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## Religious Teachings on Marital Conflicts Among Women in Tharaka Community

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### Abstract

This study examined the influence of religious teachings on marital conflicts among women in the Tharaka community, Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. Religious institutions play a major role in defining gender roles and marital responsibilities. While religious teachings promote harmony and moral guidance, certain interpretations reinforce male authority, restrict women's decision-making, and contribute to marital conflicts. Limited research has addressed the specific impact of these teachings on women's marital relationships in Tharaka. Guided by Structural Functionalism Theory, the study explained how such teachings persist as part of the social order, even when they disadvantage women. The target population was 99,435, with a sample of 380 participants comprising 148 married women, 150 married men, 70 single women, three clergies, and nine lay leaders from Matiiri Catholic Church, East Africa Pentecostal Church, Gatunga, and Methodist Church of Kenya, Marimanti. A descriptive survey design was utilised, and data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. Findings revealed that religious teachings strongly shape gender roles, often promoting female submission and discouraging divorce, even in abusive situations. Although churches offer counselling, challenges such as limited access, outdated doctrines, and inconsistencies persist. The study concluded that while the church plays a vital role in marital life, doctrinal reforms and inclusive practices are essential. It recommends updating religious teachings to promote mutual respect, gender equity, and stronger church-community collaboration. The study contributes to the sociology of religion by illustrating how religious teachings function as social constructs that shape marital dynamics and individual experiences.

**Key words:** Religious teachings, marital conflicts, male authority, marital relationships.



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## INTRODUCTION

In the Tharaka community of Kenya, marital conflicts have become increasingly common, creating serious challenges for family stability and community cohesion. One critical area contributing to these conflicts, yet often overlooked in existing research, is the influence of religious teachings on marital relationships. In this deeply religious community, churches and religious leaders play a central role in shaping marital expectations, gender roles, and decision-making processes. Many of the religious doctrines promoted within the Tharaka community emphasise rigid patriarchal structures, positioning men as ultimate decision-makers and women as submissive and subordinate partners. Such teachings not only dictate how responsibilities are shared within the home but also do not allow women to participate in crucial decisions concerning finances, parenting, and conflict resolution.

As women increasingly gain education and exposure to alternative views on gender equality, tensions emerge when religiously enforced expectations clash with evolving personal aspirations. These tensions often escalate into persistent dissatisfaction, emotional disconnect, and ultimately, the breakdown of marriages. The need to investigate this issue arises because previous studies on marital instability in Tharaka have focused on economic hardships, cultural clashes, and external pressures, leaving a critical gap in understanding how religious messages preached in churches, interpreted in homes, and enforced by religious leaders influence the stability of marriages. Thus, this study investigated the influence of religious teachings on marital conflicts among women despite religious teachings in the Tharaka community.

Religious teachings are the moral, spiritual, and doctrinal principles drawn from sacred texts, traditions, and the authority of religious leaders, intended to guide the beliefs, values, and behaviours of individuals within a community. They provide ethical standards for daily life, shape social relationships, and offer frameworks for addressing conflicts and challenges. Marital conflicts are Persistent disagreements and misunderstandings between spouses, influenced by cultural beliefs, gender roles, economic pressures, and religious interpretations, which disrupt marital harmony and family stability. In the Tharaka community, male authority is a deeply ingrained cultural value that shapes gender roles and marital relationships. Men are traditionally regarded as the “heads of the family” responsible for protecting,

providing for, and leading the household, while women are expected to be submissive, supportive, and obedient to their husbands.

In the context of marriage, religious teachings often emphasise principles such as love, forgiveness, patience, fidelity, mutual respect, and the sanctity of marriage. At the same time, many traditions also stress male headship, female submission, and the duty to preserve marital unity, which can influence how conflicts are understood and resolved. For women in the Tharaka community, these teachings serve both as tools for reconciliation, encouraging dialogue, prayer, and forgiveness and as constraints, sometimes discouraging separation or divorce even in cases of persistent marital strife. Marital relationships in Tharaka refer to the socially and culturally recognised union between a man and a woman, bound by mutual responsibilities, emotional commitment, and traditional expectations. These relationships are not merely personal but are embedded within the broader Tharaka cultural, religious, and social systems, where marriage is viewed as a vital institution for family continuity, social order, and community stability.

In Tharaka, religious teachings take on a particularly pronounced form due to the interplay between Christian teachings and traditional Tharaka customs, both of which emphasise male authority in marital relationships. Within the Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal churches in Tharaka, sermons frequently invoke Colossians 3:18, 1 Peter 3:1, and Ephesians 5:22-24 to stress the importance of wives submitting to their husbands (Icheria, 2015). These teachings are not confined to church services; they permeate marriage counselling sessions, women's fellowship gatherings, and premarital classes, where women are explicitly taught that their spiritual fulfilment depends on fulfilling their husbands' wishes. Consequently, women in Tharaka are often discouraged from pursuing higher education or professional careers if such aspirations conflict with their husbands' views (Mukiira, 2012).

The doctrine of submission within Tharaka churches also extends to family decision-making, where husbands are portrayed as the ultimate authority on financial, educational, and disciplinary matters. Even in cases where women possess greater expertise or experience, they are expected to refer to their husbands' judgment (Icheria, 2015). This dynamic reinforces the perception that women's primary role is to support their husbands'

decisions rather than contribute equally to them. Furthermore, within Pentecostal churches in Tharaka, teachings on gender roles explicitly prohibit women from holding leadership positions in the church, such as pastors, elders, or council members (Mukiira, 2012). Instead, women are relegated to subordinate roles, such as teaching children's Sunday school, coordinating hospitality, or participating in church choirs. This religiously reinforced subordination has tangible consequences for women's agency and well-being in Tharaka.

Many women report being unable to make decisions about their children's education, their own healthcare, or their household finances without their husbands' approval (Icheria, 2015). In some cases, religious teachings have been invoked to justify domestic violence, with women being advised to endure abuse silently as a demonstration of their submission and faithfulness (Mukiira, 2012). The combined effect of these religious teachings is the systematic disempowerment of women within both the domestic and public spheres, perpetuating a cycle of gender inequality that limits women's opportunities for personal, educational, and professional development.

The Tharaka community's cultural fabric has not only absorbed Christian values but also shaped how those values are interpreted locally. Religious concepts introduced by missionaries were often filtered through the community's patriarchal worldview, leading to a hybrid theology that supports existing gender hierarchies. For example, scriptural interpretations promoting headship and submission were readily accepted because they aligned with traditional norms of male dominance (Ndunjo, 2024). Over time, the teachings became indigenised, no longer viewed as external beliefs but as an intrinsic part of Tharaka identity and values.

Church leadership is frequently drawn from the community itself, meaning that many clergy members are socialised within the same patriarchal norms, and hence go on to preach about them. The overlap contributes to theological interpretations that fail to question the gender biases prevalent in society (Kamwara et al., 2022). Consequently, the messages disseminated from the pulpit are often more reflective of community values than of critical biblical scholarship. The symbiotic relationship between culture and faith ensures that neither institution independently fosters reform; rather, both support the status quo. Religious institutions play an influential role in community rites of passage, including marriage,

baptism, and funerals. The events often merge biblical teachings with cultural customs, further solidifying the connection between the church and community. For instance, traditional wedding practices often include public vows of obedience by the bride, sanctioned both by cultural expectations and church rituals. Through such integration, the church legitimises cultural practices, and the community simultaneously grants spiritual authority to the church, blurring the lines between what is cultural and what is religious.

A major contributor to marital conflict in the Tharaka community is the rigid expectation that women must suppress their opinions in order to maintain peace and appear submissive. When women begin to voice dissatisfaction or seek mutual decision-making, they are often accused of disrespect or challenging the husband's authority (Kagwiria, 2022). The dynamic creates a communication barrier, preventing open dialogue and making it difficult to resolve conflicts constructively. Over time, the lack of mutual dialogue breeds resentment and emotional disconnect between spouses, eroding the foundations of marriage.

Another factor contributing to marital discord is the shifting socio-economic landscape, particularly as women gain more access to education and financial opportunities. When women begin earning income or pursuing careers, the traditional submission model is challenged, especially if the husband feels threatened by the wife's economic independence (Kathanya, 2024). Rather than adapting to more egalitarian partnerships, some men react by asserting control or withdrawing emotionally. These tensions, when left unaddressed, often lead to separation, infidelity, or persistent quarrels that affect the entire family unit, not just the couple.

Conflict is exacerbated by a lack of structured support systems for couples experiencing difficulties. Although churches and community leaders may offer counselling, their approaches often focus on preserving the marriage rather than addressing power imbalances or emotional abuse. Women are encouraged to pray, fast, or simply "endure" hardships, while men receive little to no instruction on empathy, compromise, or accountability (Kathanya, 2024). The one-sided approach fails to equip couples with practical tools for resolving disputes and, instead, perpetuates cycles of silence, endurance, and unresolved conflict.

The reinforcement of wife submission is perpetuated through formal church structures such as premarital counselling sessions, women's guilds, and marriage seminars. The platforms often promote gender roles that are skewed in favour of men, encouraging women to adopt submissive positions under the assumption that it leads to family stability and divine favour (Alsdurf & Alsdurf, 2018). While the teachings may be well-intentioned, they seldom address the risk of emotional neglect, inequality in decision-making, or domestic control masked as biblical leadership. As a result, many women internalise these expectations as spiritual obligations, even in circumstances where their autonomy is compromised.

Community elders and family units play a pivotal role in upholding the same submission narratives passed down through generations. In customary Tharaka settings, women are expected to adhere to directives from male family members, including husbands, fathers, and even brothers (Maisiri, 2015). Disputes between couples are often resolved by older men in extended families, who may advise women to remain obedient regardless of the circumstances. This patriarchal mediation reinforces submission as a norm and discourages women from asserting their rights or leaving oppressive situations. Thus, traditional dispute resolution mechanisms can often silence women and fail to challenge the deeper systemic issues within marriages.

The intersection of church doctrine and cultural practices creates a powerful dual authority that makes it difficult for alternative gender roles to take root. For instance, when women attempt to assert independence or challenge their husbands' authority, they may be labelled as rebellious both spiritually and socially. The discouragement from questioning male authority often traps women in roles that undermine their personal growth (Maisiri, 2015). Moreover, any effort to challenge those norms is frequently met with resistance not only from the male figures but also from fellow women who have been conditioned to uphold the same values. The complex entanglement of church and culture ensures that submission remains a reinforced norm from multiple angles. When women raise objections, conflicts arise. Thus, this study will investigate the influence of religious teachings on material conflict among women within the Tharaka community in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Religious Doctrines and Marital Power Dynamics**

Religious teachings often shape marital hierarchies and influence power relations within families. Aman et al. (2021) found that evangelical Christian doctrines emphasising male headship and female submission contributed to power imbalances, communication breakdowns, and marital dissatisfaction among couples in the United States. Similarly, Nana (2021) reported that in Bamenda, Cameroon, religious teachings reinforced traditional gender roles, resulting in unequal household responsibilities and conflict as women felt undervalued. These studies highlight how doctrinal interpretations can perpetuate patriarchal structures that disadvantage women. The current study expands on this theme within the Tharaka community by examining how such interpretations continue to affect women's agency in rural Kenya.

### **Religious Prohibitions and Marital Dissatisfaction**

Teachings discouraging divorce can sustain unhealthy marriages and emotional distress. Agu (2022) demonstrated that strict religious opposition to divorce in South Korea often compelled individuals to remain in unhappy or abusive relationships, compromising well-being. Similarly, Mueni (2020) found that in Makueni County, church-mediated conflict resolution prioritised marital preservation over personal safety, especially for women in abusive relationships. These findings underscore the need for religious institutions to balance moral teachings with compassion and psychological support. The current study builds on this by exploring how similar prohibitions affect married women's experiences in Tharaka.

### **Religious Influence on Family Roles and Reproductive Decisions**

Religious doctrines also extend to family planning and gendered responsibilities. Litalien et al. (2022) found that Catholic prohibitions against contraception in Canada led to larger family sizes, financial strain, and marital tension. Likewise, Nana (2021) showed that rigid gender role expectations contributed to domestic imbalance and resentment. These findings point to how doctrinal rigidity can impact family stability. The present study broadens this scope by including multiple denominations in Tharaka, highlighting diverse religious perspectives on gender and family roles.

### **Religion, Conflict Resolution, and Church Mediation**

Religious leaders often act as mediators in marital disputes. Mtapuri and Nyanjaya (2020) observed that Congolese migrant families in Durban relied heavily on church leaders for conflict resolution, though doctrinal biases sometimes led to partial outcomes. Mueni (2020) similarly noted that pastoral counselling in Kenya emphasised forgiveness over fairness. Okech and Simatwa (2013) further found that rigid doctrines within the Anglican Church contributed to marital discord, suggesting that religious institutions should reassess teachings that perpetuate inequality. The current study in Tharaka improves upon these by including a larger, more diverse sample of church leaders and denominations.

### **Cultural and Contextual Interpretations of Christian Marriage**

Contextual factors strongly shape how religious teachings are interpreted. Sundberg (2016) revealed that in Benin, Christian converts struggled to reconcile monogamous doctrines with traditional polygamous practices, resulting in internal and communal conflicts. Similarly, Njoroge (2019) found that conflicting Christian and traditional Tharaka interpretations of marriage caused instability, emphasising the need for culturally sensitive theological approaches. Karanja (2022) noted that urban churches often failed to address modern marital challenges due to outdated doctrines. The present study builds on these insights by situating its analysis within rural Tharaka, capturing localised interpretations of faith, culture, and marital conflict.

### **Theoretical Literature**

This study was guided by Structural Functionalism, a Sociological Theory developed by Émile Durkheim in 1895. The theory views society as a complex system where various institutions function to maintain stability and order. It suggests that social institutions, including religion, family, and education, work together to shape societal norms and values (Kingsbury & Scanzoni, 1993). Each institution plays a specific role in maintaining equilibrium, and disruptions in one area can impact the entire system. Religion, as a social institution, influences moral beliefs, gender roles, and family structures, making it a crucial element in understanding marital dynamics in various societies. The relationship between Structural Functionalism and this study is evident in how religious teachings shape marital expectations in communities. Religion, as a key social institution, defines acceptable behaviours and reinforces traditional gender roles within marriages. For example,

churches should not promote doctrines that encourage women to endure marital hardships in the name of faith. The functionalist perspective helps explain why such teachings persist and how they contribute to the social order, even when they result in personal struggles for women.

In summary, the conceptual framework informed the study by guiding the selection of key variables such as religion, gender roles, and marital stability, which were essential in examining the influence of religious teachings on marital dynamics. It shaped the research objectives to explore both the stabilising and conflict-inducing roles of religion within the Tharaka community, while providing an interpretive structure for analysing the findings in relation to social order, moral values, and gender expectations. Furthermore, it highlighted the dual function of religion as both a cohesive and restrictive force in shaping marital relationships. Thus, the conceptual framework, grounded in Structural Functionalism, offered a logical and systematic approach to understanding how religious institutions influence the marital experiences of women in the Tharaka community.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted in Tharaka-Nithi County, Kenya, within the Tharaka Christian community, characterised by its blend of cultural traditions and Christian doctrines from dominant denominations: Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal churches. This setting was chosen to explore how religious teachings influence marital conflicts among women, given the interplay of cultural norms and religious interpretations that often exacerbate tensions in marriages. A descriptive survey design was utilised to examine this social phenomenon, capturing trends and personal experiences through a mixed-methods approach.

Data were collected via structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The target population, estimated at 99,435 Christians (80% of Tharaka's 124,293 residents), was sampled using a four-stage technique. First, a sample size of 382 was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table. Second, purposive sampling selected one prominent church per denomination: Matiiri Catholic Church, Methodist Church of Kenya (Marimanti), and East African Pentecostal Church (Gatunga). Third, systematic random sampling identified 370 respondents (150 married women, 150 married men, 70 single women) proportionally across denominations. Fourth, 12

purposively selected clergy and lay leaders, comprising of one clergy and three lay leaders from each of the three denominations, participated in interviews. Table 1 shows an overview of the sampling method used.

**Table 1: Summary Description of Sampling Procedure**

Denomination type	Church Name	Number of Clergy	Number of lay leaders	Total Number of married women, married men, and single women	Total of respondents
Catholic church	Catholic Church, (Matiiri)	1	3	123	127
Mainline Protestant church	Methodist Church of Kenya (Marimanti)	1	3	124	128
Pentecostal church	East African Pentecostal Church (Gatunga)	1	3	123	127
Total		3	9	370	382

Questionnaires gathered demographic data and perspectives on religious influences on marital roles, using a Likert scale and open-ended questions. Interviews with clergy and lay leaders explored theological interpretations and conflict resolution practices. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 29 for descriptive statistics, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring themes. Ethical approval was obtained from NACOSTI and Chuka University, ensuring informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Religious Teachings Contributing to Marital Conflicts based on Church Participants**

Religious teachings play a central role in shaping marital relationships within the Tharaka community, often defining gender roles, authority and expectations. While intended to promote harmony, certain interpretations contribute to power imbalances and limit women's autonomy, fueling marital conflicts. Women who are the majority in churches often struggle when these teachings clash with their social and economic roles and rights, leading to tensions in decision-making and family dynamics. Thus, the study delved into identifying such

teachings to understand the religious roots of marital conflicts among women in Tharaka.

The findings resonate with the literature reviewed, which emphasises that misinterpretation of scripture often becomes a source of conflict in families. Parsitau (2014) and Aman et al. (2021) observed that patriarchal readings of texts such as Ephesians 5:22 can legitimise male dominance, leading to oppression and reduced autonomy for women. Similarly, Gichure (2016) argues that when submission is taught without mutual respect, it fosters inequality and can escalate into psychological or physical abuse. The 38.0 per cent who reported unfair treatment justified by religion confirms Mukiira's (2012) assertion that cultural and religious norms are sometimes exploited to perpetuate gender-based power imbalances. Therefore, while religious teachings are intended to strengthen families, their distortion or selective interpretation creates vulnerabilities that threaten marital harmony. The findings indicated there was a need for the church to develop contextualised messages that promote equality while upholding biblical principles to minimise such conflicts. To put the study into perspective, the specific teachings that were believed to cause marital conflicts were investigated. Responses were presented in Table 1.

**Table 2: Religious Teachings that Cause Marital Conflict**

Religious Teachings	Ratings	SD	D	N	SA	A	Totals
Wives should unconditionally submit to their husbands	Frequency	112	154	12	51	39	368
	Percentages	30.4	41.8	3.3	13.9	10.6	100
There should be no divorce, even in abusive relationships	Frequency	131	124	23	41	49	368
	Percentages	35.6	33.7	6.3	11.1	13.3	100
Believers should seek counselling from their religious leaders only	Frequency	64	115	50	98	41	368
	Percentages	17.4	31.3	13.6	26.6	11.1	100
Believers should endure suffering as a sign of faithfulness in marriage	Frequency	102	141	09	41	75	368
	Percentages	27.7	38.3	2.4	11.1	20.4	100
Believers should practice forgiveness and reconciliation in conflicting relationships	Frequency	84	93	08	123	60	368
	Percentages	22.8	25.3	2.2	33.4	16.3	100

**Wives Submit to Your Husbands Unconditionally**

The findings revealed that the Majority 276 (72.2%) of respondents disagreed with the statement that wives should submit to their husbands unconditionally. While 90 (24.5%) agreed and 12 (3.3%) remained neutral. This indicates that most women in the Tharaka community rejected a rigid interpretation of religious teachings that emphasise unconditional submission, reflecting a growing resistance to doctrines perceived as perpetuating gender inequality. Such resistance aligns with broader scholarship suggesting that women increasingly challenge patriarchal readings of scripture that subordinate them in marriage (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008).

The disagreement further underscores a shift toward valuing mutual respect and partnerships in marital relationships consistent with an egalitarian interpretation of Christian marriage (Njoroge, 2016). The minority who supported unconditional submission represent individuals more influenced by traditional or conservative religious teachings, which continue to emphasise male headship (Mbiti, 1991). The neutral response 12 (3.3%) suggests that some women remain undecided, possibly reflecting tension between cultural expectations and modern views on gender equality within marriage. The results demonstrate that misinterpretation of submission teachings contributes to marital conflicts, as many women perceive them as outdated and inconsistent with contemporary understandings of dignity rights and shared responsibility in marriage.

**No Divorce**

The findings revealed that the majority, 255 (69.3%) of respondents disagreed with the statement that there should be no divorce even in abusive relationships. While 90 (24.4%) agreed and 23 (6.3%) remained

neutral. The majority who disagreed were of the opinion that divorce was a legitimate response to protect victims from physical and emotional harm associated with domestic violence (Dobash & Dobash, 2004). Many respondents were influenced by growing awareness of human rights and a gender equality framework that emphasises safety and dignity, rejecting doctrines that compel women to remain in abusive marriages (United Nations, 1979). Changing cultural attitudes towards marriage further shaped these views, with modern unions being seen as a partnership built on mutual respect rather than lifelong endurance regardless of the harm (Cherlin, 2020). In addition, religious interpretations challenge rigid doctrines, emphasising that God does not condone abuse and that "till death do us part" does not imply enduring violence (Grenz, 1995). Respondents who disagreed with the statement seemed to understand the effects of abusive relationships that cause severe psychological consequences, including trauma and depression, and therefore supported divorce as a healthier option (Walker, 2009).

Despite divorce being considered a legal solution to marital breakdown, it can itself become a source of marital conflict among women in the Tharaka community. Religious teachings, particularly within Christianity, emphasise the permanence of marriage and strongly discourage divorce, often citing biblical injunctions such as "what God has joined together let no one separate (Mathew 19:6). With such a religious framework, women who pursue divorce are frequently stigmatised accused of lacking submission, or even blamed for the failure of their marriage (Mbiti, 2015). This creates ongoing interpersonal and communal conflicts since women may face rejection from their spouses, in-laws, church members or the wider community.

Additionally, the contradiction between cultural expectations and religious teachings fuels marital tension. In Tharaka, marriage is viewed not only as a union between two individuals but also as a covenant between families. Thus, when divorce occurs, disputes arise regarding dowry refund, child custody and inheritance rights; issues that are further complicated when religious leaders insist that divorce is illegitimate (Njoroge, 2006). Such teachings intensify the conflicts by pressuring women to remain in unhealthy relationships rather than risk being seen as disobedient or dishonouring their family. This was supported by 90 (24.4%) respondents who agreed that there should be no divorce even in abusive marriages. Consequently, instead of resolving conflicts, divorce often escalates them within this religious-cultural setting. The stigma attached to divorced women, combined with religious condemnation, leads to social isolation, economic vulnerability and emotional distress; factors that perpetuate ongoing marital and post-marital conflicts.

The small group of neutral respondents, 23 (6.3%), suggest they were unaware of religious teaching and safety concerns for women in abusive marriages. It also shows they lack awareness about the legal framework guiding marriage unions (Lehrer, 2004). Overall, the findings indicate that while religious teachings and traditional practices still shape people's lives, teachings on divorce can trigger marital conflicts.

#### **Counselling by Religious Leaders Only**

The findings revealed that out of 368 respondents, 179 (48.6%) disagreed with the statement that believers should seek counselling from their religious leaders only, 139 (37.8%) agreed, while 50 (13.6%) remained neutral. The large proportion of disagreement suggests that many participants acknowledge the importance of professional counselling services in addressing psychological and emotional needs beyond the spiritual guidance offered by clergy. Previous research indicates that religious leaders often lack formal training in evidence-based mental health interventions, which may explain why individuals prefer seeking support from professional counsellors (Leavey, 2010). Moreover, concerns about stigma, confidentiality, and judgment within religious communities have been identified as barriers to relying solely on clergy for mental health support in the Tharaka community (Stanford, 2007).

The preference for alternative counselling sources is also consistent with the biopsychosocial model, which emphasises the interplay of psychological, medical, and social factors in health care, rather than spiritual input alone (Engel, 1977). When counselling is monopolised by religious leaders, women may feel silenced or judged, particularly in a patriarchal church setting where the emphasis is on preserving marriage at all costs. This creates inner conflicts for women who struggle between obeying religious authority and addressing their legitimate emotional and physical needs. The exclusion of professional marriage counsellors reinforces power imbalances in marriage, leaving women vulnerable to recurring disputes. In addition, relying solely on religious leaders for counselling can escalate communal tensions. Women who seek alternative forms of help may be accused of lacking faith or rebelling against God's ordained structures (Mbiti, 2015). This stigmatisation breeds further stigmatisation within families and church communities as women navigate between spiritual obedience and their rights to holistic care.

On the other hand, the 139 (37.8%) of respondents who agreed may reflect a continued trust in religious leaders as spiritual authorities and accessible sources of support. For many believers, clergy provide guidance that is culturally and spiritually aligned with their values, making them a preferred choice for counselling (Pargament, 1997; Idler, 2014). Religious leaders are often perceived as approachable, affordable, and familiar, which can increase reliance on them over professional services (Wang et al., 2005). However, some respondents 50 (13.6%) remained neutral, which could be explained by uncertainty or a case-by-case perspective where both religious and professional counselling may be considered depending on the nature of the problem (Tan, 2007; Koenig, 2012). Overall, these findings highlight a complex perspective: while many believers value pastoral support, there is also recognition of the limitations of clergy-only counselling and an openness to integrative approaches that combine faith-based and professional support. Thus, while church teachings on exclusive religious counselling aim to preserve marital harmony, they often perpetuate unresolved conflicts, silence women's voices, and reinforce gender-based inequalities in marriage.

#### **Endure Suffering in Marriage**

Out of 368 respondents, 243 (66%) disagreed with the statement that believers should endure suffering as a sign of faithfulness in marriage, while 116 (31.5%) agreed

and 9 (2.4%) remained neutral. The high level of disagreement suggests that most participants reject the idea of normalising or spiritualising marital suffering, recognising instead that issues such as abuse, neglect, or emotional harm should not be tolerated under the guise of religious devotion. Contemporary scholarship emphasises that endorsing endurance of suffering in marriage may perpetuate cycles of domestic violence and psychological harm, contradicting both human rights principles and modern understandings of marital well-being (Le Roux & Loots, 2017). Moreover, public health research has established that enduring abuse in intimate relationships has detrimental consequences for physical and mental health, further supporting the rejection of suffering as a spiritual obligation (World Health Organisation, 2021). This perspective aligns with evolving cultural and theological views that prioritise mutual respect, love, and well-being over rigid adherence to suffering as a religious virtue (Nason-Clark, 2004).

Conversely, the 166 (31.5%) who agreed may reflect the influence of traditional or conservative interpretations of faith, which often frame marital endurance, even in hardship, as a test of loyalty and spiritual maturity. Research indicates that some religious communities still promote sacrificial endurance within marriage, particularly among women, as part of their religious and cultural identity (Bent-Goodley & Fowler, 2006). The small percentage of neutral respondents (2.4%) may indicate ambivalence, possibly stemming from the tension between respecting religious teachings and acknowledging the psychological and social risks of unquestioned endurance. Overall, these findings highlight a shifting perspective among believers, where the sanctity of marriage is increasingly understood not as unquestioned endurance of suffering but as the pursuit of mutual care, dignity, and holistic well-being.

### **Practice Forgiveness and Reconciliation**

The results revealed that out of 368 respondents, 183 (49.7%) agreed with the statement that believers should practice forgiveness and reconciliation in conflicting relationships, while 177 (48.1%) disagreed, and 8 (2.2%) remained neutral. The nearly equal split indicates a complex perception of forgiveness and reconciliation among believers. The slight majority who agreed reflects the central role of forgiveness in many religious traditions, where it is viewed as a moral and spiritual imperative that promotes healing, reduces resentment, and fosters relational restoration (Worthington, 2006). Prior studies have shown that religious communities

often emphasise forgiveness as a pathway to both personal well-being and communal harmony, which can explain why many respondents endorsed it as essential in conflict resolution (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002).

Conversely, the 48.1 per cent who disagreed may reflect awareness of the potential risks of unconditional reconciliation, particularly in relationships marked by abuse, exploitation, or repeated harm. Scholars caution that pressuring individuals to forgive without accountability can perpetuate cycles of injustice, silence victims, and overlook the need for personal safety and boundaries (Exline et al., 2003; Nason-Clark, 2004). This perspective suggests that while forgiveness may be valued, reconciliation is not always seen as mandatory, especially when it compromises well-being. The small proportion of neutral responses (2.2%) may reflect ambivalence, possibly due to tension between religious teachings that prioritise forgiveness and practical concerns about justice and safety. Overall, these findings highlight the nuanced understanding among believers: forgiveness is valued as a virtue, yet its application in reconciliation is contingent upon context, accountability, and the protection of individual dignity.

### **Religious Teachings that Contribute to Marital Conflicts based on Clergy and Lay Leaders**

In the Tharaka community, religious teachings play a central role in shaping marital expectations, roles, and conflict resolution strategies within faith communities. While many teachings promote harmony, love, and mutual respect in marriage, certain interpretations and applications by clergy and lay leaders may inadvertently contribute to marital conflicts. For instance, strict doctrinal views on gender roles, submission, forgiveness, and the sanctity of marriage can influence how spouses navigate disagreements and endure challenges in their marital relationships (Nason-Clark, 2004). In some contexts, religious leaders emphasise endurance and sacrifice, even in harmful situations, which may silence victims of abuse and perpetuate cycles of conflict (Le Roux & Loots, 2017). At the same time, lay leaders may reinforce cultural norms under the guise of religious authority, thereby deepening tensions between partners. These dynamics highlight the dual influence of religion as both a source of marital guidance and a potential contributor to conflict, depending on how teachings are communicated and practised within faith communities.

**Religious Teachings on Marriage Most Emphasised**

An investigation was carried out on religious teachings, with the most emphasised responses as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Religious Teachings on Marriage are Most Emphasised**

Religious teaching	Mentions	(%)	Contrasting religious teachings	Mentions	(%)	Excerpts
Wives' submission to husbands	8	66.7	Emphasis on mutual submission	4	33.3	"We teach that wives must respect and obey." / "Both should submit to each other in love."
Marriage is for life (no divorce)	6	50.0	Divorce is acceptable in severe cases	6	50.0	"Divorce is not an option." / "If abuse persists, separation may be necessary."
Husband as family head	5	41.7	Shared leadership model	7	58.3	"The man is the head of the home." / "Leadership is shared equally between spouses."
Patience and endurance in marriage	4	33.3	Resolve issues early, not just endure	8	66.7	"Endure in prayer." / "Don't suffer in silence; seek help early."

The majority, 8 (66.7%) of the respondents supported the idea of wives' submission to their husbands, while 4 (33.3%) emphasised mutual submission. On divorce, the responses were evenly divided: half rejected divorce outright, while the other half considered it acceptable in cases of abuse or severe hardship. Leadership within the home also revealed division, with 5 (41.7%) affirming male headship and 7 (58.3%) supporting shared leadership. Finally, 4 (33.3%) emphasised patience and endurance in marriage, while 8 (66.7%) encouraged early conflict resolution rather than prolonged endurance.

The data reveal clear tensions between traditional doctrinal positions and emerging egalitarian interpretations. A significant portion of leaders continue to stress submission and male headship; these teachings are historically tied to patriarchal norms. However, growing support for mutual submission, shared leadership, and proactive conflict resolution reflects a shift toward more balanced models of marriage. Similarly, while some leaders uphold lifelong marriage as absolute, others are open to separation in cases of abuse, signalling a more pastoral and pragmatic response to conflict.

These findings underscore the complex role of religious teachings in shaping marital conflict. Traditional emphases on submission, endurance, and male authority may contribute to power imbalances, communication breakdowns, and the silencing of women in conflict

situations (Aman et al., 2021). Such interpretations often discourage divorce even in harmful contexts, compelling spouses (especially women) to remain in abusive relationships (AGU, 2022). In contrast, the growing advocacy for mutual submission, shared leadership, and early conflict resolution aligns with contemporary theological perspectives that prioritise justice, dignity, and equality in marriage (Whitnah, 2022; Kagema, 2024).

Structural Functionalism helps explain this variance: religion seeks to preserve social order, but as societal expectations shift, doctrines are contested and reinterpreted to meet new realities. The responses from Tharaka thus reflect both continuity and change in church teachings, illustrating the tension between preserving tradition and addressing modern marital challenges.

Overall, the data highlights a community in transition. While many leaders still promote traditional teachings that may reinforce marital conflict through rigid gender roles and endurance, a significant number embrace evolving interpretations that encourage equality and proactive conflict resolution. This duality suggests that the church in Tharaka is both a site of continuity and a space of transformation, where leaders reinterpret teachings to address the realities of marital conflict in contemporary society.

**Conflicts Linked to Misinterpretation of Teachings**

The study was carried out regarding conflicts linked to misinterpretation of teachings, and the results are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: Conflicts Linked to Misinterpretation of Teachings**

Religious teaching	Mentions	%	Contrasting religious teaching	Mentions	%	excerpts
Pastoral counseling	10	83.3	Refer to professional counsellors when needed	2	16.7	“We counsel couples ourselves.” / “Sometimes we refer cases to professionals.”
Emphasise prayer and forgiveness.	8	66.7	Encourage practical solutions along with prayer	4	33.3	“We pray with them.” / “Prayer plus professional advice works better.”

The majority of respondents 10 (83.3%) reported that their primary response to marital conflict is pastoral counselling, often based on scripture and prayer, while 2 (16.7%) recognised the importance of referring couples to professional counsellors in severe cases. One respondent supporting pastoral counselling remarked, *“We counsel couples ourselves” (CCL3, 2025)*, underscoring the church’s role as both a spiritual and relational authority. *Another respondent advocating for professional counselling alluded that “Sometimes we refer cases to professionals” (PCC, 2025)*. This minority reflects a growing acknowledgement that pastoral care alone may not be adequate, especially where psychological trauma or abuse is present. Structural Functionalism helps frame this tension. Religion serves to stabilise relationships, but overreliance on internal mechanisms like pastoral counselling, without integration of modern support systems, may inhibit the adaptability of religious institutions in a changing society. In Tharaka, this resistance to external expertise could hinder long-term conflict resolution.

Similarly, 66.7 per cent of respondents emphasised prayer and forgiveness as primary tools for resolving marital issues. A pastor explained, *“We pray with them” (MCL2, 2025)*, expressing deep belief in divine intervention. However, a more pragmatic group (33.3%) stressed combining prayer with practical action, as one leader stated, *“Prayer plus professional advice works better” (PCCL1, 2025)*. This tension mirrors Kagema's (2024) findings that transformative church leaders in Kenya increasingly promote adaptive leadership and theological flexibility. The Tharaka study echoes this shift, highlighting how outdated interpretations of endurance, prayer, and forgiveness can perpetuate cycles

of abuse or dissatisfaction. Scholars like Aman et al. (2021) argue that rigid interpretations often suppress communication and leave women vulnerable. Therefore, religious leaders in Tharaka must walk a fine line between preserving doctrinal integrity and promoting effective conflict resolution. Incorporating professional mental health support alongside pastoral care may be key to addressing deep-rooted marital issues without undermining faith-based guidance.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Conclusion:** In conclusion, the study established that marital conflict among women in the Tharaka community is closely linked to certain religious teachings, particularly those emphasising unconditional submission of wives, endurance in suffering, and the prohibition of divorce. These teachings have been deeply internalised through sermons, premarital counselling, and general church instruction. Insights from both church participants and clergy revealed a strong doctrinal foundation that often prioritises family preservation over individual well-being. While a few leaders advocated for reinterpretation, the dominant position upheld traditional roles. These findings highlight the pressing need to reevaluate theological teachings to promote healthier, just, and faith-based marital relationships.

**Recommendations:** Therefore, the study recommended that there is an urgent need for churches in Tharaka and similar communities to reassess and reinterpret teachings on marriage that emphasise unconditional submission, endurance of abuse, and male headship. Theological training institutions and church leadership should promote balanced teachings grounded in mutual love, respect, and justice. Scriptural interpretations must reflect

pastoral sensitivity and uphold the dignity and safety of women in marriage.

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