

The Level of Participation of Men in Small Christian Communities in the Catholic Diocese of Bungoma

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Abstract- This research paper presents a comprehensive examination of male participation levels in Small Christian Communities (SCCs) within the Catholic Diocese of Bungoma, Kenya. Through systematic analysis of survey data collected from various parishes within the diocese, the study provides crucial insights into the current state of male engagement in these fundamental church structures. The research employs both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to understand the complex dynamics of male participation in SCCs. The findings of this study reveal a significant gender disparity in SCC participation, with men showing markedly lower engagement levels compared to women. Statistical analysis indicates that only 30% of men actively participate in SCC activities, highlighting a substantial gap in gender representation within these community structures. This disparity becomes even more pronounced when examining regular attendance and leadership roles within SCCs. The study further identifies varying participation patterns between urban and rural parishes, with urban areas showing slightly higher male engagement rates at 61.6% compared to 38.4% in rural areas. Through careful analysis of survey responses and interviews with church leaders, the research identifies several key factors affecting male participation levels. These include cultural barriers, particularly among the Bukusu community, traditional gender roles, timing of SCC meetings, and perceptions about the nature and purpose of SCCs. Educational background and age also emerge as significant variables, with secondary school graduates showing higher participation rates and the age group 40-50 demonstrating the most consistent engagement. The study concludes by offering practical recommendations for improving male engagement in SCCs. These recommendations encompass structural changes to SCC operations, leadership development programs, and strategies for cultural integration.

Indexed Terms- Small Christian Communities, Male Participation, Catholic Church

I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) represents a significant shift in the Catholic Church's approach to evangelization and community engagement, particularly in Eastern Africa. Following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which emphasized greater lay participation in church activities, the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa (AMECEA) made a pivotal decision in 1973 to establish SCCs as a key pastoral priority. This decision was rooted in the recognition that effective evangelization required more intimate, locally-based faith communities that could respond to the specific needs and cultural contexts of African Christians.

The Catholic Diocese of Bungoma, established in 1987, embraced this vision by introducing SCCs in the 1980s. The timing of this implementation coincided with a broader movement across Eastern Africa to create more participatory and inclusive church structures. These communities were designed to serve as vehicles for evangelization, fostering deeper spiritual growth, and promoting active involvement of all faithful in the life of the Church. The establishment of SCCs marked a departure from the traditional parish-centered model of church organization, introducing a more grassroots approach to Christian community life.

Geographically, the Diocese of Bungoma occupies a strategic position in Western Kenya, encompassing four distinct sub-counties: Busia, Bungoma, Teso, and Mt Elgon. Covering an extensive area of 4,840 square kilometers, the diocese serves a diverse population with varying pastoral needs. The region's primary inhabitants are the Bukusu people, a sub-tribe of the

larger Luhya community, whose cultural practices and traditional beliefs significantly influence their approach to Christianity and community participation. The agricultural nature of the region, with coffee, cotton, sugarcane, pyrethrum, and tobacco as main cash crops, also shapes the socio-economic context in which SCCs operate.

Despite over three decades of existence in the Diocese, SCCs face significant challenges, particularly regarding male participation. The disparity in gender participation has become increasingly apparent, with men showing markedly lower levels of engagement compared to women. This gender imbalance is particularly striking given the patriarchal nature of Bukusu society, where men traditionally hold leadership roles in community affairs. The seeming disconnect between male leadership in traditional social structures and their limited participation in SCCs raises important questions about the effectiveness of current pastoral approaches.

Several factors contribute to this situation. Cultural norms and traditional male roles often conflict with the participatory nature of SCCs. Additionally, the perception among many male Christians that SCCs are primarily women's organizations has created a barrier to their involvement. This misconception persists despite the original vision of SCCs as inclusive communities meant to involve all members of the church, regardless of gender. The situation is further complicated by economic factors, as many men prioritize income-generating activities over church community engagement.

The Diocese of Bungoma's experience with SCCs reflects broader challenges faced by the Catholic Church in Africa as it seeks to implement Vatican II's vision of increased lay participation while respecting local cultural contexts. The continued growth of the Diocese in various ecclesial dimensions suggests potential for addressing these challenges, but the persistent gender disparity in SCC participation indicates a need for targeted interventions and renewed understanding of the significance and importance of these communities among male Christians.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Catholic Diocese of Bungoma faces a significant challenge in achieving balanced gender participation within its Small Christian Communities (SCCs). While these communities were established with the vision of involving all members of the church in grassroots evangelization and community building, a pronounced disparity has emerged in the level of participation between men and women. This gender imbalance represents a serious concern for the diocese's pastoral mission and the overall effectiveness of SCCs as vehicles for evangelization. The primary problem manifests in the notably low participation of men in SCC activities compared to women's involvement. Statistical evidence indicates that only 30% of men actively participate in SCCs, while women's participation rates are significantly higher. This disparity is particularly troubling given the patriarchal nature of the Bukusu community, where men traditionally hold leadership positions and influence community decisions. The disconnect between men's traditional social roles and their limited engagement in SCCs suggests a deeper underlying problem in how these church structures are perceived and valued by male members of the community.

This gender imbalance creates multiple challenges for the pastoral mission of the Church. First, it compromises the fundamental purpose of SCCs as inclusive faith communities that reflect the universal nature of the Church. The limited male participation means that these communities are not fully representative of the entire church membership, potentially limiting their effectiveness in addressing the spiritual and social needs of all faithful. Second, the lack of male engagement affects the implementation of pastoral programs and initiatives, as these communities were designed to be primary vehicles for evangelization and spiritual formation at the grassroots level.

Furthermore, the problem extends beyond mere numerical representation. The limited participation of men in SCCs impacts the holistic development of the church community in several ways. It affects family spiritual life, as men's absence from these faith communities can create a disconnect between family members' religious experiences. This situation

potentially undermines the Church's efforts to strengthen family unity through shared faith experiences. Additionally, the lack of male participation influences the decision-making processes within SCCs, potentially leading to unbalanced perspectives in community initiatives and pastoral approaches.

III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is to assess the level of participation of men in Small Christian Communities in the Catholic Diocese of Bungoma.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory (1962), which explains how new ideas are adopted within a social system. The theory is particularly relevant as it helps explain why men may be resistant to fully embracing SCCs, which, while not new to the church, may be perceived as a novel concept by many male Christians. The theory's five elements - relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, triability, and observability - provide a framework for understanding men's participation levels.

V. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review examines key themes regarding men's participation in Small Christian Communities (SCCs), focusing on historical development, participation patterns, and cultural influences that shape male engagement in these church structures.

5.1 Historical Context

The historical development of SCCs reveals their intended inclusive nature. Healey (2012) documents that when SCCs were established in Eastern Africa in the 1970s, they were envisioned as comprehensive community structures meant to involve all members of the church regardless of gender. His research demonstrates that the AMECEA bishops specifically designed SCCs to be vehicles for full lay participation in church life, emphasizing the equal role of both men and women in evangelization and community building.

McGary et al. (1993) further elaborate that the foundational principles of SCCs in Africa were rooted in Vatican II's vision of the Church as the "People of God," where all baptized members are called to active participation in the Church's mission. Their research shows that the original implementation guidelines for SCCs in Eastern Africa explicitly called for balanced gender participation, viewing it as essential for the complete realization of the Church's mission at the grassroots level.

5.2 Participation Patterns

The actual patterns of participation in SCCs reveal significant gender disparities. O'Halloran (2002) conducted extensive research across African SCCs and found that men's participation was consistently lower than women's across different regions. His studies identified varying participation rates, with some areas showing as low as 20% male participation in regular SCC activities. The research indicates that this pattern is not unique to any particular region but represents a widespread phenomenon across African SCCs.

The participation patterns also show variation between urban and rural settings, with urban areas generally showing slightly higher male participation rates. O'Halloran's work demonstrates that these patterns are influenced by multiple factors including education levels, economic activities, and social structures within different communities.

5.3 Cultural Factors

Shorter's (1991) research provides crucial insights into how traditional African cultural norms affect male participation in SCCs. His work identifies several cultural factors that create barriers to male participation:

1. Traditional male roles that emphasize leadership and authority often conflict with the collaborative and participatory nature of SCCs
2. Cultural taboos and customs, particularly regarding interactions between in-laws, can limit men's ability to participate fully in SCC activities
3. Traditional time allocation patterns for men in African societies often clash with typical SCC meeting schedules

Shorter's research also highlights how these cultural factors interact with modern pressures and changing

social structures, creating complex challenges for male participation in church activities.

VI. GAPS IN LITERATURE

Despite the existing body of research on SCCs, several significant gaps remain in our understanding of male participation patterns and their underlying causes.

First, there is a notable lack of quantitative assessment of participation levels. While various studies acknowledge the problem of low male participation, few have conducted systematic quantitative analyses to measure exact participation rates, frequency of attendance, and levels of engagement in different SCC activities. This absence of hard data makes it difficult to track changes over time or compare different regions effectively.

Second, region-specific research focusing on the Bungoma Diocese is particularly limited. While general studies exist about SCCs in Eastern Africa, the unique cultural, social, and economic factors affecting male participation in Bungoma have not been adequately explored. The specific dynamics of the Bukusu community and their influence on male participation patterns remain largely unstudied.

Third, there is insufficient comparative analysis between urban and rural participation patterns. Although some studies note differences between urban and rural SCCs, there has been no comprehensive study comparing how male participation varies between these settings and what factors might account for these variations. This gap is particularly significant given the rapid urbanization occurring in many parts of Kenya and its potential impact on church participation patterns.

These gaps in the literature highlight the need for more focused research that can provide a clearer understanding of male participation in SCCs, particularly within specific cultural and geographical contexts like the Bungoma Diocese. Such research would be valuable for developing more effective strategies to enhance male participation in SCCs.

VII. METHODOLOGY

7.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research approach utilizing a cross-sectional survey design to investigate the level of participation of men in Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in the Catholic Diocese of Bungoma. The quantitative approach was chosen because it allows for numerical measurement and statistical analysis of participation levels, enabling the researcher to identify patterns and trends in male participation across different parishes. The cross-sectional survey design was particularly appropriate as it permitted data collection at one point in time from a sample selected to represent a larger population, making it possible to gather information from different parishes that would have been difficult to observe directly due to geographical dispersion.

7.2 Sample and Sampling Procedures

The target population for this study comprised all priests, religious men and women, and laity in the Catholic Diocese of Bungoma. To ensure representative sampling, the researcher employed a multi-stage stratified random sampling technique.

First, the 30 parishes in Bungoma Diocese were stratified into rural and urban categories. From each stratum, two parishes were selected using random sampling, resulting in four parishes total - two urban and two rural. This stratification was crucial to ensure representation of both urban and rural perspectives on male participation in SCCs.

The final sample size consisted of 144 respondents, distributed as follows:

- 120 lay Christians (60 males and 60 females, with 15 of each gender selected from each parish)
- 20 religious men and women
- 4 parish priests

The selection of lay respondents was conducted using simple random sampling from SCC registers in each parish until the designed number was attained. This method ensured that each member had an equal chance of being selected, thereby minimizing selection bias. The sample size was determined to be sufficient based on Gay's (1996) suggestion that for descriptive studies,

10% of the accessible population is adequate for representation.

7.3 Data Collection

The study utilized two primary instruments for data collection: questionnaires and interview guides. These instruments were designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of male participation in SCCs.

7.3.1 Questionnaires

The research utilized carefully structured questionnaires designed to gather comprehensive data about male participation in SCCs within the Catholic Diocese of Bungoma. Each questionnaire was organized into five key sections: demographic information, knowledge and experience regarding participation in SCCs, factors determining participation, benefits of SCCs, and suggestions for improvement. Three distinct questionnaires were developed to address different respondent groups: one for priests (15 items), another for religious men and women (14 items), and a third for lay people (17 items). The instruments employed a mixed-method approach, combining closed-ended questions using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree) with open-ended questions that allowed respondents to provide detailed explanations and suggestions. This combination of quantitative and qualitative questions enabled the collection of both measurable data and rich descriptive insights about male participation in SCCs, enhancing the comprehensiveness of the study's findings.

7.3.2 Interview Guides

To complement the questionnaire data and gather more in-depth information, the study employed face-to-face interviews using structured interview guides. A total of twelve respondents were strategically selected for these interviews, comprising one priest, three religious men and women, and eight lay Christians. These interviews provided valuable opportunities for detailed exploration of perspectives and experiences regarding male participation in SCCs, allowing respondents to elaborate on their views and share personal insights that might not have been captured through questionnaires alone. The diverse composition of interviewees ensured that views from

all levels of church hierarchy were represented, enriching the quality and depth of the collected data.

7.3.3 Response Rate

The study achieved varying but generally high response rates across all categories of respondents, reflecting successful data collection strategies. Among lay respondents, a 100% response rate was achieved with all 120 questionnaires returned, primarily due to the researcher's personal administration and immediate collection of questionnaires. Religious men and women showed a 75% response rate with 15 out of 20 questionnaires returned, while priests also demonstrated a 75% response rate with 3 out of 4 priests participating in interviews. The slightly lower response rates among religious men and women and priests were attributed to unavoidable commitments and time constraints, though these rates still provided sufficient data for meaningful analysis. Overall, the high response rates, particularly among lay people, enhanced the reliability and representativeness of the study's findings.

7.3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process began after obtaining necessary permissions from both the University and the local ordinary of the Diocese. The researcher, assisted by a trained research assistant, personally administered the questionnaires and conducted interviews over a one-month period. This personal approach helped ensure high response rates and allowed for clarification of any questions that respondents had during the process.

VIII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

8.1 Level of Participation

The study revealed significant disparities in male participation within Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in the Catholic Diocese of Bungoma. Analysis of the data showed that only 30% of men actively participate in SCC activities, indicating a notably low engagement level. More concerning is that a majority of respondents (50.8%) explicitly indicated that men do not participate actively in SCCs, while 19.2% expressed uncertainty about men's participation levels. These findings align with O'Halloran's (2002) observations about the generally low male participation in African SCCs. The high percentage of

respondents indicating non-participation suggests a systemic issue rather than an isolated phenomenon. When interviewed about this low participation, Fr. Christopher Wanyonyi, a parish priest with 21 years of experience, noted that men often prioritize other activities over SCC participation, particularly in rural areas where traditional cultural norms exert stronger influence.

8.2 Participation Patterns

Analysis of participation patterns revealed interesting geographical and demographic variations. Urban parishes demonstrated notably higher male participation (61.6%) compared to rural parishes (38.4%). This urban-rural disparity could be attributed to several factors, as explained by religious leaders interviewed during the study. Fr. Christopher Wanyonyi observed that urban men tend to be more educated and better understand the value of SCCs, while rural areas face stronger cultural barriers to participation.

Age-based analysis revealed that the 40-50 age group showed the highest male participation rate at 15.9%. This finding is particularly significant as it suggests that middle-aged men are more likely to engage in SCC activities compared to both younger and older age groups. The researcher found that this age group often represents established community members who have achieved relative stability in their careers and family life, allowing them more time for church activities.

Education levels demonstrated a clear correlation with participation rates. Secondary school graduates showed the highest involvement, representing 38.9% of active male participants, followed by primary school graduates at 33.3%, tertiary education at 18.9%, and university graduates at 8.9%. This distribution suggests that moderate education levels correlate with higher participation rates, though interestingly, those with higher education showed lower participation rates.

8.3 Nature of Participation

When examining how men participate in SCCs, the study identified three primary areas of involvement. Financial contributions emerged as the leading form of participation at 32.5%, suggesting that men prefer to

support SCCs through monetary means rather than direct involvement in activities. This pattern aligns with traditional African male roles as providers and may reflect their comfort with contributing in ways that don't require significant time commitment.

Leadership roles accounted for 30% of male participation, indicating that when men do engage, they often take on positions of authority. This finding correlates with traditional cultural expectations of male leadership and suggests that offering leadership opportunities might be an effective strategy for increasing male participation. As one religious brother noted during interviews, "Men tend to be more engaged when they have specific responsibilities and authority within the community."

Decision-making processes also saw 30% male participation, closely tied to leadership roles. This level of involvement in decision-making suggests that participating men maintain significant influence in SCC operations despite their overall lower participation rates. However, Sr. Agnes, during her interview, expressed concern that this concentration of decision-making power among a small percentage of male participants might not represent the broader community's needs.

The nature of participation also varied by parish setting. Urban parishes reported more diverse forms of male participation, including organizational roles and spiritual activities, while rural parishes showed more traditional patterns focused on financial contributions and formal leadership positions. This variation might be attributed to different cultural pressures and expectations between urban and rural settings.

These findings suggest a complex interaction between cultural norms, educational background, and geographical location in determining both the level and nature of male participation in SCCs. The data indicates that while overall participation remains low, those men who do participate tend to take on significant roles within the community structure. This pattern presents both challenges and opportunities for increasing male participation in SCCs.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that men's participation in SCCs in the Catholic Diocese of Bungoma is significantly lower than desired, with only about one-third of men actively participating. This low participation is influenced by multiple factors including cultural traditions, timing of meetings, and perceived role of SCCs in the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Adjust SCC meeting times to accommodate working men
2. Develop leadership roles specifically targeting male participants
3. Create awareness programs about the importance of male participation
4. Integrate cultural sensitivity in SCC activities
5. Establish mentorship programs for young men
6. Implement income-generating projects to attract male participation

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