

## **Sexuality Communication between the Clergy and Adolescents in Nakuru County, Kenya.**

### **Authors**

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### **Abstract**

The study examines the sexuality communication between the clergy and adolescents in Nakuru County, Kenya. The study uses Systems theory anchored by Ludwing Von Bertalanffy (1969). Eighty students were sampled from ten secondary schools in Nakuru East and Njoro sub-counties representing both urban and rural teacher population. The schools included six same-sex secondary (three only boys and three only girls) schools and four mixed-sex secondary schools. The categories of the schools included two national schools, three extra-county schools, three county schools and two sub-county schools. The study used a self-administered questionnaire as a method of data collection, which was appropriate for collecting sensitive information such as sexual communication yet provide quantifiable data that can be used for statistical analysis. The schools were categorized from letter A to J. The results of this study showed that although the clergy engage the adolescents in some sexuality communication, the sexuality information communicated by the clergy was insufficient to help them manage the sexuality challenges they encounter. This is partly because adolescents did not consider their interests as fully taken into account since the clergy used strategies that were convenient for them, but failed to address the adolescents' needs. The study suggested that clergy should be more accommodative of the views of the adolescents by considering the feedback regarding their interests and concerns. A good system will seek balance through interchanging with its environment and this comes through those feedback loops that enlighten the system on how or what to modify in order to maintain the system balance.

**Key terms:** Adolescence, clergy, sexuality, communication, strategies

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## INTRODUCTION

Adolescents' sexuality development is an issue of concern for various stakeholders such as parents, teachers and the clergy in all societies because of their vulnerability to risks associated with sexual engagements. While adolescents' vulnerability to sexually risky behaviour can be attributed to the fact that they are not yet fully matured, which contributes to less self-control and inability to assess risks or consequences of their unsafe sexual behaviour accurately, it has been argued that many face sexual challenges due to unavailability of sexual information that would help them make informed choices (WHO, 2006). Adolescence is considered a turbulent stage characterized by psychological challenges, exploration and experimentation. Some of the risky behaviour in adolescence such as drug abuse, use of alcohol and unhealthy sexual practices (Sadock, & Sadock, 2007) may have negative consequences in adolescence and later in life. Adolescents' lack of accurate and adequate information about sexual matters often leads to unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS, performing poorly academically, dropping out of schools and many girls die during delivery or when attempting to procure abortion (Mitchell, & Zhang, 2005). According to the WHO (2018), many adolescents are unaware of the risks of engaging in sexual activities and how to prevent sexually transmitted infections and pregnancies.

Communicating sexual information with adolescents is critical for teaching, protecting and modifying their sexual behaviour. World Health Organization (2014) refers to sexual behaviour as the approach to the states of physical, mental and social well-being with regard to sex and sexual relationships comprising sex, identification by gender and roles, sexual orientation, being erotic, intimacy, pleasure and reproduction. Sexual behaviour can be modified by provision of information on sexual behaviour, sex, bodily

development, relationships, alongside with the building of skills to make young people able to communicate better and to decide wisely about their sexuality and their sexual health (Bridges, & Hauser, 2014). Such communication also helps to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS whose transmission mode among teenagers is most predominantly sexual intercourse (WHO, 2011). According to the National Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy (2015), adolescent boys and girls in Kenya on average have their first sexual intercourse at 18.2 years and 17.6 years respectively. Consequences of inadequate sexual information, such as contraction of diseases and early pregnancies can affect the individual teens, their families, their communities and society. Sexual communication entails the use of language and communication signals to inform, educate or modulate sexual interaction as such sexual communication plays a vital role in the sexual socialization of the adolescents (Ward, 2003). Today's adolescent is exposed to various sources of sexual information- parents, peers, teachers, religious leaders, print and broadcast media and the internet, though communication patterns and content may differ based on the purpose of the communicator. This study investigates sexuality communication between the clergy and the school attending adolescents in Nakuru County. Rather than reporting whether or not sexuality communication happens between the clergy and the adolescents, there is a need to further interrogate the content of sexual communication that adolescents get from their religious leaders as well as the strategies used in delivering such information. Equally important is evaluating the delivery of such content, especially from the adolescents' perspective, to determine whether such communication helps meet their sexuality information needs. This is what this study does, by assessing the adolescents' views of the messages they get from the clergy.

Vast research into adolescent sexuality, however, shows that young people do not receive adequate information and the knowledge they need to manage their reproductive lives at the time they need it most (Senderowitz, 1998; Jaccard, 2010). This is compounded by modernization and urban migrations, which have broken down some of the traditional means of information transmissions and guidance and have made intra-family communication on the subject inadequate. Although the social-cultural setting keeps changing by the day, the need for adolescent guidance with regard to sexuality, as well as other social challenges, remains constant. While adolescents lack adequate information, the emotional and psychological changes they undergo increases the temptation for experimentation with sexual behaviour, and this could have long-lasting repercussions on their health and general well-being. Sexual communication is imperative in disseminating sexual knowledge, which includes information, facts, descriptions and skills acquired through experience, formal education or non-formal education. Effective sexual knowledge, however, requires much more than information for as Blake et al. (2001) avers, sexual knowledge, entails understanding what sex is, the role sex has in human life, whether one can identify the sex acts that are considered moral or immoral, and how that understanding influences sexual behaviour.

Global statistics show that many adolescents do not receive sufficient sexual communication to enable them to avoid the negative consequences of sexual engagements. Consequently, as the World Health Organization (2014) reports about 21 million girls aged fifteen to nineteen years and 2 million girls aged under fifteen years become pregnant in developing regions each year. Furthermore, about 16 million girls aged 15 to 19 years and 2.5 million girls below the age of sixteen years give birth in developing regions (UNFPA, 2013). Adolescent pregnancies and difficulties during childbirth cause most deaths among girls aged fifteen to nineteen years globally (WHO, 2016).

Additionally, about 3.9 million of girls between fifteen to nineteen years procure unsafe abortions every year, increasing maternal mortality and contributing to long-term health problems among young women (Darroch, et al., 2016).

In Kenya, one in every five adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 has begun childbearing KDHS (2014). Consequently, more than 20,000 girls in the country seek medical services for abortion-related problems annually, and unsafe abortions remain the foremost cause of maternal death among girls under 20 years (KDHS, 2014). The National AIDS Control Council (NACC) approximate that in Kenya, almost 30, 000 youth aged between 15-24 years contract HIV annually, and adolescents death associated with HIV/AIDS amount to about 17 percent. Adolescence pregnancy can be more complicated because of their needs, whether emotional or psychosocial can exceed other women's needs due to their age. Childbearing in adolescence can risk the health of the new-borns and their mothers (Ganchimeg, et al., 2016). Other than pregnancies, adolescents face heightened chances of getting sexual infections like HIV/AIDS (Rice, & Dolgin, 2008). According to the WHO, more than 2 million adolescents live with HIV/AIDS, accounting for about 35 percent of HIV cases globally. Sub-Saharan Africa has nearly 10 percent of adolescent boys and 15 percent of adolescent girls living with HIV (UNAIDS, 2013). The Centre for Disease Control (2017) reports that a third of all STIs in the world happen among youth under twenty-five years. The rate of STI transmission can be rapid and severe, especially in situations where adolescents have more than one sexual partner. Forhan et al. (2009) report that among sexually active girls in the USA, four in ten had had an STD that causes infertility or death.

In most traditions in Africa, sex-related information was transmitted to adolescents by relatives such as aunts, grandparents, as well as by the elders. Traditional rites of passage provided the platform and ample time for girls and

boys to be taught about the human reproductive system and the duties of women and men in society. During circumcision, boys learnt from grandfathers and elders about their sexuality and societal expectations on them (Munthali, & Kok, 2016). In most of the societies, both sexes were taught about the societal sanctions to premarital sexual activities and the consequences that would ensue, including fines, public ridicule, banishment from the community and even pronouncement of curses. Majority of the modern adolescents spend most of their time in formal schools and rarely get any chance to acquire such sexual information from their interaction with elders and relatives (Muhwezi, et al., 2015). In the modern setup, adolescents get sexuality information from varied sources, including their parents, teachers, religious leaders, their peers and the media. However, how this is done and structured is not clear. There is a need to study the messages that each of these sources provide to the adolescents in order to fill any gap that may exist. Factual, affordable and accessible sexual health information communication offered in a confidential, non-judgmental and friendly way can be significant in enabling effective adolescence to adulthood transition.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious leaders play a critical role in shaping their adolescent followers' attitudes towards sexual behaviour. Studies have shown that religiosity can be protective against risky sex behaviour (Belgrave, et al., 2000) and may intensify consciousness and influence decision making regarding moral conduct. Ellison and Levine (1998) explain that most religious communities have moral and ethical teachings, which discourage certain behaviours that increase the risk of health problems and encourage positive life-style choices. The clergy contribute immensely to the promotion of religion in the society and have the ability to mobilize masses and disseminate appropriate and accurate information on most issues including sexual health (Lincoln & Mamiya, 2001). Additionally, leaders of

many faith-based organizations are highly respected and valued and are influential since they are viewed as reliable sources of information and guidance (Eke, et al., 2010). Since many turn to religious institutions for guidance and spiritual support, religious leaders may serve as important agents for helping adolescents with sexual decision-making skills.

Smith and Faris (2002) report that in the United States, 87% of high school students were affiliated with organized religion and that religious affiliation and participation positively influences adolescents. For instance, Smith and Faris (2002) observed that religious affiliation is associated with less cigarette, alcohol and marijuana use and is also related to higher self-esteem and positive family relationships. Church leadership also contributes to healthy adolescent development by providing them with role models, moral direction, community leadership skills alongside spiritual experiences (Regnerus, & Elder, 2003). Affiliation and participation in religious activities have also been attributed to lower likelihood of initiating or engaging in sexual behaviour, and to delay the onset of sexual activity (Smith, & Faris, 2002). Mash and Mash (2013) argue that religious leaders and churches are increasingly becoming important partners in combatting HIV by providing HIV related services to adolescents, including its prevention. In this regard, the church has an advantage owing to perceived credibility, easy accessibility and wide communication networks and infrastructure. Churches are widespread even in the remotest villages and towns. Most of the churches also have infrastructural advantage such as space, educational materials as well as the personnel who could be used to teach the adolescents about sexuality.

Berry, (2017) argues that there has been minimal research on the messages adolescents are exposed to during participation in Church activities such as worship services, youth group meetings, Bible study, and other activities. In a study done in Kwa-Zulu Natal, Eriksson et al. (2014)



discovered that the adolescents viewed religious leaders as the most trusted educators on sexuality. While the church does well in providing health care, support and treatment to people infected and affected by HIV, it may struggle when it comes to addressing the broad scope of sexuality issues the modern youth encounters, especially when it comes to use of contraceptives and offering of other sexual and reproductive health services. This is because the Church has traditionally aimed at inculcating morals such as abstinence from sex and faithfulness to one partner in marriage. The reality on the ground is, however, very different and many adolescents in the church involve themselves in sexual activities. There is a need, therefore not only to assess the content of sexual communication that adolescents get from their religious leaders but also the strategies used in delivering such information. Equally important is the assessment of the delivery of such content, especially from the adolescents' perspective, to determine whether such communication helps meet their sexuality information needs. This is what this study aimed to do by assessing the adolescents' views of the messages they get from the clergy.

The study uses Systems theory propagated by Ludwing Von Bertalanffy (1969). The theory views life as a set of systems whose parts are interrelated, and which should work together to maintain balance. With regard to sexuality communication, such as what this study explores, the researcher considers the views of Bertalanffy that the most fundamental character of a living thing is its organization and that studying entities as systems that are related to one another and that affect one another could enhance the knowledge on the function of a particular system (Drack, 2008). Systems Theory considers organizations, whether families, churches or schools as one

part of the whole that is interdependent and whose success is dependent on the input of all members. Each of these organizations are subsystems of the real world, who are connected and are interdependent. The sexual health of the adolescents and the resultant social, stability and security with regard to sexual health are dependent on the role each of the subsystems plays.

Communication is an inherently integrative process that facilitates interaction between the various elements of the whole. Clergy and adolescent students relate in a context that requires constant interaction necessary for the acquisition of values and skills that aid the development of moral and religious values. Systems are relevant as a communication approach because it provides a framework that places communication logically within the field of interaction (Lubbe, & Puth, 1994). It is communication that co-ordinates behaviour control, defines the ideals and goals, and measures their attainment, which are essential components of the society's functioning. Hence, organizations such as churches are effective when they successfully bring in resources necessary for their survival as well as that of the larger society. Such resources in the context of this research are the experiences, knowledge, skills, among others that the clergy present when communicating with their adolescent followers about sexuality issues.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Strategies Used by Clergy to Communicate to

Adolescents about Sexuality: Adolescents' Perspective

The study sought to establish adolescents' views regarding the strategies used by pastors to communicate to adolescents about sexuality. The results of the study are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Strategies used by pastors to communicate to adolescents about sexuality: adolescents' perspective

Strategy	True		False	
	Freq.	Percent	Freq.	Percent
When there is a subject of concern I am talked to directly	35	48.6%	37	51.4%
Communication is addressed to a group instead of directing it to me as an individual	55	72.4%	21	27.6%
I am spoken to indirectly using parables	39	52.7%	35	47.3%
I am sent other church members to talk to me	23	31.1%	51	68.9%
I am bought books/ movies/magazines that address my questions	16	21.9%	57	78.1%
I am mostly warned about the dangers and consequences of sexual behaviour	73	94.8%	4	5.2%
I am listened to respectfully about my sexual concerns	35	45.5%	42	54.5%
I am shown genuine concern and understanding	41	56.2%	32	43.8%
We usually have a healthy dialogue or discussion	45	60.8%	29	39.2%
I am lectured on various topics	46	64.8%	25	35.2%
I do not contribute to the sexual discussions	30	40.0%	45	60.0%
My opinions are important and are respected	28	38.4%	45	61.6%
WhatsApp/email/twitter/etc. is used to pass sexuality information to me	20	33.9%	39	66.1%

Most of the respondents (51.4%) noted that their pastors do not talk to them directly when there is an issue of concern in contrast with 48.6percent who reported they did. Similarly, most of the respondents (72.4%) disapproved the proposition that pastors used individualized communication to discuss sexuality with them. Only 27.6 percent of the respondents agreed that they were addressed as individual and not as groups. That pastors use parables when communicating about sexuality issues with adolescents was indicated by the majority (52.7%) of the respondents while 47.3 percent disapproved. On sending other church members to communicate about sex to the respondents, the study established that this was not the case as the majority (68.9%) negated it. On the contrary, 31.1 percent of the respondents were usually sent other people to talk to them about sex.

A majority of the respondents (78.1%) negated that they were bought books, magazines and movies that addressed

their questions on sexuality contrasted with 21.9 percent who supported that statement as true that they were able to access books, movies and magazines addressing sexuality. Most of the respondents were warned about the dangers and consequences of sexual behaviour as opposed to 5.20 percent who were not. 54.5 percent refuted that they were listened to respectfully about their sexual concerns, 56.2 percent agreed that they were shown genuine concern and understanding when talking about sexuality issues while 60.8 percent agreed they had a healthy sexuality dialogue with their pastors. While 64.8 percent felt that they were lectured about sexuality issues, 60.0 percent reported that they did not contribute to the sexual discussions. Majority of respondents (61.6%) observed that their opinions in the sexually-based discussions were not considered influential and respected. 66.1 percent reported that pastors did not use social media like WhatsApp, email or twitter to pass sexuality information to adolescents.

From the findings, the clergy preferred to address sexuality issues to groups of adolescents as opposed to individuals. This is consistent with the nature of church services where the pastor addresses social and political issues in the course of sermon delivery. Additionally, the clergy use parables when communicating sexuality with adolescents. This may be influenced by the religious register that is usually metaphorical and extensively uses symbolism to talk about sex. The clergy used warning about negative outcomes of sexual activities, but the adolescents were more positive towards the information given. The adolescents did not feel that their opinions regarding sexuality issues were respected by the clergy. This can be associated with the religious doctrines which are non-compromising on moral issues such as premarital sex other sexual practices.

Moreover, most of the church communication is one way and did not give room for dialogue or feedback, which according to Systems theory, is a key component in

maintaining the balance of the system. The findings, therefore, reveal that there is some sexuality communication that happens between the clergy and the adolescents in church setup, but this is subject to the doctrines of the church, which mainly targets sexual purity of the young people, as opposed to the holistic approach of the topic that would allow more intense discussion on the varied angles to sexuality education. Sexuality education, however, does not only aim at reducing the risks of undesirable sexual outcomes also enhances the quality of adolescent relationships. Thus, effective sexual health education enhances the safety of adolescents and at the same time helps them enjoy their sexuality (UNAIDS, 2008).

## Strategies Adolescents Want Clergy to Use in Sexuality Communication

The views of adolescents regarding what they would want pastors to use in sexuality communication with the adolescents were captured and presented in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Strategies Adolescents want pastors to use in sexuality communicate with adolescents**

Strategy	Freq.	(%)
Being talked to directly when there is an issue of concern	14	21.5
Having communication addressed to a group instead of directing it to me as an individual	2	3.1
Being spoken to indirectly using parables	4	6.2
Being sent other church members to talk to me	1	1.5
Being bought books/ movies/magazines that address my questions	5	7.7
Being warned on the dangers and consequences of sexual behaviour	2	3.1
Being listened to respectfully about my sexual concerns	10	15.4
Being shown genuine concern and understanding	3	4.6
Having a healthy dialogue or discussion	5	7.7
Being lectured on various topics	4	6.2
Allowing my contribution to the sexual discussions	8	12.3
Treating my opinions as important and are respected	4	6.2
Having WhatsApp/email/twitter/etc. used to pass sexuality information to me	5	7.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The findings show that 21.5 percent of the adolescents would prefer that pastors talk directly when there is an issue of concern, 15.4 percent would want to be listened to by the pastor respectfully about their sexual concerns and

a further 12.3 percent of the adolescents preferred to be allowed to make a contribution during sexual discussions with the clergy. The results thus show that the adolescent would want the clergy to engage them directly when there was an issue of concern, as opposed to addressing them in groups. While this might be a challenge given the numbers of the teens in various churches, it expresses a desire among the adolescents for more open and trustworthy engagements that would allow for more insightful communication on sexuality issues. Adolescents also liked being listened to respectfully about their sexual concerns. The other preferred strategy was allowing adolescents to freely engage in discussions about sex and sexuality matters. This, therefore, underscores the need for the clergy to be flexible in handling sexual communication to enable them to provide the desired guidance to the adolescents.

From the findings, it can also be deduced that least preferred method of communication by the pastors was being sent other church members to talk to them when they had sexuality challenge (1.5%), a further 3.1% indicated that they were not comfortable with being warned about the dangers and consequences of sexual behaviour, and a similar percentage (3.1%) indicated that they did not prefer when communication was addressed to a group instead of directing it to an individual when they had a sexual challenge. In the view of the above results, sexual communication with the clergy is not effective when other individuals that were not privy to the sexual communication or challenges the adolescents faced are involved. This implies that adolescents prefer confidentiality in sexual communication. The adolescents would also appreciate a broader understanding and guidance on sexual issues rather than only being warned about the dangers of sexual activities. Lastly, teenagers prefer a more direct approach to communication on sexuality rather than being spoken to in parables. In a big way, the adolescents seem to suggest that the clergy

should try to recognize the individual differences in needs based on their different circumstances.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

**Conclusion:** The study shows that there is sexual communication between the clergy and adolescents in Nakuru County. However, this communication is not always perceived positively by adolescents because of the strategies used to deliver it. For instance, while the clergy preferred to address sexuality issues to groups of adolescents, amidst other religious issues, the adolescents would appreciate a more direct engagement that avail more focused sexuality information. The clergy's strategy of addressing a group rather than individuals is consistent with the nature of church services where the clergy address social and political issues in the course of sermon delivery. Additionally, the clergy use parables when communicating sexuality with adolescents. This may be influenced by the religious register that is usually metaphorical and extensively uses symbolism to talk about sex and sexuality. The clergy also widely used warning about the negative consequences of engaging in sexual activities but the adolescents wanted to learn more information regarding how to handle the many aspects of sexuality, rather than mere threats. According to Systems theory, the different parts of the system should be organised in a flexible way that allows for dynamic interaction and working together among the various parts to maximise the potential for such interaction. The current communication strategies used by the clergy apparently fails to create an environment for maximization of interaction which can enhance acquisition of the moral and religious values by the adolescents, which are an important aspect of individual and social stability.

**Recommendation:** The study suggested that clergy should be more accommodative of the views of the adolescents by considering the feedback regarding their interests and concerns. A good system will seek balance through interchanging with its environment and this comes through



those feedback loops that enlighten the system on how or | what to modify in order to maintain the system balance.

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