



Religious Barriers to Transformative Masculinity and Femininities: *Church discipline on pregnant adolescent girls in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania*

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Abstract

Church discipline aims to correct, confront, and encourage repentance for sin with the intention of maintaining moral and spiritual integrity within the congregation. Under the category of moral delinquency, the church holds the authority to impose disciplinary measures on members proven to engage in immoral behaviours. Within the context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, cases of sexual immorality and adultery are often highlighted when unmarried adult members and adolescents are found to be pregnant. While pregnancy visibly points to moral misconduct for women, equivalent indicators of immorality or adultery for men are less explicitly addressed. Furthermore, under Tanzania's Penal Code Cap 16 2002 (R.E 2019), impregnating a girl under 18 is a criminal offense with legal implications. This paper seeks to explore religious barriers to transformative masculinity and femininities, fostering dialogue on critical concerns such as: Why are victims of sexual abuse or violence often forced to repent or prohibited from partaking in the Eucharist (frequently discovered through pregnancy)? What are the roles of the church in preventing, supporting, and responding to sexual abuse, violence, and gender-based violence? How can the church challenge unequal moral standards for men and women while equipping both to support adolescent girls and promote transformative masculinity and femininity in the face of exploitation, abuse, violence, and stigmatization?

Keywords: Adolescent, Church discipline, GBV, Religious transformation, Transformative masculinity and femininity

Introduction

This paper addresses the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Within the context of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT), it explores how church discipline practices impact adolescent girls, emphasizing the need for transformative masculinity and positive femininity. The study investigates the religious barriers that hinder the development of equitable gender norms, particularly in relation to pregnant adolescents facing stigma and exclusion.

The relevance of transformative masculinity and positive femininity is central to this discussion, as these concepts promote healthy, respectful relationships and challenge traditional gender roles. By fostering a culture that values both men and women equally, the ELCT can contribute to



a more inclusive environment that supports the well-being of all members, particularly vulnerable groups such as pregnant adolescents.

The key questions in these paper are:

Why are victims of sexual abuse or violence often forced to repent or prohibited from partaking in the Eucharist, particularly when their circumstances are revealed through pregnancy?

What roles does the church play in preventing, supporting, and responding to sexual abuse, violence, and gender-based violence (GBV)?

How can the church challenge unequal moral standards for men and women while equipping both genders to support adolescent girls and promote transformative masculinity and femininity in the face of exploitation, abuse, violence, and stigmatization?

Methodologically, this paper employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a literature review and case studies to examine the intersection of church discipline, legal frameworks, and gender norms. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the complexities surrounding adolescent pregnancy and the church's role in shaping attitudes toward gender-based violence (GBV). Through the analysis of existing literature and empirical data, the study aims to provide recommendations for promoting a more supportive and transformative framework within the church community.

The intersection of church discipline practices within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) and the legal framework surrounding adolescent pregnancy reveals significant socio-cultural and legal complexities (Kamanzi & Shilunga, 2021). Church discipline, a vital aspect of maintaining doctrinal and moral standards within the ELCT, often involves measures taken against members who deviate from prescribed norms, including cases of adolescent pregnancy (Chisale & Moyo, 2017). This disciplinary approach is deeply rooted in theological and moral traditions that emphasize chastity and responsible sexual behaviour.

The ELCT employs a structured disciplinary system to address moral infractions among its members. This system includes pastoral counselling, suspension from church activities, and, in severe cases, excommunication. Adolescent pregnancy, viewed as a moral failing, typically results in disciplinary action aimed at both correction and deterrence (Chisale & Moyo, 2016). These disciplinary practices are intended to uphold the church's moral teachings and ensure community coherence. However, the stringent application of such discipline raises critical ethical and practical questions, particularly concerning the treatment of pregnant adolescent girls.

In parallel, Tanzania's legal framework, notably the Penal Code Cap 16 (R.E 2019), addresses issues related to sexual conduct, consent, and protection of minors. The code criminalizes acts of sexual intercourse with minors, reflecting the state's commitment to safeguarding adolescent girls from exploitation and abuse. Legal provisions also extend to the rights and welfare of pregnant adolescents, ensuring their access to education, healthcare, and social support. The juxtaposition of these legal safeguards with church discipline practices highlights a potential area of conflict and necessitates a nuanced analysis of their implications (Rosser et al., 2020).

The dual enforcement of church discipline and legal protections for adolescent pregnancy in Tanzania presents a complex challenge. On one hand, the ELCT's disciplinary measures aim to maintain moral order and uphold religious tenets. On the other, the legal framework seeks to



protect the rights and welfare of pregnant adolescents, ensuring they are not further marginalized (Mkumbugo, Shayo, and Mloka, 2020). This dichotomy often results in tension and conflicting outcomes for pregnant adolescent girls, who may face ostracism and punitive measures from their faith community while simultaneously being protected under state law.

The primary issues arising from the ELCT's disciplinary actions include stigmatization, social exclusion, and disruption of education for pregnant adolescent girls (Machoka, Kabiru, and Ajayi, 2024). These actions can lead to significant psychological and social harm, exacerbating the vulnerability of an already marginalized group. Furthermore, the punitive nature of church discipline can undermine the holistic support necessary for the well-being of pregnant adolescents, contradicting broader humanitarian and legal principles (Chisale & Moyo, 2017).

The conflict between church discipline and legal frameworks is rooted in differing priorities and approaches. While the church focuses on moral rectitude and communal integrity, the legal system prioritizes individual rights and protection. This divergence can lead to scenarios where pregnant adolescents are caught between adhering to religious expectations and exercising their legal rights. The reconciliation of these conflicting frameworks is essential for ensuring that pregnant adolescent girls receive compassionate and comprehensive support, without being subjected to undue harm or discrimination (Akinloye, 2020). The interaction between church disciplinary practices within the ELCT and the legal context in Tanzania presents significant challenges. Addressing these requires a delicate balance between upholding religious values and protecting the rights and welfare of pregnant adolescent girls (Mkumbugo, Shayo, & Mloka, 2020).

Literature Review

The literature review in this paper examines existing research on church discipline practices, gender norms, and the treatment of pregnant adolescent girls within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT). It highlights the theological underpinnings of church discipline, focusing on moral rectitude and the stigmatization of adolescent pregnancies. Previous studies have documented the psychological and social impacts of church discipline, illustrating how punitive measures lead to ostracism and emotional distress among pregnant adolescents.

Key scholars referenced in the literature include Kamanzi & Shilunga (2021), who discuss the socio-cultural complexities surrounding church discipline and adolescent pregnancy, and Chisale & Moyo (2017), who analyze how disciplinary practices function as a form of moral policing that disproportionately affects young women.

The research gap identified in the document revolves around the lack of comprehensive studies that integrate both the legal and religious dimensions of adolescent pregnancy. While existing literature addresses the punitive aspects of church discipline, there is limited exploration of how these practices intersect with legal protections for minors. Additionally, the gap encompasses the need for more empirical data on the experiences of pregnant adolescents within the church, particularly regarding their access to support services and the psychological effects of stigmatization.

Furthermore, the study highlights the necessity for research that examines the roles of transformative masculinity and femininity in mitigating the negative impacts of church discipline. This area remains underexplored, signaling the need for further studies that can inform both church practices and legal frameworks to better support vulnerable populations.



Church Discipline and Moral Delinquency

Church discipline serves a crucial role in maintaining the moral and doctrinal purity of religious communities. Within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT), discipline is implemented as a means of confronting sin, encouraging repentance, and restoring errant members to a state of spiritual health (Duncan, 2010). This approach is deeply embedded in theological doctrines that stress the importance of holiness and moral rectitude among believers. By addressing behaviours that deviate from scriptural teachings, church discipline aims to preserve the integrity of the faith community and uphold its moral standards. The practices of church discipline encompass a range of measures, including pastoral counselling, public admonition, suspension from church activities, and, in severe cases, excommunication (Burnett, 1991). These actions are designed not only to correct the individual involved but also to serve as a deterrent to the broader congregation (Duncan, 2010). The overarching goal is to foster a community that reflects Christian values and resists moral decay.

Specific Disciplinary Measures for Sexual Immorality and Adultery

Sexual immorality, particularly cases involving adolescent pregnancy, is addressed with strict disciplinary measures within the ELCT, reflecting the church's emphasis on chastity and marital fidelity. For example, in situations where an unmarried adolescent girl is discovered to be pregnant, she may be subjected to pastoral counselling, which aims to confront the behaviour privately while encouraging repentance. Public measures, such as being prohibited from participating in the Eucharist or other church activities, may follow, reinforcing the gravity of the infraction (Chisale & Moyo, 2017).

Similarly, in cases of adultery involving married individuals, the church often initiates a process that includes pastoral mediation to encourage reconciliation within the affected family. However, if the offense is deemed severe or if there is repeated misconduct, the individual may face suspension from leadership roles, public admonition during a church service, or, in extreme cases, excommunication (Goodson, 2023). These responses serve both as corrective measures for the individuals involved and as a deterrent to the congregation, underscoring the church's commitment to maintaining its moral standards (Kolden, 2005).

Initially, pastoral counselling is provided to guide the individual towards repentance and spiritual healing. If the behaviour persists or is deemed particularly egregious, more severe actions such as suspension from sacraments and church activities may be imposed. Initially, pastoral counselling is provided to guide the individual towards repentance and spiritual healing, reflecting the church's commitment to fostering moral and spiritual restoration (Ruimassa & Parera, 2024). However, if the behaviour persists or is deemed particularly egregious, more severe actions such as suspension from sacraments and church activities may be imposed. In the most serious cases, excommunication is employed as a last resort, underscoring the gravity of the sin and the necessity of full repentance.

While such practices are rooted in the church's commitment to upholding moral and doctrinal purity, their application within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) remains a subject of debate. In my context, these measures are still practiced, though their implementation varies across congregations and regions. While they serve as a reminder of the church's moral expectations, they also risk alienating individuals at a time when they may need support and restoration the most. I believe that a balance should be struck—prioritizing reconciliation,



understanding, and the holistic well-being of individuals over punitive measures. This would align more closely with the pastoral mission of compassion and grace.

Impact on Pregnant Adolescent Girls

The impact of these disciplinary measures on pregnant adolescent girls can be profound, affecting both their psychological well-being and social standing. The stigmatization and social exclusion resulting from church discipline can lead to significant emotional distress. Boon and Brown (2020) highlight how perceived injustice and unforgiveness among ex-communicants are strongly associated with reduced psychological well-being. Such individuals often experience feelings of shame, guilt, and isolation, which can exacerbate their already vulnerable state. Furthermore, Lloyd (2021) notes that spiritual reductionism and experiences of shame within evangelical communities can deepen mental distress, underscoring the long-term psychological toll of being singled out and punished in a community setting.

Socially, disciplined pregnant adolescents may face ostracism from their peers and community members. Prieto et al. (2018) observe that the attitudes and practices of caregivers towards teenage pregnancies can significantly influence the level of social exclusion these adolescents experience. This social exclusion can disrupt their educational and social development, limiting their opportunities for personal growth and integration into society. The punitive nature of church discipline, while intended to correct behaviour, can therefore inadvertently contribute to the marginalization of these young individuals, contradicting the broader humanitarian and ethical principles of care and support. (Prieto et al., 2018)

While the purpose of church discipline within the ELCT is to maintain purity and confront sin, its application, particularly in cases of sexual immorality and adolescent pregnancy, can have significant adverse effects on the affected individuals. Balancing the need for moral accountability with compassion and support is essential to mitigate these negative impacts and promote the holistic well-being of all members of the faith community (Graan and Van der Merwe, 2016).

Legal and Ethical Considerations

Tanzania's Penal Code Cap 16 (R.E 2019) explicitly criminalizes sexual intercourse with minors, defining it as statutory rape. The legal consequences for impregnating a girl below the age of 18 include severe penalties such as imprisonment, reflecting the state's commitment to protecting minors from sexual exploitation and abuse (Tanzania Penal Code, 2019). The law aims to safeguard the rights and welfare of young girls, ensuring they are not subjected to premature pregnancies and the associated socio-economic challenges (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The intersection of the legal framework with church discipline practices within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) presents a complex dynamic.

While the law seeks to protect minors and punish offenders, church discipline focuses on moral rectitude and repentance. In cases of adolescent pregnancy, the church's disciplinary actions such as suspension from sacraments and public admonition often aim at addressing the perceived moral failings of the individuals involved (Kwayu, 2019). However, these actions can conflict with legal protections that emphasize the rights and welfare of the adolescent. This divergence necessitates a nuanced approach to ensure that church practices do not undermine legal protections or further victimize young girls (Mwambene, 2019).



Ethical Concerns

The morality of forcing victims of sexual abuse to repent or prohibiting them from partaking in the Eucharist raises significant ethical concerns. Such practices can be seen as punitive and insensitive, further traumatizing the victims (Marshall, 2021). Forcing repentance on victims implies that they are partly to blame for the abuse, which contradicts principles of justice and compassion. Similarly, denying them access to the Eucharist—a vital sacrament in the Christian faith—can exacerbate their feelings of isolation and shame (Ntukamazina, 2018).

The church holds ethical responsibilities towards victims of sexual abuse and gender-based violence (GBV). These responsibilities include providing pastoral care, emotional support, and a safe environment for healing. The church should prioritize the well-being of victims, offering counselling and support services rather than punitive measures. Upholding the dignity and rights of victims aligns with broader Christian values of love, compassion, and justice (Rudolfsson, Tidefors, & Strömwall, 2011). By fostering a supportive and understanding community, the church can help victims of abuse rebuild their lives and regain their sense of self-worth. While the Penal Code Cap 16 (R.E 2019) and church discipline practices both aim to address issues of sexual morality and protection, their intersection highlights significant legal and ethical challenges. The church must carefully navigate these complexities to ensure that its disciplinary actions do not conflict with legal protections or ethical responsibilities towards victims of sexual abuse and GBV.

The Role of the Church in Addressing Sexual Abuse and GBV

The church plays a crucial role in both preventing sexual abuse and providing support to victims of gender-based violence (GBV) (Mukuka, 2023). Prevention initiatives within the ELCT often include educational programs that raise awareness about sexual abuse and GBV, emphasizing the importance of respect, consent, and healthy relationships. These programs may involve workshops, sermons, and community discussions aimed at fostering a culture of vigilance and intolerance towards abuse (Bruns et al., 2005). Additionally, the church can implement policies and protocols for reporting and addressing incidents of abuse, ensuring that victims have a safe and confidential means to seek help. Support initiatives are equally vital and typically encompass pastoral counselling, support groups, and referral services to professional counselling and legal aid. By providing a compassionate and supportive environment, the church can help victims of abuse begin the healing process. Church leaders are often trained to offer spiritual guidance and emotional support, helping victims cope with trauma and rebuild their sense of self-worth (Moon & Shim, 2010). Furthermore, the church can collaborate with local NGOs and government agencies to provide comprehensive support services, including medical care, shelter, and legal assistance.

Evaluation of ELCT's Programs Aimed at Preventing Sexual Abuse and Supporting Victims

Evaluating the effectiveness of the church programs aimed at preventing sexual abuse and supporting victims is essential to ensure they meet the needs of the community. This evaluation can involve collecting feedback from participants, assessing the reach and impact of educational initiatives, and reviewing the outcomes of support services provided. Metrics such as the number of reported cases, the responsiveness of the church to incidents, and the satisfaction of victims with the support received can provide valuable insights into the programs' effectiveness (Rassenhofer, Zimmer, Spröber, & Fegert, 2015).



One of the key indicators of success in prevention initiatives is a demonstrated increase in awareness and understanding of GBV issues among church members. Successful programs often result in more open discussions about abuse, a higher rate of reporting incidents, and a supportive community response. In terms of support services, positive outcomes include victims feeling validated and supported, experiencing reduced trauma symptoms, and successfully accessing external resources for further help (Nkaabu, 2023).

Challenges and Successes in Addressing GBV within the Church Community

Addressing gender-based violence (GBV) within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) presents several challenges. One significant challenge is overcoming the stigma and silence surrounding sexual abuse, which often prevents victims from coming forward. This is particularly prevalent in certain regions where cultural and theological beliefs may prioritize forgiveness and reconciliation over justice, complicating efforts to hold perpetrators accountable. This challenge has contributed to a reluctance among members to report incidents of abuse (Hamad & Kitula, 2024).

Another obstacle is the limited resources and training available to church leaders in handling GBV cases. In some dioceses, a lack of formal training on trauma-informed care and victim support has hindered the church's ability to provide effective assistance. The limited availability of such training directly impacts the effectiveness of church responses to incidents. Despite these challenges, the ELCT has seen notable successes in addressing GBV within its community. Several dioceses, including the Diocese of Central Tanganyika, have implemented robust reporting mechanisms and support systems that empower victims to seek help without fear of judgment or retaliation. For example, the Diocese of Meru has partnered with local NGOs to create safe spaces for victims and provide legal support. These initiatives reflect a broader trend within the ELCT to foster a culture of transparency and accountability (Nkaabu et al., 2024).

Collaborative efforts with external organizations have enhanced the ELCT's capacity to address GBV comprehensively. In recent years, the ELCT signed a memorandum of understanding with various local organizations to provide specialized counselling, legal aid, and health services to GBV victims. This collaboration has significantly improved the church's ability to address the complex needs of victims by ensuring they have access to a wider range of support services, including mental health counselling and legal assistance (Magezi & Manzanga, 2019). While challenges remain, the continuous evaluation and successful implementation of prevention and support initiatives are crucial in the ELCT's efforts to combat GBV. By fostering a culture of awareness, support, and accountability, the ELCT can continue to contribute significantly to addressing and mitigating the impacts of GBV within its community (Ngwepe et al., 2024).

Promoting Transformative Masculinities and Femininities within the ELCT

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) plays a key role in challenging traditional gender norms and fostering an environment of equality. Through various initiatives, the church works to promote gender equality by addressing harmful stereotypes, encouraging equitable relationships, and advocating for transformative masculinities and femininities (Feinstein et al., 2011). The ELCT's programs such as workshops, seminars, and sermons raise awareness about gender equality and empower both men and women to embrace more inclusive roles. By integrating these themes into religious teachings, the church reinforces the inherent dignity of all individuals, regardless of gender (Boiliu et al., 2024). Role models within the church men who support gender equality and women who challenge traditional roles serve as living examples of



transformative masculinities and femininities. These role models share their testimonies to inspire others and demonstrate the benefits of embracing gender equality in both public and private life (Nyhagen, 2020).

The ELCT is also committed to addressing the exploitation and stigmatization of adolescent girls. Through educational programs that promote girls' rights and self-esteem, the church helps them resist exploitation and provides safe spaces for open discussion and support. At the same time, the ELCT engages men and boys in conversations about the harmful effects of rigid masculinity and encourages them to become allies in the fight against gender-based violence (Noble et al., 2019).

Through education, advocacy, and support, the ELCT is reshaping cultural narratives that perpetuate gender inequality. The church's approach promotes an inclusive understanding of gender, striving to create a society where both men and women can thrive free from the constraints of outdated stereotypes. Grounded in its Christian teachings, the ELCT continues to stand for gender equality as essential to building a compassionate, just community.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has investigated the impact of church discipline on pregnant adolescent girls within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania (ELCT). While the church aims to uphold moral standards and protect the sanctity of marriage, our findings indicate that current disciplinary practices have unintended negative consequences. Primarily, the fear of church exclusion and social stigma often compels pregnant adolescents to conceal their pregnancies, hindering their access to crucial healthcare services like prenatal care and safe delivery. This can significantly increase maternal and infant mortality rates.

Furthermore, the emphasis on individual blame and punishment overlooks the complex social and economic factors that contribute to adolescent pregnancy, such as poverty, limited access to education, and inadequate sexual and reproductive health information. Moreover, the exclusionary practices of the church can exacerbate feelings of shame and isolation among pregnant adolescents, negatively impacting their emotional and social well-being. These experiences can have long-term consequences for their mental health and future relationships.

This research underscores the need for a more nuanced and compassionate approach to addressing adolescent pregnancy within the ELCT. The church should prioritize the well-being of pregnant adolescents by implementing several key strategies. Firstly, comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education programs should be made available, encompassing information on contraception, safe sex practices, and the consequences of early pregnancy. Secondly, the church must provide accessible support services, including prenatal care, counselling, and social support networks for pregnant adolescents and their families. Furthermore, open and honest dialogue within the church community is crucial to addressing issues of sexuality, gender roles, and the challenges faced by adolescents.

Finally, a critical review of existing church discipline policies is necessary to ensure they are compassionate and restorative, and prioritize the well-being of all members, particularly vulnerable adolescents. By embracing these measures, the ELCT can move towards a more transformative approach to addressing adolescent pregnancy, one that promotes the health, well-being, and empowerment of all its members.



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