in accessing education within the region (Odhiambo, 2023).

### **Problem of the Statement**

Religious women have been the backbone of evangelization in the Catholic history. As highlighted by Raftery and Delaney (2022), the role of women, especially teaching Sisters, played a major part in the expansion of Catholic schooling in the Anglophone world, shaping the contours of girls' schooling on two continents. Nineteenth-century North American and European female education also lies under the legacy of teaching Sisters.

Less is known of the missionary zeal that moved Sisters to go from Europe and North America to teach in Australia, India and Africa. This indicates that women religious have suffered historical marginalization. Male white missionaries, from the 19th to 20th century, reported their activities to superiors in Europe or the United States and published in missionary magazines such as 'The Seed' and 'Comboni Missions Magazine', which became sources of vocations and finances. Congregations of white missionary sisters did not have the same connections, and their voice was rarely heard.

As early as 1978, a theologian woman of American descent lamented that Catholic sisters' missionary congregations had staffed schools, hospitals, orphanages and pastoral work in sub-Saharan Africa since the nineteenth century, and in America since the eighteenth century, yet their life and work remained largely untold (Denis, 2022). They labored for years in Catholic education, but their contributions remain largely unaccounted for. Research reveals that 11% of all students in the 1950s were educated in Catholic schools in the United States, whose ministry lay in the hands of women religious. Even in decline, they outnumbered religious and ordained men

(National Association of Catholic Education, 2024). Yet little is known about their professional identity as teachers (Ursin, 2024). This study aims at highlighting the impact of Catholic Sisters in Education for Sustainable Development in Africa.

#### **Key Research Questions**

1. What possible Impact do Catholic Women Religious leave on the students that pass through their hands in schools?
2. In what ways do Catholic Women Religious Impact on Socio-Economic Development of Families, Society and Nation as Instructors and Teachers in Schools?

#### **The aim of the Study**

The current study seeks to unveil the Remarkable Impact of Consecrated Women Religious through Education for Sustainable Development in Africa. The study is using a case study of a girl-child beneficiary who chose to amplify the good that Catholic sisters do and the change that sisters bring into the lives of many through education as well as being the voice of many voiceless victims who fall prey to the strong in the society, yet the sisters' works remain unnoticed.

#### **Literature Review**

##### **The Intensity of Catholic Sisters in Education Sector Globally and their Visibility**

In the United States of America, after the initial Ursuline foundation in New Orleans in 1727, the early-to-mid nineteenth century saw an influx of different women congregations with majority coming from Europe. Congregations like the Society of the Sacred Heart, the Sisters of Charity, Dominicans, Franciscans, Sisters of St. Joseph, the Sisters of Mercy, and the Sisters of Loretto, as well as many others, had established congregations approximating to 46,000 Catholic women religious in the United States. By 1920, 90,000 Catholic sisters had created and/or maintained more than 6,000 parochial schools, serving 1.7 million school children in every region of the country, both urban and rural. (Coburn, 2021)

Since the reformation in Ireland, the Presentation Sisters were the first modern, indigenous religious congregation to be established. This was before Nagle's vision that spearheaded an era of change in Ireland, that saw various women religious congregations founded to provide for the spiritual and secular education of young Irish Catholic girls. In 1831, the Sisters of Mercy became part of that change when Catherine McAuley established her first foundation in Baggot Street, Dublin.

Central to the apostolic mission of both religious orders was a constitutional commitment to the education of the poor, specifically poor Catholic girls. These provided the girls with the necessary skills that empowered them to gain employment as well as practical instructions. In various types of needlework, such as sewing and knitting formed part of the education offered in the schools, providing their pupils with an opportunity to develop skills that would enable them to earn a livelihood (Raftery & Delaney, 2022)

Oblate Sisters of Providence founded by Sister Mary Elizabeth Lange in Baltimore in 1828, the first community of religious women of African descent in the United States. By dedicating themselves to the education of black children, the Oblate Sisters contradicted the stereotype of black women only capable of doing menial work or being involved in childcare. (Denis, 2022).

### **Impact of Catholic Sisters Running and Managing Schools in Africa**

Under the umbrella of the Congregation for Catholic Education through their respective Catholic Conferences of Bishops, many church learning institutions are run with majority being under the management of the Women Religious Congregations. This is confirmed by Adhiambo (2019) in her paper when she captures the KCCB Chairman acknowledging that women religious are greatly involved in the education sector, they help the Kenya Catholic Conference of Bishops (KCCB) to realize its vision 'Sanctification and salvation of all people'. Hence, religious Sisters bring something unique to the classroom that other teachers cannot, even though at basic level they perform the same functions (Farrow, 2018)

The schools that religious sisters run range from kindergarten, nursery to primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. Mostly, these schools are owned by the Church, religious congregations of the Church or to other non-governmental organizations. In whichever category, the sisters have been generous in providing the needed personnel that staff the school. Most of these schools have been outstanding in their performance.

The impact of sisters in education is immensely felt since according to Jumanne, (2021), the majority of the Catholic Schools under leadership of their respective Congregations are aimed at transforming the surrounding society by conveying holistic education, leadership skills, character formation, love for self and neighbor, prayer, self-reliance among others.

Through schools at various levels, the sisters help the graduates to give back to the society who are responsible in building the society, they (sisters) are a sign of God's tangible presence, closeness and warmth of those most in need guided by the gospel and teachings of the church (Adhiambo, 2019). Thus, Women Religious have been and continue to be representatives of the unprivileged due to their inalienable invisibility in the traditional narrative history of the institutional Catholic Church (Deirdre & Catriona 2022).

Guided by their charisms, many congregations in Africa have embarked on education, for instance, Daughters of the Sacred Heart, Teresian srs, Sisters of Divine providence, Sisters of the Holy Rosary, Missionaries sisters of Africa, Daughters of the Redeemer, Little children of our blessed lady, Dominican sisters, Canossian sisters, Brides of the lamb sisters, Daughters of St. Ann among others.

The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM, 1609), Loreto Sisters in Kenya since 1921, South Sudan and Tanzania, whom their mention brings into mind the prestigious schools and the distinguished women and Christians they have nurtured over the years such as Prof. Wangari Maathai among others, is dedicated to education. According to the Loreto (IBVM) Eastern Africa website, following their foundress's conviction that 'women were equal to men in intellect and should be educated accordingly' the Loreto Sisters operate some 150 schools world - wide as a response to narrow the gap on Gender Equality (women illiteracy) in the various areas that they are found.

In Kenya, their first school at Msongari begun in 1921 with a population of 17 pupils together with adult learning for the poor which later stopped since men complained that their wives would be too proud for them. By 1971, the primary school had grown to a population of 700 students. Later on, other schools were opened in different areas of the country such as Goan school, Loreto Matunda, Loreto Mombasa, Loreto Limuru, Loreto Kiambu, Loreto Changamwe, St. Teresa Eastleigh, Loreto Nakuru, among others. In 1998, the Archdiocese of Mwanza, Tanzania, the then ArchBishop observed a gap that the girls in his archdiocese particularly in Nyakato parish were

very behind in academics, he then invited the Loreto Sisters to provide this service because of their long experience in the field of education.

Sisters of Notre Dame De Namur working in South Sudan, Zimbabwe and Kenya whereby according to their website, following their foundress' footsteps on her promise to God to "Form school teachers for the country areas" thus, aware of the needs of the people to be served, they remain always and everywhere solicitous about education.

In Kenya, guided by their foundress's motto 'Educating for life' the sisters opened Notre Dame Educational Centre (NDEC) in Malava whereby the Centre attracts many students in a learner friendly approach to education for they realize that they not only teach for now but preparing future and responsible citizens ready to apply knowledge and to find solutions to everyday problems.

The Evangelizing Sisters of Mary is one of the Catholic Institutes running different schools in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda among the less advantaged people in the society. According to Mcesmadmin (2021), due to the nature of their Charism, the sisters are obliged to run mixed schools where they can accommodate both boys and girls. Being Catholic faith-based schools, the sisters' goal is to form students holistically, that is to change lives by imparting useful knowledge, wisdom and fear of God.

Dominican Sisters who through their Charism of Preaching and teaching leave a great impact on youths in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Kenya. They seek to educate generations of young people in their faith by bringing them into deeper relationship with Christ. The sisters teach in formal school education from Pre-school to A-Level, lecturing at universities and working with others to provide various forms of adult education. This is offered either in their schools, diocesan or state (Government) as well as schools for the deaf and the blind. According to their website, they run 10 schools in Zimbabwe, while in Kenya, a vocational training and a pre-primary and a primary school.

Assumption Sisters of Eldoret (ASE, 1957) Continue to live and share the charism of participating in the redeeming mission of Christ. They serve in Kenya and Southern Sudan in all areas in need especially in teaching at various level. In the management of the schools, sisters seek to fill the gap on indiscipline in public Government schools thus, guided by the Congregation's core values and spirituality centred in the Eucharist and prayer life, discipline enables the students to respect every person, caring for others and respecting life, (Pamela & ASE, 2022),

Franciscan Sisters of St. Anna working in Kenya, Ethiopia and Tanzania emphasize on education. Many of the schools were founded to fill the gap on girl child, the vulnerable and the less fortunate in the society echoing the mission of the sisters; Voice to the voiceless. The study reveals that, the Charism and sound traditions of the Congregation is the guiding principle for the sisters whereby they seek to inculcate good morals in the learners through catholic teachings. In collaboration with Kenyan Government in funding, the sisters see that the schools grow, in long standing history of discipline and good morals (Aluoch, 2022)

Queen of the Holy Rosary Schools in Nigeria where the sisters since 1928 at the time of the survey, the sisters had managed and staffed 224 primary schools, 11 secondary/high schools, 13 teacher training colleges, and one commercial school (Holy Rosary Sisters-Education, 2009-2013). The Holy Rosary Sisters had expanded their educational services to South Africa in 1940, Sierra Leone in 1948, Kenya and Cameroon in 1956, and Ethiopia in 1975. In these countries, they have opened and managed an additional 17 primary schools, 11 high schools and four teacher training colleges including six vocational schools (HRS-Education, 2009-2013).

Holy Child Sisters run schools both in Nigeria and Ghana. The Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Africa run schools in Algeria, Tunisia and Mauritania in the Maghreb; Mali, Burkina-Faso and Ghana in West Africa; Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, Mozambique, and Tanzania in Eastern Africa (Pelletier, 2003). Daughters of Divine Love, Eucharist Heart Sisters and Nativity Sisters in Nigeria, and in South Africa, Montebello Sisters and Daughters of St. Francis. The list remains endless and seamless in relation to the number of schools that religious sisters run and staff across the Continent of Africa.

### **Method**

This study employs a Qualitative Narrative study, inductive approach seeking to explore the Impact of Catholic Women Religious in Education across Africa. A Narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving account of an event/ action or series of events/actions that are chronologically connected (Creswell, 2013). The researcher narrows down data collection to two different narratives from two cases (participants) who voluntarily chose to unveil their experiences related to the great impact Catholic sisters have made to girl-child through education and advocacy. According to Creswell, (2013) Narrative stories are gathered mostly through in-depth interviews that serves as the primary form of data collection. The researcher used an in-depth interview guide questions that guided and prompted the participant for quality information. Data was analyzed thematically.

### **Results and Discussion**

**Participant 1:** The study embarked on the narrative as the raw data that was collected through in-depth interviews in which quality information was achieved. V (in place of participant's name) is a 27-year-old lady who highlights the importance and the impact of Catholic Sisters that came into her life since class 7 (of 8.4.4 already faced out Kenya Education System). The Narrative underlines key moments of V's life when Catholic sisters came in strongly to uplifted and light her way. Her narrative turns to be one among many unrevealed or rather untold success stories about Catholic Sisters across African Continent who follow their master by doing good to all.

To describe the experiences encountered by V in the hands of Catholic Sisters, five important themes were childhood instability and loss, responsibility and resilience in a struggling household, impact and the role of catholic sisters as mentors and supporters, impact of catholic sisters in V's academic achievement and transformation and Catholic sisters' family empowerment through education.

### **Demographic Information**

#### **Childhood Instability and Loss**

V's early life was marked by family disruption and emotional hardship. The separation of her parents and the subsequent loss of her grandmother, her primary caregiver, created significant emotional and psychological challenges. This early experience of instability significantly shaped her resilience and coping mechanisms.

“As a young child, I experienced my parents' separation. My grandmother became my primary caregiver. My grandmother was a kind and loving woman who provided me with stability and a sense of security during my early childhood. She played a key role in shaping my values, teaching me the importance of kindness, hard work, and perseverance. Sadly, a few years later my grandmother passed away unexpectedly. Her death was a devastating loss, not only emotionally but also because she had been my primary source of support. Her passing left me without a stable guardian, and I had to relocate to live with my mother”

According to Gowan et, al. (2019), it can be traumatic for young children experiencing sudden and unexpected loss of primary care giver due death or even separation from loved ones such as parents.

### **Responsibility and Resilience in a Struggling Household**

Upon moving in with her mother, V assumed a caregiver role as the eldest of five children. The economic hardships faced by the family meant that she had to grow up quickly. Despite the adversity, her mother instilled in her the value of education as a tool for escaping poverty.

“Moving in with my mother was a significant change. My mother had five children, and as the eldest, I quickly realized how much responsibility I had to shoulder. Life in our new home was difficult. My mother, though incredibly resilient, was a single parent, and it was not easy to support five children on her own. We often faced financial struggles and the reality of not having enough to go around made life even more challenging. Despite the hardships, my mother always stressed the importance of education. She worked hard to ensure we stayed in school, but sometimes we could not afford all the school necessities. Still, my mother’s determination to give us a better future kept us going. Even when times were tough, she would remind us that education was our way out of poverty and that we should never give up on our studies.”

The experience of V is described by Stein (2023) as parentification whereby for one reason or the other, while expectedly parents take care of their children, the roles are reversed with the child taking up the responsibility beyond what is expected at her/his age. Stein warns that this can lead to serious consequences for the child that takes up the role.

### **Impact and the Role of Catholic Sisters as Mentors and Supporters**

The entrance of the Catholic sisters into V’s life marked a transformative phase. They played multiple roles such as mentors and emotional anchors since they provided psychological support, mentorship, and a sense of belonging. Financial supporters, they offered full sponsorships for her secondary, university, and master’s education. Holistic Family Support, their support extended beyond V to her mother and siblings, facilitating generational uplift.

“The turning point in my life came when I was admitted to a new school (Vipingoni Primary School) in Class Seven after I relocated with my Mum to the Coast. It was in this new school that I first encountered the Catholic sisters. I remember my first teacher at this school was a sister, a kind and compassionate woman who immediately saw potential in me, despite my challenges. She was not just a teacher but a mentor and guide. She helped me adjust to the new environment and provided emotional support, recognizing the struggles I was facing, both at home and in my transition to a new school. She took time to understand my background and encouraged me to keep pushing forward, even when things seemed difficult. Her support was not limited to the classroom. She would often meet with me after school to provide guidance and talk about my future. She helped me build self-confidence and develop a belief in my ability to succeed, despite my circumstances. This was the second time someone believed in me beyond just my academic performance it was about my character, resilience, and potential”

In support of Vs experience with Catholic sisters, Admin, (2024) concurs with her that the commitment of Catholic sisters goes beyond the classroom, in providing care and support to those in need, fostering an environment of compassion and understanding.

### **Impact of Catholic Sisters in V's Academic Achievement and Transformation**

With consistent support, V excelled academically graduating second in her class in high school, attaining first-class honours in her undergraduate degree, and completing a master's degree with distinction abroad. These achievements represent both personal triumph and the broader success of a support-driven educational model.

“Recognizing that my family could not afford the cost of schooling, Sister stepped in and, through their program, sponsored me. The sponsorship provided me with full financial support for my high school education. It was a life-changing opportunity, as it lifted the heavy burden of tuition fees and allowed me to focus on my studies without worrying about how to pay for my education. I furthered my education at Sacred Heart Girls' Secondary School, a Catholic institution in Mpeketoni, where I graduated second in my class in 2017. Thanks to the sponsorship, I was able to attend a high school, where I excelled academically. The Catholic sisters continued to provide guidance and encouragement throughout my high school years. They not only supported my education financially but also emotionally, offering a safe space for me to talk about any struggles I faced whether they were related to school or my personal life.

Upon graduating high school, I faced yet another hurdle: university tuition. My mother, despite her hard work, could not afford to send me to university. However, once again, the Catholic sisters stepped in. Through their network of supporters and donors, I was able to receive another scholarship that covered my university education. I pursued a Bachelor of Education (Sciences) in Biology and Chemistry at the Murang'a University of Technology, where I graduated with first-class honors in December 2021 and my education at the university level became a reality, thanks to the generous support of the Catholic sisters. As I neared the end of my undergraduate studies, I began to dream about furthering my education beyond university. The day after my graduation, the sisters had organized a surprise celebration to honor my success. It felt so special, and I was thrilled.

However, the financial burden of pursuing graduate studies seemed insurmountable. I had tried to apply for several scholarships without knowing how to go about it and just when I was about to give up, I received an unexpected message from a sister from Spain. She had found a link to a scholarship for a master's program in Hungary, Europe and sent it to me. The scholarship covered some expenses, including tuition and accommodation, I found a part-time job that catered for the living costs. It wasn't difficult. With her belief in me and her continued support, I applied for the scholarship and was accepted into the program. I completed a Master of Science in Biology at the University of Debrecen, Hungary in Europe, graduating with distinction in June 2024. This scholarship to study abroad was a turning point in my life. It gave me the chance to gain international experience and broaden my academic horizons”

Admin (2024) confirms Catholic sisters as the profound source of hope, strength and compassion in the lives of people that includes youth who benefit through education that has transformed countless lives often in the most underserved (peripherals) areas. Catholic sisters, continue to inspire through their resilience and deep spiritual calling, making significant contributions both locally and globally.

### **Catholic Sisters' Family Empowerment Through Education**

Education not only changed V's life but also empowered her family. Her mother was able to further her studies, and her siblings benefited from educational support, demonstrating a ripple effect of empowerment through education.

"The impact of the Catholic sisters was not limited to my education. They also played a crucial role in helping my mother improve her qualifications. After hearing about my mother's desire to pursue further education, The Catholic sisters sponsored my mother's studies, allowing her to complete her Certificate and Diploma degrees in ECDE while raising five children. The Catholic sisters also took one of my sisters in and supported her through secondary school, while they helped our youngest sibling for two years during her primary school education. This was a transformative moment for our family. My mother's education opened up career opportunities for her and inspired me to continue striving for success. It showed me that it was never too late to learn and that education could change not just one life, but an entire family's future. Thanks to the support of the Catholic sisters, my mother's achievement was a source of pride for all of us."

In connection with V's experience on her family empowerment that included her mother and one of her siblings, Okoth (2024) highlights the crucial need to strengthen family apostolates which could focus on positive parenting and economic status of families.

### **Participant 2: Principal X for Justice on vulnerable Student X**

This qualitative narrative study draws on the lived experiences of a Catholic sister serving as the principal of a faith-based girls' secondary school in rural Kenya. The narrative centres on a single case that unfolded within the school in 2016, illustrating systemic, familial, and institutional dynamics that intersect around the issues of child protection, gender-based violence, and educational leadership.

#### **Background information**

##### **Vulnerability of Girls in Marginalized Settings**

The school serves girls from poor and vulnerable backgrounds, most of whom rely on external sponsorship. The socio-economic status of the students heightens their vulnerability to exploitation, especially in cases where guardianship may not be protective.

"I am Catholic Sister born in Kenya and currently Running a Catholic private school owned by our Congregation. The school being girl's secondary school in the peripherals, most of the girls come from poor backgrounds. Majority of them are sponsored either by their guardians or faith-based organization. Small percentage gets fee from their parents"

##### **Exploitation of the vulnerable in the hands of their guardians**

The narrative reveals how a trusted guardian used the pretence of seeking medical care to sexually abuse a minor. The manipulation of a legitimate excuse (eye check-up) to facilitate abuse underscores the insidious nature of some forms of gender-based violence.

"One fine day, in 2016 a guardian of student X reached out to me and explained the need to go home with the girl for eye medical check-up at a more urban area from the village location of the school. Upon filling-in the relevant documents, I released the student. After the given period of time the girl returned to school and expressed that all went on well. Based on pregnancy test, that confirmed pregnancy, the girl was made aware of the situation that shocked her totally. As she narrated *"I was taken to the urban in the name of eye check-up when my guardian treated a drink with sleeping pills without my knowledge, persuading me to take it in the lodging only to wake up in the*

*morning finding him with me on the same bed”* with tears flowing the girl could not continue the narration.

In relation to student X, experience, Olatide, (2023) affirms that, girls experience various difficulties that account as hinderance to education such as the fear of sexual harassment including relatives, teenage pregnancies, abduction, distance of school from home, early marriage, among many others. Hence parents and guardians to these girls who are vulnerable, have a responsibility to safeguard their livelihood.

### **Peer Solidarity and Institutional Support**

Fellow students noticed signs of pregnancy and reported to school authorities, suggesting a level of peer awareness and solidarity. The school responded promptly and responsibly by verifying the allegations, involving healthcare professionals, and supporting the student emotionally and logistically.

“After a month or so, her fellow students began suspecting pregnancy signs and so they reached out to the boarding mistress of the school proposing pregnancy test upon student X. Following the allegations, the boarding mistress with my permission accompanied the student to the nearby clinic run by sisters of the same congregation that runs the school. Shockingly enough the girl was confirmed pregnant.

### **The Role of Faith-Based Institutions**

The school and its managing religious congregation played a crucial role in protecting the child, reporting the crime, supporting her testimony, and following legal procedures.

The sisters’ commitment went beyond academics, they provided shelter, emotional support, burial arrangements for the deceased baby, and eventual legal reintegration with the family.

“The teenager (student X) gave birth to a blue baby (child born with a hole in the heart) upon which the child died after a year. Faced with the challenge that the family disowned the girl accusing her for exposing family issues to the Catholic church and government, the school had to relocate her to a children’s home. Now that the baby died, the school sisters took up the responsibility and secured a burial site from a family that accepted the baby be buried in their plot. As a sign of ending a long journey of justice that had begun, the sisters terminated the stay of the girl from the children’s home and handed her to the family lawfully signing legal documents that cleared the sisters from the case. However, the perpetrator has remained in jail for the better part of his life”

### **Legal and Justice System Outcomes**

The narrative documents successful legal intervention, with the perpetrator apprehended, charged, and jailed. The role of local authorities, diocesan child protection services, and the police contributed to ensuring justice despite attempts to sabotage the case through abduction.

“As the principal I reported this case to the diocesan children rights as well called the police for the arrest of the victim who was a primary school teacher in the area. After the girl gave testimony, she relocated from school and stayed with another relative. Just before the date for the case, the girl was abducted and so went missing. By God’s grace, a neighbor happened to be with her in the same public vehicle and aware of the situation, she immediately understood the deal and conducted the school upon which arrangements were made for her return. A shocking wave cut across the room when the perpetrator saw the girl in the court ready to attest the truth. The system favored the student of course with the guardian charged and jailed for minor defilement.”

Admin, (2024) acknowledges and concurs with sister principal X that, beyond educational and caregiving efforts, Catholic sisters are known to be advocates for peace and justice, actively standing alongside individuals facing oppression. Through their work, they raise awareness of social issues and promote initiatives that seek to uplift marginalized voices. By embodying the principles of service and solidarity, they contribute to building a more equitable and compassionate society for all.

### **Social Stigma and Family Rejection**

After the incident, the girl was disowned by her family, emphasizing the cultural stigma often associated with defilement cases, especially when they involve public exposure. This rejection necessitated relocation to a children's home, further reflecting the emotional and social burden borne by the survivor (student X)

“Faced with the challenge that the family disowned the girl accusing her for exposing family issues to the Catholic church and government, the school had to relocate her to a children's home.”

In line with the families' decision to reject and disown their daughter after she exposed the perpetrator to government and Catholic Church is what Gurm and Marchbank, (2020) explains that victims of rape especially the vulnerable groups like children, there is a likelihood that the victim is depended on the perpetrator.

In African culture for instance, it is a taboo that the victim (survivor) brings shame to the family by exposing them to legal offices (police or other places of justice and advocacy such as children rights, or faith-based entities), thus it remains a challenge for legal persons in bringing culprits to book. The case of student X was contrary to the norm, because of Catholic Sisters' Advocacy and voice for the voiceless.

### **Conclusion**

Catholic Sisters remain at the forefront in witnessing the truth, sacrifice and resilience to their work in the service of Catholic Church for the glory of God. Sisters have worked in the collaboration of bishops, priests as well as the state for the good of God's people regardless of their religion, nationality gender, social class, ethnic group, colour among others. Echoing the words of Pope Francis, 'where there is religious, there is joy'. This has always been the case in most of the schools run or managed by sisters globally impacting positively millions of lives from all walks of life.

Faced by societal gender biases, Girl-child has for a long period won the attention of the sisters' concern and have greatly benefitted through education and advocacy. In the case of western countries, there seem remarkable decline of the numbers of teaching sisters who have been replaced by lay faithfuls such as the many schools in the United States of America. A sister seen in the habit, reminds the Americans those old days when most of the schools were dominated by white sisters.

As if the turn for Africa, the narrative changes in the sense that many religious congregations run and manage schools based on their charisms to impart knowledge to the young for their own sustainability. Some of these religious congregations include: Daughters of the Sacred Heart, Loreto Sisters, Dominican Sisters, Asumbi Sisters, Assumption sisters of Eldoret, Assumption sisters of Nairobi, Little sisters of St Francis, Evangelising sisters of Mary, Sisters of Mary of Kakamega among others.

The study focused on the Impact of Catholic Sisters in Education, Africa. The two cases under the narrative study highlight and show-case the much work done by Catholic sisters. They empower

girl-child through education as well as fearlessly seeking justice for her who is among the vulnerable groups, voicing out what seems a taboo by the society for the sake of peace and justice. The two cases however underline the many works and great deeds that Catholic sisters accomplish, yet they go unnoticed and unrecorded. The question remains; how many other good works done by Catholic Sisters, remain under the carpet?

### Recommendations

Need to encourage more research on Catholic sisters' way of life and apostolates so as to create more awareness in different decision-making. Need to encourage more documentation of Catholic Sisters' interventions especially in education sector as well as advocacy for voiceless students.

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**Students Disruptive Behavior and Management Approaches by Counsellors and Administrators in Public Secondary Schools in Elgeyo-Marakwet County in Kenya**

Collette Ndunelo<sup>1</sup>, Prof Jeniffer K. Munyua<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Prisca Tarus<sup>1</sup>

Email: [collettechizoro@gmail.com](mailto:collettechizoro@gmail.com)

1. Mount Kenya University, (Department of counselling psychology, P.O Box 2591-30100, Eldoret
2. The Catholic University of Eastern Africa- Gaba Campus (Department Of Couselling Psychology, P.O. Box 908-30100 Eldoret
3. Mount Kenya University, (Department of counselling psychology, P.O Box 2591-30100, Eldoret

**Abstract**

Physical discipline, formerly a widespread method of managing student behavior in schools, has been outlawed in Kenya, leading to implementation of alternative disciplinary approaches. This study explored the nature of student disruptive behaviours and the management strategies adopted in secondary schools in Elgeyo-Marakwet County, Kenya using Co-educational methods approach. The quantitative aspect of the study applied a cross-sectional survey design to assess the effectiveness of various disciplinary methods, whereas the qualitative aspect employed a case-study design to explore the application of counseling strategies. Data were assembled using a carefully designed inquiry form administered to learners and counselors, supplemented by in-depth interviews with school administrators and counselors. The rationality and trustworthiness of the instruments were subjected to pilot testing and expert review before administration. The study exhibited that alcohol use and noisemaking were the most common behavioral misconducts, particularly in single male ' boarding schools. The main finding signposted significant gaps in the application of counseling and learner-centered disciplinary methods, with administrators primarily relying on punitive measures such as manual labor and calling parents. The study concluded that there was a need for more learner-friendly disciplinary approaches, emphasizing developmental support over punitive measures. The main recommendation suggested reinforcing individual and peer guidance in behavior control to enhance the efficacy of Counseling support services in secondary schools.

**Keywords:** Corporal Punishment, Guidance And Counseling, Disruptive behaviours, Disciplinary Strategies, Student Behavior

**Introduction**

Disruptive behaviours among learners is a growing global concern, with increasing intensity and prevalence across various regions. Studies from different countries have documented diverse manifestations and causes of disruptive behaviours. For instance, Cvetkova Dimov, Atanasoska and Trajkovska, (2019), identified bullying, inattentiveness, disrespect, and inappropriate dressing as common issues in Australia, while De Abreu Pestana, and Nunes, (2023), found truancy, vandalism, and delinquency prevalent in South African schools. In the United States, Doughty and Connelly (2020), reported a 150% rise in school-related assaults between 2000 and 2001, citing drug abuse, deviance, and exam malpractice as dominant issues. Similarly, in the UK, over 2,000 primary pupils were suspended in 2019 due to violent behavior (Bowers & Hulse, 2021). Globally, student disruptive behaviours have emerged as a persistent and intensifying concern across education systems. Early evidence from countries such as Australia exhibited issues like bullying, disrespect, inattentiveness, and inappropriate dressing (Cvetkova Dimov, Atanasoska & Andonovska-Trajkovska, 2019), while in South Africa, common forms included truancy,

vandalism, and delinquency (De Abreu Pestana & Nunes, 2023). In the United States, between 2000 and 2001, school-related assaults rose by 150%, with drug abuse, deviance, and exam malpractice identified as major concerns (Doughty & Connelly, 2020). By 2019, the United Kingdom had suspended over 2,000 primary school pupils for violent behavior (Bowers & Hulse, 2021). In India, disruptive behaviours manifested through ragging, absenteeism, and classroom disruptions, which were worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic (Sajeevan et al., 2022; Saini et al., 2023). Meanwhile, African schools, including those in Uganda and Nigeria, have recorded issues such as instructors' assaults, drug use, refusal to participate in classwork, and examination cheating (Awor, 2016; Korugyendo, 2022).

Underlying causes of these behaviors such as parental neglect, drug abuse, and media influence have been well-documented (Atunde & Aliyu, 2019; Enefu, Obaka & Okaforcha, 2019). In Uganda, punitive disciplinary measures have often resulted in extreme outcomes, including student-instructors violence and student expulsions (Musabyimana, 2018). The limitations of traditional punitive methods, including suspension and detention, have been noted globally, as seen in the U.S., where high rates of bullying, cyber misconduct, and absenteeism persist despite such approaches (CDC & NCES, 2021; Sparks, 2023). Consequently, counselling has gained attention as a student-centered alternative that promotes responsibility and behavioral change (Khlegghi et al., 2017; Madukwe et al., 2016 Wang'ang'a, & Ndurumo, 2022).

In Africa, widespread disruptive behaviours issues in African schools include vandalism, bullying, drug abuse, and aggression (Onyechi et al., 2017; Ojewola, 2017). Other cases include serious student disruptive behaviours issues, including instructors' assaults and even killings, are on the rise (Slatter, 2018; Daniel, 2018). In Uganda, unruly learners were becoming a big issue in majority of secondary schools. Press stories of disruptive behaviours incidents resulting in fatalities in certain schools occurred daily (Awor, 2016). Most prevalent disruptive behaviours cases included refusal to participate in class activities, failed to turn in homework and assignments, debilitating drugs and cheating on tests (Alex, 2021). Truant learners frequently struggled to focus throughout their studies because they believed they would not be able to do well on tests (Korugyendo, 2022). Majority of behavioral adjustment strategies have been punitive measures. For instances, there had been documentation in Ugandan secondary schools when instructors had faced charges and expulsion for mistreating learners, as well as instances where learners had been expelled for attacking instructorss (Musabyimana, 2018).

Disruptive behaviours issues are widespread (Alex, 2021; Korugyendo, 2022) and disciplinary approaches have been largely punitive, leading to instructors-student conflicts and even expulsions (Musabyimana, 2018; Marshall, 2020). Counselling is proposed as a constructive alternative that empowers learners to make better disruptive behaviours choices (Ngalya, 2017). Kenya faces a critical challenge of student disruptive behaviours in secondary schools, marked by truancy, substance abuse, theft, and arson. High-profile cases include the tragic arson attacks at St. Kizito (1991), Nyeri High (1999), Bombolulu Female s (1998), Kyanguli High (2001), and Lokichogio Co-educational Secondary School (2017) (Ndaita, 2016; Lubanga & Lutta, 2017). The disruptive behaviours issues are often driven by peer pressure and substance abuse (Akoko, 2017). Despite existing interventions, the recurrence of severe cases highlights the need for more effective solutions. This underscores the rationale for investigating counselling strategies as a disruptive behaviours adjustment mechanism in secondary schools in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya. Student disruptive behaviours problems have persisted and evolved, often with tragic consequences. Traditional punitive measures have failed to address underlying causes. Counselling strategies offer a transformative, student-centered approach that promotes self-regulation, personal responsibility, and positive disruptive behaviours change. The in present study

in Kenya sought to explore student disruptive behaviours and intervention approaches in public secondary schools in Elgeyo-Marakwet County.

In Kenya, the 2001 abolition of corporal punishment marked a shift towards guidance and counselling as a formal disciplinary strategy, building on reforms from the 1970s (Republic of Kenya, 2002). In spite of these interventions, disruptive behaviours continue to be a major challenge in Kenyan secondary schools, evidenced by high-profile tragedies such as the arson incidents at St. Kizito (1991), Nyeri High (1999), and Lokichogio Co-educational (2017) (Ndaita, 2016; Lubanga & Lutta, 2017). Common misconduct includes truancy, substance abuse, arson, and theft often linked to peer pressure and drug use (Akoko, 2017; Muchiri, 2018). In Bungoma County, for instance, disciplinary strategies range from suspension and detention to guidance and counselling (Ahmed, 2020). While legal frameworks support exclusion for severe offenses (Agesa, Mbirithi & Mange, 2021), punitive strategies have not effectively curbed rising disruptive behaviours (Alex, 2021).

In response, various disciplinary strategies have been employed. In Bungoma County, Kenya, Ahmed (2020) reported that head instructors implemented measures such as expulsion, suspension, corporal punishment, detention, and behavioral guidance, among others, to address disruptive behaviours. Similarly, in Australia, suspension was used for serious offenses like drug possession and truancy, supported by legal frameworks empowering school administrators to exclude unruly learners (Agesa, Mbirithi, Mange, 2021). Suspension was also seen to involve parents in correcting disruptive behavioural problems. In Kenya, behavioural guidance has been institutionalized as a key strategy since the 2001 ban on corporal punishment, with its foundations in earlier educational reforms dating back to 1971 (GOK, 1964; Republic of Kenya, 2002). Despite these efforts, studies (Alex, 2021) indicate persistent high rates of disruptive behaviours, underscoring the need for further investigation. Considering persistent misconduct and the inadequacies of conventional discipline, this review justifies the present study's focus on Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya. The exploration aimed to ascertain prevalent forms of disruptive behaviours and assess the effectiveness of counselling and administrative interventions as strategies for promoting behavioral improvement among secondary school learners.

### **Statement of the problem**

Secondary educational institutions are expected to offer a secure, orderly, and nurturing environs where learners can concentrate on their studies, develop positive social skills, and achieve their academic potential. Discipline in schools should foster responsibility, mutual respect, and emotional stability among learners, enabling them to transition smoothly into adulthood and contribute productively to society. In such settings, school management strategies, including counseling services and structured guidance programs, are expected to minimize behavioral challenges while promoting academic excellence and holistic development (UNESCO, 2019).

Rising incidents of disruptive behaviours among secondary educational institutions in Elgeyo Marakwet County including truancy, bullying, defiance, substance abuse, and vandalism continue to disrupt learning and undermine academic achievement. Reports from education stakeholders and public health offices have highlighted the growing dominance of substance abuse among adolescents, contributing to behavioral maladjustment and mental health challenges (Clavarino & Najman, 2017; NACADA, 2021). Teenage pregnancies, poor parental guidance, and peer pressure have further compounded the situation, contributing to school dropouts and socio-economic disadvantage (KDHS, 2020; Nwankwo & Onyia, 2020; Nyaboke, 2023). Conventional disciplinary actions, including deferrals and evictions, have largely failed to yield lasting behavioral change, often worsening student alienation and resistance. The persistence of these

challenges, despite government and school-based interventions, signals an urgent need for alternative, student-centered management strategies tailored to adolescents' social and developmental realities.

Although research has examined student disruptive behaviours and its management in various contexts, important gaps remain. Contextually, many studies have been conducted outside Kenya (e.g., Clavarino & Najman, 2017 in Australia; Nwankwo & Onyia, 2020 in Nigeria), which differ in social, cultural, and policy contexts from Elgeyo Marakwet. Conceptually, prior studies have focused narrowly on single issues such as substance abuse, bullying, or teenage pregnancy, rather than adopting a holistic approach that considers multiple forms of disruptive behaviours alongside management strategies. Methodologically, earlier studies have applied limited designs such as ex post facto approaches, case studies, descriptive surveys, cross-sectional designs, or multistage sampling (e.g., Nyaboke, 2023; NACADA, 2021), which constrain depth and generalizability of discoveries. To discourse these breaches, the present enquiry employs a mixed-methods approach to provide a more thorough understanding of student disruptive behaviours and the efficacy of intervention strategies in secondary educational institutions in Elgeyo Marakwet County.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- i. To identify the most commons form of disruptive behaviours in public secondary educational institutions in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya
- ii. To examine the approaches employed by school administrators to address disruptive behaviours in secondary public secondary educational institutions in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya.
- iii. To determine the strategies utilized by counselors to manage disruptive behaviours in public secondary educational institutions in Elgeyo Marakwet County.

### **Research questions**

The study was informed by the following research questions

1. What are the most common types of disruptive behaviours observed in public secondary schools in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya?
2. What methods do school administrators use to address disruptive behaviours in secondary educational institutions in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Kenya?
3. What strategies do counselors employ to manage disruptive behaviours in public secondary educational institutions in Elgeyo Marakwet County?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Tegan (2022) theoretical framework explains the key concepts in research and shows the relationship using relevant theories. This enquiry was anchored on Albert Bandura Social Learning philosophy. Social Cognitive Theory was put forward by Albert Bandura in 1986. The notion of philosophy constructs doctrines of collective erudition, underscoring that people acquire knowledge and behaviors by observing others. By the mid-1980s, Bandura expanded his research from social learning theory to adopt a more holistic perspective, highlighting the central role of cognitive processes in shaping personality and behavior. This theory underscores how both children and adults interpret, process, and respond to social experiences, with these cognitive operations influencing learning, behavior, and development (Nabavi & Bijandi, 2011).

Social Cognitive Learning Theory remains very relevance to behaviour change especially among the learners. The important element that justifies the selection of the philosophy for this enquiry is that Social Cognitive Learning Theory enhances learners' motivation. It advocates that learners

are inclined to be enthused to comprehend when they presume that they are adept in accomplishing their objectives. This is consistent with the responsibility of mentorship in confronting disruptive behaviours among learners. Learners who are involved in disciplinary problems can be helped through counselling thereby leading to behaviour change (Yasmi, 2022).

### **Empirical Review**

In Brazil, Campos and Aparecida (2022) investigated learners' perceptions of undisciplined behavior in schools. Out of a population of 550 learners, 167 responded to structured inquiry forms, and 24 participated in interviews. Analysis combining quantitative and qualitative data exhibited that learners who did not participate in counseling sessions tend to pursue disruptive behavior as opposed to those who did. Although the discoveries reinforce the value of counseling, the study was conducted in Brazil, which differs significantly in cultural, social, and educational contexts compared to Kenyan secondary schools. This underscores a knowledge gap on how counseling interventions specifically impact disruptive behaviours in schools within Elgeyo Marakwet County.

In South Africa, Obadire and Sinthumule (2021) examined learner delinquent behaviour following the ban of physical discipline, where counseling was promoted as a key strategy for behavior management. Using purposive non-probability sampling, they engaged Institutional heads and disciplinary committee coordinators from four secondary schools and applied qualitative approaches to generate in-depth insights. The discoveries exhibited that both internal and external factors contribute to disruptive behaviours, but these can be addressed effectively through school-based counseling programs. The study emphasized the involvement of school leadership in creating a supportive environment for counselors. While the research provides lessons on post-punitive approaches to discipline, it was limited to the South African context, leaving open questions about how similar strategies could work in rural Kenyan counties such as Elgeyo Marakwet, where traditional punitive measures are still common.

In Nigeria, student misconduct has become a serious concern among education stakeholders due to its negative mental, emotional, and social consequences. This was contained in the study conducted by Okeke (2021) on school counselors' perceptions regarding the efficacy of implemented strategies to curb disruptive behaviours in Nigerian educational institutions, particularly in Onitsha Metropolis. The enquiry targeted 70 guidance counselors working in public secondary schools. Data were assembled using a well-thought-out self-designed inquiry form, which had a reliability coefficient of 0.89. Data was assessed using numerical indicators, specifically means and standard deviations. The discoveries exhibited operative communiqué by instructors, strategic posting of guidance counselors in schools, and the use of behavior modification strategies were perceived as vital tools for addressing disruptive behaviours among learners. The enquiry commended that the MoE and school administrators ought to prioritize consistent placement of professionally trained guidance counselors in public schools and support them in implementing disciplinary measures that focus on rehabilitation and behavioral transformation rather than punishment alone. While this enquiry was carried out in Nigeria, the contemporary enquiry is among Kenyan educational institutions thus geographical gap.

Guidance and counselling in schools have enhanced personal development and good moral among many learners especially in Nigeria. These are contained in the research conducted by Egenti (2016) in Nigeria using secondary method of data collection, which involved gathering information from various publications, periodicals, newspapers, magazines and journals. The enquiry exhibited that G&C help learners to identify and realize their potentials, which in turn

reduce disruptive behaviours among learners. Also, instructors are assisted through training got by the counsellor to be more efficient in their duties. The reviewed study made use of secondary data collection hence did not get first-hand information from schools and was carried out in Nigeria which is different from Kenyan setting.

In Ghana, disruptive behaviours have long posed a challenge in many educational institutions. Amoah, Adinkrah, Gyanfi, and Ayarkwah (2018) carried out a descriptive survey targeting four colleges of education, with a sample of 223 respondents comprising counselors, tutors, and pre-service instructors selected through random and purposive sampling. Information was assembled using inquiry form and analyzed with SPSS version 17. Discoveries exhibited that all respondents across the sampled colleges affirmed that behavioural guidance services assumed an imperative part in reducing student disruptive behaviours. The researchers recommended strengthening counseling units within institutions to effectively address behavioral issues. While these insights are useful, the study was conducted in instructors-training colleges in Ghana rather than in secondary schools in Kenya, leaving a gap in understanding how counseling interventions address disruptive behaviours in secondary school settings such as Elgeyo Marakwet County.

Similarly, in Eritrea, counseling services have been explored as tools for managing delinquent behaviour among educational institutions. An enquiry by Andegiorgis (2019) engaged both systematic random and purposive sampling to opt for 306 learners, 20 instructors, 5 head instructors, and 5 counselors. Using a convergent parallel mixed-method design, data were assembled through inquiry form and interviews. Discoveries exhibited that 75% of instructors conveyed their schools lacked counseling services, while the 25% who had access to such services emphasized their role in supporting discipline among learners. Although this study highlights the importance of counseling, its discoveries are limited to the Eritrean context, creating a contextual gap in relation to secondary schools in Elgeyo Marakwet County, where unique socio-cultural and behavioral dynamics may shape how counseling influences student discipline.

Simeo and Tangi (2022) shepherded an enquiry in Tanzania, to scrutinize the approaches executed by secondary educational institutions heads to oversee student delinquent behaviour and academic achievement. A convergent parallel Co-educational methods design was utilized in the enquiry, with data from 113 participants assembled via inquiry form and interviews. The discoveries signposted that strategies like guidance and counseling, parent-instructors cooperation, and a system of rewards and punishments proved effective in promoting conducive learning atmosphere that facilitated academic success. While the study provides valuable insights, a significant knowledge gap remains. The enquiry was executed in Tanzania, while the contemporary enquiry was undertaken in Kenya, a different socio-educational context. Furthermore, the Tanzanian study focused solely on school heads, while the current study explores the role of the broader administrative team.

Kariithi, Mukolwe and Mwaura (2022) shepherded an enquiry in Kenya to evaluate the effect of student-to-student counseling as a behavioral management intervention on learners' delinquent behaviour. The enquiry had a total target population of 227 deputy institutional heads, 3,479 therapists, and 89,065 learners. A sample of 23 deputy institutional heads, 97 instructors, and 398 learners were nominated by adopting simple random sampling. Info amass instruments included inquiry form, discussion guide and field observation sheets which were piloted for clarity and validity. Quantitative statistics were scrutinized by means of numerical statistics, Pearson correlation and multivariate regression analysis, while qualitative data were subjected to content analysis. From the discoveries, it was established that there was an arithmetically significant optimistic correlation ( $r = 0.476$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) between student discipline and peer counseling

interventions, showing that peer counseling positively influenced student behavior and contributed to improved discipline. The enquiry was done in Kiambu while the contemporary enquiry was done in Elgeyo Marakwet County hence contextual gap.

Wambua (2017) conducted an enquiry to explore the effect of institutional heads' inclusive leadership approaches on behavioural regulation in secondary schools. The study made use of stratified proportionate sampling proportionate number of Institutional heads, instructors and learners' leaders as the sample. Using discussion guide, info was assembled from the instructors and Institutional heads while inquiry form was used for learners. Student mentorship was examined in the enquiry to alleviating delinquent behaviours issues among learners. It helps learners navigate detachment, fury and aggravation which are the roots of delinquent behaviours among learners. The enquiry discoveries showed that where there is student mentorship program run by the competent counsellor, learners tended to uphold discipline at a higher degree. Also, leadership mentorship has contributed to the reduction of failure of learners to attend to their duties, increased respect for the competent authorities and among learners themselves, learners' engagement in substance abuse and patterns of lesson absenteeism. The reviewed study assessed mentorship as way of instilling discipline among learners. Thus, the present study researched on the role of counselling on delinquent behaviours among learners.

Onsoti (2018) conducted an enquiry on sway of peer-related persuasion on form two learners' delinquent behaviour in public secondary educational institutions in Kenya. The enquiry made use of descriptive research design. Inquiry forms were engaged for assemblage of info and were analyzed in descriptive arithmetical technique via proportions. The unit of analysis was 700 learners drawn from educational institutions and 7 therapists. The number of subjects was 77 participants, which was obtained using lottery method. The data assembled was interpreted in numerical techniques and presented in tables and graphs. Study discoveries show that majority of the issues counsellors address in counselling sessions are emanating from peer pressure (Onsoti, 2018). The study was done in Kenya among form two learners while the research under study was undertake on the role of therapeutic activities on disruptive behaviours among schools' learners in Elgeyo Marakwet County.

In conclusion, extensive research has been conducted globally and regionally on the role of psychoeducational support in mitigating disruptive student conduct, and these studies have provided valuable insights into how counseling influences learners' behavior. Nonetheless, only a limited number of studies have addressed similar issues in the Kenyan context, and very few specifically focus on Elgeyo Marakwet County. In addition, most of the reviewed studies addressing student disruptive behaviours did not apply the theoretical framework guiding the present research. This study addresses that gap by adopting Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Learning Theory, which emphasizes the influence of observation, modeling, and reinforcement in shaping student behavior, making it particularly relevant to the challenges of disruptive behaviours among adolescents in the study area. Methodologically, previous studies have largely relied on designs such as ex-post facto, case studies, descriptive surveys, multistage, and cross-sectional approaches. By contrast, the current study applied a mixed-methods research approach, specifically using an embedded mixed-method design, thereby filling a methodological gap left by earlier research and enabling a deeper understanding of the problem.

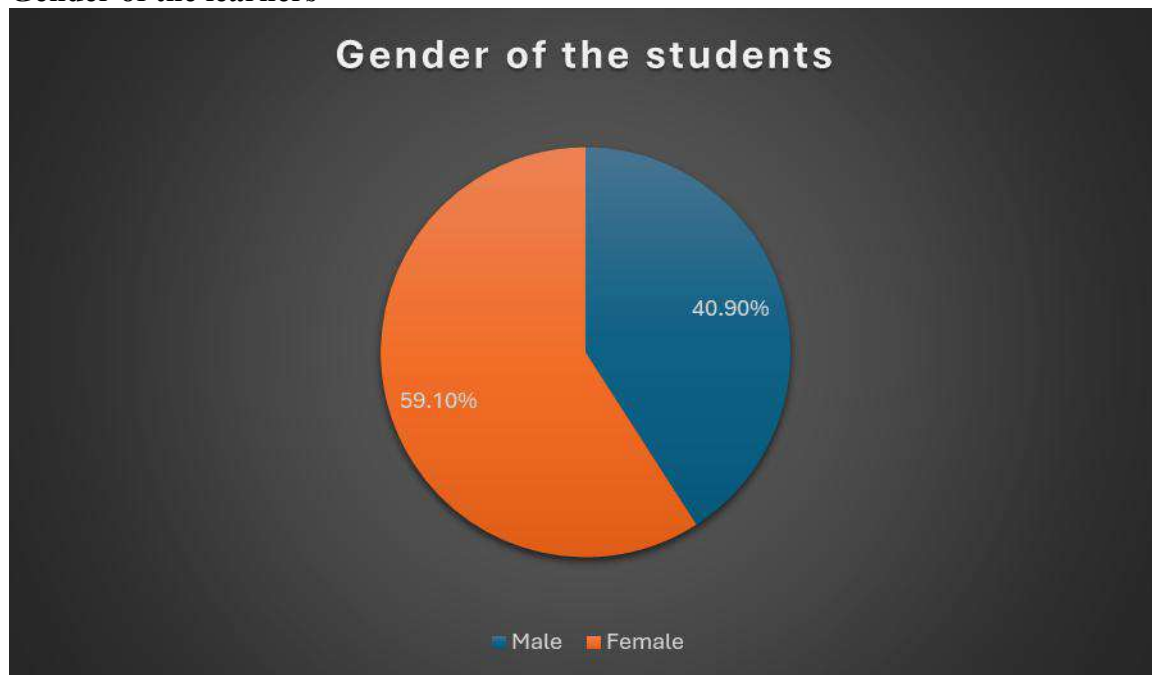
Finally, in Kenya—and more specifically in Elgeyo Marakwet County—no prior study has examined counseling and student disruptive behaviours with the same combination of topic, context, and population. For this reason, the current research was essential, as it addressed existing gaps and laid a foundation for further inquiry in this field.

### Method

The inquiry engaged a survey research design. This study investigated student delinquent behaviours and behavioural management approaches among educational institutions in Elgeyo-Marakwet County. The unit of analysis comprised learners from 30 public and 10 private secondary educational institutions. A categorical proportionate sampling approach was engaged to recruit 10 schools 8 public and 2 private guaranteeing representation from male', female s', and Co-educational schools. Within each selected school, 20 learners were randomly sampled, and one instructor in charge counselling was purposively designated, consequential in a total sample of 210 participants. Info was assembled using inquiry forms for learners and discussion consultation for therapists. The enquiry evaluation tools underwent face and constructs validation with expert input and were piloted for reliability using Cronbach's alpha used to explore items homogeneity. Info was scrutinized using SPSS version 21.5, generating descriptive statistics, which were illustrated using tabular presentations. The study adhered to ethical procedures by obtaining the necessary research approvals, securing informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and guaranteeing that participation was entirely voluntary."

### Results and Discussions

#### Gender of the learners

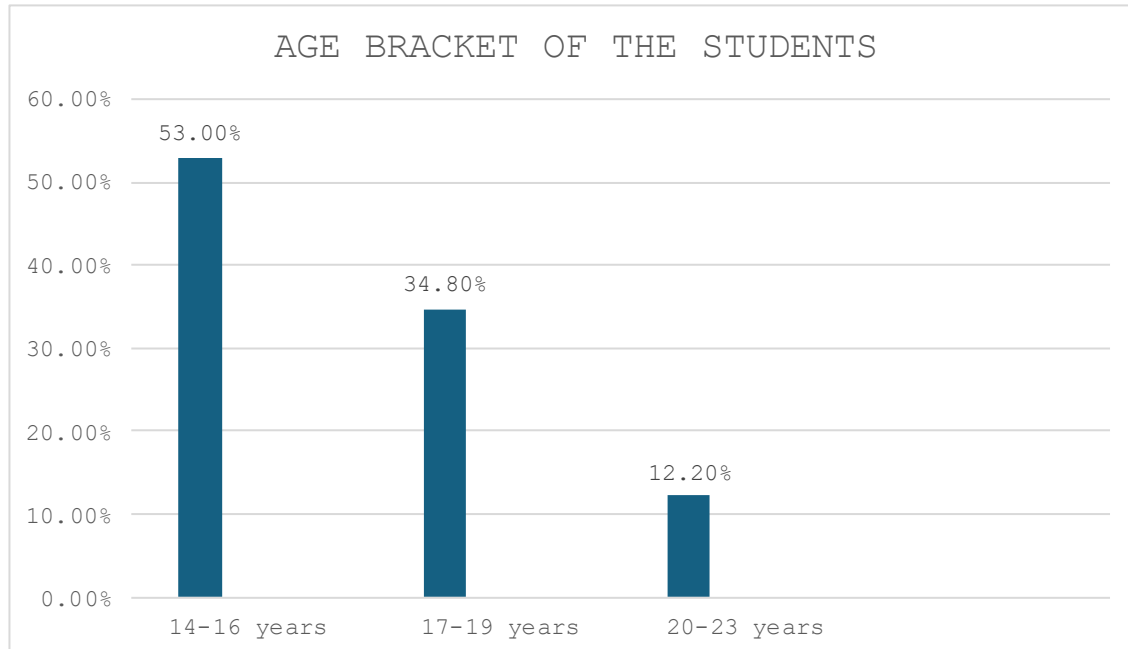


**Figure 1: Gender of the Learners.**

The discoveries showed that 59.1% of the learners were female and 40.9% male, indicating greater female representation in the study. This may reflect higher female enrolment in sampled schools or a greater willingness among female learners to engage in studies on counselling and discipline. Sociocultural dynamics and sampling methods may also have contributed to the imbalance. Given those male learners are often more involved in disciplinary issues, the results highlight the need for gender-responsive behavioral interventions. Schools should develop inclusive strategies that address the distinct disciplinary needs of gender differences.

### Age Bracket of Learners

The age bracket of the learners was analyzed and presented in figure 2



**Figure 2: Age Bracket of Learners**

The discoveries signaled that the predominant portion of learners in public secondary schools, fall within the age range of 14 to 16 years, accounting for 53.0% of the total student population. This age group represents the typical age bracket for learners in lower secondary school, such as Forms One and Two, in the Kenyan education system. A significant proportion, 34.8%, comprises learners with 17 and 19 years, which is consistent with the expected age range for upper secondary school learners in Forms Three and Four.

However, a notable 12.2% of the learners fall within the 20 to 23 years age group, which is considered above the conventional age range for secondary education. This overage population can be traced to several causes such as late school enrollment, grade repetition due to poor academic performance, interruptions in schooling caused by socioeconomic challenges, or personal circumstances including illness, early pregnancy, or financial difficulties. In rural settings like Elgeyo Marakwet, it is not uncommon for learners to experience delays in progressing through the education system due to such constraints.

This age distribution provides essential insight into the student demographic and is critical for designing effective behavior management and counseling interventions. Younger learners may benefit more from structured peer counseling and programs that support emotional development and social integration. On the other hand, older learners, particularly those in the 20–23 age bracket, may require more targeted and individualized support, including career guidance, psychosocial counseling, and interventions that help address the stigma of being over-age. The presence of both typical and overage learners suggests a need for differentiated and age-sensitive discipline strategies that are responsive to the unique developmental needs and challenges of each group.

### Forms of Disruptive behaviours By School Types

The enquiry pursued to explore the modes of disruptive behaviours based on school types. The discoveries were scrutinized and exhibited in table 1.

**Table 1 : Forms of Disruptive behaviours by School Type**

| Statement                                                                                               | School Type    | SA        | A         | U       | D        | SD |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-----------|-----------|---------|----------|----|
| Alcohol use is observed among learners in my school.                                                    | Male           | 38        | 8 (13.8%) | –       | 12       | –  |
|                                                                                                         | Boarding       | (65.5%)   |           |         | (20.7%)  |    |
|                                                                                                         | Female         | 8 (12.1%) | 15        | –       | 43       | –  |
|                                                                                                         | Boarding       |           | (22.8%)   |         | (65.1%)  |    |
|                                                                                                         | Co-educational | 14        | 10        | –       | 17       | –  |
|                                                                                                         |                | (54.1%)   | (24.4%)   |         | (41.5%)  |    |
| Students in my school often engage in making noise during lessons, disrupting the learning environment. | Day            |           |           |         |          |    |
|                                                                                                         | Co-educational | 8 (50.0%) | 5 (31.3%) | –       | 3        | –  |
|                                                                                                         | Boarding       |           |           |         | (18.7%)  |    |
|                                                                                                         | Male           | 43        | 4 (6.9%)  | 7       | 4 (6.9%) | –  |
|                                                                                                         | Boarding       | (74.1%)   |           | (12.1%) |          |    |
|                                                                                                         | Female         | 10        | 8 (12.1%) | 27      | 21       | –  |
| Disrespectful behavior by students toward teaching staff is evident in the school.                      | Boarding       | (15.2%)   |           | (40.9%) | (31.8%)  |    |
|                                                                                                         | Co-educational | 18        | 12        | –       | 11       | –  |
|                                                                                                         |                | (43.9%)   | (29.3%)   |         | (26.8%)  |    |
|                                                                                                         | Day            |           |           |         |          |    |
|                                                                                                         | Co-educational | 10        | 6 (37.5%) | –       | –        | –  |
|                                                                                                         | Boarding       | (62.5%)   |           |         |          |    |
| Physical altercations among students are frequently observed.                                           | Male           | 30        | 16        | 12      | –        | –  |
|                                                                                                         | Boarding       | (51.7%)   | (27.6%)   | (20.7%) |          |    |
|                                                                                                         | Female         | 10        | 7 (10.6%) | 32      | 17       | –  |
|                                                                                                         | Boarding       | (15.2%)   |           | (48.4%) | (25.8%)  |    |
|                                                                                                         | Co-educational | 6 (14.6%) | 10        | 16      | 9        | –  |
|                                                                                                         |                |           | (24.4%)   | (39.0%) | (22.0%)  |    |
| Some learners engage in unauthorized visits to the shopping centre during school hours.                 | Day            |           |           |         |          |    |
|                                                                                                         | Co-educational | 7 (13.8%) | 9 (–%)    | –       | –        | –  |
|                                                                                                         | Boarding       |           |           |         |          |    |
|                                                                                                         | Male           | 10        | 14        | 34      | –        | –  |
|                                                                                                         | Boarding       | (17.3%)   | (24.1%)   | (58.6%) |          |    |
|                                                                                                         | Female         | 7 (10.6%) | 9 (13.6%) | 33      | 17       | –  |
|                                                                                                         | Boarding       |           |           | (50.0%) | (25.8%)  |    |
|                                                                                                         | Co-educational | 10        | 12        | –       | 19       | –  |
|                                                                                                         |                | (24.4%)   | (29.3%)   |         | (46.3%)  |    |
|                                                                                                         | Day            |           |           |         |          |    |
|                                                                                                         | Co-educational | 6 (37.5%) | 6 (37.5%) | 4       | –        | –  |
|                                                                                                         | Boarding       |           |           | (25.0%) |          |    |
|                                                                                                         | Male           | 34        | 14        | –       | 10       | –  |
|                                                                                                         | Boarding       | (58.6%)   | (24.1%)   |         | (17.3%)  |    |
|                                                                                                         | Female         | 14        | 12        | 21      | 19       | –  |
|                                                                                                         | Boarding       | (21.2%)   | (18.2%)   | (31.8%) | (28.8%)  |    |



|                                                                                            |                         |               |               |               |               |   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---|
| Some learners exhibit aggressive and intimidating behavior toward newly admitted students. | Co-educational Day      | 18<br>(43.9%) | 12<br>(29.3%) | –             | 11<br>(26.8%) | – |
|                                                                                            | Co-educational Boarding | 7 (43.7%)     | 5 (31.3%)     | –             | 4<br>(25.0%)  | – |
|                                                                                            | Male Boarding           | 30<br>(51.7%) | 12<br>(20.7%) | 16<br>(27.6%) | –             | – |
|                                                                                            | Female s Boarding       | 7 (10.7%)     | 7 (10.7%)     | 17<br>(25.6%) | 35<br>(53.0%) | – |
| A portion of learners are involved in academic dishonesty during assessments.              | Co-educational Day      | 20<br>(48.8%) | 10<br>(24.4%) | –             | 11<br>(26.8%) | – |
|                                                                                            | Co-educational Boarding | 8 (50.0%)     | 6 (37.5%)     | –             | 2<br>(12.5%)  | – |
|                                                                                            | Male Boarding           | 30<br>(51.7%) | 17<br>(29.3%) | 5 (8.6%)      | 10.4%         | – |
|                                                                                            | Female s Boarding       | 12<br>(18.2%) | 15<br>(22.7%) | 20<br>(30.3%) | 19<br>(28.8%) | – |
|                                                                                            | Co-educational Day      | 14<br>(34.2%) | 16<br>(39.0%) | 5<br>(12.2%)  | 6<br>(14.6%)  | – |
|                                                                                            | Co-educational Boarding | 7 (43.7%)     | 5 (31.3%)     | –             | 4<br>(25.0%)  | – |

The discoveries highlight notable variations in the forms and frequencies of student disruptive behaviours across different school types: male boarding, female s' boarding, Co-educational day, and Co-educational boarding. Alcohol consumption is more prevalent in male boarding schools, where 65.5% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement. In contrast, only 12.1% of respondents in female s' boarding schools strongly agreed, while the majority (65.1%) disapproved. Co-educational day and Co-educational boarding schools reported moderate levels of agreement, indicating that alcohol use may be facilitated by external access and less supervision compared to closed boarding environments for female s.

Classroom disturbances due to noise are widespread among learners in male and co-educational boarding schools, with strong agreement by 74.1% and 62.5% of respondents respectively. This suggests a more relaxed or less enforced classroom discipline environment. Female s' boarding schools, however, showed a more balanced perception, with 40.9% undecided and 31.8% disapproving, suggesting better control or stricter adherence to classroom norms. Rudeness to instructors was reported predominantly in male' boarding schools (79.3% agreed or strongly agreed), indicating a potential disciplinary challenge with male learners. Female s' schools and Co-educational schools showed a higher proportion of undecided or disapproving respondents, reflecting either a lower frequency or a more subtle form of disrespect not easily captured.

When examining fighting among learners, over half of the participants in male boarding and female s' boarding schools remained undecided (58.6% and 50%, respectively), which may indicate that fights occur but are underreported or normalized. Co-educational day and Co-

educational boarding schools showed more active acknowledgment of fights, possibly due to Co-educational gender interactions or less effective supervision. Sneaking out to shopping centers is most prevalent in male' boarding schools (82.7% agree or strongly agree), suggesting poor gate security or greater student boldness. Female s' boarding schools show a higher rate of neutrality or disapproval, likely due to stricter control measures. Co-educational schools also recorded moderate to high agreement, pointing to accessibility and the possible influence of day scholars.

Bullying of new learners is significantly acknowledged in male' boarding (72.4% agreed or strongly agreed) and Co-educational schools. Female s' boarding schools, however, had the highest rate of disapproval (53%), reflecting a possible cultural or disciplinary difference in gendered approaches to initiation and student hierarchy. Examination cheating is most prevalent in male' boarding (81%) and Co-educational boarding schools (75%), suggesting a competitive or high-pressure environment. Female s' boarding schools showed more balanced responses, with 30.3% undecided and 28.8% disapproving, perhaps indicating a stronger culture of academic integrity or less access to cheating resources. The data reveals that male' boarding schools face the highest frequency of disruptive behaviours cases, especially in alcohol consumption, class disruptions, rudeness to instructors, and sneaking out. Females' boarding schools tend to exhibit more structured discipline, with lower agreement rates on problematic behaviors. Co-educational schools, particularly Co-educational day, show variability in behavior patterns, likely influenced by external exposure and less supervision.

#### **Administrative Methods of Curbing Disruptive behaviours**

The enquiry pursued to explore the administrative approaches used to alleviate disruptive behaviours in public secondary schools in Elgeyo Marakwet County. The discoveries were scrutinized and presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Administrative Approaches Used to Deter Disruptive behaviours**

| Statement                                                                                       | SA             | A             | U             | D             | SD            |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Manual work is commonly assigned to students exhibiting disruptive behavior.                    | 68<br>(37.6%)  | 74<br>(40.9%) | – (–)         | 6<br>(3.3%)   | 33<br>(18.2%) |
| Students who fail to finish their homework are tasked with supplementary assignments.           | 34<br>(18.8%)  | 74<br>(40.9%) | 23<br>(12.7%) | 17<br>(9.4%)  | 33<br>(18.2%) |
| Students exhibiting noise-related disruptive behavior are tasked with cleaning the classroom.   | 35<br>(19.3%)  | 66<br>(36.5%) | 14<br>(7.7%)  | 24<br>(13.3%) | 42<br>(23.2%) |
| Extension of preparation time is assigned to students who sleep during class preps.             | 32<br>(17.7%)  | 58<br>(32.0%) | 8 (4.4%)      | 26<br>(14.4%) | 57<br>(31.5%) |
| Students with behavioral infractions are subjected to kneeling on rocky terrain.                | 37<br>(20.4%)  | 31<br>(17.1%) | 9 (5.0%)      | 23<br>(12.7%) | 81<br>(44.8%) |
| Students with behavioral infractions are suspended as a corrective measure.                     | 61<br>(33.7%)  | 60<br>(33.1%) | 11<br>(6.1%)  | 20<br>(11.0%) | 29<br>(16.0%) |
| Parents are occasionally summoned to the school regarding their children's disruptive behavior. | 104<br>(57.5%) | 52<br>(28.7%) | 5 (2.8%)      | 8 (4.4%)      | 12<br>(6.6%)  |

|                                                                                                                             |               |               |          |               |               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|----------|---------------|---------------|
| Expulsion is imposed on students demonstrating extreme disruptive behavior.                                                 | 71<br>(39.2%) | 50<br>(27.7%) | 9 (5.0%) | 16<br>(8.8%)  | 35<br>(19.3%) |
| The Guidance and Counselling Department participates in the disciplinary committee to address cases of student misbehavior. | 20<br>(11.0%) | 63<br>(34.8%) | 2 (1.1%) | 85<br>(47.0%) | 11<br>(6.1%)  |

The discoveries presented in Table 2 reveal various administrative approaches engaged by authorities to deter disruptive behaviors among learners. The most reported strategy is assigning manual labor to learners who exhibit disruptive behaviors. This method is widely accepted, with a significant majority of respondents (78.5%) either strongly agreeing or agreeing that manual labor is used as a form of punishment. This reflects the continued reliance on physical tasks as corrective measures, possibly aimed at instilling discipline through engagement in productive activity.

Another common approach involves giving additional homework to learners who fail to complete their assignments. About 59.7% of respondents affirmed this practice, suggesting a preference for reinforcing academic responsibility through logical consequences. However, 27.6% either disapproved or strongly disapproved, indicating a level of inconsistency in its application or varying perceptions of its effectiveness.

Sweeping the class was identified as a punishment for learners who make noise during lessons, with 55.8% of respondents supporting this approach. Nonetheless, 23.2% strongly disapproved, raising concerns about the fairness or appropriateness of this method. A similarly Co-educational response was observed regarding learners who exhibit inattentiveness during self-study session being forced to extend their prep time. While 49.7% supported this measure, 45.9% were opposed, highlighting a lack of consensus and possible concerns about its practicality or impact on student well-being.

A particularly concerning finding is the reported use of physically punitive methods, such as forcing learners to kneel on rocky ground. This practice was strongly opposed by 44.8% of respondents, although 37.5% still supported it. The high level of disapproval suggests increasing awareness of children's rights and a rejection of inhumane disciplinary measures. Such practices are not only outdated but potentially harmful, both physically and psychologically.

Suspension was another disciplinary action frequently used, with 66.8% of respondents indicating that learners with disruptive behaviours cases are often suspended. This suggests that schools still rely on exclusionary discipline to manage severe behavior issues. While sometimes necessary, suspension can have adverse effects on learners' academic progress and social development if overused or not complemented with support measures.

Parental involvement emerged as a highly favored strategy, with an overwhelming 86.2% of respondents acknowledging that parental involvement is sought by the school in cases of disruptive behaviours. This reflects a collaborative approach to student behavior management, where schools recognize the importance of family engagement in resolving behavioral problems.

Expulsion was also reported as a response to severe disruptive behaviours, with 66.9% supporting this approach. While expulsion may be justified in extreme cases, its high frequency points to a need for preventive and rehabilitative measures to reduce its necessity. Such severe actions should ideally be a last resort after other interventions have failed. Surprisingly, the involvement of the guidance and counselling department in disciplinary matters was reported as limited. Only 45.8%

of respondents agreed that the counselling department plays a role in handling discipline cases, while 53.1% disapproved. This suggests an underutilization of a critical resource in behavior management. The counselling department has the potential to offer rehabilitative support, conflict resolution, and behavior modification programs, and its marginal role represents a missed opportunity to address disruptive behaviours more holistically.

In summary, the discoveries indicate a strong reliance on punitive and reactive disciplinary methods within schools, such as manual labor, suspension, and expulsion. While parental involvement is commendably high, the limited engagement of the counselling department signals a gap in implementing more supportive and rehabilitative approaches. Furthermore, the continued use of harsh and potentially abusive punishments, such as kneeling on rocky ground, highlights the urgent need for policy reforms and sensitization on child-friendly disciplinary practices. Schools are encouraged to adopt more constructive discipline strategies that emphasize guidance, rehabilitation, and respect for learners' rights.

### **Strategies Used by Counselors in the Management of Disruptive Behaviours**

The enquiry pursued to investigate tactics used by therapists to oversee disruptive behaviours.

**Table 3: Strategies Used by Counselors in the Management of Disruptive behaviours**

| Statement                                                                                                      | SA         | A          | U          | D          | SD         |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Learners receive individualized counseling services from the school counselor.                                 | 25 (13.8%) | 6 (3.3%)   | 24 (13.3%) | 65 (35.9%) | 62 (33.7%) |
| Learners exhibiting common behavioral concerns, participate in group counseling.                               | 48 (26.5%) | 17 (9.4%)  | 27 (14.9%) | 39 (21.6%) | 50 (27.6%) |
| Motivational interventions are offered to learners every term to foster positive attitudes and behaviors.      | 6 (3.3%)   | 8 (4.4%)   | 14 (7.7%)  | 68 (37.6%) | 85 (47.0%) |
| When necessary, parents are requested to attend school meetings to discuss their child's behavior or progress. | 24 (13.2%) | 13 (7.2%)  | 21 (11.6%) | 59 (32.6%) | 64 (35.4%) |
| Guidance and Counselling instructors provide essential support in addressing learners' behavioral issues.      | 28 (15.5%) | 22 (12.2%) | 8 (4.4%)   | 65 (35.9%) | 58 (32.0%) |
| Peer counseling enables students to contribute to the management of disruptive behaviors among their peers.    | 22 (12.2%) | 16 (8.8%)  | 8 (4.4%)   | 82 (45.3%) | 53 (29.3%) |

The discoveries presented in Table 3 on tactics engaged by therapist in the management of Disruptive behaviours reveal a generally low level of implementation and effectiveness of counseling-based strategies in overseeing disruptive behaviours among learners in educational institutions. The responses show that while some aspects of counseling are acknowledged, a predominant proportion of participants either disapprove or sturdily disapprove with the adequacy and consistency of counseling interventions.

To begin with, only a small proportion of respondents (17.1%) agreed that school counselors conduct individual counseling sessions for learners with disruptive behaviours cases, while a much larger percentage (69.6%) disapproved or strongly disapproved. This suggests that individualized attention and psychological support for learners exhibiting problematic behavior is minimal or not systematically offered. The low engagement in individual counseling points to either understaffing in the counseling departments or a lack of prioritization of psycho-social interventions within school discipline frameworks. Similarly, when asked whether learners with frequent occurrences such as are offered group-based interventions, only 35.9% of respondents agreed, while a notable 49.2% disapproved. Group counseling is an important tool for addressing behavioral issues that stem from shared experiences, such as substance abuse or peer influence. The lack of widespread implementation of this strategy suggests that schools may not be utilizing group therapy approaches to their full potential, thus missing an opportunity for peer-supported behavior change.

Even more concerning is the finding that motivational talks are not commonly conducted. Only 7.7% of respondents supported the claim that motivational talks are given termly to avert negative energy among learners, while a significant 84.6% ( $D = 37.6\%$ ,  $SD = 47.0\%$ ) disapproved. Motivational talks are crucial for inspiring learners, promoting positive behavior, and reinforcing values such as discipline, responsibility, and resilience. Their absence implies that schools may not be investing adequately in preventive psycho-educational programs. Regarding parental involvement in counseling, only 20.4% of respondents agreed that parents are invited for dialogue when the need arises, while 68.0% disapproved. This shows a critical gap in the collaboration between schools and families in addressing student disruptive behaviours. Engaging parents in counseling sessions and behavioral interventions has been shown to improve student outcomes significantly, and its limited application here is a matter of concern.

The discernment of the helpfulness of G&C instructors in handling disruptive behaviours is also relatively poor. Only 27.7% of respondents viewed the G&C instructors as profoundly advantageous, while 67.9% disapproved. This echoes a deficiency of self-assurance in the function or capability of these professionals, which may stem from insufficient training, limited resources, or lack of integration into the school's discipline systems. Finally, involving learners in the disruptive behaviours management through psychoeducational group sessions is also perceived as largely ineffective. Only 21% agreed that this strategy is practiced, while 74.6% disapproved or strongly disapproved. Peer counseling is known to be an effective method of behavior change, especially among adolescents, due to the influence of peer relationships. The limited use of peer counseling indicates that schools may not be fully leveraging peer influence as a corrective tool.

**Interview Guide**

Discoveries from counselors' interview schedule shown in Table 4.5.

**Table 4 Results of counselors' interviews**

|                                   |     | F<br>% |
|-----------------------------------|-----|--------|
| Guidance and counseling office is | Yes | 10     |
| 45.5                              |     |        |



|                                                |                          |           |
|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|
| Active                                         | No                       | 12        |
| 54.5                                           |                          |           |
|                                                | <b>Total</b>             | <b>22</b> |
|                                                | <b>100</b>               |           |
| Guidance and counseling is used in             | Yes                      | 13        |
| 59.1                                           |                          |           |
| the process of resolving disruptive behaviours | No                       | 9         |
| 40.9                                           |                          |           |
| cases                                          | <b>Total</b>             | <b>22</b> |
| <b>100</b>                                     |                          |           |
| Methods of dealing with disruptive behaviours  | Instructors' role models | 10        |
| 45.5                                           |                          |           |
| Cases                                          | Use of school rules      | 7         |
| 31.8                                           |                          |           |
|                                                | Guidance and counseling  | 5         |
| 22.7                                           |                          |           |
|                                                | <b>Total</b>             | <b>22</b> |
| <b>100</b>                                     |                          |           |
| Strategies of managing disruptive behaviours   | Conducting individual    | 3         |
| 13.7                                           |                          |           |
|                                                | counseling for learners  |           |
|                                                | Group counseling         | 6         |
| 27.3                                           |                          |           |
|                                                | Involvement of parents   | 8         |
|                                                | 36.4                     |           |
|                                                | Peer counseling          | 5         |
|                                                | 22.7                     |           |
|                                                | <b>Total</b>             | <b>22</b> |
|                                                | <b>100</b>               |           |

---

One of the counselors noted that, *“The counseling office in our school is not functional because it is a small day school with no designated private room for counseling sessions. I usually speak to students late in the evening after other teachers have left the staffroom. Moreover, I am not a professionally trained counseling teacher; I only rely on my limited experience to assist learners.”*

The enquiry discoveries publicized that 13 (59.1%) of the school therapists leveraged G&C in the governance of learners' disruptive behaviours within educational institutions. Conversely, 9 (40.9%) of the participants signposted that they did not dependent on G&C as an alternative approach to steering disruptive behaviours. Nonetheless, a noteworthy proportionate of instructors

accredited that, to a limited extent, they engaged G&C approaches to deter disruptive behaviour among secondary school learners.

The discoveries supplementary established that 10 (45.5%) of the participants conveyed that the utmost conjoint alternative technique for confronting learners' disruptive behaviour was through teachers acting as role models. Teachers were anticipated exhibiting exemplary conduct and moral character for learners to emulate. Conversely, surpassing a quarter, 6 (60%), of the counselors itemized that the use of teachers as role models did not result in immediate behavioural change and was therefore rarely applied in their schools. Even though many respondents agreed that they practiced this strategy, only a small proportion of teachers consistently modelled desired behaviour. One counselor remarked, *"Only a few teachers are true role models in our school. Some even support learners in wrongdoing. For instance, while teachers are prohibited from giving learners their phones, some still allow them to use the phones at inappropriate times."*

The results further indicated that more than a quarter, 7 (31.8%), of the teachers reported that the use of school rules was another common strategy for managing learners' disruptive behaviours. This demonstrates that school regulations played a significant role in promoting discipline among students.

Additionally, guidance and counselling teachers confirmed during interviews that various counselling approaches were used to address student misconduct. Group counselling was employed by 6 (27.3%) of the counsellors, while peer counselling was utilized by 5 (22.0%). Individual counselling was the least applied, as indicated by only 3 (13.7%) of the respondents. One teacher explained, *"Learners rarely attend individual counselling sessions unless they are referred by teachers or administrators because many believe that guidance and counselling is only meant for students with behavioural problems."*

Learners exhibiting disruptive behaviour were typically identified and referred by the guidance and counselling department. The identification process occurred through three main avenues: first, class teachers detected learners with behavioural or emotional issues and referred them for counselling. The findings thus suggest that teachers play a pivotal role in managing students' disruptive behaviours through the provision of guidance and counselling. This is because the guidance and counselling department, disciplinary committee, and career department were all composed of teachers.

### **Conclusions & Recommendations**

The study concluded that student disruptive behaviours is prevalent in most secondary schools in Elgeyo-Marakwet County. Common forms include alcohol use, bullying, fighting, and exam malpractice. Schools primarily rely on punitive measures like suspension and physical punishment, while supportive strategies such as counselling and peer programs are underutilized. Consequently, guidance and counselling services have not been effective. The study also highlighted continued use of corporal punishment despite legal prohibitions, indicating slow implementation of child protection laws. The discoveries suggest that counselling services in the sampled schools are significantly underutilized as tools for managing student disruptive behaviours. There is a strong reliance on punitive measures, with insufficient investment in preventive and supportive strategies such as individual counselling, group therapy, motivational talks, parental engagement, and peer counselling. This reveals a critical gap in the psychosocial support framework within the schools.

## Recommendations

The study recommends a comprehensive and inclusive approach to improving student discipline in secondary schools in Elgeyo-Marakwet County. Key strategies include adopting gender-specific interventions, particularly in male' schools where disruptive behaviours such as bullying and alcohol use are more prevalent. Schools are encouraged to replace punitive disciplinary methods with learner-friendly alternatives like mentorship, peer support, and open forums.

The study also emphasizes the need to strengthen guidance and counselling programs by hiring professionally trained counsellors capable of handling both individual and group issues. Motivational programs, including regular talks and seminars, should be institutionalized to reinforce positive behavior.

Parental involvement is another critical area, with schools urged to develop structures that actively engage parents in the discipline and counselling processes to ensure consistent support at home and school. Additionally, peer counselling and mediation programs should be expanded, especially in Co-educational and male' schools, to address classroom disruptions and promote positive peer influence.

Enhanced supervision in boarding schools is also necessary to curb behaviors such as sneaking out and bullying, through increased staff presence and tighter security controls. Lastly, instructors and administrator training is recommended to improve understanding and support for counseling as a core component of school discipline frameworks.

Overall, the recommendations propose a holistic, rehabilitative, and context-sensitive model for discipline management, prioritizing proactive engagement, collaboration, and student well-being.

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**The Contribution of African Sisters' Education Collaborative-Higher Education for Sisters in Africa to Quality Education of Sisters in Kenya**

**Authors:** <sup>1</sup>Susan Kajuju Thiruaine, <sup>2</sup>Beatrice Akinyi Origa

1&2 The Catholic University of Eastern Africa. Website: [www.cuea.edu](http://www.cuea.edu)

**Correspondence:** Susan Kajuju Thiruaine, Email [susanthiruaine06@gmail.com](mailto:susanthiruaine06@gmail.com),

Beatrice Akinyi Origa Email [beatriceoriga5@gmail.com](mailto:beatriceoriga5@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

This study examines the contribution of ASEC-HESA to quality education of sisters in Kenya and was guided by the following research questions; How does ASEC-HESA contribute to the academic and professional development of sisters, and how does ASEC-HESA Contribute to Quality Education of Sisters in Kenya? The study was grounded on the Human Capital Theoretical framework and employed Mixed Methods Research design utilizing Convergent Parallel Mixed-Methods Research methodology, employing descriptive survey research design under quantitative paradigm and phenomenology research design under a qualitative paradigm. The study targeted 2400 sisters. 30 sisters and 2 members of ASEC-HESA staff in Kenya were sampled using Probability and non-probability sampling techniques giving a sample size of 32 respondents. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected using structured questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. Validity of the data collection instruments was ensured through expert review while trustworthiness of qualitative data was established through triangulation. The reliability of quantitative data was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Qualitative data was analysed thematically and presented in narratives and direct quotes while descriptive statistics was used to analyze and present quantitative data. Key findings of the study: ASEC-HESA programs significantly enhance the academic qualifications and professional skills of sisters, enabling them to take on leadership roles and contribute to improved services in their communities, addressing critical needs in education, healthcare, and social services. In conclusion, ASEC-HESA plays a transformative role in empowering and equipping sisters adequately. The integration of academic, professional, and spiritual development ensures a holistic approach to education, benefiting both the individual sisters and their communities. This study recommends an increase of more sisters into the ASEC-HESA program and expanding partnerships with local and international institutions; provide additional resources such as local scholarships contributed by ASEC-HESA beneficiaries, their religious congregations, and promotion of the success stories of ASEC-HESA graduates.

**Keywords:** ASEC-HESA, Quality Education, Sisters-Kenya, Academic Development, Professional Development.

**Introduction**

**Background to the Study**

Globally, education is recognized as a cornerstone for individual and societal advancement, particularly for marginalized populations, serving as foundational infrastructure for job creation, poverty reduction, and improved health and equality (United Nations, 2015; World Bank, 2024). Consequently, according to (World Bank, 2024) despite advancements in school enrolment, significant learning disparities persist, especially in low and middle-income nations, underscoring the necessity of strategic investments in human capital. Within this context, the education of

women religious, or sisters, is crucial for their personal development, effective community service, and the broader impact of their congregations (Duffy, 2021). Contemporary research further highlights the holistic benefits of religious education, including enhanced resilience and mental health (Frontiers, 2025), and its alignment with Gender-Transformative Education (Transform Education, 2025) to empower women to challenge inequalities and foster just societies.

While ASEC-HESA is a major force in Africa, several other global organizations are actively supporting the education and empowerment of Catholic sisters across continents. Key foundations that support education for religious sisters and other programs include Conrad N. Hilton Foundation for Catholic Sisters Initiative which invests in education, leadership development, and lifelong well-being of sisters in over 100 countries, and Misesan Cara, an Irish faith-based missionary development movement, which Supports sisters working in marginalized communities through education, health, and human rights programs across more than fifty (50) countries. Other significant contributors are Missio (Germany) a Catholic missionary agency focused on sustainable pastoral and development work. It Supports sisters in initiatives for peace, reconciliation, and care for disadvantaged women and children, and Adveniat (Germany) which also funds sisters' work in education, healthcare, and community development. These organizations recognize the transformative role sisters play in their communities and invest in their education to multiply that impact.

In the African setting, where socio-economic challenges are prevalent, educated religious sisters play an increasingly vital role in addressing these issues through diverse ministries such as education, healthcare, and social services (Catholic Relief Services, 2023). Recent analyses consistently demonstrate their significant and evolving contributions, with symposia like CERRA-Africa (2025) specifically exploring education's role in poverty alleviation, personal, spiritual, and community development. This aligns with the understanding that formal education and professional training enhance sisters' skills, broaden their perspectives, and contribute to social, economic, and political progress across the continent, necessitating deliberate interventions for their inclusion in national development efforts (UN Women, 2025).

The African Sisters' Education Collaborative (ASEC) has emerged as a key facilitator, with its Higher Education for Sisters in Africa (HESA) program making a powerful impact well beyond Kenya. ASEC-HESA operates in 10 sub-Saharan African countries, where it supports Catholic women religious in accessing undergraduate and master's level education. These countries include: Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Nigeria, Ghana, Malawi, South Sudan, Lesotho, and Cameroon. These programs are often delivered through partnerships with African universities and online institutions in the United States, creating a wider pipeline for sisters to grow in leadership, education, and service.

In Kenya, according to the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops, (2020), religious sisters have historically been pivotal in providing essential services, particularly in education and healthcare, often reaching the underserved communities as highlighted by recent discussions on their roles in healthcare (Global Sisters Report, 2024). While scholarly focus on sisters' direct impact on education in Kenya is emerging (Ng'ang'a et al., 2023), the evolving societal needs mandate continuous academic and professional development for these sisters (Ministry of Education, Kenya, 2022; AOSK, 2025; Tangaza University).

Recognizing this critical need, initiatives supporting the higher education of religious sisters are instrumental in enhancing their capacity to lead, innovate, and deliver quality services within their

ministries (Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya, 2019; Santa Sabina College, 2020; Religions for Peace, 2024). Equally, the impact of ASEC-HESA in Kenya is well-documented, showcasing how it enables sisters to access undergraduate and master's level education, leading to significant personal and professional growth in areas such as computer literacy, financial management, leadership, and education administration (ASEC Kenya, n.d.; CERRA-Africa, 2025). This investment empowers sisters to become more effective agents of change and contribute to sustainable development, often through social entrepreneurship, blending business principles with social missions for resilient and impactful ministries (Petermann & Warner, 2020; Strathmore University Business School, 2024). Understanding the specific contributions of such programs to the quality of education received by sisters in Kenya is therefore essential for evaluating their impact and informing future initiatives.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the critical role Catholic sisters play in education, healthcare, and social services across Kenya, many of them face significant barriers to accessing quality higher education and professional development opportunities. These limitations hinder their ability to effectively serve their communities and contribute to national development goals. The African Sisters Education Collaborative (ASEC), through its Higher Education for Sisters in Africa (HESA) program, seeks to address this gap by providing Catholic women religious with access to undergraduate and graduate-level education through partnerships with universities in Africa and the United States (ASEC-SLDI, 2021).

However, while the HESA program has made notable strides serving over 2,490 sisters across Africa, with 44% studying in the field of education and 32% engaged in teaching ministries there remains a need to critically assess its impact on the academic and professional development of sisters in Kenya specifically. Furthermore, the extent to which HESA contributes to the quality of education delivered by these sisters in their ministries is not fully documented or understood (Global sisters report, 2020).

In Kenya, where sisters are often frontline educators and administrators in underserved regions, the effectiveness of HESA in enhancing their competencies, leadership capacities, and pedagogical skills is a vital concern. Evaluation reports indicate that 99% of HESA participants reported increased competency after completing reflective learning workshops, and 98% of alumnae found the program's workshops exceeded expectations. Yet, questions remain about the sustainability of these outcomes and their translation into improved educational quality for students under the sisters' care (AOSK, 2023).

Therefore, it is upon this backdrop that this study seeks to explore how the ASEC-HESA program contributes to both the academic and professional development of Catholic sisters in Kenya, and how this, in turn, influences the quality of education they provide. Addressing this problem is essential for informing future program design, policy decisions, and investment in religious women's education as a strategy for community transformation.

### **Research Question**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- i) How does ASEC-HESA contribute to the academic and professional development of sisters in Kenya?
- ii) How does ASEC-HESA Program Contribute to Quality Education of Sisters in Kenya?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in the Human Capital Theory, an economic theory that posits that education and training are critical investments in an individual's productive capacity. According to Becker (1993), individuals who acquire more education and skills are better equipped to contribute to economic growth and societal development. Although originally framed in terms of individual financial returns, Human Capital Theory has since been extended to various sectors, including health, education, and social development, making it applicable beyond purely economic considerations.

In the context of this study, the "capital" being invested in is the education of Catholic religious sisters through the ASEC-HESA (African Sisters Education Collaborative – Higher Education for Sisters in Africa) program. This investment is not aimed at personal monetary gain but rather at enhancing the capabilities and effectiveness of the sisters in their ministries. These ministries; such as education, healthcare, and social services play a crucial role in the well-being of communities across Kenya. Therefore, the returns on this educational investment are realized in the form of improved service delivery, greater leadership capacity, and more impactful social engagement.

By obtaining academic qualifications and professional skills through the ASEC-HESA program, the sisters are better equipped to address complex societal issues, including poverty, illiteracy, and inadequate healthcare, especially in marginalized and underserved areas. Education empowers them to take on leadership roles within their congregations and ministries, thereby extending their influence and effectiveness in promoting social justice and holistic human development.

Furthermore, Human Capital Theory, as extended by Schultz (1961), emphasizes the need for ongoing investment in education to keep pace with changing environments and emerging challenges. This is particularly relevant in the religious life, where the nature of service is increasingly influenced by social, technological, and economic transformations. In this regard, the ASEC-HESA program serves as a vital mechanism for continuous professional development, ensuring that religious sisters remain competent and responsive to the evolving needs of the communities they serve.

The study's focus on the impact of ASEC-HESA on the quality education of the sisters which facilitates service delivery thus aligns closely with the core tenets of Human Capital Theory. The knowledge, competencies, and leadership acumen acquired through higher education are expected to directly enhance the sisters' productivity not in an industrial sense, but in their effectiveness as agents of change and service. This enhanced productivity contributes not only to community well-being but also to the sustainability of the ministries they lead. In essence, the education of religious sisters through ASEC-HESA is a strategic investment in human capital that yields long-term social returns across Kenyan society.

### **Review of Related Literature**

#### ***The Contribution of ASEC-HESA to Academic and Professional Development of Sisters in Kenya***

The importance of education for women has been extensively documented, highlighting its positive impacts on individual empowerment, economic development, and societal progress. Within religious contexts, the education of women religious is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in enhancing their capacity for ministry and leadership. Programs like ASEC-HESA operate within this broader understanding of the transformative power of education.

Globally, research confirms that investments in the higher education of women religious yield significant returns in their ministries. A 2022 study by Johnson and Chen published in the *Journal of Religious Education* found that sisters with university degrees were more likely to initiate and lead community-based development projects, resulting in a higher success rate and greater sustainability. The study, which surveyed over 500 sisters across three continents, concluded that advanced academic qualifications directly correlate with improved project management and leadership capabilities.

A complementary study by Roberts (2023) in the *International Journal of Women's Leadership* further supports this by highlighting the unbroken glass ceilings that often exist for women in religious and academic leadership roles. Roberts' research, based on a survey of Catholic sisters globally, found that those with advanced degrees (Master's and Ph.D.) were more likely to be appointed to senior administrative and leadership positions within their congregations and religious organizations, demonstrating that formal education is a critical tool for overcoming institutional barriers to leadership. This aligns with the Human Capital Theory, which posits that education enhances an individual's productivity and capacity for leadership.

Focusing on the African context, the education of religious sisters is particularly salient given their significant contributions to various sectors in resource-constrained environments. A 2023 report by the African Women in Ministry Association (AWIMA), titled "Education as a Catalyst for Change," provided compelling evidence that higher levels of education among religious women in sub-Saharan Africa correlate with increased effectiveness in their ministries and enhanced ability to address complex social issues like poverty, disease, and gender inequality.

Furthermore, a 2024 case study by Omondi and Ng'ang'a, published in the *African Journal of Development Studies*, specifically analyzed the impact of higher education on sisters in East Africa. Their findings indicated that sisters who completed degree programs were more likely to assume leadership roles within their congregations and local communities. Similarly, a related study by Ofori (2025) on women's migration, religion, and education in Ghana, highlighted how mission-inspired institutions, such as the Agogo Presbyterian Women's College of Education, empower women through education. Ofori's work, which used qualitative research methods, revealed that access to formal education transformed the lives of young women, enabling them to become leaders in education and agents of social change in their communities. This resonates with the experience of women religious, whose educational advancements often have a ripple effect on the communities they serve.

In Kenya, the role of religious sisters in education, healthcare, and social services has a long and impactful history. The evolving landscape of these challenges necessitates that sisters have access to quality higher education to remain effective and relevant. For instance, in 2023, a study by the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA) highlighted that while religious sisters contribute significantly to national development, many lack the advanced qualifications required to effectively manage modern institutions and secure external funding.

Similarly, a 2024 thesis by Mutiso, focusing on the outcomes of the ASEC-HESA program in Kenya, provided specific empirical evidence. The research, which included interviews with program graduates and their superiors, revealed that the program led to significant enhancements in academic qualifications and professional skills. Graduates reported a newfound confidence in assuming leadership roles and a tangible improvement in their ability to design and implement effective service delivery strategies.

The study is further corroborated by a 2025 study by Shiroti, a HESA alumna, which investigated the program's societal impact. Her research, using a mixed-methods approach, found that HESA

alumnae are actively transforming their communities by initiating projects, fundraising, and founding small businesses. The study concluded that the education gained through HESA equips graduates with the skills and knowledge necessary to make a positive impact on those that they serve.

### ***Contributions of the ASEC-HESA Program to Quality Education of Sisters in Kenya***

The ASEC-HESA (Higher Education for Sisters in Africa) Program significantly contributes to the quality education of sisters in Kenya and across Africa by providing access to undergraduate and master's level education, thereby enhancing their professional skills, leadership capabilities, and capacity to serve their communities effectively. The program addresses the historical lack of post-secondary education among many women religious in Africa, empowering them to become impactful leaders in various ministries such as education, healthcare, social work, and administration. Through its multifaceted contributions to quality education of women religious, the program strongly aligns with the tenets of the Human Capital Theory. This theory posits that investments in education and training enhance an individual's productivity, skills, and knowledge, thereby increasing their economic value and capacity to contribute to the society.

Through Increased Access to Higher Education as Human Capital Investment, the program's core function is to provide access to diploma, bachelor's, and master's degrees for sisters who would otherwise face financial or logistical barriers. From a Human Capital perspective, this access represents a direct investment in the human capital of these women. In addition, by acquiring formal qualifications, the sisters are accumulating knowledge, cognitive abilities, and specialized skills that are valuable in the labor market (even if their "labor" is in service-oriented ministries). The "fully funded" aspect highlights the significant investment being made to build this human capital. (ASEC-SLDI, n.d.).

In the light of Enhanced Professional Skills and Leadership as Returns on Investment, the theory suggests that investments in human capital led to enhanced productivity and better performance. ASEC-HESA directly demonstrates this by equipping sisters with "advanced knowledge and practical skills relevant to their ministries," including improved teaching methodologies, administrative capabilities, financial management, and leadership skills. These enhanced professional skills are the direct returns on the educational investment. Graduates, as stated, are "better prepared to lead and manage educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and community development projects," signifying their increased capacity and value as human capital. (Global Sisters Report, 2024; ASEC-SLDI, n.d.).

The program has equally enhanced Strengthening Congregations and Communities through Human Capital Accumulation. The ripple effect of educated sisters returning to their communities aligns perfectly with the societal benefits emphasized by Human Capital Theory. When sisters, as highly skilled human capital, serve in vital roles, it leads to "improved services in various sectors." This demonstrates that the investment in individual human capital (the sisters) translates into collective human capital gains for the congregations and broader communities, leading to better quality education, healthcare, and social programs. The Global Sisters Report (2024) highlighting that ASEC "uplifts entire communities" by educating sisters underscores this broad societal return on human capital investment.

Additionally, Promotion of Sustainable Development through Enhanced Capabilities ensures the program's aim to empower sisters to contribute to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) further reinforces the Human Capital perspective. By enhancing the sisters' capabilities through education, they become more effective agents of change, directly addressing critical development challenges. This signifies that the investment in their human capital is a

strategic one for achieving broader societal and developmental objectives. (Global Sisters Report, 2024).

The program also employs Cultivating Servant Leadership as a Qualificative Enhancement of Human Capital: According to Awuor & Wafula, (2023) study, the findings indicate that the program fosters "a deeper understanding of servant leadership" and enables sisters to "lead with greater confidence, relational engagement, and a focus on community needs" points to a qualitative enhancement of human capital. While often difficult to quantify, these leadership attributes are crucial for effective service and community development, further increasing the value and impact of the sisters' human capital.

On the global perspective, Global Sisters Report (2024) though not a peer-reviewed empirical study, functions as a large-scale evaluation of the returns on human capital investment. The fact that ASEC has served "over 10,500 sisters across 10 countries" and enabled them to "improve the quality of education in schools, enhance healthcare services, and initiate development projects" provides compelling evidence of the widespread positive impact of investing in the sisters' education (their human capital). The emphasis on sisters working in "challenging and underserved areas" highlights how this human capital is strategically deployed where it can yield the greatest societal returns.

Regionally from the Association of Religious in Uganda (ARU) Conference (n.d.); the specific data indicates that "72 sisters have completed master's degrees and 129 bachelor's degrees", directly quantifies the human capital developed within that nation. Mother Dr. Speranza Namusisi's statement about the program's "significant impact on empowering sisters and fostering confident leaders capable of addressing Africa's complex challenges" is a qualitative assessment of the enhanced human capital. Furthermore, the "over \$19 million raised for community projects" and "positively impacting over 200 million people" represent the tangible, large-scale societal returns generated by the human capital developed through ASEC programs.

According to Awuor & Wafula, (2023) qualitative Study in Kenya provides granular evidence of the internal changes that occur as a result of human capital investment. The "enhancement of ministry abilities (academic, professional, congregational strengthening, spiritual), empowerment (self-confidence), and relational engagement (social interaction, self-awareness, leadership)" are all direct indicators of increased human capital. The conclusion that the program "profoundly influenced sisters' understanding of their lives as women religious and their view of themselves in ministry, ultimately fostering the concept of servant leadership" showcases how the educational investment transforms individuals into more effective, self-aware, and impactful human capital resources within their communities.

Therefore, it is evident that, ASEC-HESA Program is a wide example of how strategic investment in human capital, particularly through higher education, can yield significant individual and societal benefits. By providing access to education and fostering enhanced skills and leadership, the program empowers women religious to become highly effective agents of change, demonstrating the enduring relevance and predictive power of the Human Capital Theory in the context of development and social impact.

### Research Methodology

This study employed a Mixed Methods Research design, utilizing a Convergent Parallel Mixed-Methods Research methodology. The approach involved the concurrent collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, with the findings being merged and interpreted together to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Under the quantitative paradigm, a descriptive survey research design was used to gather numerical data on the academic and professional development of the sisters and their perceived impact on quality education and service delivery. This design allowed for the collection of data from a larger sample to identify patterns and trends. Under the qualitative paradigm, a phenomenology research design was employed to explore the lived experiences of the sisters regarding the influence of ASEC-HESA programs on their lives and vocations, particularly in balancing studies with religious life. This design aimed to provide rich, in-depth insights into the sisters' perspectives and the meaning they ascribe to their educational experiences.

The target population for this study comprised all 2400 sisters who have benefited from ASEC-HESA programs in Kenya. A sample size of 32 respondents was selected using both probability and non-probability sampling techniques. For Probability Sampling, a simple random sampling technique was used to select a representative sample of 30 sisters from the total population of beneficiaries to allow for generalizability of the quantitative findings. Using Non-Probability Sampling, Purposive sampling was used to select 2 key members of the ASEC-HESA staff running the program in Kenya. These individuals were chosen based on their in-depth knowledge of the program and its implementation.

Data was collected using structured questionnaires and Semi-Structured Interviews. The structured questionnaires were used to gather quantitative data from the sampled sisters on their academic and professional development, their roles in service delivery, and their perceptions of the program's impact. The questionnaires included closed-ended questions with Likert scale response options. Semi-Structured Interviews were also conducted with a subset of the sampled sisters to gather in-depth qualitative data on their experiences with the ASEC-HESA program. The interview guides also included open-ended questions to allow for rich and detailed responses.

Validity of the data collection instruments was ensured through expert review. Experienced researchers and professionals in the field of education and religious life reviewed the questionnaires and interview guides to assess their clarity, relevance, and content validity. Trustworthiness in the qualitative data was established through triangulation using multiple data sources interviews, and member checking. Consequently, reliability of the quantitative data was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951) to assess the internal consistency of the scales used in the structured questionnaires. A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.70 or higher is generally considered acceptable for research purposes.

Ethical concerns were addressed by seeking for permission to conduct the study from the relevant authorities, including the leadership of the religious congregations and the ASEC-HESA program administration in Kenya. Ethical principles were adhered to throughout the study for instance, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation and the confidentiality of their responses. Anonymity was also maintained in the reporting of the findings. The questionnaires were distributed to the sampled sisters, and arrangements were made for collecting data at convenient locations and times for the participants. Collected data was stored securely to protect the privacy of the participants.

Qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analysed thematically. This involved identifying recurring themes, patterns, and meanings within the data. The findings were presented in narratives and direct quotes to provide rich contextual understanding. Consequently, Quantitative data collected from the structured questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistic tables. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the characteristics of the sample and the responses to the questionnaire items.

### **Findings and Discussions**

This section presents findings according to the research questions of the study. Quantitative data is presented in Tables, and percentages, while qualitative data is presented in quotations. For qualitative data, direct quotes have been used to identify various participants and to conceal their names for anonymity. The authors have discussed the findings based on current discourse on the subject by recent scholars under each research question.

#### **The Contribution of ASEC-HESA to Academic and Professional Development of Sisters**

The first research question sought to establish the respondents' opinion on the contribution of ASEC-HESA to Academic and Professional Development of Sisters in Kenya. The results from the analysis of findings are illustrated in Table 1 based on a survey of 30 respondents.

**Table 1: *The Contribution of ASEC-HESA to Academic and Professional Development of Sisters in Kenya***

| <b>Academic and Professional Development of Sisters</b>                                                                   | <b>SD</b> |          | <b>D</b> |          | <b>N</b> |          | <b>A</b> |          | <b>SA</b> |          |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|
|                                                                                                                           | <b>F</b>  | <b>%</b> | <b>F</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>F</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>F</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>F</b>  | <b>%</b> |
| Financial assistance is provided to sisters to pursue various academic programs for personal and professional development | 0         | 00       | 0        | 00       | 2        | 6.7      | 19       | 63.3     | 9         | 30       |
| Workshops, seminars and other courses are provided to enhance sisters' skills                                             | 0         | 00       | 0        | 00       | 0        | 00       | 22       | 73.3     | 8         | 26.7     |
| There is provision of digital tools e.g laptops which facilitate access to online platform and technical assistance.      | 0         | 00       | 0        | 00       | 0        | 00       | 2        | 6.7      |           | 93.3     |
| Sisters take up leadership positions within their institutions, communities and other professions                         | 2         | 6.7      | 3        | 10       | 6        | 20       | 12       | 40       | 7         | 23.3     |
| The program provides sisters with mentors and opportunities to connect with peers and professionals                       | 0         | 00       | 0        | 00       | 0        | 00       | 12       | 40       | 18        | 50       |
| Sisters secure relevant jobs                                                                                              | 4         | 13.3     | 8        | 26.7     | 8        | 26.7     | 7        | 23.3     | 3         | 10       |
| There are challenges associated with balancing studies and the religious life                                             | 0         | 00       | 2        | 6.7      | 2        | 6.7      | 15       | 50       | 11        | 36.7     |
| <b>Valid N (list wise) = 30</b>                                                                                           |           |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |           |          |

**Source: Researchers (2025)**

### Key Findings

The researchers asked the respondents about their understanding on the contribution of ASEC-HESA to Academic and Professional Development of Sisters in Kenya. Findings from Table 1 shows a Strong Agreement on Support for Academic and Professional Development of sisters. For instance; on Financial Assistance: A combined 93.3% (63.3% Agree, 30% Strongly Agree) acknowledge that financial assistance is provided to sisters to pursue various academic programs, highlighting a substantial impact in this area. This finding therefore implies that the financial assistance for the sisters from the program is adequate. The sisters receive not only financial assistance on the tuition fees but also a small token for their stationery.

On Workshops and Skill Enhancement, a significant majority (73.3% Agree, 26.7% Strongly Agree). This indicates that workshops, seminars, and other courses provided by ASEC-HESA are highly effective in enhancing sisters' skills for professional development in this aspect which combines to a 100% agreement. These workshops and seminars also give a strong back up to the academic performance of the sisters.

The finding on the provision of digital tools like laptops and technical assistance is overwhelmingly seen as beneficial for facilitating access to online platforms, with 6.7% agreeing and 93.3% strongly agreeing, summing up to 100% agreement. Consequently, regarding sisters taking up leadership positions, 40% agree and 23.3% strongly agree giving a total percentage of 63.3% positive agreement. While this is a majority, 20% remain neutral and a combined 16.7% disagree or strongly disagree, indicating room for growth or varied experiences in leadership progression.

This finding equally resonates to Mentorship and Networking Opportunities with an impressive 90% (40% Agree, 50% Strongly Agree) affirming that the program effectively provides sisters with mentors and opportunities to connect with peers and professionals, indicating a strong support system for professional growth. This was further supported by the qualitative information stating that:

*“The program has been very effective in facilitating sisters’ academic and professional development. Sisters have been empowered to go through the learning system; they have acquired the relevant credits and stand a very competitive place in the society with the other professionals out there. The sisters have been empowered to offer services in the community in the society through the different professions that they have qualified in including health, education, and social ministry among others”*

However, the finding on the sisters' ability to secure relevant jobs after the program shows a more varied response. 23.3% agree and 10% strongly agree (summing up to 33.3% positive), while a substantial portion either disagree (26.7%) or strongly disagree (13.3%), and another 26.7% remain neutral. This suggests that job placement post-program might not be as consistently successful or universally perceived as other aspects. Alternatively, it could mean that some congregations may not be placing sisters to serve in the professions that they have trained for.

### The contribution of ASEC-HESA Program to Quality Education of Sisters in Kenya

The study also sought to establish the respondents' opinion on the Contribution of ASEC-HESA Program to Quality Education of Sisters in Kenya. The results from the analysis of the findings are illustrated in Table 2. The data is based on responses from 30 participants.

**Table 2: The Contribution of ASEC-HESA Program to Quality Education of Sisters**

| Quality Education of Sisters in Kenya                                                                          | SD |      | D  |      | N |      | A  |      | SA |      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|------|----|------|---|------|----|------|----|------|
|                                                                                                                | F  | %    | F  | %    | F | %    | F  | %    | F  | %    |
| Successful completion of programs.                                                                             | 0  | 00   | 0  | 00   | 9 | 30   | 14 | 46.7 | 7  | 23.3 |
| Attainment of relevant degrees                                                                                 | 0  | 00   | 0  | 00   | 0 | 00   | 15 | 50   | 15 | 50   |
| Sisters apply their knowledge and skills to address societal needs                                             | 0  | 00   | 3  | 10   | 8 | 26.7 | 11 | 36.7 | 8  | 26.8 |
| Sisters have no challenges in coping with religious life demands, ministry and studies                         | 8  | 26.7 | 10 | 33.3 | 5 | 16.7 | 5  | 16.7 | 2  | 6.7  |
| There are agreement and collaboration with universities and colleges in Kenya to facilitate sisters' education | 0  | 00   | 0  | 00   | 2 | 6.7  | 17 | 56.7 | 11 | 36.7 |
| <b>Valid N (list wise) = 30</b>                                                                                |    |      |    |      |   |      |    |      |    |      |

**Source: Researchers (2025)**

The findings from this table on the first item, indicates that, a significant majority of the sisters expressed successful completion of programs, with 46.7% agreeing and 23.3% strongly agreeing, summing up to 70% agreement. However, 30% remained neutral, suggesting a potential area for further understanding or varied experiences. This could also be as a result of delay on the part of sisters under the post graduate programs in conducting research upon completion of coursework. In this case the delay therefore lies on the particular sister and her congregation.

There is also an overwhelming agreement that the ASEC-HESA program contributes to the attainment of relevant degrees, with an equal split of 50% agreeing and 50% strongly agreeing, resulting in a 100% positive perception in this area. This highlights a core strength of the ASEC-HESA program in facilitating academic qualifications and quality education to sisters. Qualitative analysis on the attainment of relevant degrees for quality education was affirmed by the respondent who noted that;

*“The program has seen mass qualification and graduation of sisters attaining relevant degrees and have delved into the job market in the society. The program has produced sisters in various professions including Administrators, health workers like nurses, lawyers, teachers, catechists and many others. We have a sister who was recognized for her active participation on the aspect of impacting the nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through their studies, sisters have also been so creative in many and impactful ways in the society”.*

On assessing the Impact of sisters on Societal Needs and Holistic Development, a significant proportion of sisters believe that they apply their knowledge and skills to address the societal needs, with 36.7% agreeing and 26.8% strongly agreeing, hence a total of 63.5% positive perception. This underlines the program's perceived success in empowering the sisters to make a broader impact. Likewise, the program's facilitation of the holistic development of sisters (intellectually, spiritually, socially, and professionally) is highly affirmed, with 46.6% agreeing and 53.4% strongly agreeing, leading to a strong 100% positive agreement response. This suggests that the program is seen as contributing broadly to the sisters' overall growth in facilitating quality education.

Assessing the agreement and collaboration with universities and colleges in Kenya to facilitate sisters' education is also highly recognized, with 56.7% agreeing and 36.7% strongly agreeing, giving a total of 93.4% agreement. The qualitative respondents further opined that;

*“ASEC-HESA collaborates with various universities and colleges which offer credits to the sisters at various levels both locally and globally. On the global level, the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya made a collaborative partnership with Rosemont University in the United States of America (USA) in which the ASEC- Sponsored Sisters take some courses during their first year of enrolment for the various courses. The credits are then transferred to the Catholic University in Kenya upon the transfer of the sisters from Rosemont University from the second year of their study to the Catholic University of Eastern Africa in Kenya. This process is successfully facilitated by the ASEC-HESA linkages office at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa in Kenya. In addition, ASEC also has partnership with other universities including Tangaza University and Chemichemi Ya Uzima Institute both of which offer various courses and credits to Sisters”.*

The researcher also sought the views of sisters on the Challenges in Balancing Religious Life, Ministry, and Studies. From the findings, a considerable number of respondents (26.7% strongly disagree, 33.3% disagree) indicate that sisters do face challenges in coping with religious life demands, ministry, and studies. This is a critical finding, with a combined 60% negative perception on this statement. This directly contrasts with the statement that sisters have no challenges, indicating that these challenges are indeed present and significant for the sisters, aligning with a similar finding in Table 1.

*“From my perspective, we have not addressed such challenges and I’m not aware of any challenges that the sisters have experienced in the course of their study in relation to balancing their studies, ministry and living out their call to religious life. Most important is to understand that the program is meant to empower the sisters to be more resourceful and impactful in their ministries and their area of apostolate of assignment by the congregation. However, there has been a few challenges on balancing work and religious life for only a few postgraduate students, but it’s not a major challenge. However, for the undergraduate students, any challenge is personal because they are offered full time for studies by their respective congregations. Therefore, as a program, we cannot justify any challenge among the sisters related to the balancing of studies and religious life”.*

## Discussion of the Findings

### *The Contribution of ASEC-HESA to Academic and Professional Development of Sisters.*

The first research question of the study sought to determine the contribution of ASEC-HESA to academic and professional development of sisters. The findings of the study provide compelling evidence for the significant contribution that ASEC-HESA program has to the academic and professional development of sisters in Kenya. For instance, the enhancement of academic qualifications and professional skills directly empowers the sisters to become more effective leaders and service providers, which perfectly aligns with the principles of Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993).

This study is thus in agreement with a study by Roberts (2023) in the International Journal of Women's Leadership which supports the finding by highlighting the unbroken glass ceilings that often exist for women in religious and academic leadership roles. Roberts' research, based on a survey of Catholic sisters globally, found that those with advanced degrees (Master's and Ph.D.) were more likely to be appointed to senior administrative and leadership positions within their congregations and religious organizations, demonstrating that formal education is a critical tool for overcoming institutional barriers to leadership.

This finding equally corresponds with a 2024 case study by Omondi and Ng'ang'a, published in the African Journal of Development Studies, that specifically analyzed the impact of higher education on sisters in East Africa. Their findings indicated that sisters who completed degree programs were more likely to assume leadership roles within their congregations and local communities. Therefore, by investing in the sisters' education, ASEC-HESA is not only benefiting the individual sisters but also strengthening the capacity of religious congregations to address critical the societal needs in Kenya.

The findings on the study regarding sisters taking up leadership positions, received a 63.3% positive agreement, while a few 20% remained neutral and a combined 16.7% disagree or strongly disagree, indicating room for growth or varied experiences in leadership progression. The data highlights a paradox of progress with a strong majority in supports that sisters take up leadership roles upon completion of the various degrees and at varied levels. However, a notable minority holds a different view, which may stem from deeply ingrained congregational norms or otherwise. This suggests that simply having the numbers in favor isn't enough; however, addressing the underlying reasons for neutrality and disagreement is crucial for achieving the ASEC-HESA program goals and objectives in leadership. Similarly, the uptake of leadership positions, while predominantly positive (63.3% combined agreement), still shows a notable proportion of neutrality (20%) and disagreement (16.7%) as indicated above. This means that leadership progression, while facilitated, may not be a uniform experience for all participants.

The findings of the study are in agreement with a 2024 thesis by Mutiso, focusing on the outcomes of the ASEC-HESA program in Kenya. The research, which included interviews with program graduates and their superiors, revealed that the program led to significant enhancements in academic qualifications and professional skills. Graduates reported a newfound confidence in assuming leadership roles and a tangible improvement in their ability to design and implement effective service delivery strategies.

The study is further corroborated by a 2025 study by Shiroti, a HESA alumna, which investigated the program's societal impact. Her research, using a mixed-methods approach, found that HESA alumnae are actively transforming their communities by initiating projects, fundraising, and

founding small businesses. The study concluded that the education gained through HESA equips graduates with the skills and knowledge necessary to make a positive impact on those that they serve.

Further, the findings present a more varied picture concerning sisters securing relevant jobs. While a combined 33.3% reported positive outcomes (23.3% agree, 10% strongly agree), a substantial 40% expressed disagreement (26.7% disagree, 13.3% strongly disagree), and 26.7% remained neutral. This suggests that while some graduates find relevant employment, job placement is not as consistently successful or universally perceived as degree attainment. This disparity could be influenced by various factors, including the job market, specific fields of study, or individual circumstances.

In a nutshell, the reported improvement in service delivery across education, healthcare, and social services highlights the tangible impact of the ASEC-HESA program on Kenyan communities. Educated sisters are better equipped to address complex challenges, implement evidence-based practices, and advocate for the needs of the marginalized populations they serve. This observation is in line with a report from the Catholic Relief Services, (2023).

### ***Contribution of ASEC-HESA Program to Quality Education of Sisters in Kenya***

The second premise of the study was to find out the contribution of ASEC-HESA program to quality education of sisters in Kenya. The findings from Table 2 and the accompanying analysis illustrate contributions of the ASEC-HESA program to the quality education of Sisters in Kenya, while also highlighting areas that warrant further consideration. The data strongly indicate the program's efficacy in facilitating academic achievement and holistic development, yet reveal concerns regarding post-graduation employment and the a few other challenges. These finding resonates with a study according to Awuor & Wafula (2023) conducted in Kenya. This qualitative study provides granular evidence of the internal changes that occur as a result of human capital investment on religious sisters.

A significant strength of the ASEC-HESA program is its demonstrable success in program completion and degree attainment. The data show that a combined 70% of sisters reported successful completion of programs (46.7% agreeing, 23.3% strongly agreeing), with only 30% remaining neutral. This neutrality, while present, does not negate the strong positive trend. More notably, there is an overwhelming consensus regarding the attainment of relevant degrees, with 100% of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing (50% each category). This observation underscores the program's core objective of academic empowerment, aligning with the qualitative assertion that the program "has seen mass qualification and graduation of sisters attaining relevant degrees." The diverse professional fields mentioned, such as administration, healthcare, law, and education, further validate the program's breadth and the sisters' successful integration into various sectors post-graduation.

The program's contribution to societal impact and the holistic development of sisters is highly affirmed. A significant majority (63.5%) believe they apply their knowledge and skills to address societal needs (36.7% agreeing, 26.8% strongly agreeing), underlining the program's perceived success in empowering sisters to contribute to broader community well-being. This is further reinforced by the perfect 100% agreement on the program's facilitation of holistic development intellectually, spiritually, socially, and professionally. This strong affirmation highlights the program's comprehensive approach to personal and professional growth, suggesting that it provides a well-rounded educational experience beyond mere academic qualifications for quality education.

A critical finding, contrasting with the program's overall successes, pertains to the challenges sisters face in balancing religious life demands, ministry, and studies. A considerable 60% of respondents (26.7% strongly disagree, 33.3% disagree with the statement that they have *no* challenges) indicate that these challenges are indeed present and significant. This directly contradicts the perspective from the qualitative data, which suggests that "as a program, we cannot justify any challenge among the sisters related to the balancing of studies and religious life," and that "any challenge is personal" for undergraduates. The discrepancy between the high percentage of sisters reporting challenges and the program's perception of these challenges as minimal or personal warrants closer examination. While the program aims to empower sisters for ministry, the concurrent demands of religious life and rigorous academic pursuits appear to create genuine difficulties for a substantial proportion of participants, particularly for postgraduate students where "a few challenges on balancing work religious life" were acknowledged. This misalignment highlights a crucial area for support and intervention.

### Summary of Major Findings

The integration of academic, professional, and spiritual development ensures a holistic approach to education, benefiting both the individual sisters and their communities. In conclusion, ASEC-HESA plays a transformative role in empowering sisters in Kenya, equipping them with the skills and knowledge needed to address societal challenges effectively. The program aligns with the Human Capital Theoretical framework by investing in the education of sisters, which in turn enhances their productivity and contributions to the society.

On overall, the findings strongly suggest that ASEC-HESA plays a vital and highly effective role in the academic and professional development of sisters. The program is widely perceived as providing crucial resources, opportunities, and support mechanisms, including financial aid, skill-building workshops, digital tools, educational partnerships, and mentorship. The high percentages in the "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" categories across most indicators underscore the program's perceived success and positive impact. However, it is also evident that the challenge of balancing studies with religious life remains a significant consideration for the sisters, despite the support provided. This highlights a potential area for further exploration or tailored support within the ASEC-HESA program.

In addition, the ASEC-HESA program is largely perceived as highly effective in contributing to the quality education of sisters in Kenya, particularly in facilitating successful program completion and the attainment of relevant degrees. The program is also seen as instrumental in enabling sisters to apply their knowledge to societal needs and fostering their holistic development.

However, the findings also highlight areas that may require further attention. Majority of sisters perceive positive outcomes in job security and leadership roles, however, there is a noticeable percentage of neutral or negative responses, suggesting that these outcomes might not be as consistent or universally experienced. Most importantly, the data strongly indicates that balancing the demands of religious life, ministry, and studies remains a significant challenge for the sisters, despite the program's contributions. This suggests a need for continued or enhanced support mechanisms to address these specific pressures and ensure a more seamless educational journey for the sisters.

Additionally, the ASEC-HESA program significantly contributes to the quality education of Sisters in Kenya by ensuring successful program completion (70% agreement) and universal

attainment of relevant degrees (100% agreement), validating its core educational objective. Facilitating comprehensive intellectual, spiritual, social, and professional growth for all sisters (100% agreement). Empowering a majority of sisters (63.5% agreement) to apply their skills to address societal needs. Showing varied success in job security (33.3% positive, 40% negative, 26.7% neutral) and leadership roles (63.3% positive, 16.7% negative, 20% neutral). A substantial 60% of sisters experience difficulties balancing religious life, ministry, and studies, a finding that contrasts with the program's perceived minimal impact on this area.

### **Conclusions of the Study**

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the ASEC-HESA program plays a transformative role in empowering sisters in Kenya by equipping them with the skills and knowledge needed to address societal challenges effectively. The program's focus on academic and professional development, coupled with its support for balancing religious life with studies, contributes significantly to the quality of education received by the sisters and their subsequent contributions to their communities. The findings strongly support the application of the Human Capital Theoretical framework in understanding the impact of investing in the education of religious sisters.

ASEC-HESA programs significantly enhance the academic qualifications and professional skills of sisters, enabling them to take on leadership roles in education and community service. Sisters find a balance between their academic pursuits and religious commitments, with the program fostering spiritual growth alongside professional development. Graduates contribute to improved service delivery in their communities, addressing critical needs in education, healthcare, and social services. However, while the program is impactful, challenges such as limited resources, cultural expectations, and balancing academic and religious life are also noted. The key findings were summarized in frequency tables followed by brief interpretation.

### **Recommendations of the Study**

This study recommends an increase of more sisters into the ASEC-HESA program and expansion of partnerships with local and international institutions provision of additional resources such as local scholarships contributed by ASEC-HESA beneficiaries and their Religious Congregations for the continuity of the scholarship program. The study also recommends promotion of the success stories of ASEC-HESA graduates to walk the talk of ASEC-HESA to attract more support and funding for the program.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed: Strengthening Resource Mobilization such that efforts should be intensified to secure more resources for the ASEC-HESA program to expand its outreach and provide more comprehensive support to participating sisters. Secondly, addressing cultural expectations should be key to the program. Strategies should be developed to address any cultural expectations that may hinder a sisters' access to or success in higher education, potentially through community engagement and advocacy. In addition, the study recommends that continued and enhanced support systems should be put in place to help the sisters to effectively balance their academic responsibilities with their religious duties, including mentorship programs and flexible study options.

### Recommendations for Further Studies

Based on these findings, the following recommendations for further studies are proposed:

1. To undertake a longitudinal study to track the career trajectories, job attainment rates, and leadership progression of ASEC-HESA program graduates over a longer period. This would provide more definitive data on the program's long-term impact on employment and leadership roles, particularly addressing the mixed responses observed in the current study.
2. To conduct a qualitative study using interviews or focus groups with sisters to explore the specific nature, causes, and coping mechanisms related to balancing religious life, ministry, and studies. This would provide richer insights into the 60% who report challenges, helping to understand the nuances and propose targeted support strategies.

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## The Role of Consecrated Women in Integral Formation in Africa

Sr. Dr. Lilian Adhiambo Peter<sup>1</sup>, Rev. Dr. Patrick Ekpada Taiye,<sup>2</sup>

Email: [adiambo201477@gmail.com](mailto:adiambo201477@gmail.com)

<sup>1</sup> Tangaza University, Institute of Spirituality and Religious Formation, Nairobi, Kenya

<sup>2</sup> Tangaza University, Institute of Spirituality and Religious Formation, Nairobi, Kenya

### Abstract

This study explores the vital role of consecrated religious women in the holistic formation of individuals and communities in Africa. Rooted in the African context, holistic formation refers to the integrated development of the human person which includes the spiritual, moral, intellectual, emotional, and social aspects. Consecrated religious women, through their charisms and apostolic missions, contribute significantly to this multidimensional growth, particularly in education, healthcare, social justice, and pastoral care. The study was guided by the following objectives: To examine the role of consecrated religious women in holistic formation in African. To analyze the impact of consecrated religious women in promoting holistic formation in Africa. To assess the challenges of consecrated religious women in promoting holistic formation in Africa. To identify the available opportunities for consecrated religious women in implementing holistic formation. The study employed meta-analysis of the past literatures on the role of consecrated religious women in holistic formation in Africa. The study was guided by Paulo Freire's Theory of Critical Pedagogy, which perceives education as a practice of freedom and a tool for social transformation. This theory supported an understanding of formation as a dialogical, empowering, and community-oriented process, resonating with the mission of consecrated women in Africa. The study emphasized on the transformative and liberative dimensions of holistic formation led by consecrated religious women in Africa. The findings aim to highlight their role, impact, challenges, and opportunities available in Africa for consecrated religious women to promote holistic formation. This research contributes to broader discussions on gender, spirituality, and socio-cultural transformation in Africa.

**Keywords:** Consecrated women, integral formation, Africa, pedagogy, human development.

### Introduction

The African continent, rich in cultural, social, and spiritual diversity, continues to face various developmental challenges. Amidst these, the role of religious actors, particularly consecrated women, has been pivotal in addressing the multifaceted needs of communities. Consecrated women, through their commitment to religious life and service, contribute significantly to holistic formation. Consecrated women in Africa have long played a pivotal role in shaping the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and social development of individuals and communities. Rooted in deep religious convictions and the charisms of their Congregations, these women serve not only as spiritual mentors but also as educators, healthcare providers, community developers, and advocates for justice and peace. The aim of this paper is to explore the multifaceted role of consecrated women in integral formation within the African context. This formation encompasses spiritual, intellectual, moral, emotional, and social development. This paper explores the indispensable role consecrated women play in holistic formation across Africa, the challenges they face and the opportunities available in enhancing their contribution in transforming lives in Africa.

### Background of the Study

Rospigliosi (2022) argues that Africans have been and are the men and women who have colonized an especially hostile region of the world on behalf of the entire human race. That has been their chief contribution to history. It is why they deserve admiration and support. The central theme of African history is the peopling of the continent, the achievement of human co-existence with nature, the building up of enduring societies and their defence against aggression from more favoured regions. In the view of Meredith (2021), during the scramble for Africa, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European powers staked claims to virtually the entire continent. In other cases, Europe's new colonial territories, enclosed hundreds of diverse and independent groups with no common history, culture, language or religion.

In the concluding act of partitioning, the imperial power set out to take over some parts of Africa and incorporated them to the British empire. This left a legacy of bitterness and hatred among Africans that endured for generations. The British military destroyed several farmsteads, razing villages to the ground and slaughtering livestock on a massive scale reducing Africans to impoverished continent (Meredith, 2021). In response to the cry of the African people and the marginalized globally, *Vita consecrata*, emphasizes the significance of consecrated life in the Church, rooted in the example and teaching of Jesus Christ. He highlighted the role of consecrated persons in living out the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience making visible the kingdom of God in the world and serving as a sign of God's presence. The Pope invites consecrated religious women and men to deepen their love for Christ and the Holy Spirit and the Father to actively participate in evangelization through proclamation and service.

According to Cimperman (2020), religious men and women are continually being called as they walk together with open hearts to respond to the cries of the humanity, especially, the marginalized. This invitation is to wake up the world, particularly the developing countries, in which Africa is included. The consecrated religious women are reminded to read the signs of the times, see life in God intimately and intricately become connected to a life concerned for the global society. Religious orders of consecrated women are born in response to God's call and in response to a particular context. Therefore, consecrated religious women can continue to live and evolve only in particular local and global contexts. James (2020), explains further that, Charisms as the gift of the Holy Spirit to each order of consecrated women, serves, not only as a founding impulse but continually moves a Congregation to respond to the calls and cries of God in the world. The love of God and neighbor link the responses of consecrated religious women in Africa and beyond to respond to God's will, being guided by the same Holy Spirit. One of the ways in which consecrated religious women respond to God is through holistic formation through education.

As observed by Afolayan (2021), integral formation refers to an integrative approach to human development that encompasses physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual dimensions. In Africa, where socio-economic challenges and cultural complexities abound, the contribution of consecrated women in this domain has been profound. Historically, religious women have been instrumental in providing education, healthcare, and social services, often in remote and underserved areas. Their dedication stems from a deep sense of mission and a commitment to embodying the values of the Gospel in tangible ways.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Religious women in Africa and beyond undergo vigorous integral or holistic formation which conform their will and character to that of our Lord Jesus Christ who was formed spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, intellectually and socially. Through their thorough preparation they are equipped with skills for various apostolates such as health care, education, social work, youth and social ministry as well as any relevant ministry in the church. Despite their significant contributions, the role of consecrated women in holistic formation is often under-recognized and inadequately supported. There is a lack of systematic documentation and critical analysis of their impact, which leads to underutilization of their potential in the broader development agenda of the continent. Moreover, they face numerous challenges, including limited resources, gender discrimination, and societal undervaluation. Religious vocation being a divine calling for personal and societal transformation, with the objective of touching hearts teaching minds and transforming lives. There is a need to empower, support and document the roles or various activities done by the sisters across the globe, particularly in Africa to allow holistic formation of humanity through direct engagement of the person, people or indirectly by reading the documentations of religious women according to their charism. This will also assist in the promotion of vocation to religious life and to marriage life for the church. Therefore, this study is vital because through its findings and recommendations, it will help in identifying the existing gaps for future research and offer possible and practical solutions to challenges facing religious life today in Africa.

### **Broad Objective**

The broad objective of this study is to examine the role of consecrated women in promoting integral formation in Africa, with the aim of understanding their impact, the challenges they face, and the opportunities available to enhance their contribution.

### **Research Objectives**

The current study will be guided by the following research objectives:

- i. To explore the role of consecrated women in promoting integral formation in Africa.
- ii. To examine the impact of integral formation by consecrated women in Africa.
- iii. To assess the challenges faced by consecrated women in integral formation in Africa.

### **Research Questions**

- i. What is the role of consecrated women in promoting integral formation in Africa?
- ii. What is the impact of integral formation by consecrated women in Africa?
- iii. What are the challenges faced by consecrated women in integral formation in Africa?

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Paulo Freire Theory and the Idea of Critical Pedagogy**

According to Peter and Paulo (2023), Paulo Freire (1921–1997) was a champion of what's known today as critical pedagogy: the belief that teaching should challenge learners to examine power structures and patterns of inequality within the status quo. Freire emphasized how important it is to recall what it is to be human and emphasized on education as a way to transform oppressive structures. His perspective stemmed from the values of love, care, and solidarity. In his famous

book, pedagogy of the oppressed, Freire talks about becoming an act of deposit. He calls this the banking concept of education which is his admittedly bleak way of saying that learners are not actively participating in their learning in problem posing or interacting but are expected to receive, memorize and repeat information. This approach has a disempowering effect on learners and can create misuse of power. In this scenario, the teacher is all knowing, kindly bestowing their knowledge on to those considered ignorant. As observed by Gomes (2022), Freire's antidote to this dehumanizing approach because of the impact it has on the learner. Critical thinking and pedagogy that encourage participation. Freire emphasized the collaborative, social nature of learning. He called for careful consideration of the power dynamic between teacher and learner so that learning is a joint venture instead of something more authoritarian. Learners should think critically about things they read, see and hear and they can identify inequality or injustice. A learner with critical consciousness can frame questions around issues and look for possible answers because they have language which asks: is this fair? Was that just? Was there equality? Encourage active enquiry and curiosity-lead participation: Freire believed that by preventing active inquiry in classrooms, you deny learners the opportunities for growing up into mature autonomous people who critically reflect on their world to make it a better place (Nkealah and Simango, 2023).

### **The Strength of Paulo Freire Theory**

In view of Peter and Paulo (2023), dialogue and praxis are core elements of education, where teachers and learners engage in a reciprocal exchange of ideas. Dialogue with praxis, brings the integration of reflection and action, allowing learners to apply their critical understanding to real world problems and strive for social change. Another benefit of this theory as observed by Grey and Lauren (2024), is social justice and equity. Freire's work is rooted in the belief that education can be a powerful tool for social transformation and liberation. His pedagogy aims to empower marginalized communities and promote a more just and equitable society. This theory also noted that, the teacher is both a facilitator and a co-learner. Freire's approach shifts the role of the teacher from a dispenser of knowledge to a facilitator of dialogue and critical inquiry. The teacher and learners are seen as co-creators of knowledge, working collaboratively to explore complex issues. The focus on collective struggle and solidarity is important in challenging oppression. His pedagogy encourages learners to work together to create a more just and equitable world Peter and Paulo (2023). According to the researcher, Freire's theory and the idea of critical pedagogy, is applicable in integral formation for consecrated women because it promotes dialogue, solidarity and critical thinking which enhances problem solving and self-sustainability in Africa and beyond.

### **The Weaknesses of Paulo Freire Theory**

Though Paulo Freire's Theory has several contributions to education, Grey and Lauren (2024), explain that, some of the drawbacks of Freire's theory. Firstly, among Freire's theoretical drawbacks is the banking model criticism: where teachers deposit knowledge passively and students are expected to memorize and regurgitate information, while a valid point, may be seen as too simplistic and not always applicable in all educational settings. Besides, Knoetze (2022), has also identified lack of engagement with feminist's perspective. Critics, particularly feminists, have pointed to Freire's limited engagement with feminist's perspective and his potentially gender insensitive language. Additionally, overemphasis on political agenda, Freire is centred on social justice and challenging oppressive structures. Scholars argue that, this focus can overshadow other educational goals, potentially neglecting individual development and subject expertise. The researcher argues that, despite the drawbacks of Paulo Freire Theory such as the banking model and lack of engagement with feminist's perspective, the same theory recognises the pronounced

role of the teacher and the learner as co-workers, in which each has the duty to carry out substantial research on the subject matter in each curriculum. It also promotes critical thinking and commitment as well as teamwork information (AMA Journal of Ethics, 2025).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Integral formation refers to an integrative approach to human development that nurtures every dimension of a person. In the African context, where communal life and spirituality are deeply embedded in societal norms, formation is not limited to academic education but extends to moral uprightness, emotional resilience, social responsibility, and spiritual maturity (Olisaemeka, 2024). To guide this study, Paulo Freire's Theory of Critical Pedagogy is employed. Freire advocates for an educational practice that is liberative and transformative, enabling learners to become critical thinkers and agents of change. This theory aligns with the work of consecrated women in Africa, who empower individuals and communities through education, advocacy, pastoral care, and social outreach. According to Wirth (2022), undoubtedly, the problem of education and formation concerns every dimension of the human being. Everything is connected, interdependent and ordered to precise, transcendent ends in the human individual. Integral formation insists on love of God and of the neighbor through needs. Integral formation perceives Man as the perfection of the universe and the Spirit is the perfection of man and love as the product of an integrated man or woman. Love is the apex of humanity and the entire created universe, and when love is directed towards God it is called charity. Thus, humanism is an integral humanism, that is, a theocentric humanism, rooted where man has his roots, integral humanism, humanism of the incarnation. His humanism is integral because it takes account of both the openness to transcendence and natural and temporal realities: corporeality, passions, affectivity, relationship with others and with this world's realities (AMA Journal of Ethics, 2025).

### **Meta-Analysis of Literature from other Studies in Africa**

The current study used meta-analysis method of research that combines results from various independent research on the same research topic providing a more precise and comprehensive understanding of the research question. Bartoš, Wagenmakers & Viechtbauer (2025). Meta-analysis offers a systematic, statistical approach to synthesize the research findings. It also strengthens evidence-based practice by pooling the findings from multiple studies offering a more robust conclusion than single studies alone. It examines trends in social behaviour, policy outcome or demographic patterns. The researcher settles on meta-analysis because by combining multiple studies, sample size is increased reducing random error. It also clarifies whether conflicting findings point in a consistent direction in overall. It also provides evidence across different populations, settings and conditions (Bartoš, et al.2022). The criteria for sampling literature in meta-analysis involved: formulating the research questions, collecting relevant and systematic literature through databases and journals, selecting studies that meet specific methodological standards, extracting relevant information. Carrying out statistical analysis using a correlation co-efficient to extract relevant information. The using a fixed –effects model that allows for variation across the studies and assessing heterogeneity by carrying out by testing whether differences in the findings across the studies are because of chance or real variation using Q-statistics. Lastly, checking for publication biasness by exploring whether the studies with significant findings are likely to be published than those with null results. The results were interpreted based on the overall effect size, on the contexts or sub-groups which were affected, and on the implication of the theory, practice, or policy on the influence of religious women roles on integral formation in Africa. The report findings were done systematically collecting different

studies based on the variables and the topic, standardizing and pooling the findings statistically and additionally, by interpreting the combined evidence to assist in coming up with convincing and accurate general conclusions (Yang, Lagisz, & Nakagawa, 2023).

### **Literature Review**

Globally, according to Conrad Hilton Foundation and Religious Life Vitality Project (2020), 90% of consecrated women around the world through their formation, have acquired skills for ministerial apostolates, hence, they play a critical role in training educators, participating in pastoral care, and the spiritual development of communities across the globe. Scholars have documented the unique contributions of consecrated women to the Church's mission of integral human growth and overall being. Conrad Hilton Foundation and Religious Life Vitality Project deliberates the comprehensive theological basis of Christian ministry, emphasizes the vocational role of religious women in education, healing, and catechesis as central to the Church's integral mission. According to Draru, Karimi, & Lopatofsky (2021), religious women have improved leadership competencies and stronger capacity of religious women to serve as instructors and institutional managers which has strengthen integral programmes. This has eventually reshaped the understanding of who God is through their service and presence, contributing greatly to spiritual and social formation, particularly in marginalized contexts. The researchers are in agreement with the above researchers that, consecrated women across Africa and beyond, have improved the social, psychological, spiritual and emotional wellbeing of people, however the impact is more felt on financial constraints to reach out to the masses in marginalized areas in Africa. In addition, Chikwendu (2024), recognizes the transformative educational roles often carried out by consecrated religious women in communities lacking formal infrastructure. Also, Becker (2019), posits that, consecrated women lead initiatives in spiritual formation, trauma healing, and community empowerment, particularly among vulnerable populations. According to the researchers, UNESCO and Becker's findings, resonates with the Catholic Church's teaching on equality and justice through education based on holistic approach that integrates academic learning with personal development of the individual and commitment to social justice as its pedagogy rather than an approach to sameness with the male gender or the impulse to gain power through violence or aggression in order to promote the rights and dignity of women in the modern era (Ochieng, 2025). Additionally, in Asia, Becker (2019), did an investigation on the role of consecrated women in church ministry and in the contemporary society. He employed Focus Group Discussions to collect data from the respondents. According to the findings, consecrated women have been a response force for ecclesial renewal and societal transformation. Church history, has continually shown that consecrated women have contributed to ecclesial renewal and societal transformation down through the ages in various ways. The study observed that, several religious consecrated women have taken up the challenge of women's promotion through different apostolic works; for example, gender education, legal advocacy, assisting the youth in their basic needs and promoting education. What is urgently needed is to network with others on the national and global levels in order to globalize these collective efforts. The researchers concur with Neo on the contribution of consecrated women in promoting various apostolates such as education and healthcare which has transformed the lives of young and old people in Africa however, lack of enough facilities has been a challenge to some consecrated women to offer their services all over Africa. Nonetheless, their prayers have never stopped for those who suffer in various ways. They believe that, where they cannot reach physically, God's presence can always be realized (African Sisters Education Collaborative, 2024).

Regionally, Afolayan (2021), studied the contribution of consecrated women in Africa. From the findings, he found out that, consecrated women have redefined community engagement through their educational apostolates, especially in rural areas of Africa. A recent study by Chikwendu (2024), on the role of consecrated women, explains further that, consecrated women integrate indigenous knowledge with spirituality in their formation programs which has improved the quality of formation among African youth. Knoetze (2022), investigated on the contribution of religious consecrated women in modern communities. He contends that for consecrated life to meet up with the demands of the 21st century, it must accept the spirit of transformation without losing itself and the importance to change itself. There is need to examine first the understanding and application of consecrated life purely from the evangelical counsel, since the vows are the lowest common factors among all the consecrated persons. According to the findings, consecrated women are prophetic in nature. Like the biblical prophets, they condemn the sins and indifference of the people to the teachings of Christ and their holiness of life. They feel in their hearts a burning desire for holiness of God and proclaim the word with their lives. By so doing, they become the watch dogs of the Church by being alive and alert to the signs of the time and confronting them with gospel's values to transform the continent of Africa. Cimperman (2020), also carried out a research on women religious in Africa and found out that, consecrated women in Africa in their social domain work with refugees either in camps or in centres where they provide for their spiritual and material needs, counseling services, academic and entrepreneurial knowledge and skills. They also reach out to street children and to mothers with needs, the physically and mentally challenged persons, orphaned children and single mothers who need help. Through these apostolates, consecrated women, respond to Jesus call for the preferential option for the poor by caring for the vulnerable women, the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. Today, Africans experience a host of overwhelming illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, cancer, malaria, TB, malnutrition and cholera among others. To run a health center or infirmary in Africa, consecrated women contribute greatly to the Church's transformative and healing roles as demonstrated by Jesus during His ministry of compassionate service to humanity. As observed by the researchers, it is true that, consecrated women have assisted Africans in health care which has reduced the mortality rate, in ailments such as malaria and waterborne diseases. However, the researchers differ slightly, with the earlier researchers that, some parts of Africa, still suffers the heat of ailments such as bilharzia and cholera due to inadequate medicare because of the inadequacy of consecrated women in all parts of Africa, hence, some communities are left unattended. The researchers suggest partnership between the Catholic Church and the government for workforce in eradicating ill-health through integral formation for the current and future generations in Africa.

Bernard, Ikpe, & Lockwood (2023), explored on the significance of spiritual direction in the integral formation of the temporary professed sisters of the Daughters of St Paul in Nairobi Kenya. The objective of the study is to investigate the value of listening in spiritual direction for integral formation of temporary professed sisters of the Daughters of St Paul in Nairobi Kenya. The study was guided by the five stages of the Ignatian Pedagogy. The authors used qualitative research method in which data was collected through interview guide and Focused Group Discussion Guide. The findings of the study show that consecrated women have been instrumental in offering spiritual direction to people of all ages through attentive listening. This has, facilitated serenity and peace within families which has promoted productive lives in various apostolates done locally for self-sustainability. Since spiritual directions reconnects the individual with God and promotes social wellbeing, family lives have become stable and fulfilling. The study also indicates that; consecrated women have been training women on how to manage small projects to support their families. The study reveals further that, it is advisable to empower women for family continuity and livelihood. The study concludes that, though families comprise of father, mother and children,

women or mothers remains the backbones of several families. In view of the researchers, the findings of the three researchers reflect the roles of consecrated women in Africa, of molding families into reliable social units where there is continuity and reciprocity of love and ideologies for future growth and development. On the other hand, the researcher is of the opinion that, consecrated women, primarily, should make a paradigm shift from ordinary formation to integral formation and self-sustainability to empower Africa communities for future life.

Locally, consecrated women play a vital role in the Church's pastoral strategies, education systems, and formation programs. Ncube and Wanjiku (2022), noted the pastoral dimension of consecrated women's work, how their spiritual formation is foundational to personal transformation. Mungai (2023) explores the psycho-social impact of women religious in conflict zones, highlighting their resilience and ability to foster healing. Ochieng (2025), also documented the contributions of consecrated women in environmental stewardship, linking ecological education to moral and spiritual formation. Further, Becker (2019), observes that, inculturation of faith in Africa, is attributed to consecrated women who are often at the forefront of transmitting values that integrate African culture with Christian principles, hence, shaping the moral and spiritual fabric of society. The researchers are in support of the findings of Wanjiku, Mungai, Ochieng and Shorter that consecrated women have contributed to the spiritual growth and transformation of communities in Africa. At the same time, they have spearheaded environmental stewardship, linking ecological education to moral formation. In response to *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis' encyclical, on environmental conservation, the researcher suggests that, consecrated women ought to empower people on the usage of traditional and modern ways of conserving the environment to make the earth favorable to support plant and animal life.

Afolayan (2021), discusses the spiritual formation progressions within African Christianity, pinpointing consecrated religious women as major actors in promoting a spirituality that is both African and authentically Christian. Institute of Spirituality and Religious Formation (2022) report, provides data and case studies on the activities of consecrated women in East Africa, showing their contribution in integral formation through formal education, spiritual accompaniment, and social outreach which has contributed to intellectual and spiritual growth of the people. Meredith (2021), argues that, religious consecrated women, integrate spiritual care with socio-economic empowerment in their formation programs which has promoted integral empowerment of the human person. The researcher explains further that, apart from socio-economic motivation and spiritual support, consecrated women should include critical thinking and skills to enhance innovativeness in order to work towards achieving the objectives of vision 2030 at local and global levels.

Meredith (2021), insists that, African religious women have a crucial and progressing role in pastoral mission of the church, especially in catechesis, more so in rural and under-resourced areas where they assume leadership roles in faith formation and evangelization. Wirth (2022), find out that, religious women not only teach catechism, but also contextualize Christian messages in culturally meaningful ways for local communities to appreciate the Gospel as part of their lived reality. Besides, the Church in Africa, as studied by Ncube & Wanjiku (2022), has authorized consecrated religious women to help in the distribution of Holy communion particularly in the Dioceses with few priests such as rural parts of Kenya, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Knoetze (2022), further observed that, in African context, consecrated women provide a bridge between faith and health. They work in parish settings, hospitals and homes to offer physical care and sacramental support through prayer. According to the researchers, religious women in Africa, have assisted parishes in Africa, particularly in the rural settings in distribution of the holy

communion from parishes to outstations, however, not all Christians have appreciated this, arguing that, it is not appropriate for women religious to distribute the holy communion during mass, attributing this role, to ordained ministers the priests. Despite the negative feedback, religious women still active part in teaching Catechesism to Catechumens in many parishes without any Renumeration.

## Discussion

Across East and West Africa, various scholars have underlined the crucial role of religious consecrated women in mentoring young people through spiritual and human formation (Mungai 2023; Chikwendu, 2024). However, while their pastoral contributions in education and healthcare are widely documented, fewer studies analyze their intellectual formation of the community, suggesting a gap for further research. Religious women across the globe contribute greatly to the spiritual formation of the community. This shows that, their lived witness of prayer, retreats and community life enables them to be indispensable in nurturing faith and christian identity. It resonates with African cultural values of communal spirituality and mentorship in learning. Borrowing from Paulo Freire Theory and the Idea of Critical Pedagogy, learning or education ought to instill dialogue and Praxis as core elements of education, to help educators or instructors together with learners engage in a reciprocal exchange of ideas. Both dialogue and praxis, brings the integration of knowledge and skills, allowing leaners to apply critical understanding to real world problems and strive for transformative change. This pedagogy's objective is to promote the needy and the most vulnerable in the communities while promoting a more just and reasonable society where every person matters and can contribute to the common good of the community. According to the researcher, this goal can only be achieved if learning institutions managed by the religious consecrated women in Africa, apply the preferential option for the poor in order to take care of the marginalized in the community, who may be talented intellectually, but suffers from financial constraints. Similar to Becker (2019), this review confirms that, consecrated women in Africa embody an integral approach to formation that is deeply relational and contextual. Their ministries are not confined to religious spaces but extend to the margins of society, where they encounter and uplift the most vulnerable. The role of consecrated women in Africa in fighting illiteracy, injustices, sickness, poverty, misery and oppression has led to the assertion of some authors that Christian Africa will be what consecrated women will make it. They are indispensable evangelical signs among the people of Africa. However, unlike Wirth (2022), who minimizes the role of consecrated women in technological advances and skills, the current review discovered a growing evidence that consecrated religious women are increasingly active in theological education through catechetical courses together with biblical knowledge which helps in shaping the character and behaviour of the human person. Nonetheless, the researcher is of the opinion that, consecrated women play a crucial role in integral formation in Africa, particularly through education, healthcare, social justice advocacy, which is shaping individuals and communities, hence, promoting human dignity. In African context, integral formation entails formation of the whole human person. Young men and women were taught chores according to their gender, and other responsibilities for the community. After seclusion, the individual is expected to be well formed knowing who she/he is and what the community expected from each of them. Becker (2019), in support, explains further that, consecrated women advocate for social justice by challenging injustices and promoting the wellbeing of the vulnerable populations. They address issues such as poverty and oppression by providing practical ways of overcoming them. However, Cimperman (2020), is of the opinion that, consecrated women foster a sense of community and solidarity working collaboratively with other religious groups, local organizations and government entities to address societal challenges for example ACWECA empowering consecrated women to

advocate for the wellbeing of children, mothers and families equipping them with communication skills to amplify their impact in the society (Chikwendu, 2024).

Daughters of St. Paul (2021), found out that, consecrated women serve as leaders in religious communities and as mentors for young women, inspiring them to pursue their own vocations and contribute to societal transformation. In Africa, it extends beyond traditional religious duties to encompass a comprehensive approach to human development, impacting individuals, communities and society as a whole. Chikwendu (2024), in agreement expounds further that, their actions and presence, embody principle of human dignity and advocate for the rights and well-being of all, especially, women and the marginalised groups. However, Mungai (2023), argues that, the unique position of consecrated women in Africa, allow them to address multiple dimensions of human formation simultaneously, on the other hand, they need to advance in technological courses for basic skills to upgrade their formation to be more useful in the world job market. For instance, in a school setting, a religious consecrated woman, may provide academic instruction, moral guidance, emotional support, and health education, but without information technology. Their work is often informed by a deep understanding of local cultures and traditions, which enables them to contextualize the Gospel message in meaningful ways. However, the effectiveness of consecrated women is hindered by structural and institutional limitations. Many operate with minimal financial support and face burnout due to overwhelming responsibilities. There is also a need for greater inclusion of their voices in church leadership and policy-making processes. Additionally, ongoing formation and professional development are essential to equip them with the skills needed for contemporary challenges. For the Catholic church and religious formation houses for both genders, this implies that, there should be collaboration for common courses in formation houses or centres which also includes technological skills as well as theological knowledge to offer grounded religious men and women for the society and the world. The dicastery of religious life and formation can empower consecrated women in their various ministries based on their charisms. For future research, there is a need to document the works of indigenous consecrated religious women across the globe and advising where necessary for better outcome in their apostolates.

## Conclusion

Consecrated women are indispensable agents of integral formation in Africa. Their integrative approach, which encompasses spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and social dimensions, is vital for the development of individuals and communities. Recognizing and supporting their contributions is essential for the flourishing of both the Church and society. Consecrated women play a critical role in the integral formation of individuals and communities in Africa. Their multifaceted contributions embody the principles of integral development and transformative pedagogy. Recognizing and supporting their mission, is essential for the continued growth and resilience of African societies. These studies affirm the pivotal role of consecrated women in promoting integral formation at all levels: spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and social. Their work is not only ecclesial but also developmental, contributing to human dignity and transformation across the global, regional, and local contexts.

## Recommendations

1. Greater investment in the training and ongoing formation of consecrated women to enhance their capacity for holistic ministry.

2. Documentation and dissemination of best practices in holistic formation by religious women.
3. Inclusion of consecrated women's perspectives in ecclesial and developmental policymaking.
4. Provision of adequate financial and institutional support to sustain their ministries.
5. Promotion of partnerships between religious communities and other stakeholders in education, healthcare, and social development.
6. Strengthen collaboration between religious congregations and local churches for better resource mobilization.
7. Provide continuous formation and psychosocial support for consecrated women.
8. Promote gender equality and recognize the leadership roles of women within the Church.
9. Enhance visibility and documentation of the work of consecrated women.

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## Evaluation of Trace Elements' Concentrations in Nails: An Early Cancer Diagnostic Screening Tool

Owili Nancy', David K. Kariuki" and Michael J. Gatari'

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Nuclear Science & Technology, University of Nairobi, P.O. Box 30197-00100, Nairobi

<sup>2</sup>Department of Chemistry, University of Nairobi, P.O. Box 30197-00100, Nairobi

Corresponding author: [nyathiowili@students.uonbi.ac.ke](mailto:nyathiowili@students.uonbi.ac.ke)

### Abstract

Cancer is ranked third among the leading causes of death in Kenya with an average of 75% of cancer patients being diagnosed at advanced stages of the disease. This late diagnosis is attributed to most patients presenting themselves for check-ups when the disease has progressed. Literature establishes that among the several causes of cancer, is prolonged exposure to toxic heavy metals and high concentrations of trace elements in the body. Thus, this study aimed at evaluating the concentrations of Cr, Hg, Se, Pb, Cu, Zn, and Fe elements in the human body in esophageal and stomach cancer patients in Kenya. It was a case-controlled study comprising 95 esophageal and stomach cancer patients and 31 non-cancer volunteers as a control group. Fingernail clippings were obtained from the newly diagnosed stomach and esophageal cancer patients at the Kenyatta National Hospital, Nairobi, Kenya who had consented to take part in the study. The control group comprised adult volunteers of matched age and sex and without any known cancer history. The mean concentrations in esophageal cancer patients were 8.32  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 212  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 21.8  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 211  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 2.04  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 2.24  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 9.01  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$  respectively; and 11.6  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 209  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 18.3  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 265  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 1.70  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 2.56  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 10.1  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$  respectively in stomach cancer patients; while in the non-cancer patients, the mean concentrations were 3.17  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 213  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 28.1  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 258  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 1.06  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 1.39  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$ , 10.5  $\mu\text{g g}^{-1}$  for Cr, Fe, Cu, Zn, Se, Hg and Pb respectively. The findings revealed that evaluation of Cu, Cr, Pb, Se, and Hg in nail clippings using TXRF can be used as an early screening diagnostic tool for cancer. There were no correlations established for Fe and Zn concentrations.

**Keywords:** Trace Elements, Heavy Metals, Stomach Cancer, Esophageal Cancer, Fingernail Clippings

### Introduction and Literature Review

Cancer is currently a global burden as it exerts too much pressure on demographic and health systems across all income levels in a population. Local and international news report that both the rich and the poor, rural and urban populations of all faiths and lifestyles are dying of one form of cancer or the other. According to Kenya Ministry of Health, 2017, cancer is ranked third among the leading causes of deaths, after cardiovascular and infectious diseases (Bray *et al.*, 2018).

Moreover, estimated new cancer cases now stand at 47,887 reported annually with a mortality of 32,987. In the year 2012, it is reported that 28,500 people died of cancer and cancer related

ailments (KMH, 2017). Clearly, there is an increase of the cancer epidemic. As reiterated by Muinao and Co-workers, 2018, survival rates for cancer are typically lower due to late stage of diagnosis and lack of accessibility to quick and efficient as well as standard treatment. Therefore, correct and timely disease detection is critical for clinical diagnosis, proper toxicity monitoring, and ultimately ineffective cancer treatment (Muinao *et al.*, 2018).

Consequently, the key obstacle in treatment for cancer is early-stage disease identification, which would significantly improve cancer treatment efficiency and survival. Consequently, minimally invasive tests are ideal for detecting early phase melanoma, and developing these techniques in clinical applications is desirable. Fortunately, recent efforts have been made to develop a variety of chemical tools for detecting cancer-related biomarkers with high sensitivity, such as protein molecules, nucleic acids, enzymes, organic molecules and cancerous cells (Muinao *et al.*, 2018). Current diagnostic screening methods include the use of Cancer Protein Biomarkers, Enzyme-linked Immunosorbent Assay methods, Electrochemical and Electrical Detection methods, Optical methods, Enzyme-induced Conformational Change method, Electrophoresis-based methods and fluorescent methods (Muinao *et al.*, 2018).

However, the future of cancer biomarker detection lies in the development of efficient screening platforms with highly sensitive and selective, smaller size, highly flexible, elevated, and the discovery of new biomarkers that explicitly state the need for earlier detection (Ferlay *et al.*, 2012). It is observed from studies that among the major causes of cancer are toxic heavy metals and high concentrations of trace elements in the human body which have been confirmed to be carcinogenic (Karimi *et al.* 2012 & Mulware, 2013).

Unfortunately, chronic exposures to these elements are almost unavoidable in daily life due to their physiological and chemical properties. Consequently, drug manufacturing, food additives, industrial applications, mining, manufacturing of semiconductors, cement-manufacturing plants and refining of metal ores have led to release of different trace elements and heavy metals into the environment. These in addition, increase the level of population exposure, thereby contributing to environmental contamination and also human body accumulation (Abo El- Atta, 2011).

Trace elements are dietary nutrients required in minute quantities of an organism's mass; normally not up to 0.01%. They have a vital role in health maintenance, proper growth, development and are also components of enzymes in living organisms. They are inorganic micronutrients involved in many cellular functions; hence their deficiency may cause malfunctions, diseases and possibly result in death (Mehri & Maman, 2015).

According to Chitturi et al. (2015), there are nineteen trace elements known which are categorized as either essential, probably essential or potentially toxic elements. Requirements for essential elements in humans per day, which include Co, Cu, F, Fe, Zn, Se, Mn, Mo and I ranges from 50 pg to 10 mg. Their imbalance in the body is considered in many diseases as a risk factor. Probably essential elements have very little or no beneficial function in the humans' life process and very little is known about them and they include Sn, Ni, B, and V; while potentially toxic elements' excessive concentrations are considered hazardous to human health and can also inhibit growth in plants. There may however be some possibility with essential functions for these elements, and they include Au, Al, Pb, Cr, Cd, and Hg (Chitturi *et al.*, 2015).

Hence, in the bodily concentration of trace elements, a balance needs to be maintained for proper maintenance of life and health of living organisms (Mehri & Marjan, 2015). Heavy metals on the other hand, are elements that occur naturally with high atomic mass and weight. They are considered toxic in the human body even at low concentrations because they are understood to cause numerous organ harm, even at minimum levels of exposure. They are widely dispersed throughout the environment as a result of their numerous applications in agriculture, household life, industry, and medicine. This factor gives rise to worries about their possible negative consequences on human health. Their toxicity is dependent on the method of exposure, the dosage, the chemical species, as well as the exposed person's weight, age, gender, and nutritional status. Due to their high toxicity levels, As, Cd, Cr, Pb, and Hg are designated as priority metals of concern for public health (He *et al.*, 2005).

In cancer inhibition and development, trace elements have a complex character in their roles and have raised many questions because of their very essential and also toxic effects on human health. Their carcinogenic capability depends mainly on their chemical structures and oxidative states. Thus, the complexes they form catalyze redox reactions within DNA, thereby oxidizing the DNA. This leads to DNA damage, promoting the onset of carcinogenesis in most cases (Mulware, 2013).

Consequently, in studies involving trace elements' status in the body, nail measurements have demonstrated to be very useful. For instance, in assessing Se status, toenail Se level has always provided a time-integrated and a more superior measure than other biomarkers. In a certain case-control study on investigation of trace elements, nail specimens were used as biomarker. The study examined Fe, Co, Zn, Ca and Cr in relation to cancer of the upper digestive tract. The findings revealed differences in mineral intake of those individuals who developed some carcinomas of the upper aero-digestive tract and of those who did not. Thus, the measurements of trace elements in nails continues to be very vital in clinical research (Janbabai et al., 2018).

Various studies on analysis of soil samples, air and water provide insufficient data to assess the effects of environmental pollution on health hazards because the extent of heavy metal contamination, may vary in given areas depending on environmental conditions (Liang et al., 2017). Analysis of hair and nail clippings have been of great importance in the heavy metals' monitoring in the environment; hence, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) considers them as very important biomarkers. As excretory systems, they accumulate a lot of heavy metals, and can also accommodate heavy metals in their structure as they continue to grow since nails and hair are also metabolic products (Liang et al., 2017).

This study only used nail clippings because most of the body tissues are in a flux state due to metabolic activities, except the nails and hair. For example, after the nail formation, what follows is its complete expulsion from the nail-bed before its isolation from the continuing metabolic activities of the body. Therefore, nails represent the body's exposure or intake during the past few months or so; thus, one millimeter of the nail sample could correspond roughly to one month of the body's nutritional status (Abdulrahman, 2012). It then follows that assessment of heavy metals in the nails can provide information about the body intake for a given period of time.

Consequently, a link can be established between trace element detection in nail beds and early cancer detection. For example, a study to investigate trace elements in hair and nails of patients with stomach cancer revealed that the mean concentration of certain trace elements significantly increased with increasing cancer stage. The findings of the study therefore brought out an association between increase in Cu, K, Li, P, Se and Fe, and stomach cancer development. Thus, an increase of trace elements in nails could be a potential diagnostic marker to predict cancer progression and its etiology (Janbabai et al., 2018).

Similarly, in another study to establish trace elements and cancer risks, the results supported an inverse association between exposure to Se and risk to prostate cancer. There was also an observed reduction in risk as far as lung cancer was concerned in relation to Se exposure. In addition, an inverse association was established between breast cancer and Zn. Stomach, colorectal and breast cancers were however reported not to have any association with Se; while prostate cancer also had no association with Zn. The findings also revealed a strong association between As in bladder and lung cancers (Silvera & Rohan, 2007).

Having experienced rapid economic development in the process of urbanization and industrialization during the past few years, Kenya has with no doubt pollution issues, which must have great influence on human health. There is absolutely no research in Kenya on biological

monitoring of heavy metal pollution levels in humans which can be a direct indicator of the concentration of trace elements in the human body. Hence, the current study focused at determining the concentration of these elements in the human body and establishing their association to the growth of esophageal and stomach cancer cells. These patients were those being attended to at the Kenyatta National Hospital. The effort of this work was to find a non-invasive and a more economical method of fostering early cancer detection, diagnosis and treatment.

### **Materials and Methodology**

This study was designed to be a case-control study which involved administration of written questionnaires accompanied by a consent form to obtain nail clippings from esophageal and stomach cancer patients being attended to at the Kenyatta National Hospital, Nairobi, Kenya. Simple random sampling technique was used to select the cases through the assistance of KNH Health Information Department, while the control group were randomly selected from KNH patients at the orthopaedic surgery, general surgery and ophthalmology wards with no known cancer history and were not currently admitted for any digestive system disease or cancer.

After obtaining an informed consent from each of the participants to the study, written questionnaires were administered before sample collection to capture the respondents' demographic information, socio-economic status, dietary habits, lifestyles and cancer history. Data quality was ensured by conducting continuous checks of the completeness of questionnaires. The data was entered and managed in Microsoft Access database where they were saved in a password protected database.

Fingernail samples of approximately 50 milligrams were then collected from the selected population using stainless sterilized nail cutters; the samples of each individual were preserved in a small plastic bag and labelled accordingly pending preparations. Sample preparation was preceded by cleaning of the sample carriers according to S2 PICOFOX TM Manual. This was done in 800 ml laboratory glass beakers. The procedure involved mechanical pre-cleaning of the sample carriers with a fluffy-free tissue and acetone, mounting of the washing cassette with the pre-cleaned sample carriers, transferring of the washing cassette into the glass beaker filled with cleaning solution and heating on a heating plate for five minutes before rinsing thoroughly with distilled water. This was followed by transferring into another glass beaker filled with 10% nitric acid and heating for two hours. The sample carriers were then transferred into a beaker filled with distilled water and heated for five minutes before rinsing thoroughly with distilled water, drying on a heating plate and careful short wiping of the sample carriers with a fluffy-free tissue soaked with acetone. Finally, 10 µl of silicon solution was applied into the centre of the sample carriers and the droplets allowed to

spread into a circle of about 20mm after which they were dried at about 80<sup>0</sup> C for 30 minutes on a heating plate. For purity control measurement, analysis of the cleaned blank sample carriers for any trace element content was then done using TXRF (Bruker AXS Microanalysis GmbH) technique.

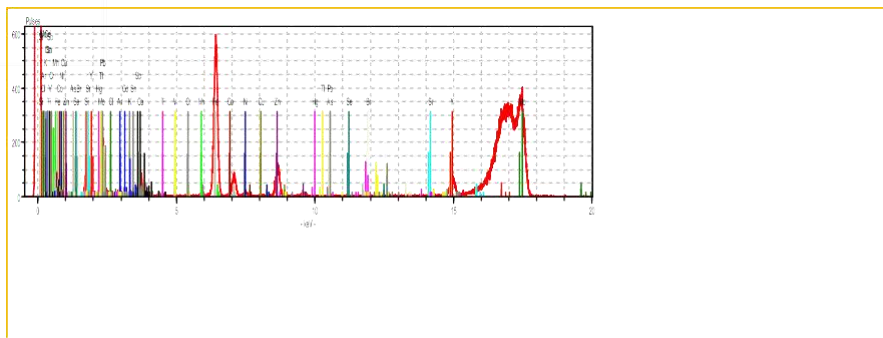
Each of the nail samples was cleaned under continuous stirring according to sample washing procedure proposed by IAEA. This was done repeatedly using acetone, deionized water and Triton X-100 as a nonionic detergent. The samples were then dried between filter papers for 24 hours and weighed before digestion.

Wet acid digestion method using nitric acid was used. This involved weighing an average of 25 mg of the already cleaned and dried nail samples and placing them into polypropylene tube and adding 1 ml of concentrated HNO<sub>3</sub>. The mixture was then left overnight at room temperature for complete digestion. Finally, the digest was accurately diluted to 15 ml using deionized water ready for TXRF analysis. The accuracy of the procedure was validated by three replicate measurements. For quantification of the elements in the sample and to improve the precision of qualitative analysis, 0.3 ppm of Yttrium (Yttrium ICP Standard, Merck KGaA, Germany) liquid was used as a mono-element standard for internal standardization. This was after determination of the qualitative element distribution in the sample using TXRF to avoid spectral interferences between the added internal standard element and the elements already present in the sample. Thus, it was ensured that the element used as an internal standard was not present in the sample itself.

The volume in ml of the internal standard to be pipetted into the sample solution was obtained as:  $M_i V_i = M_2 V_2$ , where,  $M_r$  was the concentration of the stock internal standard solution in ppm,  $V_i$  was the volume to pipette,  $M_z$  was the concentration of the sample solution in ppm while  $V_2$  represented the volume of the sample solution in ml. The internal standard solution was added to each of the sample solutions and thoroughly homogenized. A measured volume of the homogenized mixtures was then transferred to sample carriers by means of an automatic micropipette, dried on a heating plate and finally analyzed for elemental content using TXRF (Bruker AXS Microanalysis GmbH) technique to detect the selected trace elements.

The TXRF instrument used was equipped with molybdenum (Mo) X-ray tube as the anode, silicon drift detector. It was operated at a tube current of 1000 pA, working at 50kV and set at 200 seconds for each sample analysis. Only one sample could be loaded and analyzed at a time by the automatic sample carrier. The spectral lines used in this study were L - o and K — o. For gain correction and confirmation of any detector artifact like background and escape peaks, arsenic (As) was used as the mono-element standard sample. This mono-element standard sample reset or compensated for any spectroscopic amplification drift; thus, a correction value could be transferred to the spectroscopic amplifier. For the correction of any pile-up peaks, 10 ppm of a

multielement solution was used each day before carrying out any instrumental analysis.



**FIGURE 1 TXRF SPECTRA OF FINGER NAIL CLIPPINGS SAMPLE**

R statistical software was used in coding of the data obtained from the samples. These were presented in interquartile range, mean, median and then analyzed using t-test.

The concentration of each of the analyzed trace elements was expected to appear and be presented in form of tables, pie and bar charts. This was followed by a data table summarizing all the charts for Cr, Fe, Zn, Cu, Pb, Se, Hg as the selected trace elements for the study.

An official approval for this study was obtained from Kenyatta National Hospital-University of Nairobi (KNH-UoN) Ethics and Research Committee with approval number P124/02/2020. It was then endorsed by the Deputy Director of Medical Research, while the Director of the Department of Health Records and Information gave a written permission to access the daily records of patients' files in order to identify the intended cases for the study.

## Results and Discussion

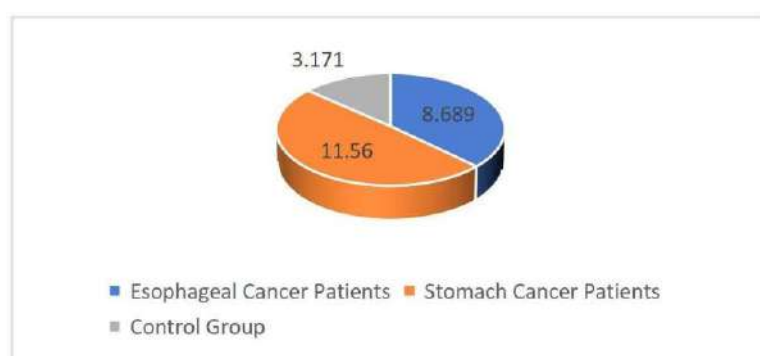
### Study Population

The participants for this study comprised of adult patients scheduled for and receiving treatments at the Kenyatta National Hospital. The collection of the nail clipping samples took place from October 2020 to March 2021 and a total of 126 samples were obtained from stomach, esophageal cancer patients and a non-cancer control group. Fifty seven percent of the patients were newly diagnosed with cancer of esophagus. Compared to the percentage of stomach cancer which was only 18%, there was a clear indication that esophageal cancer is on the rise and affects a large part of the population. This observation agreed with a study by Awichi, 2019 carried out in Bonnet County, Kenya which revealed that esophageal cancer ranks 9<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> most common cancer in the world and developing countries respectively, with approximately 300,000 newly diagnosed cases each year. In terms of age distribution, 90% of the cancer patients who participated in this study were aged between 48 and 58 years while the younger population aged below 49 years made up only 10%.

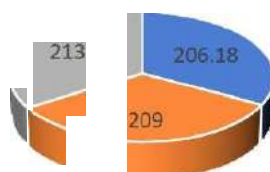
Distribution of the cancer patients' residence in terms of counties revealed that out of forty-seven counties in Kenya, twenty-seven counties were represented in the study as shown in Figure 6. Kiambu, Nairobi and Murang'a counties had the highest representation of 12, 11 and 11 respectively. This could be attributed to the fact that these are the major counties within Nairobi region and it could be assumed that patients in western part of Kenya are most likely to be going to Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital, Eldoret which is also a level six referral hospital and is nearer to them than the Kenyatta National Hospital, Nairobi.

### Trace Elements' Concentrations

Elemental analysis was done using TXRF (Bruker AXS Microanalysis GmbH) technique on samples from 95 cancer patients and 31 non-cancer control group, all aged between 20 to 65 years. R statistical software was then used in coding of the data obtained from the samples. These were analyzed using unpaired two-sample t-test and then presented in interquartile range, mean and median.

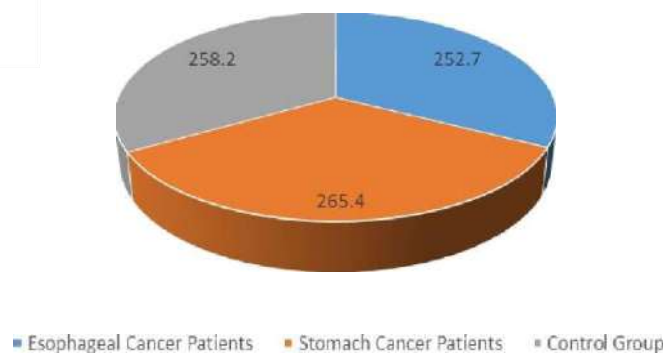
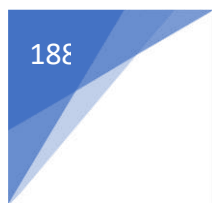


### Comparison in the Mean Concentrations of Chromium in Test Groups

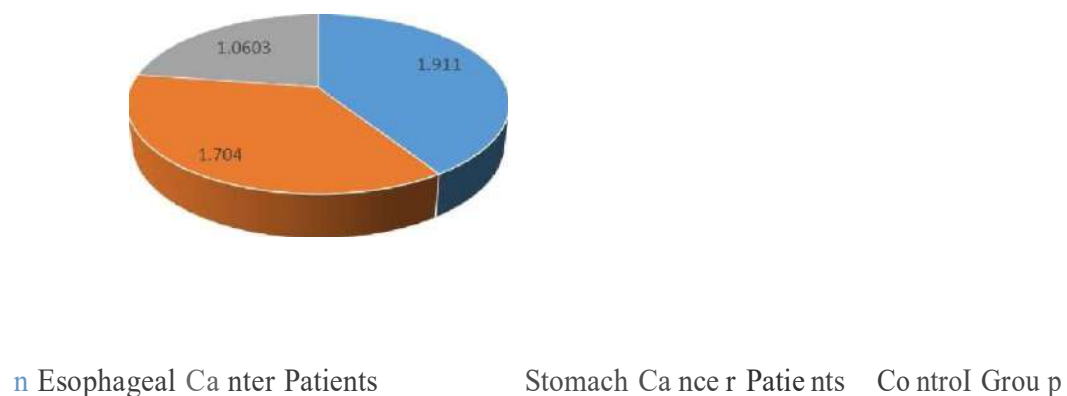


- Esophageal Cancer Patients
- Stomach Cancer Patients
- Control Group

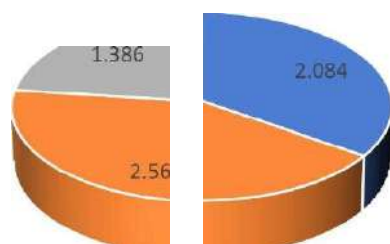
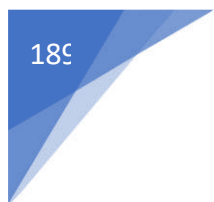
### Comparison in the Mean Concentrations of Iron in Test Groups



Comparison in the Mean Concentrations of Zinc in Test Groups

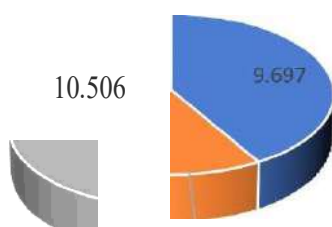


Comparison in the Mean Concentrations of Selenium in Test Groups



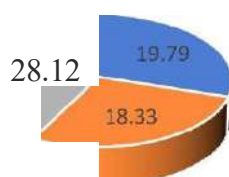
• Esophageal Cancer Patients • Stomach Cancer Patients Control Group

Comparison in the Mean Concentrations of Mercury in Test Groups



• Esophageal Cancer Patients • Stomach Cancer Patients Control Group

Comparison in the Mean Concentrations of Lead in Test Groups



• Esophageal Cancer Patients



Stomach

Cancer Patients Control Group

Comparison in the Mean Concentrations of Lead in Test Groups

Table 1 Relationships and Differences on Elemental Concentrations

| Participants<br>Trace<br>Elements | Non-Cancer<br>Control Group (N =<br>31) | Esophageal<br>Cancer Patients<br>(N = 72) | Stomach Cancer<br>Patients (N = 31) |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>Chromium</b>                   |                                         |                                           |                                     |
| Mean                              | 3.171                                   | 8.689                                     | 11.56                               |
| Median                            | 1.295                                   | 8.578                                     | 10.8                                |
| IQR                               | 0-4.059                                 | 0-13.013                                  | 5.1-17.41                           |
| <b>Iron</b>                       |                                         |                                           |                                     |
| Mean                              | 213                                     | 206                                       | 209                                 |
| Median                            | 203                                     | 190.34                                    | 202.9                               |
| IQR                               | 166.9-264                               | 150.98-190.34                             | 170.1 — 242.1                       |
| <b>Copper</b>                     |                                         |                                           |                                     |
| Mean                              | 28.12                                   | 19.79                                     | 18.33                               |
| Median                            | 25.66                                   | 18.737                                    | 16.69                               |
| IQR                               | 22.61-36.24                             | 13.31-24.274                              | 13.94-20.14                         |
|                                   |                                         |                                           |                                     |
| Mean                              | 258.2                                   | 252.7                                     | 265.4                               |
| Median                            | 263.2                                   | 239.8                                     | 260.8                               |
| IQR                               | 188.1-337                               | 187.9-303.4                               | 187.3-312.5                         |
| <b>Selenium</b>                   |                                         |                                           |                                     |
| Mean                              | 1.060                                   | 1.911                                     | 1.704                               |
| Median                            | 0.9156                                  | 1.758                                     | 1.394                               |
| IQR                               | 0-1.8778                                | 0-2.084                                   | 0-2.463                             |
| <b>Mercury</b>                    |                                         |                                           |                                     |
| Mean                              | 1.386                                   | 2.082                                     | 2.56                                |
| Median                            | 1.145                                   | 1.418                                     | 2.619                               |
| IQR                               | 0-2.63                                  | 0-3.502                                   | 0-3.8                               |
| <b>Lead</b>                       |                                         |                                           |                                     |
| Mean                              | 10.506                                  | 9.697                                     | 10.084                              |
| Median                            | 9.477                                   | 9.41                                      | 10.203                              |

|     |              |             |              |
|-----|--------------|-------------|--------------|
| IQR | 6.381-13.462 | 5.96-13.978 | 6.473-13.042 |
|-----|--------------|-------------|--------------|

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The total number of esophageal cancer patients who participated in this study were seventy-two; this represents 57% of the whole study population. Analysis of trace elements in finger nail clippings of esophageal cancer patients in comparison to non-cancer control group gave varied concentrations based on the results of unpaired t-test at 95% confidence interval.

The mean concentration of Cr in esophageal cancer patients was 8.323 Jig/g as compared to 3.171 pg/g in the non-cancer control group, with a test statistic of  $t = -3.0353867$ , 39.786 degrees of freedom and  $p\text{-value} = 0.004$ . The mean concentration of Cu was 21.788 pg/g in esophageal cancer patients and 28.116 pg/g in the non-cancer control group; with a test statistic of  $t = 2.4514$ , 51.615 degrees of freedom, and  $p\text{-value} = 0.018$ . The mean concentration of Zn was 210.262 pg/g while non-cancer control group was 258.180 Jig/g and the mean concentration of Fe was 211.991 pg/g and 213.028 pg/g in esophageal and non-cancer patients respectively. The mean concentration of Se was 2.043 pg/g and 1.060 pg/g in esophageal and non-cancer patients respectively; with a test statistic  $t = -2.892$ ,  $df = 52.319$  and  $p\text{-value} = 0.006$ . Analysis of the mean concentration of Hg in esophageal cancer patients revealed 2.239 pg/g as compared to 1.386 pg/g in the non-cancer group with a test statistic  $t = -1.5773$ ,  $df = 46.595$  and  $p\text{-value} = 0.121$ . The concentration of Pb was 9.015 pg/g and 10.506 Jig/g in esophageal cancer patients and non-cancer control group respectively, with a test statistic  $t = 0.96908$ ,  $df = 43.511$  and  $p\text{-value} = 0.338$ .

The results also revealed that out of the 126 participants of this study, 23 were stomach cancer patients. This represents 18% of the study population. Analysis of the levels of trace elements in finger nail clippings of in terms of mean concentrations gave the following results in comparison to non-cancer patients, all at 95 confidence intervals: The mean concentration of Cr in stomach cancer patients was 11.560 pg/g and 3.585 Jig/g in non-cancer control group with a test statistic of  $t = -3.6497$ ,  $df = 26.458$  and  $p\text{-value} = 0.001$ . Analysis of the levels of Fe in both stomach cancer and non-cancer patients gave mean concentrations of 208.993 pg/g and 215.169 pg/g; while the mean concentrations of Zn were 265.376 qg/g and 252.206 pg/g respectively. With a test statistic  $t = 3.237$ ,  $df = 29.616$  and  $p\text{-value} = 0.003$ , the mean concentrations of Cu in both stomach cancer patients and the non-cancer control group were 18.328 pg/g and 27.149 pg/g respectively. The mean concentration of Se was 1.704 pg/g in stomach cancer patients as compared to 1.202 pg/g in the non-cancer control group at  $t = -0.97235$ ,  $df = 31.144$  and  $p\text{-value} = 0.3384$ . At  $t = -1.7208$ ,  $df = 32.318$  and  $p\text{-value} = 0.094$ , the concentration of Hg was 2.560 pg/g and 1.374 pg/g in stomach cancer and non-cancer patients respectively. The mean

concentration of Pb was 10.084 pg/g as compared to 8.519 pg/g in non-cancer control group.

Based on the significant differences observed in the concentrations of most of the selected trace elements among the participants of this study, a disparity exists in the levels of these elements in cancer patients and non-cancer population. This shows that accumulation of these elements in the human body could possibly be a function of the physical state of the body. There was however no much significant variation observed for the concentration of Fe and Zn among the three test groups in this study since the correlation of all the tests gave a p-value greater than 0.05; this could imply that these two elements are not associated factors to the growth of cancer cells and their concentrations may not influence early diagnosis of cancer. However, more studies need to be carried out on other cancer types and with different analytical instruments so as to ascertain this conclusion.

The main aim of this study having been to develop a rapid early diagnostic screening tool for cancer by establishing a correlation of trace elements in esophageal and stomach cancer patients with a non-cancer control group, using Total Reflection X-ray Fluorescence; analysis of the data revealed that in 96% of the tests carried out, the p-value was less than  $\alpha=0.05$  thus rejecting the null hypothesis which stated that there was no significant difference, on average, in the mean concentrations between the samples. Therefore, it is possible to discriminate between cancer of the esophagus and cancer of the stomach based on the concentration of Cu, Cr, Se and Hg since these four trace elements showed greater correlations with these cancers in comparison to the non-cancer patients. This study can therefore be a basis to develop an early diagnostic tool with TXRF as an analytical tool.

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