Influence of Premarital Counselling on Marital Stability Among Catholic Couples in Naromoru Deanery, Archdiocese of Nyeri, Kenya

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Abstract

Marital stability is an important dimension of family wellbeing, particularly in faith-based communities where marriage is understood as a lifelong commitment. Yet, premarital preparation does not necessarily prevent later marital difficulties. This study assessed the influence of premarital counselling on marital stability among Catholic couples in Naromoru Deanery, Archdiocese of Nyeri, Kenya. Guided by Behavioural Family Counselling Theory and Social Exchange Theory, the study used a convergent mixed-methods design. The target population was 3,313 married Catholic couples in five parishes. A sample of 211 couples was selected by proportionate stratified random sampling, and the five premarital counsellors, one per parish, were purposively selected. Data were collected with structured Likert-scale questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, and analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and thematic analysis. Of the 211 couples sampled, 198 returned usable questionnaires (93.8%), and all five counsellors participated. Marital stability was high ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.73$). Conflict resolution, realistic expectation-setting and commitment enhancement were each rated favourably and were positively and significantly correlated with marital stability ($r = .633$, .541 and .742 respectively; $p < .01$). Counsellors emphasised constructive conflict management, realistic preparation for marital responsibilities and sustained commitment. The findings indicate association rather than causation, and suggest that premarital counselling is an important resource for marital stability in this setting. The study recommends institutionalising conflict-resolution training, strengthening expectation-setting on finances, parenting and extended-family relationships, and providing post-marital follow-up and couple-support groups, particularly in the first five years of marriage.

Keywords: *premarital counselling, marital stability, conflict resolution, commitment, Catholic couples*

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1.0 Introduction

Marital stability is an essential element of family wellbeing and contributes strongly to emotional security, economic productivity and social cohesion (Tierney, 2023). Marriage is commonly considered a fundamental pillar of the health of societies around the world, but many couples do not prepare well for marriage, a lack that is associated with increased marital conflict, dissatisfaction and divorce (Stanley et al., 2020). One prominent intervention that can give partners important skills for marital longevity is premarital counselling (Williamson et al., 2018). In North America and Europe, professionally facilitated, structured counselling programmes have been linked to greater relationship satisfaction, less communication-related conflict and lower divorce rates (Hawkins et al., 2020). However, not every programme resonates with Western ideas of marriage, and programmes may not account for the values of marriage in non-Western cultures (Gui, 2021).

The family remains an important source of identity, support and social continuity in sub-Saharan Africa, but it has not been spared the pressures that threaten marital stability elsewhere. Research in Ghana has examined the relationship between premarital counselling and marital success among married Christians (Adzovie & Dabone, 2021). Counselling programmes in African settings also vary in structure, content and outcomes, and many are rooted in religious beliefs and may give limited attention to practical skills for contemporary challenges such as financial strain and dual-career pressures.

Marital stability remains an important concern in Kenya, where couples experience relational, cultural and economic pressures that may challenge the continuity and quality of marriage (Gachutha et al., 2026). In Nyeri County, and particularly within Naromoru Deanery, couples navigate changing cultural expectations, economic demands and limited access to structured relationship support. Internal church records indicate that some Catholic couples who married within the preceding five years subsequently sought counselling or conflict mediation, suggesting that premarital preparation does not necessarily eliminate later marital difficulties (Nyeri Catholic Secretariat, 2023). Church-based preparation in the region also needs to respond to contemporary concerns such as financial management, gender-role expectations and parenting aspirations (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2024). Although premarital counselling is an established part of Catholic marriage preparation, its contribution to marital stability in this local context requires empirical examination. Accordingly, this study aimed to assess the influence of premarital counselling on marital stability among Catholic couples in Naromoru Deanery, Archdiocese of Nyeri, Kenya.

Theoretical framework

Behavioural Family Counselling Theory (BFCT) is founded on the behavioural tradition (Patterson, 1976), which holds that adaptive interpersonal behaviours can be learned through teaching, practice and reinforcement until they become routine, and that maladaptive behaviours such as hostility, criticism and withdrawal can be unlearned. In premarital counselling, BFCT describes the systematic training of couples in communication, conflict-resolution and commitment skills, using role play and guided practice to shift the relational dynamics they bring home (Stanley et al., 2020). Marital stability is then understood not as an inherent quality of the couple but as the sum of reinforced positive behaviours, which provides a mechanism through which counselling content can lead to lasting change.

Social Exchange Theory (SET), formulated by Thibaut and Kelley (1959), explains relationships in terms of perceived rewards, costs and comparison levels. Partners stay engaged when they believe that the relational rewards outweigh the costs and are at least equal to their expectations (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). In premarital counselling, SET highlights the importance of communication skills, conflict resolution and realistic expectations: each reduces relational costs and increases perceived rewards, which in turn

increases couples' willingness to invest in and maintain their marriage (Lavner et al., 2021). BFCT and SET thus offer complementary explanations of the behavioural and motivational elements of counselling's influence on marital stability.

"The family remains an important source of identity, support and social continuity in sub-Saharan Africa"

2.0 Materials and Methods

Communication competence is widely regarded as a cornerstone of marital happiness. Strong communication has been related to higher relationship satisfaction and lower conflict (Williamson et al., 2018), and conflict-resolution training has been found to increase marital harmony by providing de-escalation skills (Hawkins et al., 2020). Resolving financial and parenting expectations has been associated with less early conflict and disillusionment (Williamson & Lavner, 2020), and goal-setting and trust-building with greater long-term commitment (Stanley et al., 2020). Most of this evidence comes from Western contexts, where norms of marriage differ from those in Africa.

African studies add cultural and communal elements. Research in Ghana has examined premarital counselling among married Christians and among Christian and Muslim lay counsellors (Adzovie & Dabone, 2021; Osei-Tutu et al., 2020), and work in South Africa has identified the components of culturally relevant marriage enrichment programmes (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2024). Evidence from Kenya is sparse and scattered. Karuga (2024) and Muturi (2025) studied premarital counselling and marital satisfaction among Christian couples in Nairobi, and Karuga (2024) identified socio-demographic factors such as education, income and duration of marriage as influences on satisfaction, but little research examines how counselling components function in a rural Catholic context (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2024). The present study addresses this gap by examining the contribution of conflict resolution, realistic expectation-setting and commitment enhancement to marital stability in Naromoru Deanery.

Research design and setting

The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analysed separately and integrated during interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2021). The quantitative strand was a descriptive correlational survey, and the qualitative strand used a phenomenological approach to obtain counsellors' own accounts of how premarital counselling operates in practice. The study was conducted in Naromoru Deanery, Archdiocese of Nyeri, Kenya, which comprises five Catholic parishes serving a predominantly Kikuyu, largely agrarian population.

Participants and sampling

According to church records for December 2022, the target population was 3,313 married Catholic couples in the five parishes, together with five premarital counsellors, one attached to each parish. Couples were eligible if they had solemnised their marriage in the Catholic Church within the Deanery, had been married for at least two years, both spouses were aged 18 years or above, and both were permanent residents of the Deanery. The couple was the unit of analysis. Using Nassiuma (2000) formula with a coefficient of variation of 30% and a margin of error of 2%, a sample of 211 couples was calculated, allocated to the parishes in proportion to their share of the population, and selected by stratified random sampling from parish marriage registers. Each sampled couple completed one questionnaire with both spouses present. Of the 211 questionnaires distributed, 198 were returned usable, a response rate of 93.8%. The five counsellors were purposively selected for interviews, and all participated.

Instruments

The questionnaire had six sections: demographic information, marital stability (ten

items) and premarital counselling components (conflict resolution strategies, setting realistic expectations and commitment enhancement strategies. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), and composite scores were the mean of each scale's items. Items were adapted from validated instruments on marital quality and relationship education (Karney & Bradbury, 2020; Markman et al., 2020) and reworded for the Catholic rural Kenyan setting. A semi-structured interview schedule explored the design, content and delivery of the counselling, the components couples engage with or resist, how couples apply it in marriage, and its effectiveness. Face and content validity were established through expert review and a pilot study of 22 couples in neighbouring Nanyuki Deanery, which lay outside the sampling frame. Cronbach's alpha ranged from .70 (setting realistic expectations) to .78 (marital stability) and was .72 across the 50 items.

Data collection and analysis

Questionnaires were administered after Sunday Mass or during scheduled parish meetings, when both spouses were present, with the help of research assistants trained in ethical data handling. Interviews were held in a private location, audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. All data were collected between the last week of August and mid-September 2025. Quantitative data were entered into SPSS Version 30, cleaned and analysed using frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations and Pearson's product-moment correlation. Interview transcripts were analysed thematically following the six phases of Braun and Clarke (2022), and counsellors were identified as C1 to C5. The two strands were merged at the interpretation stage.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Kenya Methodist University Scientific and Ethics Review Committee [Ref no. 653512, 21/08/2025] and a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) [permit number and date]. Written permission was obtained from the Catholic Archdiocese of Nyeri, the Dean of Naromoru Deanery and the parish priest of each parish. Participants gave written informed consent after being told the purpose of the study, their right to decline any question and their right to withdraw without penalty. No names were recorded: respondents were assigned identification numbers, findings were reported in aggregate, and electronic data were stored in encrypted form on a password-protected computer.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Marital stability

Marital stability, the dependent variable, was measured through ten Likert-scale items covering emotional fulfilment, security and trust, shared responsibilities, satisfaction, mutual emotional support and perceived permanence. Couples reported a high level of stability (composite $M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.73$; Table 1).

Table 1

Marital Stability Indicators

Statement	*M*	*SD*
Our marriage is emotionally fulfilling	4.21	0.74
We work together to overcome challenges as a couple	4.08	0.81
We feel emotionally supported by each other	4.18	0.78
Our marriage feels stable and long-lasting	4.17	0.69
Composite marital stability score	4.18	0.73

Note. N = 198. Items were rated on a five-point scale; four of the ten items are shown, and the composite is the mean of all ten.

Emotional fulfilment recorded the highest item mean (M = 4.21), with 80.8% of couples agreeing or strongly agreeing, followed by mutual emotional support (M = 4.18) and perceived permanence (M = 4.17). These results align with evidence that emotionally connected, mutually committed partners report stronger stability (Karney & Bradbury, 2020). They should nonetheless be read as an upper bound, because couples in rural Kenya may under-report marital distress where divorce is stigmatised (Wairimu & Kiptoo, 2024), legally intact but emotionally distant marriages have been documented elsewhere in Africa (Adeyemi & Oladipo, 2021), and these couples were reporting on a sacrament their faith holds to be indissoluble.

Counsellors described stability not as something couples possess but as something they practise, through communication habits, emotional maturity and a decision to persist. One observed:

"You can tell a stable couple by how they treat each other during small misunderstandings. Many of those who have stayed strong learned early how to talk and listen without escalating issues. (C4)"

Another emphasised that the stable couples are those who see marriage as "a long-term covenant, not something you walk away from when problems appear" (C2). These accounts mirror the SET premise that couples remain committed when relational rewards are consistent, and the BFCT emphasis on stabilising positive interaction patterns.

Conflict resolution and marital stability

Descriptive findings for the three premarital counselling components reported in this article (conflict resolution, realistic expectation-setting and commitment enhancement) are based on the 198 couples with usable questionnaires and are interpreted together with the counsellors' accounts. Table 2 presents the responses on conflict resolution.

Table 2

Couples' Responses on Conflict Resolution and Marital Stability

Statement	Agree+ (%)	*M*	*SD*
Premarital counselling equipped us with strategies for managing conflict	79.8	4.09	0.83
Counselling reduced our tendency to avoid difficult conversations	80.8	4.04	0.86
We resolve our conflicts constructively	81.8	4.12	0.80
We manage anger with mutual respect during disagreements	78.8	4.01	0.88
The conflict resolution skills we learned have strengthened our marriage	79.8	4.10	0.82

Note. N = 198. *Agree+ is the percentage of couples who agreed or strongly agreed. Five of the ten items are shown; the composite for all ten items is M = 4.07, SD = 0.84.*

About 80% of couples agreed that counselling equipped them to manage disagreements constructively, reduce avoidance and handle conflict respectfully (composite M = 4.07, SD = 0.84, the lowest of the four components). Constructive resolution of conflict recorded the highest item mean (M = 4.12), and managing anger with mutual respect the lowest (M = 4.01) with the widest dispersion (SD = 0.88). Counsellors described conflict management as one of the most transformative outcomes. C3 reported:

"Many couples told us that before counselling, their approach to conflict was either silence or shouting. After the sessions, they said they had

learned how to take time to listen and respond calmly rather than react emotionally. (C3)"

C2 added that couples were encouraged to "address the issue without attacking the person". Counsellors attributed the effect to role-play exercises and guided discussion, which gave couples supervised opportunity to rehearse dispute resolution. This may also help to explain the weakest item: managing anger under provocation is the behaviour that is hardest to rehearse in a counselling room.

These outcomes reflect BFCT, whereby destructive cycles of criticism and withdrawal are replaced, through rehearsal and reinforcement, with learned scripts for cooling down and negotiating (Stanley et al., 2020). SET frames effective conflict resolution as a cost-reduction strategy: when conflict can be managed without large emotional costs, couples are more willing to remain and invest (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The findings echo evidence that conflict-management training improves marital harmony (Hawkins et al., 2020), and underscore the value of experiential learning formats within premarital curricula.

Realistic expectation-setting and marital stability

Table 3 presents the responses on setting realistic expectations.

Table 3

Couples' Responses on Setting Realistic Expectations and Marital Stability

Statement	Agree+ (%)	*M*	*SD*
Premarital counselling helped us form realistic expectations of marriage	81.8	4.18	0.77
Counselling prepared us for challenges such as finances or in-laws	80.3	4.14	0.81
We entered marriage with clear roles and responsibilities	80.3	4.09	0.84
Counselling reduced the gap between our expectations and reality	79.8	4.11	0.82
Realistic expectations have helped us remain committed during challenges	82.3	4.20	0.75

Note. N = 198. Agree+ is the percentage of couples who agreed or strongly agreed. Five of the ten items are shown; the composite for all ten items is M = 4.14, SD = 0.80.

Between about 80% and 82% of couples agreed that counselling helped them form realistic expectations and prepare for challenges such as finances and in-laws (composite $M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.80$). Counsellors observed that expectation-setting conversations corrected idealised romantic notions and reframed challenges as manageable. C1 remarked, "We often find couples believe love alone will sustain their marriage. Counselling helps them confront realities such as financial planning and family involvement", while C5 noted that when couples recognise that challenges are normal, "they are more patient with each other and less likely to give up quickly".

SET explains why expectation alignment matters: realistic expectations keep experienced rewards from falling short of comparison levels, reducing disappointment and perceived costs (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). BFCT adds that expectations are modifiable through psycho-education and rehearsal, reshaping how couples interpret everyday stressors. The pattern corresponds with findings that preparing couples for financial and family pressures reduces early dissatisfaction (Williamson & Lavner, 2020), and reinforces the need for locally adapted content that combines factual preparation with culturally respectful discussion of roles.

Commitment enhancement and marital stability

Table 4 presents the responses on commitment enhancement.

Table 4

Couples' Responses on Commitment Enhancement and Marital Stability

Statement	Agree+ (%)	*M*	*SD*
Premarital counselling strengthened our sense of commitment to marriage	82.8	4.22	0.74
We view marriage as a long-term partnership because of counselling	82.8	4.19	0.76
Counselling reinforced the importance of perseverance during challenges	81.8	4.16	0.79
Counselling encouraged us to prioritise our relationship over other demands	82.3	4.14	0.80
Our commitment has been sustained by the lessons learned in counselling	80.3	4.18	0.78

Note. N = 198. Agree+ is the percentage of couples who agreed or strongly agreed. Five of the ten items are shown; the composite for all ten items is M = 4.18, SD = 0.77.

Commitment enhancement recorded the highest ratings of the four components (composite $M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.77$), with more than 80% of couples agreeing that counselling deepened their dedication, framed marriage as a long-term partnership and reinforced perseverance through difficulty. Counsellors emphasised the covenantal framing of marriage. C2 explained, "We emphasise from the start that marriage is not about convenience but about covenant", while C4 observed that "feelings may change, but the decision to remain together is what sustains the relationship".

BFCT accounts for these effects through the reinforcement of committed behaviours, shared planning and reciprocal support that become stabilising habits (Metcalf, 2011). SET clarifies the motivational dimension: when investments are reciprocated and rewards remain acceptable, commitment endures even amid hardship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Consistent with evidence that explicit commitment-building strengthens relational endurance (Stanley et al., 2020), counsellors added that parish and community reinforcement, through the public witnessing of marriage and the accountability it creates, sustained commitment beyond what counselling alone could achieve. Part of the commitment couples report may therefore derive from their religious setting rather than from the counselling sessions alone, a qualification the questionnaire could not capture.

Association between premarital counselling components and marital stability

Pearson's product-moment correlation examined the strength and direction of the relationships between the three counselling components and marital stability. As shown in Table 5, conflict resolution strategies, realistic expectation-setting and commitment enhancement were each positively and significantly associated with marital stability ($p < .01$). Commitment enhancement ($r = .742$) and conflict resolution strategies ($r = .633$) recorded the strongest associations, followed by realistic expectation-setting ($r = .541$).

Table 5

Correlation Between Premarital Counselling Components and Marital Stability

Premarital counselling component	*r*	*p*	Interpretation
Conflict resolution strategies	.633	< .01	Strong positive
Setting realistic expectations	.541	< .01	Moderate positive
Commitment enhancement	.742	< .01	Strong positive

Note. N = 198. Two-tailed tests.

The positive coefficients indicate that more favourable assessments of conflict-resolution strategies, realistic expectation-setting and commitment enhancement were associated with higher marital stability. The prominence of commitment enhancement and conflict resolution suggests that, in this faith-based rural context, sustained commitment and the capacity to manage disagreements constructively are particularly important correlates of marital resilience. This interpretation is also reflected in the counsellors' accounts.

Limitations

The cross-sectional design captured perceptions at a single point and cannot show how the effects of counselling endure or decay over the marital life course. The study was confined to Catholic couples in one deanery, so the findings cannot be extended without qualification to other denominations, faith traditions or settings. Self-reported data may carry recall bias and socially desirable responding, particularly where respondents report on a religiously sanctioned institution. Because all couples had received counselling, there was no comparison group, and the strong commitment finding cannot be separated from the doctrinal and communal setting in which it was obtained.

4.0 Conclusion

The study indicates that premarital counselling is an important contributor to marital stability among Catholic couples in Naromoru Deanery. Respondents reported generally high marital stability, with a composite mean of 4.18 (*SD* = 0.73). The descriptive findings showed favourable assessments of conflict-resolution strategies, realistic expectation-setting and commitment enhancement. The correlation analysis further demonstrated positive and statistically significant associations between these counselling dimensions and marital stability, with commitment enhancement and conflict resolution recording the strongest relationships. Counsellors' accounts supported the quantitative pattern by emphasising constructive responses to disagreements, preparation for practical marital responsibilities and the importance of viewing marriage as a sustained commitment. Taken together, the findings suggest that premarital counselling can strengthen the relational resources couples draw upon when navigating marital challenges. The results should, however, be interpreted as evidence of association within the study setting rather than proof of causation.

5.0 Recommendations

The findings have the following value and implications for premarital counselling practice in the Deanery and similar faith-based settings:

Conflict-resolution training should be institutionalised as a core component of the counselling programme, with attention to constructive negotiation, respectful disagreement, anger management and compromise, and reinforced through post-marital refresher sessions so that couples can keep applying the skills as challenges arise.

Expectation-setting should be strengthened by addressing practical areas such as financial management, parenting, extended-family relationships and gender roles, while remaining sensitive to the Church's spiritual teaching and the local cultural context.

Counsellors should encourage couples to establish shared goals and a common family vision, and parishes should support this through

couple-support groups that sustain commitment beyond the wedding ceremony.

Continuous post-marital support should be made available, particularly during the first five years of marriage, when couples are adjusting to new responsibilities and external pressures.

Premarital counselling should be integrated into broader family-stability initiatives through collaboration among faith-based institutions, government agencies and community organisations.

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