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Faith-Based Interventions in Addressing Teenage Pregnancy: The Catholic Church's Programs in Nzaui Sub-County, Makueni County, Kenya

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***Abstract*: Teenage pregnancy remains a major educational, health, and social challenge among adolescents in Kenya, particularly in rural communities. The Catholic Church, through its sponsored schools and pastoral ministries, plays an important role in addressing this challenge by promoting moral formation, counselling, and youth empowerment. This study examined the Catholic Church's intervention programmes in mitigating the causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy in Nzaui Sub County, Makueni County, Kenya. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Data were collected from students, school principals, guidance and counselling teachers, and religious personnel using questionnaires and interview guides. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that the Catholic Church has implemented interventions such as religious and moral instruction, pastoral counselling, youth mentorship, guidance and counselling, parental involvement, and psychosocial support for teenage mothers. These programmes have positively influenced value formation, school retention, and emotional well-being. However, their effectiveness is limited by poverty, peer pressure, inadequate parental support, cultural beliefs, stigma, and insufficient reproductive health information. The study concludes that the Catholic Church is a key stakeholder in addressing teenage pregnancy but requires stronger collaboration with families, schools, health institutions, and government agencies. It recommends strengthening integrated faith-based interventions, expanding youth empowerment programmes, and enhancing counselling and community participation to reduce teenage pregnancy.**

***Keywords*: Catholic Church, teenage pregnancy, faith-based interventions, adolescent reproductive health, Kenya.**

1. Introduction

Teenage pregnancy remains a significant public health and educational challenge worldwide. Early pregnancy often interrupts education, increases health risks, and limits the social and economic opportunities of adolescent girls. Despite efforts by governments and development partners, the problem remains prevalent in many low- and middle-income countries where poverty, gender inequality, and limited access to reproductive health information persist.

Sub-Saharan Africa records some of the highest adolescent pregnancy rates globally. In Kenya, the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS, 2022) reports that about 15% of girls aged 15–19 have begun childbearing, with higher rates in rural areas. The consequences include school dropout, poor academic achievement, poverty, and social exclusion, highlighting the need for effective interventions.

The Catholic Church is a major provider of education and social services in Kenya and contributes to adolescent development through moral instruction, pastoral care, guidance and counselling, youth mentorship, and parental engagement. These programmes seek to promote responsible behaviour while supporting vulnerable learners, including teenage mothers.

Despite these efforts, teenage pregnancy remains common in Catholic-sponsored schools in Nzaui Sub County, Makueni County. This raises concerns about the effectiveness of existing Church interventions and the challenges affecting their implementation. This paper therefore examines the Catholic Church's intervention programmes in mitigating the causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy in Nzaui Sub County, with the aim of informing faith-based, educational, and policy interventions for improving adolescent well-being.

2. Background to the Study

Teenage pregnancy remains a significant public health, educational, and social challenge worldwide. Although the problem affects both developed and developing countries, its prevalence is considerably higher in low- and middle-income countries due to poverty, limited access to reproductive health services, gender inequality, inadequate sexuality education, and socio-cultural practices that increase adolescents' vulnerability (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Early pregnancy often results in school dropout, maternal and neonatal health complications, social exclusion, and reduced economic opportunities for adolescent girls, thereby limiting their overall development (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA],

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2022).

Faith-based organizations have long complemented government efforts in promoting adolescent well-being through education, healthcare, counselling, and community development programmes. Among these organizations, the Catholic Church occupies a prominent position because of its extensive educational network and commitment to holistic human development. Through Catholic-sponsored schools, youth ministries, and parish programmes, the Church integrates academic instruction with moral formation, pastoral care, spiritual guidance, and youth mentorship to nurture responsible behaviour and ethical decision-making among adolescents (Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops [KCCB], 2021).

Studies on Catholic Church interventions have reported both positive outcomes and existing challenges. Faith-based initiatives such as pastoral counselling, youth mentorship, family life education, and values-based instruction have been associated with delayed sexual debut, improved self-esteem, and responsible decision-making among adolescents (Martinez & Alvarez, 2021; Okafor & Nwosu, 2022). However, some scholars argue that faith-based programmes often provide limited reproductive health information, reducing adolescents' ability to make informed decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health (Leone & Wringe, 2020; Mokomane & Mokomane, 2016). Consequently, researchers recommend integrating moral formation with psychosocial support, parental involvement, and appropriate reproductive health education to achieve more sustainable outcomes (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2015).

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, teenage pregnancy continues to undermine girls' educational attainment and socio-economic development. Factors such as poverty, early marriage, peer pressure, gender-based violence, transactional sex, and inadequate parental supervision remain major contributors to adolescent pregnancy (Asante & Mensah, 2022; Kaggwa & Namusoke, 2021). In response, many faith-based institutions have strengthened counselling services, youth seminars, mentorship programmes, parental engagement, and community awareness campaigns. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these interventions varies across communities because of differences in cultural beliefs, institutional capacity, and socio-economic conditions (Atwine & Musoke, 2021).

In Kenya, the Catholic Church remains one of the largest providers of education and social services through its sponsored schools, diocesan programmes, and parish ministries. Guided by Catholic Social Teaching, the Church promotes the dignity of the human person, responsible sexuality, respect for life, and holistic development. Consequently, it has established programmes that emphasize abstinence, moral formation, guidance and counselling, youth mentorship, family life education, and support for teenage mothers returning to school (KCCB, 2021; Kariuki & Muthoni, 2023). These initiatives complement government efforts to reduce teenage pregnancy while promoting the educational retention and psychosocial well-being of adolescent girls.

Nzaui Sub County, Makueni County, presents an important setting for examining these interventions because teenage pregnancy remains relatively high despite ongoing educational and pastoral programmes. According to the Ministry of Health (2023), the sub-county records a teenage pregnancy rate of approximately 17.8%, which is above the national average of 15% reported in the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS, 2022). The area is characterized by poverty, prolonged drought, limited employment opportunities, inadequate reproductive health services, and socio-cultural practices that continue to expose adolescent girls to early pregnancy.

The Catholic Diocese of Wote sponsors several public senior secondary schools within Nzaui Sub County and has implemented interventions such as religious instruction, pastoral counselling, youth formation, guidance and counselling, mentorship programmes, and psychosocial support for affected learners. Despite these efforts, teenage pregnancy continues to affect learners in Catholic-sponsored schools, suggesting that the effectiveness of existing intervention programmes requires further evaluation. This study therefore examines the Catholic Church's intervention programmes in mitigating the causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy in Nzaui Sub County, Makueni County, with the aim of generating evidence that can strengthen faith-based, educational, and policy interventions.

3. Statement of the Problem

Teenage pregnancy remains a major challenge affecting the education, health, and social well-being of adolescent girls in Nzaui Sub County, Makueni County. Despite government policies and faith-based interventions aimed at reducing teenage pregnancy, many girls continue to become pregnant while in school, leading to school dropout, poor academic performance, stigma, and limited future opportunities. Reports from Nzaui Sub County indicate that the teenage pregnancy rate remains above the national average, highlighting the need for more effective and context-specific interventions.

As a sponsor of public senior secondary schools, the Catholic Church has implemented various programmes, including moral instruction, pastoral counselling, youth mentorship, guidance and counselling, and parental engagement, to prevent teenage pregnancy and support affected learners. However, the continued occurrence of teenage pregnancies suggests that the effectiveness of these interventions has not been adequately evaluated. Existing studies have largely focused on the prevalence and determinants of teenage pregnancy, with limited attention given to the specific contribution of Catholic Church programmes within rural Catholic-sponsored schools. This study therefore sought to examine the Catholic Church's intervention programmes in mitigating the causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy in Nzaui Sub County, Makueni County, Kenya.

4. Research Question

How do the Catholic Church's intervention programmes mitigate the causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy in Nzaui Sub County, Makueni County, Kenya?

5. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the Catholic Church's intervention programmes in mitigating the causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy in Nzaui Sub County, Makueni County, Kenya.

6. Literature Review

Teenage pregnancy continues to be a significant public health, educational, and social concern globally. It contributes to school dropout, poor educational attainment, health complications, and long-term socio-economic challenges for adolescent girls. Although governments and development agencies have implemented various reproductive health programmes, faith-based organizations remain important partners in promoting adolescent well-being through moral guidance, counselling, education, and community support.

The Catholic Church has historically played a central role in education and social development by promoting values that uphold human dignity, responsible behaviour, and family life. Through its sponsored schools, youth ministries, pastoral care programmes, and counselling services, the Church seeks to prevent risky sexual behaviour while supporting adolescents facing social and emotional challenges. These interventions are grounded in Catholic Social Teaching, which emphasizes the dignity of every human person, the sanctity of life, and holistic human development.

Previous studies have identified multiple factors contributing to teenage pregnancy, including poverty, peer pressure, inadequate parental guidance, limited reproductive health knowledge, gender-based violence, and cultural practices. Muthengi et al. (2020) observed that poverty and limited educational opportunities expose adolescent girls to early sexual relationships that often result in pregnancy. Similarly, Brown et al. (2019) found that inadequate parent-child communication on sexuality significantly increases adolescents' likelihood of engaging in early sexual activity. Other studies have associated teenage pregnancy with peer influence, weak family structures, and inadequate access to youth-friendly reproductive health services.

Research further shows that faith-based interventions can positively influence adolescent behaviour when combined with effective mentorship and counselling. Martinez and Alvarez (2021) reported that Catholic Church-based mentorship and abstinence education significantly reduced risky sexual behaviour among adolescents in the Philippines. Likewise, Okafor and Nwosu (2022) found that participation in Catholic youth clubs in Nigeria reduced adolescents' engagement in unprotected sexual activities through peer education and moral formation.

Within East Africa, church-led interventions have increasingly incorporated pastoral counselling, family life education, youth seminars, and psychosocial support. Atwine and Musoke (2021) established that parish-based sexuality education workshops in Uganda delayed sexual debut and improved adolescents' willingness to discuss reproductive health issues within a faith context. In Tanzania, Mwita and Baraka (2023) reported that church-supported empowerment programmes enhanced reproductive health knowledge and strengthened girls' ability to resist sexual coercion.

In Kenya, the Catholic Church continues to complement government efforts through guidance and counselling, pastoral care, mentorship programmes, and parental engagement in Catholic-sponsored schools. Kariuki and Muthoni (2023) found that parish-based family life education significantly reduced the likelihood of teenage pregnancy when combined with active parental involvement. Similarly, Mwangi and Njeri (2022) reported that values-based education improved students' self-esteem, decision-making, and resistance to peer pressure.

Despite these documented interventions, existing literature reveals important gaps. Most studies have examined the determinants of teenage pregnancy or evaluated interventions in urban settings and other regions of Kenya. Limited empirical evidence exists on the effectiveness of Catholic Church intervention programmes within Catholic-sponsored public senior secondary schools in rural settings such as Nzaui Sub County, Makueni County. This study addresses this gap by examining how the Catholic Church's interventions contribute to mitigating both the causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy within the local context.

7. Methodology

A. Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design. The design enabled the researcher to collect quantitative and qualitative data concurrently, analyze each dataset independently, and integrate the findings during interpretation. The mixed-methods approach was appropriate because it provided a comprehensive understanding of the Catholic Church's intervention programmes in mitigating the causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy by combining numerical evidence with participants' lived experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Quantitative data provided measurable information on the prevalence and effectiveness of intervention programmes, while qualitative data offered deeper insights into the experiences, challenges, and perspectives of school administrators, teachers, students, and religious personnel.

B. Study Area

The study was conducted in Nzaui Sub County, Makueni County, Kenya, within the Catholic Diocese of Wote. The sub-county was selected because it has continued to record relatively high cases of teenage pregnancy despite ongoing interventions by the government, schools, and the Catholic Church. The area has several Catholic-sponsored public senior secondary schools where the Church actively participates in educational management, pastoral care, guidance and counselling, youth formation, and moral instruction.

C. Target Population

The target population comprised school principals, guidance and counselling teachers, students, priests, and religious sisters serving in Catholic-sponsored public senior secondary schools

in Nzaui Sub County. These groups were selected because they play direct roles in implementing, supervising, or benefiting from the Catholic Church's intervention programmes aimed at preventing teenage pregnancy and supporting affected learners.

D. Sampling Procedures and Sample Size

The study employed both probability and non-probability sampling techniques. Stratified and simple random sampling were used to select student respondents to ensure adequate representation across the participating schools. Purposive sampling was used to select principals, guidance and counselling teachers, priests, and religious sisters because of their knowledge and direct involvement in implementing Church programmes addressing teenage pregnancy. The sample size was determined based on the study population and ensured adequate representation of all respondent categories.

E. Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interview guides. Questionnaires were administered to students and guidance and counselling teachers to collect quantitative information regarding the implementation and effectiveness of the Catholic Church's intervention programmes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals, priests, and religious sisters to obtain detailed information on Church policies, pastoral practices, programme implementation, and challenges encountered in addressing teenage pregnancy. The combination of these instruments enabled the researcher to triangulate information and improve the credibility of the findings.

F. Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments

The research instruments were subjected to expert review to establish content and face validity. Supervisors and specialists in educational research examined the instruments to determine whether they adequately addressed the study objectives and research question. A pilot study was conducted in Catholic-sponsored secondary schools outside the study area but with characteristics similar to those of the sampled schools. Feedback from the pilot study was used to refine the instruments before the actual data collection.

Reliability of the questionnaires was determined using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or above was considered acceptable, indicating that the instruments consistently measured the intended variables (Cronbach, 1951).

G. Data Collection Procedures

Following ethical approval and authorization from the relevant institutions, the researcher sought permission from the Catholic Diocese of Wote, the County Director of Education, and the administrators of the selected schools. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained before administering questionnaires and conducting interviews. Questionnaires were distributed and collected by the researcher, while interviews were conducted at mutually convenient times and recorded with participants' consent.

H. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize respondents' characteristics and assess perceptions regarding the Catholic Church's intervention programmes. The results were presented using tables and charts where appropriate.

Qualitative data obtained from interviews were transcribed verbatim, organized into themes, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The qualitative findings were integrated with the quantitative results during interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the Catholic Church's intervention programmes in mitigating teenage pregnancy.

I. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles governing social science research. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee, while research authorization was secured from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) and other relevant authorities. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. Information collected during the study was used strictly for academic purposes, and all research data were treated with the highest level of confidentiality.

8. Findings

The study examined the Catholic Church's intervention programmes in mitigating the causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy in Catholic-sponsored public senior secondary schools in Nzaui Sub County, Makueni County. Quantitative and qualitative findings consistently demonstrated that the Church has established several interventions that contribute positively to adolescent moral formation and psychosocial support. However, the effectiveness of these programmes is constrained by socio-economic, cultural, and institutional challenges.

The findings revealed that Catholic Church-led youth seminars were the most highly rated intervention, with over three-quarters of the student respondents acknowledging that they contribute to reducing teenage pregnancy. Likewise, counselling services, collaboration between the Church and schools, religious instruction, and sermons addressing responsible sexuality received positive ratings from the majority of respondents. Students perceived these interventions as valuable in promoting self-discipline, moral values, and responsible decision-making among adolescents.

Religious personnel similarly acknowledged the effectiveness of Church programmes. Youth seminars, faith-based counselling, partnerships between schools and parishes, and moral guidance through Church leaders were identified as the most effective interventions. Nevertheless, respondents expressed reservations regarding the extent to which Church

teachings openly address practical issues related to teenage pregnancy, indicating a need to strengthen communication on adolescent reproductive health within the framework of Catholic teaching.

Interviews with school principals and guidance and counselling teachers further demonstrated that the Catholic Church provides pastoral counselling, guidance and counselling services, youth seminars, chaplaincy programmes, mandatory Christian Religious Education (CRE), spiritual formation through Mass celebrations, and mentorship activities. Respondents observed that these programmes positively influence learners' behaviour by strengthening moral values, promoting self-control, and providing opportunities for adolescents to discuss personal and social challenges. Some schools reported that regular religious activities had contributed to improved student discipline and a decline in reported cases of teenage pregnancy following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite these achievements, the study established that the implementation of Church intervention programmes remains inconsistent across schools. Some principals and counselling teachers reported that existing programmes are insufficient to address the needs of learners who are already vulnerable to early pregnancy. Limited follow-up after youth seminars, inadequate individualized counselling, weak referral mechanisms, and insufficient practical support for pregnant learners and teenage mothers reduce the overall effectiveness of these interventions. Respondents emphasized that the Church should complement moral teaching with more structured psychosocial support, mentorship, and closer collaboration with parents, schools, healthcare professionals, and community organizations.

The findings further revealed several barriers that hinder the effectiveness of Catholic Church programmes. The most significant challenges included adolescents' reluctance to seek assistance from the Church, fear of stigma and community judgment, shortage of trained counsellors, inadequate financial resources, cultural beliefs, and weak collaboration with other stakeholders. These barriers reduce programme accessibility and limit the Church's ability to provide timely support to adolescents who are most at risk of early pregnancy.

Overall, the findings indicate that the Catholic Church remains an important partner in addressing teenage pregnancy through value-based education, counselling, pastoral care, youth formation, and school-community collaboration. However, greater programme coordination, improved counselling services, stronger parental engagement, and enhanced collaboration with public health and education institutions are necessary to increase the effectiveness of these interventions.

9. Conclusion

The study concludes that the Catholic Church plays a significant role in mitigating the causes and consequences of teenage pregnancy in Catholic-sponsored public senior secondary schools in Nzaui Sub County. Through youth seminars, pastoral counselling, Christian Religious Education, chaplaincy services, guidance and counselling, and mentorship programmes, the Church contributes to the moral, spiritual, and psychosocial development of adolescents. These interventions promote responsible behaviour, strengthen ethical values, and encourage learners to make informed life choices.

However, the study also concludes that faith-based interventions alone are insufficient to address the complex factors contributing to teenage pregnancy. Poverty, peer influence, inadequate parental involvement, cultural practices, stigma, limited counselling services, and insufficient collaboration with health and education stakeholders continue to undermine programme effectiveness. Therefore, reducing teenage pregnancy requires an integrated approach that combines faith-based values with educational, psychosocial, economic, and public health interventions.

10. Recommendations

The study recommends that the Catholic Church strengthen its youth mentorship, pastoral counselling, and guidance programmes through regular follow-up and increased collaboration with parents, schools, healthcare providers, and government agencies. Such partnerships would enhance faith-based interventions while addressing the broader social and reproductive health needs of adolescents. The Church should also invest in training chaplains, counsellors, and youth mentors and establish structured support programmes that facilitate the reintegration and psychosocial well-being of pregnant learners and teenage mothers. Additionally, Catholic-sponsored schools should reinforce guidance and counselling services through life skills education and peer mentorship. Further research is recommended to examine the long-term effectiveness of faith-based interventions in reducing teenage pregnancy in different educational and community settings.

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