

Religious Interpretations on Gender Roles and Their Influence on Married Women in the Tharaka Community

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Cite this article in APA

Muchoki, S. K., Kagema, D. N., & Mwongera, P. K. (2025). Religious interpretations on gender roles and their influence on married women in the Tharaka Community. *Journal of philosophy and religion*, 4(1), 107-126. <https://doi.org/10.51317/jpr.v4i1.848>



A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history

Received: 2025-08-21

Accepted: 2025-09-22

Published: 2025-10-22

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Abstract

This study examined religious interpretations of gender roles and their influence on married women in the Tharaka community. In Tharaka, religious institutions play a central role in defining marital responsibilities and shaping perceptions of male and female roles. While religious teachings often promote harmony and moral order, some interpretations reinforce male authority and limit women's decision-making power, contributing to marital conflicts. Guided by the Structural Functionalism Theory, the study explored how these interpretations persist and maintain social order despite disadvantaging women. The target population was 99,435, with a sample size of 380 comprising 148 married women, 150 married men, 70 single women, 3 clergy, and 9 lay leaders from Matiiri Catholic Church, East Africa Pentecostal Church Gatunga, and the Methodist Church of Kenya in Marimanti. A descriptive survey design was used, and data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. Findings revealed that religion significantly shapes gender roles, emphasising female submission, male headship, and discouraging divorce, even in abusive relationships. Although churches offer counselling, access remains limited, and teachings often reflect outdated gender norms. Most participants reported being socialised to view men as leaders and women as caretakers, a belief upheld by clergy and lay leaders. Despite emerging support for gender equality among a few leaders, patriarchal norms continue to dominate. The study concluded that religious institutions should contextually reinterpret doctrines to promote gender equity, mutual respect, and balanced marital relationships that align faith with contemporary social realities.

Key terms: Gender roles, religious interpretations, male authority, marital conflicts, marital relationships.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the Tharaka community, religion plays a central role in shaping social norms, moral conduct, and family life. Religious teachings and interpretations, particularly those concerning gender roles, have a profound influence on marital relationships. While these teachings are intended to promote harmony, respect, and order within families, certain interpretations have reinforced patriarchal structures that subordinate women and limit their participation in decision-making within marriage. Despite modernisation, education, and increasing advocacy for gender equality, many married women in Tharaka continue to experience restricted autonomy and unequal power relations justified by religious beliefs. Teachings that emphasise male headship and female submission are often interpreted in ways that validate male dominance and female dependence, creating tension in contemporary marriages where women contribute economically and socially. This imbalance can lead to marital conflicts, emotional distress, and diminished mutual respect between spouses. Furthermore, existing religious and cultural institutions often fail to challenge these gendered interpretations, perpetuating norms that disadvantage women while discouraging open dialogue about equality and mutual respect.

Consequently, the influence of religious interpretations on gender roles continues to shape the experiences of married women in ways that may hinder their empowerment and well-being. Therefore, it is crucial to examine how religious interpretations of gender roles influence the lives, status, and relationships of married women in the Tharaka community, with the aim of understanding their implications for marital harmony, women's empowerment, and the broader goal of gender equality.

Religious interpretations of gender roles are a powerful force in shaping the social and marital lives of women in many African communities, including the Tharaka of Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. Religion provides not only spiritual guidance but also frameworks through which families and societies organise roles, responsibilities, and expectations of men and women. In the Tharaka community, Christianity, African Traditional Religion, and cultural practices converge to define the roles of married women primarily around nurturing, submission, and domestic responsibility. These interpretations often position men as household heads and decision-makers, while women are expected to embody obedience, respect, and service to their husbands and families.

Male authority refers to the socially and culturally sanctioned power and leadership that men hold within families and the community, allowing them to make key decisions and control important aspects of social, economic, and spiritual life. In the Tharaka community, male authority is deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions and reinforced by religious teachings that position men as heads of households and custodians of family values.

The term marital refers to anything related to marriage or the relationship between a husband and wife. It encompasses the duties, responsibilities, emotions, and interactions that exist within a marriage. Marital aspects may include communication, intimacy, decision-making, and how couples manage conflicts or share roles. In the context of Tharaka, the concept of "marital" is deeply embedded in cultural and religious values, where marriage is viewed as a sacred and social institution meant to promote family stability, lineage continuity, and moral order. Marital relationships in the Tharaka community are deeply rooted in cultural traditions, social norms, and religious beliefs. Marriage is not only a union between two individuals

but also a bond between two families and clans. It plays a central role in preserving social order, lineage, and moral values within the community.

Christian teachings, particularly those emphasising marital hierarchy and female submission (e.g., Ephesians 5:22–24), have reinforced patriarchal structures in the community. Similarly, traditional religious beliefs attribute sacred significance to motherhood and domestic roles, presenting women as custodians of family values and harmony. While these religiously inspired gender roles contribute to family stability and moral order, they can also marginalise women by limiting their participation in decision-making and leadership within both the household and the wider community.

For married women in Tharaka, these interpretations directly affect their lived experiences. Many women face constraints in voicing their opinions, accessing resources, or challenging injustices within marriage. Gender-based expectations, framed through religious and cultural interpretations, may therefore expose women to marital conflicts, particularly when societal pressures discourage them from questioning male authority. At the same time, religion can offer women coping mechanisms such as prayer, counselling, and church-based support groups that provide resilience in times of conflict.

Thus, religious interpretations on gender roles in the Tharaka community serve as both a source of stability and a mechanism of control. Their influence on married women is complex: while fostering respect for marriage and family cohesion, they also reinforce gender inequalities that affect women's autonomy, voice, and well-being.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious Teachings on Gender Roles and Their Influence on Married Women

Whitnah (2022) explored how religious teachings reinforce patriarchal gender roles and power dynamics in marriages among evangelical Christians in the United States. The study employed a qualitative approach, conducting 40 semi-structured interviews with married individuals. Findings revealed that rigid interpretations of male headship and female submission perpetuated unequal decision-making structures. The research highlights the need for more egalitarian interpretations of religious texts to promote harmony in marriages. However, the study's reliance on self-reported data introduced potential biases, and its limited sample size restricted the generalizability of the findings. Using systematic sampling and multiple data sources, this study ensured more reliable findings on religious teachings and gender dynamics.

Moreover, Hwang (2024) investigated the influence of Confucian-influenced religious beliefs on gender roles in marriages in South Korea. Using a mixed-methods approach, they surveyed 200 married couples and conducted focus group discussions with 30 participants. The study found that traditional beliefs emphasising male authority and female submissiveness led to power imbalances and hindered open communication in marriages. This study implies that integrating modern gender equity concepts into traditional beliefs could enhance marital satisfaction. The gap lay in the study's cross-sectional design, which could not capture changes in gender roles over time or across generations. This study used longitudinal interviews to capture how gender roles influenced by religious beliefs evolve over time in the Tharaka community.

Alghamdi et al. (2022) examined the role of Islamic religious teachings on marital power dynamics among immigrant Muslim families in Canada. The research employed ethnographic methods, including participant observation and interviews with 25 couples. Findings revealed that some interpretations of religious texts reinforced male authority, limiting women's participation in decision-making processes. The study emphasises the importance of culturally sensitive programs that promote balanced gender roles in faith-based communities. The gap in the study stems from its focus on a single religious group. Instead of focusing on a single religious group, this study explored religious teachings across Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal groups in Tharaka.

Ndlovu and Naidoo (2023) conducted a qualitative study examining the influence of extended family involvement on decision-making among urban African Christian couples in South Africa. Through in-depth interviews with 20 couples, the research found that traditional expectations of extended family participation often conflicted with Christian teachings advocating for nuclear family autonomy. This tension led to confusion and disputes in marital decision-making. The study suggests that couples need to establish clear boundaries with extended family members to foster healthier marital relationships. A limitation of the study is its focus on urban settings, which may not reflect the experiences of rural couples. This study investigated the role of religion in marital decision-making within rural Tharaka, capturing rural community structures.

Sounaye (2017), on the other hand, studied the relationship between polygyny and Christian marriage practices in Benin. Utilising a mixed-methods approach, including surveys and interviews with 150 participants, the research highlighted that while Christian doctrines promote monogamy, cultural acceptance of polygyny persists. This discrepancy often results in conflicts during marital decision-making, as spouses navigate between religious teachings and societal norms. The study recommends that religious institutions engage in open dialogues to address these cultural and doctrinal conflicts. However, the research is limited by its regional focus, which may not capture the broader national context. By focusing specifically on the local Tharaka context, this study produced more accurate and locally relevant findings on polygyny and Christian marriage practices.

Olaborede and Rembe (2018) investigated the impact of child marriage, influenced by religious and cultural beliefs, on decision-making autonomy among young brides in Nigeria. Through qualitative analysis of legal documents and interviews with 30 affected women, the study found that child marriage severely restricts women's ability to participate in marital decisions, perpetuating cycles of subordination and human rights violations. The authors advocate for legal reforms and educational programs to combat the practice. A noted limitation is the reliance on retrospective accounts, which may be influenced by recall bias.

Njoroge (2017) conducted a mixed-methods study surveying 150 Christian couples in Nairobi County to assess how religiosity affects marital satisfaction and stability. Findings indicated that couples with higher levels of shared religious practices and beliefs reported greater marital satisfaction and stability. The study suggests that shared religiosity fosters mutual understanding and cohesive decision-making within marriages. However, the research is limited by its focus on urban Christian couples, which may not represent the experiences of couples in rural areas or of different faiths. This study focused on rural, multi-denominational Christian groups in Tharaka, addressing the urban and single-faith focus of previous work.

Wachira (2022) conducted an ethnographic study focusing on the Agikuyu community in Kiambu County to explore how religio-cultural factors shape gender roles and influence marital decision-making. Through interviews and participant observation, the research found that traditional and religious norms often position men as primary decision-makers, limiting women's autonomy in marital affairs. The study highlighted the need for re-evaluating cultural and religious teachings to promote gender equity in marital relationships. A limitation is its concentration on a single ethnic group, which may not reflect the diversity of marital dynamics across Kenya. By studying Tharaka's multiple clan structures and cultural diversity, this study expanded beyond single ethnic group analysis.

Khamis (2019) examined the interplay between social interactions, ethnicity, and religion on fertility decisions among Kenyan couples. Using data from the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, the study found that religious affiliation significantly influences family planning decisions, with certain denominations discouraging contraceptive use. This religious stance often leads to larger family sizes, impacting economic stability and marital satisfaction. The study suggested that religious teachings play a crucial role in shaping reproductive choices within marriages. However, the reliance on survey data may not capture the nuanced personal beliefs influencing individual decisions. This study collected in-depth qualitative data on belief systems around family planning to provide nuanced insights missing from survey-based studies.

Oduor (2023) explored how biblical teachings influence marital relationships among Christian couples in Kisumu County. Through qualitative interviews with 30 couples, the study found that interpretations of biblical principles often emphasise male leadership and female submission, affecting decision-making dynamics. While some couples reported that these roles provided clear structure, others experienced tension and feelings of inequality. The study recommends a contextual understanding of biblical teachings to foster mutual respect and shared decision-making. A noted limitation is the focus on Christian couples, which may not encompass the experiences of those from other religious backgrounds. Unlike Oduor's focus solely on Christian couples, this study included minority denominations and faith groups within Tharaka to ensure broader representation.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Location of the Study

The study was conducted in the Tharaka Christian community, located in Tharaka-Nithi County in Kenya. The region has various Christian denominations. However, the dominant ones are the Roman Catholic, the Protestant, and the Pentecostal churches, from which the study will draw its participants. The Tharaka community presents a compelling context for studying women's marital conflicts due to its unique intersection of rich cultural traditions and strong Christian religious teachings. While the community is deeply rooted in cultural values and historically guided marital relationships, the adoption of Christianity introduced new perspectives on marriage, gender roles and authority within families. In many cases, certain religious interpretations, particularly those that emphasise male leadership and female submission, have contributed to the imbalances and heightened conflict in marriages. Women in particular find themselves caught between cultural expectations and religious doctrines, leading to increased marital tension and, in some cases, breakdown in the marital union. Reports of rising divorce rates and domestic conflict among Christians in Tharaka highlight the urgency of addressing these issues (Kathanya, 2024). Therefore, the Tharaka Christian community provides a relevant and insightful case for studying how religious teachings influence marital conflicts.

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive survey design, which is suitable for examining social phenomena by gathering data from a sample population and analysing trends, patterns, and relationships. This design allowed for an in-depth exploration of how religious teachings influence marital conflicts within the Tharaka community by capturing respondents' perspectives, experiences, and attitudes. It provided a structured approach to data collection using tools such as questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the issue (Aquino et al., 2018). The descriptive survey design was particularly effective in identifying the prevalence and nature of marital disputes linked to religious beliefs, as it enabled researchers to document real-life experiences and variations in how different individuals perceive the role of religion in marriage. Furthermore, this approach allowed for both qualitative and quantitative data analysis, making it possible to present measurable findings while also capturing the complexity of personal experiences. The flexibility of the descriptive survey design ensured that emerging themes and patterns were explored in-depth.

Target Population

The target population means all the respondents who are likely to be involved in the study. It includes the entire group where data is obtained (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). According to the Kenya Population and Housing Census (2019), the Tharaka community has a population of 124,293 people. However, the study targets a population comprising members from the Christian community in the Catholic Church, the Protestant Churches, and various Pentecostal churches in the Tharaka community. Since the population in the Tharaka community is approximately 80% Christians (Kathambi et al., 2020), the target population was estimated by calculating 80% of the total population of Tharaka people. Thus, 80 per cent of 124,293 = $(80/100) \times 124,293 = 99,435$. Therefore, the target population for this study was approximately 99,435 Christian individuals within the Tharaka Community. This subset of the population served as the primary group for the study. The study aimed to collect data from a representative sample of this population to gather insights on the influence of religious teachings on marital conflicts among women in the Tharaka community in Tharaka Nithi County in Kenya.

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

This study employed a four-stage sampling technique to systematically select the target participants within the Tharaka community. The study was undertaken in the selected denominations within Tharaka Nithi County. In the first stage, the researcher determined the overall sample size. Based on the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table, a population of 99,435 requires a sample of approximately 382 respondents. Therefore, a total sample size of 382 participants was used to ensure adequate representation and precision of data.

In the second stage, purposive sampling was employed to identify specific churches from the three denominations: the Catholic churches, the Protestant churches and the Pentecostal churches. Catholic Church, Methodist Protestant Church, and Pentecostal Churches were specifically selected for this study due to their dominant presence and significant influence in the Tharaka community. The denominations not only have the largest following, with a considerable gap compared to smaller religious groups, but they also have a longstanding history of operation in the region. Their extensive engagement over the years has shaped various aspects of social, cultural, and spiritual lives. Because of their deep roots and widespread acceptance, those denominations provided a relevant and representative context for

examining religious influence within the community. Therefore, Matiiri Catholic Church, East Africa Pentecostal Church, Gatunga and Methodist Church of Kenya, Marimanti were purposively selected.

Based on the 2019 census for Tharaka Nithi County, Protestant churches had the highest following with 172,266 people, followed by Catholicism (108,266) and Pentecostal churches (70,043) (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The three denominations were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on churches that have existed in the region for over 20 years, with high community acceptance, and the largest congregations compared to other denominations within the area. Each denomination has branches, but only one was selected per group to represent the wider influence. For instance, the East African Pentecostal Church, Gatunga Church, was chosen for its strong regional presence and very large following. It is also the oldest branch in Tharaka. Matiiri Catholic Church was the first Catholic mission in Tharaka (established in 1948) (Karicha, 2023). It has influenced so many families over the years. Moreover, the Methodist Church of Kenya, Marimanti, is the origin of Methodist work in the area since 1958 and has had a very large following as well. Selecting one central, historically significant branch per denomination provided meaningful representation, considering the study's focus on deep, contextual understanding over broad coverage.

In the third stage, systematic random sampling was used to select proportionately the 370 respondents comprising 150 married women, 150 married men and 70 single women. (123 from the Catholic Church, 124 from the Mainline Protestant Church and 123 from Pentecostal churches) from the Tharaka community. Simple random sampling was applied to get the number of married women, married men and single women in selected churches. Data from the Catholic Church comprised 50 married women, 50 married men and 23 single women, totalling 123 respondents. For Mainline Protestants (MCK), the data included 50 married women, 50 married men and 24 single women, totalling 124 respondents. The Pentecostal church (EAPC) had a sample of 50 married women, 50 married men and 23 single women. Including married women, married men and single women reflected the diversity of family structures, and also ensured the credibility and objectivity of the data.

In the fourth stage, 12 respondents, comprising one clergy and three lay leaders selected from each of the three denominations within Tharaka, were purposively selected to participate in face-to-face interviews using an interview guide. Table 1 presents a summary description of the sampling procedure.

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

Research Instruments

The study utilised a questionnaire and an interview guide to collect data.

Questionnaires

This study utilised structured questionnaires targeting married Christian women, married men and single women within the Christian community in the Tharaka region. The study purposively focused on married women as they are directly affected by religious teachings regarding marital roles and expectations. A representative sample of 370 (150 married women, 150 married men, and 70 single women) was selected and issued questionnaires to ensure comprehensive and diverse insights into how religious doctrines shape marital relationships, gender roles, and conflict resolution within Christian households. The questionnaires were structured into two main sections: the first section gathered demographic information, including age, education level, marital duration, and religious affiliation, while the second section focused on thematic content. Closed-ended questions using a Likert scale were used to measure respondents' views on the influence of religious teachings on decision-making, submission, conflict resolution, and role distribution in marriage. In addition, open-ended questions allowed participants to share personal experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward how religious beliefs affect their marriages. The combination of both question types ensured the collection of both quantifiable data for statistical analysis and rich qualitative narratives to capture individual experiences in context. This instrument was suitable for the study due to its effectiveness in reaching a relatively large number of respondents efficiently while providing standardised responses appropriate for comparative analysis.

Interview

This study employed face-to-face semi-structured interviews as a qualitative data collection method to gain deeper insights from 12 interviewees (3 clergies and 9 lay leaders) who were purposively selected to participate in the interviews. The selected participants included representatives from the Catholic Church, Protestant Church, and Pentecostal church, since these denominations are predominant in the area and play a significant role in guiding marital conduct among their congregants. An interview guide comprising

open-ended questions was used to explore the clergy's personal experiences and theological interpretations relating to marital teachings. The guide focused on topics such as the religious leaders' roles in resolving marital conflicts, their understanding and application of scripture in advising couples, challenges they face when dealing with marital issues, and their perspectives on possible religious-based or community-centred interventions. The semi-structured format allows flexibility, enabling interviewers to probe further into emerging themes while maintaining consistency across interviews. This method was chosen to capture detailed, context-rich information that would not be easily obtained through standardised tools such as questionnaires. By engaging directly with the clergy and lay leaders who regularly counsel married couples, the study aimed to understand how religious doctrines are interpreted at the leadership level and how these interpretations influence marital dynamics in Christian households within Tharaka.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved administering structured questionnaires and conducting face-to-face interviews to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The researcher, assisted by trained research assistants, distributed questionnaires to married women, married men and single women in selected households, ensuring systematic random sampling was followed. Respondents completed the questionnaires independently, with assistance provided where necessary. The clergy and lay leaders participated in semi-structured face-to-face interviews conducted at their respective places of worship or agreed-upon locations. These interviews provided in-depth insights into religious teachings on marriage and their impact on marital dynamics. To enhance data credibility, the researcher visited local libraries such as the Kenya National Library in Chuka, Chuka University Library, Tharaka University Library, and Tharaka-Nithi County Library to review existing literature on religion, gender roles, and marital conflicts.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 29 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to ensure accurate statistical computations. Descriptive statistics, including means, percentages, and standard deviations, summarised trends in marital conflicts influenced by religious teachings. Qualitative data from interviews with the clergy and lay leaders underwent thematic analysis, where responses were coded to identify recurring themes related to religious doctrines, gender roles, and marital expectations. This mixed-method approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how religious teachings impact marital conflicts in the Tharaka community.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI) to ensure compliance with national research regulations. Additionally, authorisation was sought from the Chuka University Ethics Review Committee, which evaluated the study's ethical considerations and approved its implementation. Permission was also requested from the Tharaka-Nithi County Government and relevant local administrative offices, including chiefs and community elders, to facilitate smooth data collection within the Tharaka community. Participants provided informed consent before participating, and their anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained. The study adhered to fundamental ethical principles, including voluntary participation, ensuring that respondents could refuse to participate or withdraw at any point without repercussions. Non-discrimination was upheld, treating all participants fairly regardless of religious affiliation or marital status. Additionally, data protection measures

were implemented, ensuring that collected information was securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Religious Interpretations of Gender Roles based on Church Members Teachings on Gender Roles and Household Responsibilities

Teachings on gender roles and household responsibilities have historically played a significant role in defining family structures and shaping marital relations across different cultural and religious contexts. These teachings often assign men the responsibilities of provision, protection, and decision-making, while women are expected to fulfil nurturing and domestic duties such as childcare, cooking, and household management (Mbiti, 1991; Grenz, 1995). In many African societies, including the Tharaka community, such roles are reinforced through cultural traditions and religious instruction, which prescribe clear boundaries for male and female responsibilities within the home. While these teachings aim to promote order and stability, they also contribute to power imbalances, limiting women's opportunities for shared decision-making and equitable participation in household leadership (Pargament, 1997; Parsitau, 2014). Consequently, examining the influence of these teachings is crucial in understanding how gender dynamics within the household affect marital harmony, women's agency, and overall family well-being.

The investigation on teachings on Gender Roles and Household Responsibilities generated data as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Teachings on Gender Roles and Household Responsibilities

Question	Yes	(%)	No	(%)
Growing up, were you taught specific roles for men and women?	310	84.2	58	15.8
Do you believe religious teachings have influenced your household responsibilities?	285	77.4	83	22.6

The findings indicated that 310 (84.2%) respondents confirmed that they were taught specific roles for men and women while growing up, whereas 58 (15.8%) stated otherwise. Furthermore, 285 (77.4%) respondents believed that religious teachings have influenced their household responsibilities, while 83 (22.6%) disagreed. These findings reveal that traditional gender role expectations remain deeply entrenched, heavily reinforced by religious teachings. In many cases, men are associated with breadwinning and leadership roles, while women are assigned domestic and caregiving duties. This strong emphasis on role differentiation underscores the interplay between cultural norms and religious doctrine, which collectively shape family dynamics in Tharaka. The statistics reflected the persistence of patriarchal models despite increasing advocacy for gender equality.

Njoroge (2018) observed that African Christian traditions often promote gender-specific duties based on scripture. Similarly, Gitonga (2020) highlights that churches emphasise distinct roles during premarital counselling, reinforcing men as providers and women as caretakers. According to Kavuna (2019), such interpretations stem from literal readings of biblical texts that frame gender hierarchies as divinely instituted. While this framework fosters order and responsibility, it can also limit women's participation in decision-making and economic activities. Makau (2017) warns that these rigid roles may lead to frustration

among educated women who desire balanced partnerships. Therefore, churches must adopt contextual interpretations that promote equity without disregarding core family values.

Decision-Making and Role Satisfaction

Decision-making and role satisfaction are central components of marital dynamics and overall family stability. The way spouses negotiate responsibilities, share authority, and participate in decision-making processes often shapes their sense of fairness, respect, and fulfilment within the relationship. Research indicates that when decision-making is equitable and roles are shared or negotiated, couples report higher levels of marital satisfaction and emotional well-being (Amato, 2007). Conversely, rigid or unequal patterns of decision-making, often influenced by cultural or religious expectations, can lead to dissatisfaction, conflict, and feelings of disempowerment (Wilcox, 2006). Role satisfaction, therefore, is closely tied to whether individuals perceive their contributions as valued and their voices as recognised in family decisions. Understanding the interplay between decision-making and role satisfaction provides important insights into both the strengths and challenges that shape marital relationships across diverse contexts. Table 3 shows the findings.

Table 3: Decision-Making and Role Satisfaction

Question	Yes	(%)	No	(%)
Do you make major family decisions jointly with your spouse?	250	67.9	118	32.1
Were you taught that a husband's decision is final in a family?	275	74.7	93	25.3
Are you satisfied with the division of roles in your marriage?	240	65.2	128	34.8

The results show that 250 respondents (67.9%) make major family decisions jointly with their spouses, while 118 (32.1%) do not. A larger proportion, 275 (74.7%) respondents, reported that they were taught that a husband's decision is final, compared to 93 (25.3%) who were not taught this. On role satisfaction, 240 (65.2%) respondents expressed contentment with the division of roles in their marriages, while 128 (34.8%) indicated dissatisfaction.

The data reveal a partial move toward joint decision-making in marriages, with more than two-thirds of respondents reporting shared participation. However, the persistence of teachings that uphold male final authority in family matters suggests that egalitarian practices are moderated by traditional ideologies. The relatively high rate of dissatisfaction with role division 128 (34.8%) indicates that not all couples experience equity in household responsibilities, and some may feel constrained by gendered expectations.

These results illustrate the tension between evolving marital practices and entrenched cultural and religious norms. While a majority of couples report consulting each other in decision-making, the widespread teaching that a husband's decision is final reflects the endurance of patriarchal models of marriage. This contradiction often generates marital conflict, as women may feel their perspectives are undervalued despite the appearance of shared decision-making. Wacheke and Rosemarie (2019) observe that urbanisation and exposure to modern values have encouraged joint decision-making in Kenyan households, but traditional ideologies continue to reinforce male supremacy. Kivuva (2016) further notes

that biblical interpretations frequently endorse male headship, reinforcing this paradox. The dissatisfaction expressed by over a third of respondents aligns with Nyambura's (2018) argument that conflict arises when the ideal of equality does not translate into actual marital practice. Such gaps between expectation and lived reality can intensify disagreements and strain relationships.

In sum, the findings highlight a gradual but incomplete transition toward egalitarian marital practices. While many couples engage in joint decision-making, the persistence of male-dominant teachings continues to shape household power dynamics. This imbalance contributes to dissatisfaction and potential conflict, particularly for women who expect equality but encounter traditional constraints. Understanding this interplay is essential for evaluating how religious and cultural teachings influence marital harmony and discord in the Tharaka community.

Authority and Leadership Opportunities

Authority and leadership opportunities within marriage and faith communities significantly shape how spouses perceive their roles, influence, and sense of worth in relationships. Religious teachings often prescribe patterns of authority, sometimes prioritising male leadership and female submission, which can affect decision-making, role satisfaction, and the balance of power in marital life (Wilcox, 2006). While such structures are intended to promote order and stability, they may also limit the leadership potential of one spouse, leading to feelings of inequality or frustration. Conversely, when both partners are encouraged to exercise leadership and share authority, couples often report stronger collaboration, mutual respect, and higher marital satisfaction (Amato, 2007). The ways in which authority is interpreted and practised, whether as a form of dominance or as shared responsibility, play a central role in shaping opportunities for leadership, influencing not only marital harmony but also the broader dynamics within religious and community life. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Authority and Leadership Opportunities

Question	Yes	(%)	No	(%)
Do you feel that religious teachings give more authority to men in marriage?	300	81.5	68	18.5
Are women in your church allowed to hold leadership roles (like pastors or elders)?	190	51.6	178	48.4

The findings revealed that 300 (81.5%) respondents believed that religious teachings grant more authority to men in marriage, while 68 (18.5%) did not. In addition, 190 (51.6%) respondents stated that women are allowed to hold leadership roles such as pastors or elders in their churches, while 178 (48.4%) said they are not. These figures highlight that while male dominance in the family remains widely accepted, attitudes toward female leadership in church settings are divided. The slight majority favouring women's inclusion suggests gradual progress toward gender inclusivity, though nearly half still oppose it due to doctrinal interpretations.

The finding is consistent with research by Ndung'u (2021), who points out that theological conservatism in African churches limits female leadership despite constitutional gender parity provisions. Mutheu (2019) similarly observes that women dominate church membership but remain underrepresented in decision-making roles due to teachings on male headship. According to Kariuki (2018), these restrictions perpetuate

the notion that spiritual authority belongs primarily to men, reinforcing societal gender hierarchies. While some denominations have begun ordaining women, the resistance seen in almost half of respondents reflects persistent patriarchal interpretations that the church must address through gender-sensitive theological training.

Limitations and Control Linked to Religious Teachings

Religious teachings serve as powerful frameworks that guide moral conduct, family life, and interpersonal relationships. However, when interpreted rigidly or applied without sensitivity to context, such teachings may impose limitations and exert control that contribute to marital strain and conflict. Doctrines emphasising absolute submission, unquestioned obedience, or endurance of suffering can restrict individual agency within marriage and perpetuate unequal power dynamics between spouses (Nason-Clark et al., 2004). Clergy and lay leaders, in reinforcing these interpretations, may inadvertently legitimise control and silence dissenting voices, particularly among women. While religion often aspires to foster harmony, love, and mutual respect, its misuse or selective interpretation can function as a tool of control rather than empowerment (Le Roux & Loots, 2017). Exploring these limitations and forms of control is therefore essential to understanding how religious teachings can both guide marital life positively and, in certain contexts, contribute to conflict and disempowerment. The findings on limitations and control linked to religious teachings are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Limitations and Control Linked to Religious Teachings

Question	Yes	(%)	No	(%)
Have religious teachings ever limited your personal ambitions?	140	38.0	228	62.0
Does your spouse refer to religious beliefs to justify control over you?	120	32.6	248	67.4

The data shows that 140 respondents (38.0%) reported that religious teachings had limited their personal ambitions, while 228 (62.0%) indicated no such restrictions. Additionally, 120 respondents (32.6%) stated that their spouses referred to religious beliefs to justify control over them, compared to 248 (67.4%) who did not experience this.

These findings suggest that religious teachings, though intended to provide moral guidance, can be interpreted in ways that impose limitations on personal development and justify dominance within marital relationships. The higher proportion of respondents reporting no such limitations, 248 (67.4%), indicates that not all adherents experience restrictive effects, yet the significant minority experiencing them signals a social and relational concern.

These results highlight the dual role of religion in marriage. On one hand, religious teachings foster discipline, unity, and shared values; on the other, their interpretation can reinforce restrictive gender roles that curtail ambitions and justify spousal control. The fact that almost one-third of respondents experienced control through religious justification illustrates how scripture can be misapplied to sustain patriarchal authority, often affecting women disproportionately.

The findings resonate with Kamau (2017), who argues that misinterpretation of religious texts is sometimes weaponised to suppress women's choices in education, career, and mobility. Gathogo (2019), similarly, contends that teachings emphasising submission without reciprocity normalise dominance in marriage.

Waruta (2016) adds that such practices perpetuate dependency and erode women's autonomy, undermining gender equality. Collectively, these perspectives affirm that while religion serves as a moral compass, its patriarchal interpretation can escalate marital disagreements and contribute to gendered conflict.

Thus, although the majority of respondents reported no restrictions linked to religious teachings, a substantial minority indicated that such teachings curtailed ambitions and justified spousal control. These patterns reveal that religious doctrine can function both as a source of harmony and as a mechanism of control within marriages. In the context of the Tharaka community, this duality underscores the need for faith leaders to promote interpretations that emphasise equality, partnership, and mutual respect in marriage.

Fairness and Burden of Gender-Based Expectations

Fairness in marital relationships is often challenged by gender-based expectations that shape how responsibilities, roles, and obligations are distributed between spouses. Religious and cultural teachings frequently prescribe distinct duties for men and women, such as male authority in decision-making and female responsibility for caregiving and household management (Wilcox, 2006). While these expectations may provide structure, they can also create imbalances that place heavier emotional, physical, or economic burdens on one partner, most often women, leading to dissatisfaction and conflict. Studies have shown that unequal role expectations not only diminish perceptions of fairness but also negatively affect marital satisfaction and psychological well-being (Amato, 2007). When couples feel that roles are imposed rather than negotiated, the burden of gender-based expectations becomes a source of tension, limiting opportunities for shared partnership and mutual growth. Addressing fairness in these expectations is therefore critical to fostering healthier, more balanced marital relationships, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Fairness and Burden of Gender-Based Expectations

Question	Yes	(%)	No	(%)
Do you think religious teachings on gender are fair in today's world?	200	54.3	168	45.7
Do you sometimes feel burdened by expectations placed on you as a wife?	180	48.9	188	51.1

Data findings on fairness and burden of gender-based expectations indicated that 200 (54.3%) respondents believed that religious teachings on gender are fair in today's world, while 168 (45.7%) felt they were not. Moreover, 180 (48.9%) admitted feeling burdened by gender-based expectations, whereas 188 (51.1%) did not share this sentiment. These mixed responses reveal tension between traditional gender norms and modern equality ideals. While some respondents accept gender roles as culturally and religiously appropriate, others find them restrictive, highlighting a growing need for reinterpretation of such teachings in light of social change. Mbiti (2015) argued that while religion shapes moral order, its rigidity can clash with evolving gender relations in contemporary Africa. Mwikali (2018) notes that burdensome expectations placed on women often lead to emotional stress and marital dissatisfaction. Similarly, Chebet (2019) emphasises that fairness in gender roles requires redefining submission as mutual respect rather than subordination. These perspectives underscore the urgency for theological frameworks that accommodate gender equity while preserving marital harmony.

How Religious Teachings Shaped Marital Roles

Religious teachings have historically played a central role in shaping marital roles by defining expectations, responsibilities, and patterns of interaction between spouses. Many faith traditions provide guidance on authority, submission, caregiving, and decision-making within marriage, often framing these roles as divinely ordained (Pargament, 1997). Such teachings can promote stability, shared values, and a sense of spiritual purpose in marital life, but they may also reinforce hierarchical structures that privilege one spouse's authority over the other (Nason-Clark et al., 2004). Clergy and lay leaders frequently interpret and transmit these doctrines, influencing how couples perceive fairness, leadership, and responsibility in their relationships. While some believers find fulfilment in these clearly defined roles, others may experience them as restrictive, particularly when gender-based expectations limit personal agency or opportunities for shared decision-making (Wilcox, 2006). Thus, religious teachings function as both a source of guidance and a framework that profoundly shapes marital roles, with implications for satisfaction, conflict, and relational balance. The findings are shown in Table 7.

Table 7: How Religious Teachings Shaped Marital Roles

Theme	Mentions	Percentage
Emphasis on male headship and female submission	150	40.8
Shared responsibility and partnership are encouraged by scripture	90	24.5
Sacrificial love and patience in marriage	75	20.4
Endurance of hardship as part of faith	35	9.5
Restrictions on women's leadership roles	18	4.8

Regarding how religious teachings shaped marital roles, the data findings revealed that the most common influence cited was emphasis on male headship and female submission, with 150 mentions (40.8%). 90 (24.5%) respondents reported that teachings encouraged shared responsibility and partnership, while 75 (20.4%) emphasised sacrificial love and patience in marriage. Additionally, 35 respondents (9.5%) noted endurance of hardship as a mark of faith, and 18 (4.8%) highlighted restrictions on women's leadership roles.

The statistics confirm that patriarchal norms dominate marital teachings, though an emerging trend toward egalitarianism is evident among a quarter of respondents. Mwenda (2017) identified Christian marital teachings as both a source of stability and a driver of gender inequality when applied rigidly. According to Kirima (2018), expectations of endurance and submission, while intended to promote unity, often silence women in abusive relationships. Conversely, Waruguru (2019) notes the positive impact of teachings on love and forgiveness in fostering resilience and partnership. This dual influence suggests the need for churches to emphasise relational equality, balancing biblical principles with human dignity and wellbeing.

Religious Interpretations on Gender Roles based on Clergy and Lay Leaders

Religious interpretations of gender roles, as communicated by clergy and lay leaders, play a significant role in shaping expectations within marriage and family life. These interpretations often draw upon sacred texts and longstanding traditions to prescribe distinct responsibilities for men and women, frequently emphasising male authority and female submission (Nason-Clark et al., 2004). While some leaders frame these roles as complementary and essential for marital harmony, others reinforce rigid hierarchies that may

perpetuate inequality and limit women's participation in leadership and decision-making (Le Roux & Loots, 2017). Lay leaders, who serve as cultural and spiritual influencers within congregations, often reinforce these interpretations, embedding them more deeply into community norms. Although such teachings can foster stability and a shared sense of purpose, they may also contribute to marital conflict when individuals perceive them as restrictive or unfair. Examining how clergy and lay leaders interpret and transmit gender roles is therefore essential for understanding the intersection of faith, culture, and marital dynamics.

Church Teaching on Roles of Men and Women

Investigation on Church Teaching on Roles of Men and Women is shown in Table 8.

Table 8: Church Teaching on Roles of Men and Women

Main Theme	Mentions	%	Contrasting View	Mentions	(%)
Men as leaders and providers	9	75.0	Promote shared leadership	3	25.0
Women as caretakers/home managers	8	66.7	Women can take leadership roles in the family, too	4	33.3
Roles fixed by tradition and scripture	6	50.0	Roles should adapt to modern family realities	6	50.0

A majority of clergy and lay leaders 9(75.0%) emphasised the traditional view that men are leaders and providers within the household. One leader stated, "Men should lead the home" (PCCL3, 2025), reflecting entrenched patriarchal structures often justified by scripture. Similarly, 8(66.7%) affirmed that women are primarily caretakers or home managers, with one respondent asserting, "Women are called to care for the home" (CCL3, 2025)

These views resonate with findings from Whitnah (2022) and Alghamdi et al. (2022), both of whom noted that such interpretations reinforce rigid gender hierarchies that often marginalise women in decision-making. However, a growing minority (25–33%) advocated for shared leadership and flexible domestic roles, arguing, for instance, that "leadership is for both partners" (MCL3,2025) This reflects a subtle but important shift among some leaders toward egalitarian perspectives, echoing Kagema's and (2024), call for reinterpretation of doctrinal norms in line with gender equality and mutual respect within marriage.

Interestingly, the most evenly divided response came on the question of whether roles are fixed by scripture and tradition or should evolve with time, 50% upheld fixed roles, while 50% encouraged adaptation to modern realities confirmed by statements from respondents who argued that "Traditional roles are God-given", (MCL1,2025) while others claimed, "They encourage flexibility for modern life", (PCCL3, 2025).

This division illustrates an ideological tension between maintaining religious orthodoxy and responding to societal change, a dynamic well captured in Structural Functionalism. The theory posits that institutions like religion must evolve to maintain social equilibrium. Studies by Ndlovu and Naidoo (2023) and Hwang

(2024) have shown that failure to adapt gender teachings can contribute to dissatisfaction, role conflict, and, eventually, marital instability.

Influence on Women's Decision-Making

In the Tharaka community, Women's decision-making within marriage and family life is often shaped by religious teachings and cultural norms that assign specific roles and responsibilities to spouses. In many faith traditions, interpretations of scripture and doctrines emphasise male headship and female submission, which can limit women's autonomy in household, financial, and relational decisions (Nason-Clark et al., 2004). Clergy and lay leaders play a critical role in reinforcing or challenging these norms in the Tharaka community, as their teachings often determine whether women are encouraged to participate equally in decision-making or are expected to defer to their husbands (Le Roux & Loots, 2017). While some religious communities increasingly advocate for shared authority and partnership in marital roles, others continue to uphold hierarchical structures that constrain women's voices. Table 9 shows the findings on the influence on women's decision-making.

Table 9: Influence on Women's Decision-Making

Main Theme	Mentions	%	Contrasting View	Mentions	(%)
Limited decision-making power for women	7	58.3	Encourage joint decision-making	5	41.7

The majority of clergy and lay leaders 7(58.3%) acknowledged that women often have limited decision-making power in marriage. One of the respondents said, "Women rarely make final decisions" (CCC, 2025), reflecting a persistent belief in male authority within marital structures. This aligns with earlier literature by Aman et al. (2021) and Alghamdi et al. (2022), which found that religious interpretations that prioritise male headship frequently led to reduced autonomy for women in key family decisions. Similarly, Nana (2021) highlighted how religious norms reinforce unequal participation in household decision-making, contributing to frustration and conflict among women. These traditional stances are often sustained by literal readings of scripture that frame men as divinely appointed leaders. From a structural functionalist lens, this dominant narrative upholds a particular gender order that contributes to systemic stability.

However, a significant minority, 5(41.7%) of leaders, advocated for joint decision-making, signalling a theological shift in some church quarters. As a respondent put it, "We teach joint consultation in all matters" (MCL2, 2025), promoting a collaborative approach to family leadership. This reflects more egalitarian interpretations of scripture and doctrine, particularly those that emphasise mutual submission as described in Ephesians 5:21. Studies by Oduor (2023) and Kagema (2024) also recommend shared leadership in marital contexts, suggesting that couples benefit more from inclusive decision-making than from hierarchical systems. These contrasting views within the Tharaka religious community reflect broader tensions between conservative and reformist interpretations of gender roles. Moreover, the split also underscores the role of pastoral education, as leaders trained in counselling or transformative leadership (Kagema, 2024) are more likely to challenge traditional power structures. As such, this theme captures an important dimension of marital conflict.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Religious interpretations on gender roles continue to influence marital dynamics among women in the Tharaka community. The study revealed that most church participants were taught from an early age that men are leaders and providers, while women are caretakers, a view echoed by the majority of clergy and lay leaders. These teachings promote obedience, male authority, and limited decision-making power for women, often justified through scripture. Although a minority of leaders now support shared responsibilities and evolving gender roles, patriarchal norms remain dominant. The research concluded that while some progress is visible, religious institutions must engage in contextual reinterpretation of doctrine to foster equity, mutual respect, and healthier marital relationships that reflect both faith and contemporary social realities.

Recommendations: Therefore, the study recommended that Gender-Sensitive Education in Churches: Church leaders should initiate structured gender-awareness training and foster teachings that promote equality and shared responsibilities in families. This includes developing inclusive Bible study programs, allowing women into leadership roles, and discouraging teachings that pressure women into silence or suffering. Encouraging joint decision-making in marriage will support healthier marital relations and promote the spiritual and emotional growth of both partners.

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