

Religion and Abortion in Kenya: Analysis of Prevalence Rates and Abortion Attitudes and Implications among Christian Women in Meru County

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Abstract

This study focuses on the escalating prevalence of abortion in modern Kenyan society. It argues that societal attitudes towards abortion, particularly within Christian communities, have evolved due to factors like sexual revolution and secular humanistic ideologies. 323 women from 11 sub-counties of Meru County were sampled for this study. The study was guided by the divine command theory. Descriptive survey design was adopted for this study, and data was collected using questionnaires. Validity and reliability was ensured through alignment with research objectives and the split-half technique. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used in data analysis, and findings presented in tables and figures. Results revealed a correlation between level of education and likelihood for abortion, with a higher abortion prevalence among respondents with a bachelor's degrees. The primary reasons cited for abortion were unplanned pregnancy and medical concerns. While most respondents opposed abortion for any reason, they were more accepting in cases of maternal risk or foetal anomaly. However, all respondents rejected abortion for sex selection or underage girls. These findings suggest the need for comprehensive reproductive health education, support for women with unplanned pregnancies, and policies promoting reproductive healthcare access, and women's rights protection. The study further recommends efforts to reduce abortion stigma within the church, and to provide support for women choosing termination.

Key Words: *Reproductive health, abortion, religion and abortion, pro-life, pro-choice, abortion attitudes, abortion prevalence*

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1.0 Introduction

Abortion is the deliberate termination of a human pregnancy before the foetus has reached a stage of viability outside the womb. The issue of abortion has been a topic of debate for millennia, with ancient civilizations outlawing induced termination of pregnancy. The Old Testament also attaches a fine to one who would cause an abortion, albeit accidentally. The New Testament avoids declarations on the issue of abortion.

Religious attitudes towards abortion have traditionally vacillated between strict

conservatism, where abortion is only permissible for medical reasons, and the far left, where the woman can terminate the pregnancy wherever, whenever. Islam opposes abortion after 4 months, while Hinduism and Buddhism are silent on this issue. The Pew Research Centre (2013) found that most religious denominations in America reject abortion except for medical reasons where the mother's life may be in jeopardy.

The prevalence rates for abortion are worrying, with 46 million abortions done every year. The world data for induced

abortion stand at 26 per 100 known pregnancies. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 500,000 abortions are done in Kenya every year, with 97% of them done unsafely. Since abortion is illegal in Kenya, most abortions are done away from the prowling eyes of the authorities. Sadly, most of these abortions are unsafe abortions, and carried out by rogue personnel who are often untrained. Coupled with the unsanitary conditions under which they are carried out, these abortions often result in the death of the mother.

Meru County is situated on the eastern side of Mount Kenya, and is mainly a Christian stronghold, with the Methodist Church commanding the largest following. In the 10 months between January and October 2021, 3,475 abortion cases were reported, a 20% increase compared to 2020. The number of abortion cases in Meru County, and generally in Kenya, is most likely a gross underestimation, since illegal abortions go unreported.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of abortion presents a significant global health crisis. Abortion has emotional and psychological impact on women, particularly when performed by individuals without proper medical training. For Christians, the moral dimension of abortion poses a critical concern, since Christian faith is rooted in adherence to divine laws which are considered immutable and culturally binding as outlined in the Bible. Despite the predominantly Christian population in Meru County, no prior research has explored the relationship between religion rates, and abortion attitudes among Christian women. Official statistics indicate that 3,475 abortion cases were reported in Meru County between January and October 2021, underscoring the relevance for this investigation. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the influence of religion on the abortion prevalence rates

and attitudes among Christian women in Meru County.

Objectives of the study

The specific objectives of this study were:

- i. To analyse abortion prevalence rates among Christian women in Meru County.
- ii. To examine attitudes towards abortion among Christian women in Meru County.

Literature review

This section reviews literature on the subject under study. It covers the theoretical framework, biblical teachings on abortion, abortion prevalence rates among Christian women and religion and attitudes towards abortion.

Theoretical framework

This study was guided by the Divine Command Theory, also called Voluntarism. This framework posits that what God commands or wills is what is right; hence, what ought to be done (Kunhiyop, 2008). Proponents of this view, such as the medieval philosopher, William of Ockham, believe that God commands what should be done, and then informs humans of these commands by implanting us with moral intuitions. This theory was pertinent to this study since it impacts on the nexus between the independent variable, religion; and the twin dependent variables; abortion attitudes and prevalence rates. Specifically, what God commands or wills is what ought to inform both theory and praxis of Christians in terms of their attitudes and actions towards abortion. This theory is relevant to this study because it highlights the nature, the motives and the effects of a departure from the divine commands.

The Bible and Abortion

The word abortion is not mentioned in the Bible, but the Bible speaks to the issue. One such passage is from Exodus 21:22-25:

If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, and bruise for bruise.

The interpretation of the Mosaic code by Wilson-Karstner and Blair (1985) suggests a hierarchical valuation between the woman and the foetus, with the woman regarded as deserving of full human dignity, and the foetus treated more like property. However, Adisah-Atta and Emeka (2019) and Fuller (1994) argue for the personhood of the foetus from conception, citing biblical passages like Psalm 51:4, which implies personhood from conception. Pro-life advocates assert that terminating a foetus is akin to murder, aligning with theological beliefs regarding personhood. However, this idea raises questions about the onset of personhood, which is not explicitly addressed in the scripture. The traditional perspective of the fathers of the early church and reformers like Luther and Calvin, holds that the foetus gains full humanity and soul at conception. This perspective is nonetheless critiqued for potentially extrapolating too much from biblical silence. Interpretations of Exodus 21:22 further complicate this understanding of the biblical acceptance of abortion on demand, adding to the complexity of the theological and ethical debate surrounding abortion within religious contexts.

The lack of scriptural clarity regarding initiation of personhood prompts varied interpretations within religious communities, thereby fueling debates over abortion rights and restrictions. The theological and philosophical exploration

of the morality of abortion within religious contexts remains complex, with interpretations differing between those emphasizing a hierarchical valuation of the woman and the foetus based on biblical texts, and those arguing for the sanctity of life from conception. Such discourses underscore the need for deeper inquiries into the nature of personhood and the ethical implications of abortion within religious frameworks. Another bible verse used by pro-lifers in discussing abortion is Genesis 1: 26.

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals and over all the creatures that move along the ground." (Genesis 1: 26)

The concept of Imago Dei underscores the sacredness of all human life. This notion stems from the belief that humans are created in the image of God. It emphasizes the inherent value and dignity of every individual, regardless of age or ability, and it necessitates respect and protection of all life. While the New Testament does not explicitly address abortion, its overarching emphasis on the sanctity of life implies a prohibition against abortion as a natural consequence of esteeming all life as sacred (Adisah-Atta & Emeka, 2019). Thus, Imago Dei principle serves as a foundational basis for advocating against abortion, as it affirms the inherent worth of every human being.

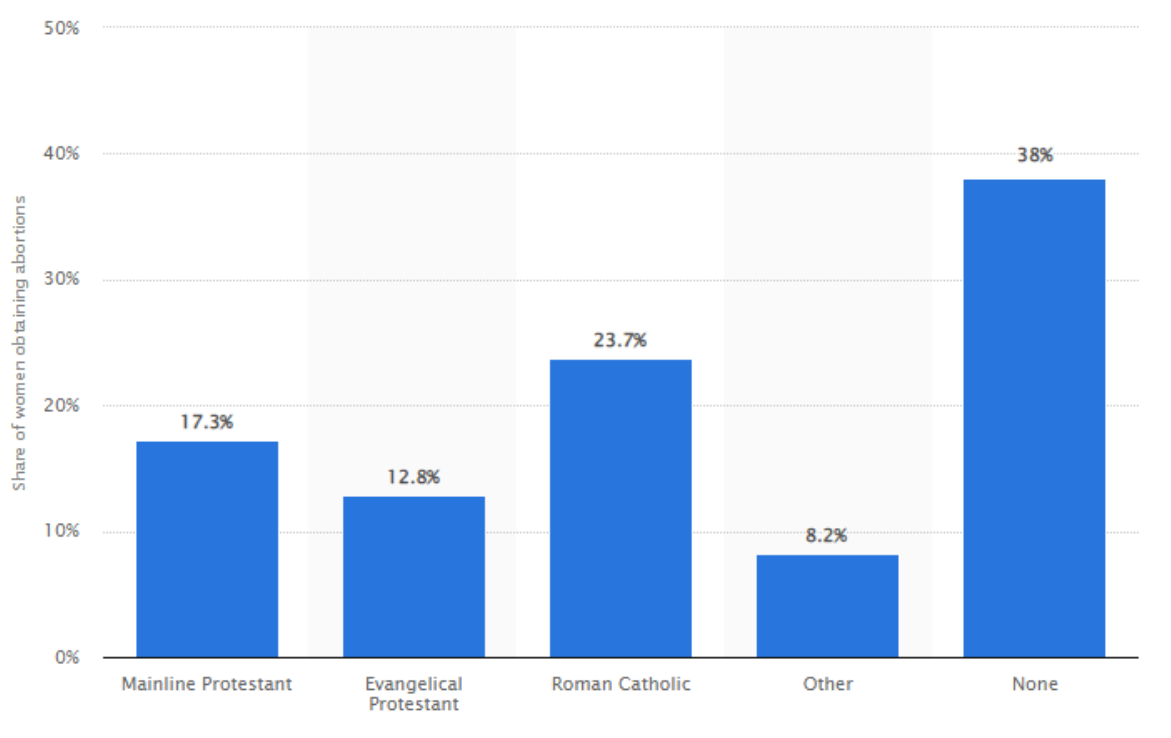
Abortion prevalence rates among Christian women

That Christian women engage in abortion is not in doubt. What is unclear is the rates of abortion in different countries. Reports indicate that a sizable number of US women will have at least one abortion, or attempted an abortion, by the age of 45. (Dozier et al 2020). In the US, 13.5 abortions per 1,000 women between the

ages of 15-49 were reported in 2017. Statistica.com report that 62% of all abortions were carried out by women who

reported to be Christian, as Figure 1 shows.

Figure 1
Distribution of women in the U.S. who procured abortion in 2014, and their religious affiliation



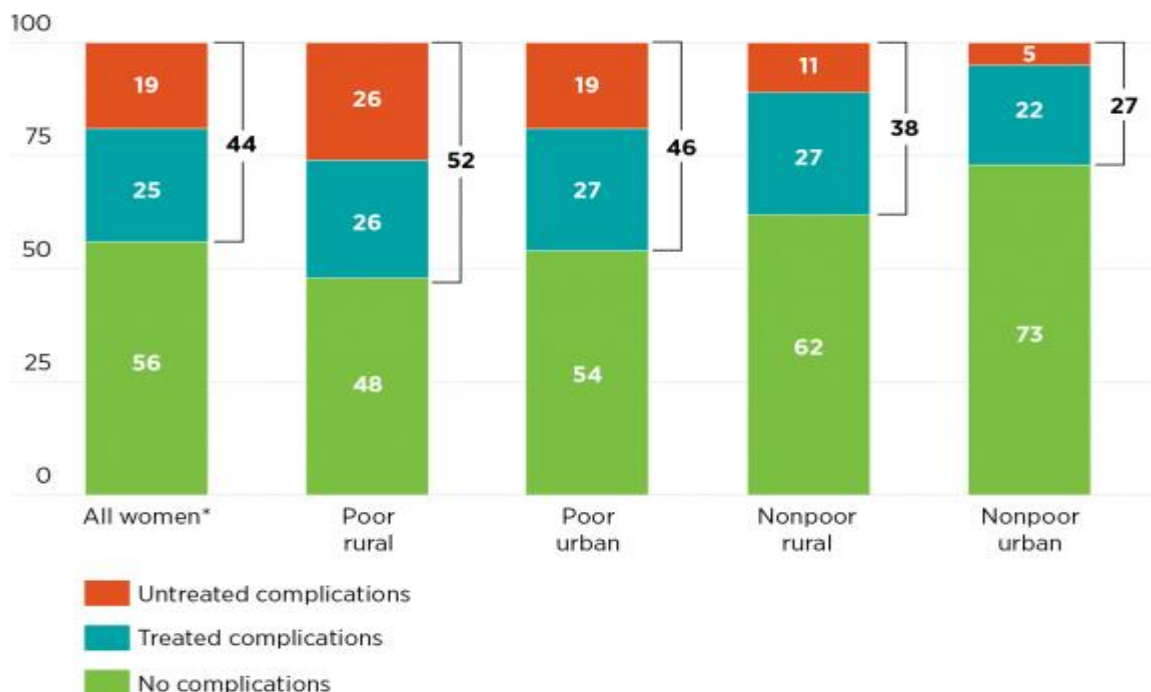
Source: Statistica.com

In the UK, where abortion is legal, over 250,000 abortions were recorded in England and Wales, with a likely majority being Christians (UK.Gov). Conversely, in Kenya, where 80% identify as Christian and abortion is illegal, over 48 abortions per 1000 women are reported (WHO, 2021; Mohamed, 2015). Mohamed's study indicated that abortion rates were highest among women aged 20-24, with Rift Valley, Nyanza, western, and Nairobi leading in regional statistics. Despite legal restrictions, abortion persists in Kenya, with Meru County, which is predominantly Christian, reporting 3,475 cases in 10 months; a significant increase

from 2020 (Mohamed, 2015). Rural women, who are disproportionately affected, often undergo unsafe abortions, as indicated in Table 2. Although not specific to Meru County, the rural context aligns with the county's demographics, where over 80% reside in the rural areas (Kenya Bureau of Statistics). This parallels data from 10 African countries, indicating the gravity of the situation in Meru County. Lack of data on abortion prevalence by religious affiliation in Kenya underscores the broader challenge of addressing abortion within religious contexts. See Figure 2.

Figure 2

Percentages (%) of abortions, according to whether they resulted in complications



Source: *The Guttmacher institute (2021)*

The Guttmacher Institute (2021) estimates that 61% of all unintended pregnancies end in abortion. This suggests that the underlying cause for abortion is unintended pregnancies. Most abortions result from pregnancies that were totally inadvertent. This means that most abortions are not as a result of medical reasons. Most are deliberate actions because a child was unwanted at that time, for whatever reason. This also means that abortion can be linked to availability of contraceptives, since these would guarantee that no pregnancy occurs, and so obviate the need for abortion.

Religion and attitudes towards abortion

In this study, attitude means the settled way of thinking or feeling, about abortion, among Christian women. Globally, religious belief is the most significant predictor of abortion attitudes, with religious leaders playing a key demographic role in shaping opinions. In

Georgia, Dozier et al (2020) found that attitudes towards abortion can be classified as prolife or prochoice, with intermediate grey areas. Adisah-Atta & Emeka (2019) found that religion was a significant variable in whether people procured abortion. In Ghana and Nigeria, Adisah-Atta & Emeka (2019) found that religion was a significant factor in whether people procured abortion. Bain et al (2020) found that the majority of Ghanians were against abortion on demand for sex selection, but supported termination of pregnancy in cases of incest and foetal malformation. However, 89.0% rejected the cardinal thesis of the study, giving blanket approval to abortion on demand.

In Kenya, Mohamed (2015) found that religion influenced attitudes of women who procured abortion. Despite many religions and belief systems abhorring abortion termination, female religion adherents still procure abortion. This

suggests a disconnect between doctrine and theory of the church, and the actual praxis by believers when confronted with the reality of abortion. Inconsistencies between everyday theologies and official doctrine are not without precedent in other denominations.

Religion remains the most significant predictor of abortion, with abortion stigma being a significant factor. The divine command theory predicts human subservience to divine command due to love, fear of punishment, or community pressure. However, since Christian women still procure abortion, it seems that other predictors overload divine command strictures, thereby requiring further investigation.

2.0 Materials and Methods

This study adopted descriptive survey design. The population for the study was Christian women in Meru County, from age 15. The study targeted women from age 15 since WHO points out that such women are in the reproductive stage, and hence, whether legal or not, they do engage in sex, and can seek out abortion services once pregnant. The sample size was calculated using the Biswas-Charan

formula for sample size, that is $n = z^2 [p \cdot q] / d^2$. Biswas Charan formula is used to calculate the sample size for qualitative studies which seek to explore the cross-sectional prevalence of a phenomenon. In this formula, n is the sample size. P is the estimated proportion of the study variable or construct based on previous studies or pilot studies (70%), $q = 1 - P$ (30%), d is the margin of error (5%), and z is the Z-score or a standard normal deviate corresponding to (100%, $\alpha/2\%$), where α refers to the significance level or the probability of making a type I error. The z score for different significance levels is: 1.96.

After computation, the sample size was 323. The 323 Christian women were randomly selected from the 11 sub counties of Meru County; namely, Igembe south, Igembe Central, Igembe North, Tigania East, Tigania West, Tigania Central, Buuri East, Buuri West, Imenti North, Imenti South and Imenti Central to ensure adequate representation in the population. Simple random sampling was further used to select the proportional numbers in each county according to the number of women in the individual sub counties. This is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Number of women in the individual sub counties

Subcounty	Female Population	Sample size per sub county
Igembe south	81446	34
Igembe Central	110200	45
Igembe North	85949	36
Tigania East	37194	16
Tigania West	72241	29
Tigania Central	52916	22
Buuri East	38497	16
Buuri West	40264	17
Imenti North	89046	37
Imenti South	103162	43
Imenti Central	66894	28
Total	800000	323

Data for this study was collected via questionnaires, which were structured to align with the research objectives. The questionnaire included demographic information (Part one) and questions about abortion prevalence rates (Part two) and attitudes towards abortion (Part C) among Christian women in Meru County. Construct validity ensured indicators and measurements were based on relevant knowledge. Split-half reliability was used, yielding a 0.7 coefficient. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were employed, with qualitative analysis focusing on themes and patterns, while quantitative data was analysed using SPSS for descriptive statistics, presented in tables and figures.

3.0 Results and Discussion

An overall response rate of 83.3% was noted for this study, meaning that 100 out of the 120 questionnaires distributed to female members of the Methodist Church in Meru County served as the basis for data analysis and research conclusions.

Profile of the Respondents

All the respondents were female members of the Methodist Church of Kenya in Meru County. Additionally, all were Christian. In terms of age, 80 (80%) were aged 15-24, while 15 (15%) were aged 25-34, while 5 (5%) were aged 35-44. In regard to education, 70 respondents (70%) had

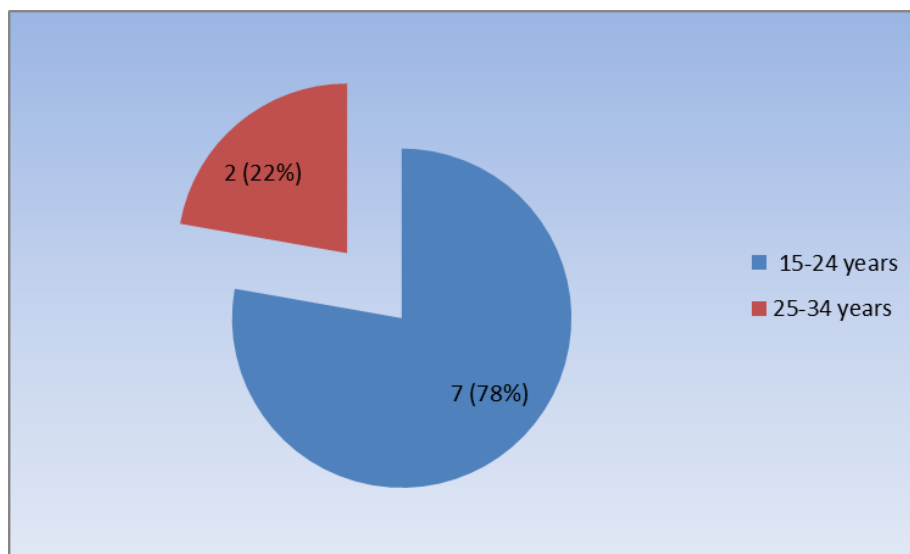
attained a bachelor's degree, 7 respondents (7%) had a diploma, while 20 (20%) had the Kenya Certificate of Secondary education as their highest academic qualification. Moreover, 3 respondents (3%) had attained Kenya Primary School certificate.

Abortion Prevalence Rates among Christian women in Meru County

The study sought to establish the prevalence rates of abortion among Christian women of the Methodist church in Meru County. To establish this, the study collected data from women in the Methodist church of Kenya. All the respondents self-identified as female, and as Christians, meaning they endeavour to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ as taught in the Bible. According to the data, 9 women (9%) had procured abortion, 90 respondents (90%) had not had an abortion, while 1 respondent (1%) declined to answer. This indicates an abortion prevalence rate of 90 per 1000 women. The world health Organization estimated a prevalence of 45 per 1000 women in Kenya in 2021. Going by the WHO data, Meru County's abortion prevalence rate is double the national average. Further, when we cross tabulate the prevalence against the age, we find that 7 women who indicated having taken an abortion were aged between 15-24, while 2 were between the ages of 25-34, as Table 3 shows.

Figure 3

Abortion prevalence by age in Meru County



The study's findings shed light on abortion prevalence rates among different demographics, with Mohamed's (2015) research indicating higher rates among women aged 20-24. However, while Mohamed's study did not focus on religion, the current study explores religion's impact on prevalence rates of abortion and attitudes. Additionally, it reveals a correlation between education levels and abortion likelihood, with a majority of cases of abortion being among women with bachelor's degrees, contrasting with Vaisanen's (2015) findings in Finland. This suggests that higher education may offer greater access to abortion services or resources. Regarding reasons for abortion, most cases (66.7%) were due to unwanted pregnancies rather than medical emergencies, corroborating with the Guttmacher Institute's (2021) findings.

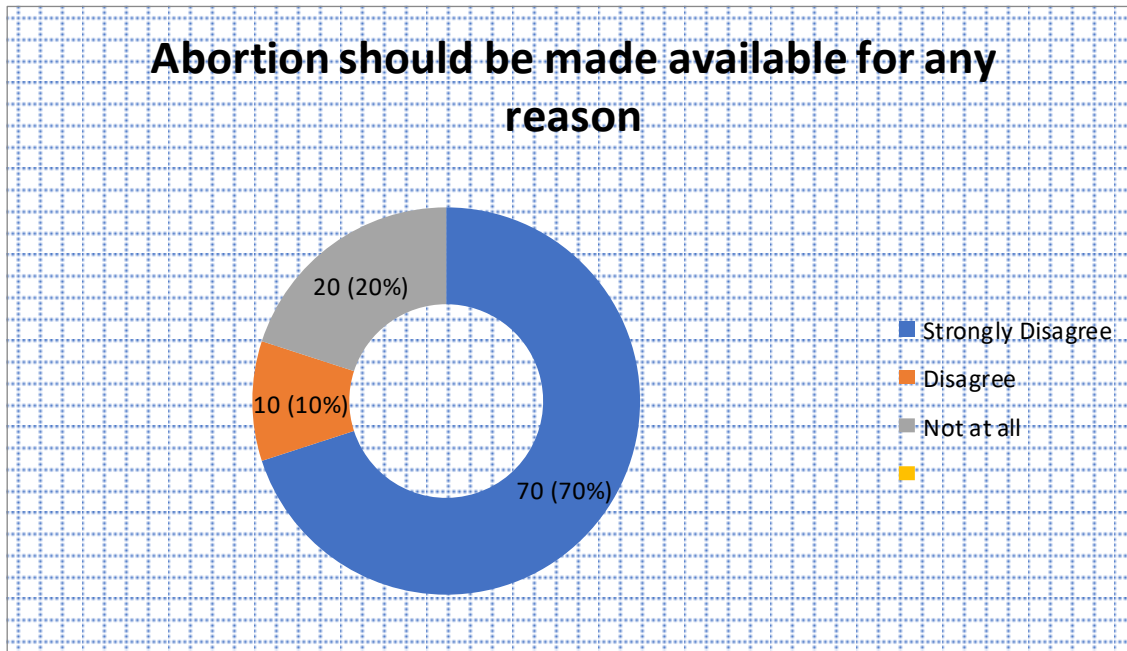
This underscores the importance of contraceptive availability and use as a primary countermeasure to abortion. Moreover, over half of the participants acknowledged knowing someone who had undergone an abortion, highlighting the prevalence of abortion within their social circles. While this may not directly impact prevalence rates, it emphasizes the

widespread nature of abortion experiences beyond Meru County or Kenya in general. These findings underscore the complex interplay of demographic factors, personal circumstances, and societal attitudes influencing abortion decisions, suggesting the need for comprehensive reproductive health education and contraceptive access initiatives to address unintended pregnancies and reduce abortion rates.

Abortion Attitudes

To investigate abortion attitudes by Christian women, 10 questions were asked to measure the level of agreement or disagreement on a likert scale of 1-5, where 1= Not at all, 2= Strongly disagree, 3= Disagree, 4= Agree, and 5= Strongly agree. The results indicated that 90 respondents (90%) strongly agreed, while 10 (10%) agreed that abortion is wrong according to the Bible. This implies that Christian women are aware of what the bible says about abortion, and even those who admitted to carrying out abortion did it in full knowledge that abortion is wrong. To the statement 'abortion should be made available for any reason', 70 (70%) of the respondents strongly disagreed with it, 10 (10%) disagreed, and 10 (10%) said not at all as shown in Figure 4.

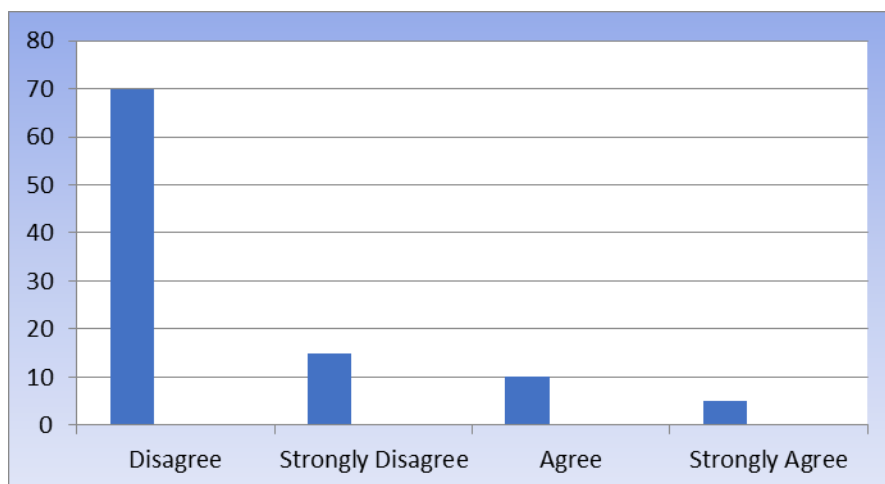
Figure 4
Abortion should be made available for any reason



This implies that all the respondents are against the sentiment of abortion being made available for any reason. This corroborates previous research from the United States by Dozier et al. (2020) that established that people may have strong anti-abortion opinions and still carry out abortion when it suits them.

Another statement which the respondents were required to react to in order to measure attitudes towards abortion was, “abortion is not acceptable, for any reason ever.” 15 (15%) respondents strongly disagreed with this statement, 70 (70%) disagreed, 10 (10%) agreed, and 5 (5%) strongly agreed with the statement. The data is presented in the Figure 5.

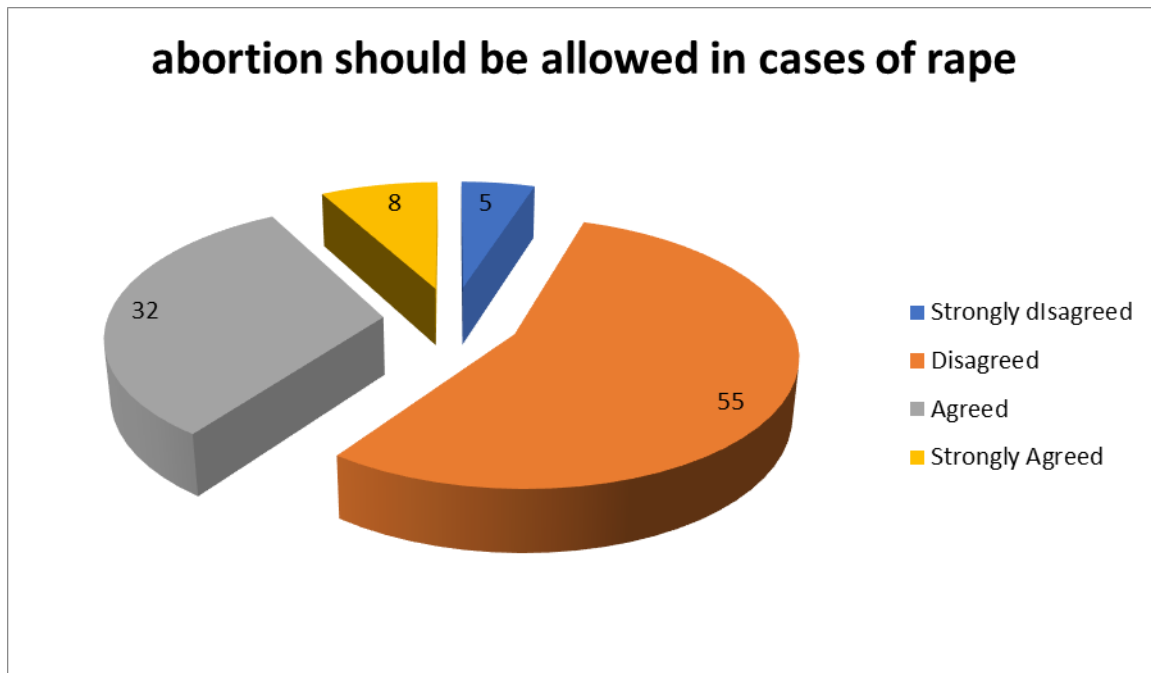
Figure 5
Abortion not acceptable for any reason



From the data, 85% of the respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement. This implies that they believe abortion is acceptable for certain reasons. This finding dovetails with previous research by Mohamed (2015), who found out that majority of women, believed that abortion should be allowed in some cases; for instance, medical reasons

when a woman’s life is danger, doctrinal strictures notwithstanding. 34 (34%) respondents strongly disagreed, while 60 (60%) disagreed with the statement that abortion should be allowed in cases of rape, while 6 (6%) agreed that abortion should be allowed in cases of rape. See Figure 6.

Figure 6.
Abortion should be allowed in cases of rape

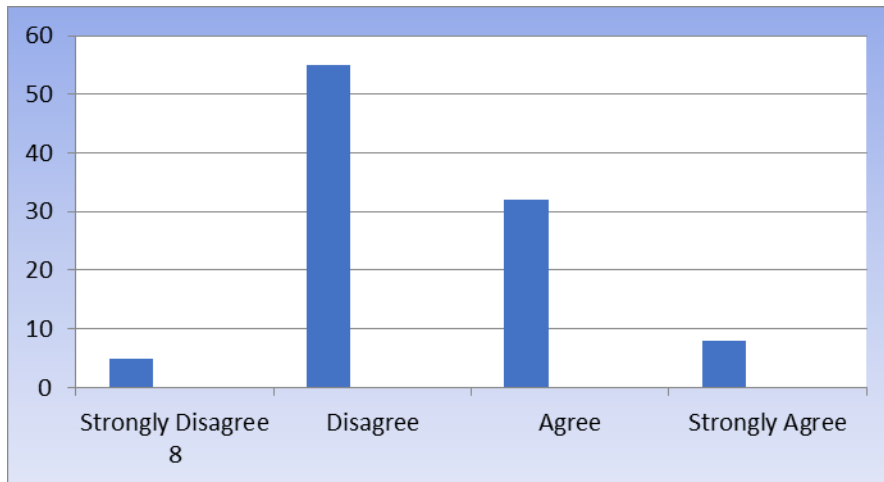


This implies that the majority of respondents (94%) would prefer to carry the child of their rapist, rather than abort it. Perhaps this is not surprising, considering that all the women agreed that abortion is always wrong, according to the bible. This however, contradicts Adisah-Atta & Emeka (2019) study, who established women favoured abortion in cases of rape.

Another statement to measure abortion attitudes was, ‘abortion should be allowed in cases of incest’. 5 respondents (5 %) strongly disagreed, 55 (55%) disagreed with the statement, while 32 respondents (32%) agreed, with 8 (8%) strongly agreeing, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Abortion should be allowed in cases of incest



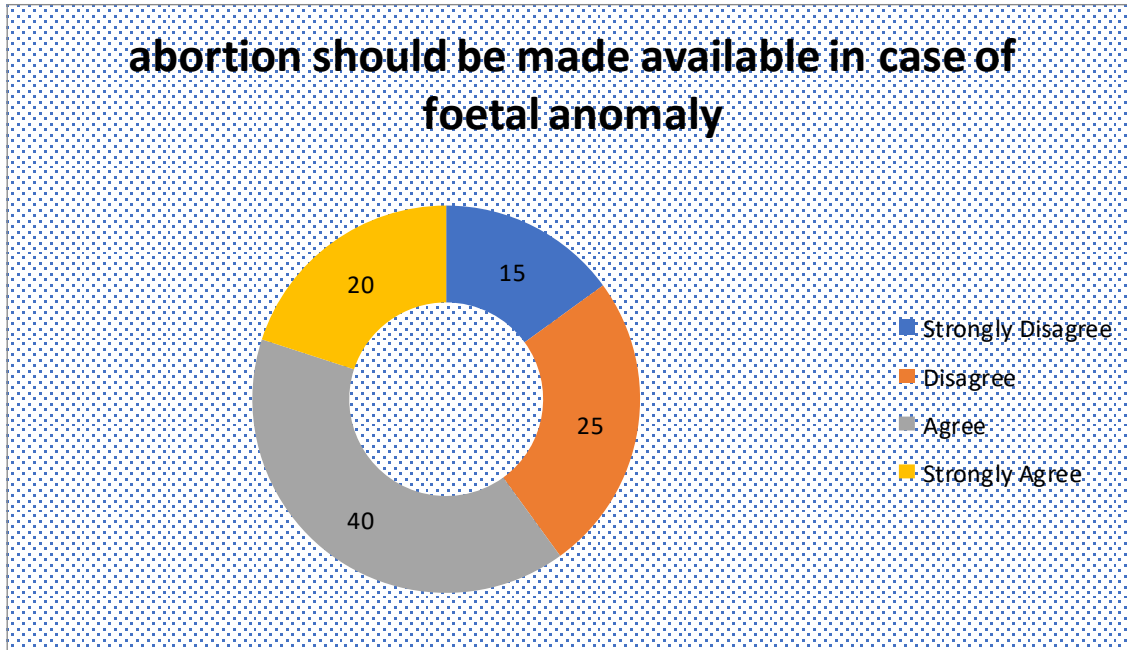
According to Figure 7, 60 % of the respondents would be okay bearing a child from an incestuous relationship. This contradicts conclusions from Bain et al (2020) who averred that in Ghana, women favoured abortion in cases of incest and foetal malformation. Additionally, the findings show that ten percent (10%) of the respondents disagreed that abortion should be made available when the mother’s life is in danger, while 80 (80%) agreed, and 10 (10%) strongly agreed with the statement. This implies that 90% of the respondents were in favour of allowing abortion in cases where the mother’s life is in danger. This supports research from Lyah et al (2015) who found out that even religious mothers would choose their life over the baby’s if they felt the pregnancy put them at risk.

In terms of seeking parents to adopt the baby being a better choice than abortion, 70 (70%) agreed, while 30 (30%) strongly agreed with the statement. This finding

prompts the question why some women prefer abortion to bearing the child then giving it up for adoption, since they think that giving the baby up for adoption is a better option. It would seem that while in their minds Christian women know that giving the baby for adopting is a better option, some may not do it since even carrying the pregnancy to full term comes with stigma and raises many questions. This supports research by Dozier et al (2020), who discovered that some abortions pivot on stigma and shame, particularly in cases where the woman is unmarried.

On the other hand, 15 respondents strongly disagreed, 25 disagreed, 40 agreed, and 20 strongly agreed with the statement that abortion should be made available in case of foetal anomaly. This shows that 60 % of the respondents were in favour of abortions in cases where there was foetal anomaly. See Figure 8.

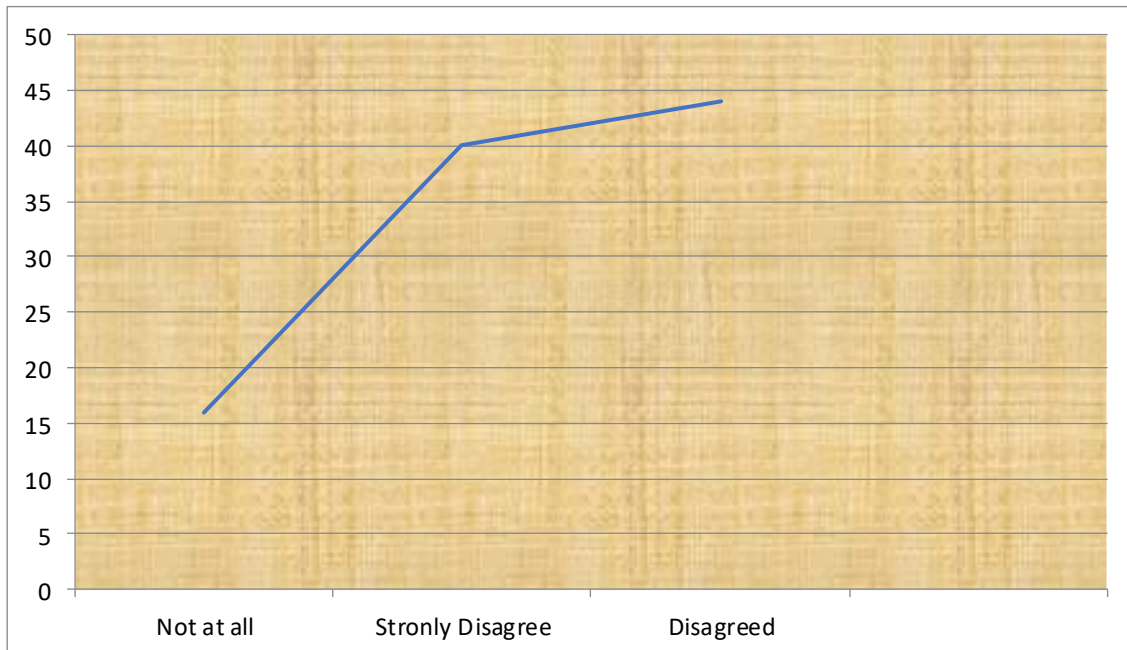
Figure 8
Abortion should be made available in case of foetal anomaly



This corroborates Bain et al (2020) research findings that majority of women favoured abortion in cases of foetal anomaly. Moreover, when asked to react to

the statement that abortion should be made available for sex selection purposes, 16 women said not at all, 40 strongly disagreed, and 44 disagreed. See Figure 9.

Figure 9
Abortion should be made available for sex selection purposes



Results in Figure 9 indicate that all women were against using aborting for sex selection purposes. This finding supports Bain’s et al (2020) study who found out

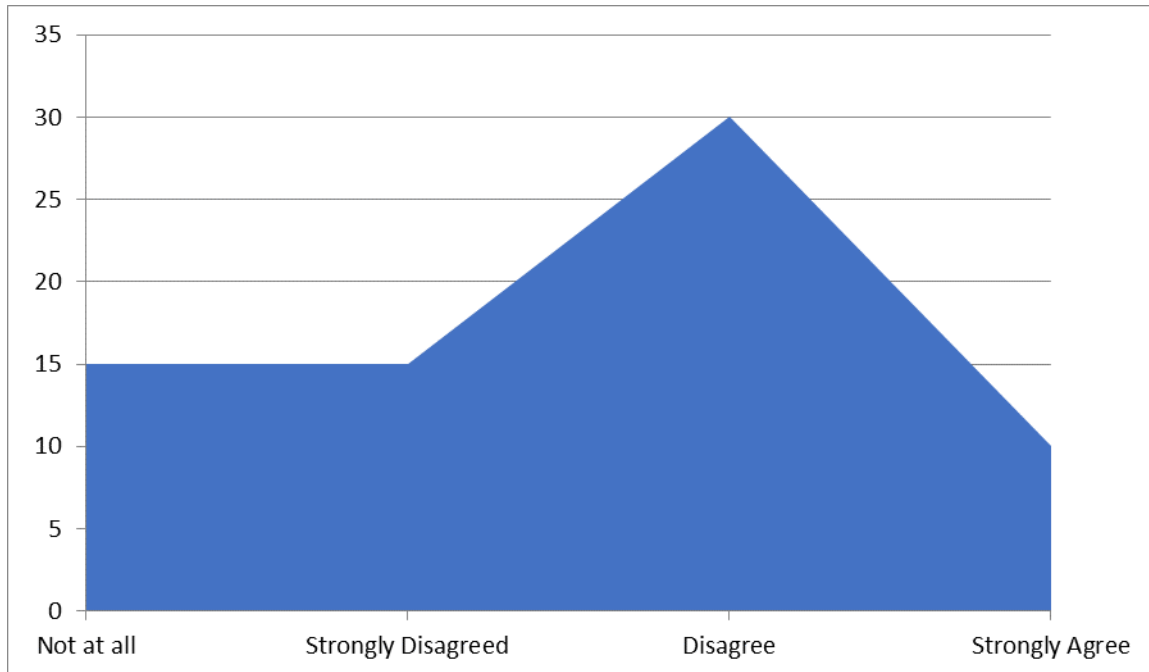
that women in Ghana were against using abortion for sex selection purposes.

The last statement sought to establish whether abortion should be made available for girls under the age of 18. 15 (15%) respondents said not at all, 15 (15%)

strongly disagreed, 30 (30%) disagreed, 30 (30%) agreed, and 10 (10%) strongly agreed as shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10

Abortion should be made available for girls under the age of 18



On whether abortion should be made available to girls under the age of 18, data indicated that 60 % of the women were against abortion being made available to underage girls. The results corroborates Mohamed (2015) findings that Kenyans were against availing abortion services to girls under the age of 18.

4.0 Conclusion

The findings of this study deepen our insight on abortion prevalence among Methodist Christian women in Meru County, revealing an abortion rate of 9 per every 100 women, which is double the national average, with a significant proportion occurring among women aged 15-24. Education levels appear linked to abortion rates. Notably 66.7% of abortion cases were noted among women holding bachelor's degrees. Most abortions result from unwanted pregnancies rather than

medical necessity, and respondents unanimously favour adoption over abortion. Despite acknowledging abortion as biblically wrong, respondents express openness to it in cases of medical emergency or foetal anomaly, while there was a unanimous rejecting of use of abortion for sex selection. Moreover, respondents opposed abortion in cases of rape, incest, and for underage girls.

5.0 Recommendations

The study recommends that the church do more to educate its members about reproductive health and the full range of options available to women who are facing an unintended pregnancy. Second, it recommends that the church becomes more supportive of women who choose to have abortion. Finally, it recommends that the church advocates for policies that promote access to reproductive health

services and those that protect women's reproductive rights. In this regard, the church should aim to challenge the stigma

associated with abortion, and create a more supportive environment for women who choose to have abortion.

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