

Christianity and Social Change: A Gendered Lens of Empowerment, Responsibility, and Morality in Meru, Tanzania



Kayla McLoone, Alexis Dorman, Sophie Winer, and Dr. Beth Ann Williams
Florida State University | Department of Religion



ABSTRACT

The Lutheran church in Tanzania— established during the East African nation’s time under German colonial rule— has endured as a prominent institution in the Meru region. The church plays a significant role in defining East African womanhood and moral norms. This project looks at the role of the region’s Lutheran churches through the stories and lived experiences of Meru people in the second half of the twentieth century. Tanzanian women’s spirituality and involvement in the church informs their engagement with society and their understanding of empowerment. By maneuvering through Christian norms of morality and respectability, women are able to uplift themselves, their families, and their communities. Analyzing the interviews illuminated certain social issues, which were revealed in the interviewees’ ideas, opinions, and experiences. These themes include gendered expectations of child-rearing, disproportionate amount of work for women, and gender inequality in educational and economic opportunities. The experiences of women of varying ages and captured in these interviews also reveals differences in the prevalence of these social issues across generations. Through church programs, education, and their own faith, Tanzanian women have found the means and the determination to create socioeconomic opportunities for themselves and make change in their communities.

METHODS

Materials

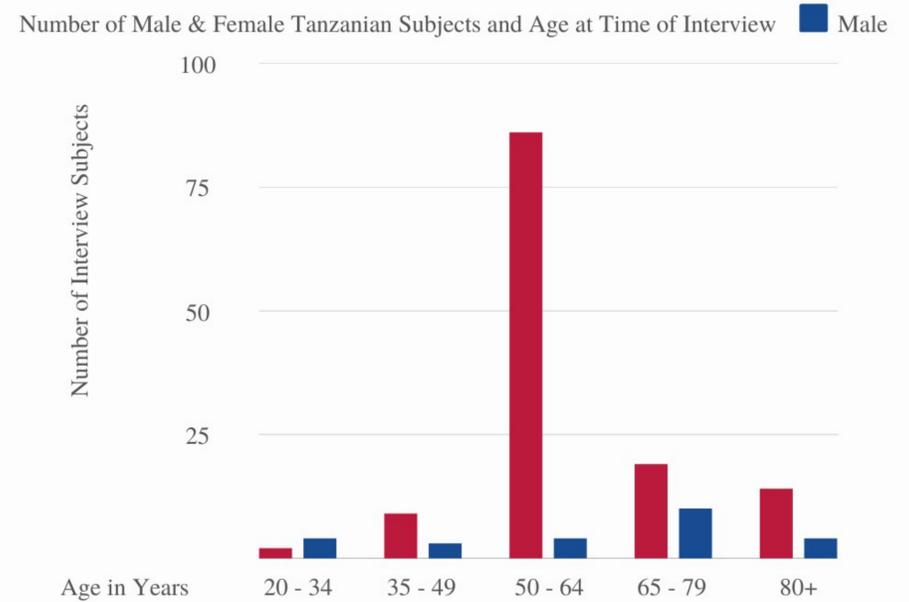
- 118 transcribed oral interviews (primary sources)
- Participants
 - Residents of Meru, Tanzania and Nairobi, Kenya (both male and female)

Procedures

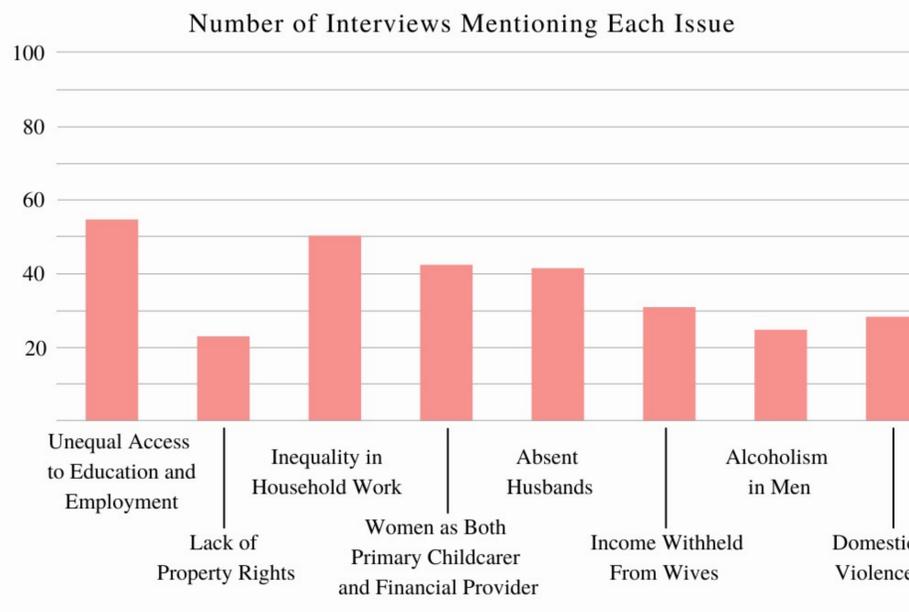
- Citizens of Tanzania and Kenya were interviewed by Dr. Beth Ann Williams individually or in groups.
- Interviews were translated (if needed) and transcribed.
- Research assistants analyzed transcriptions for key demographic and thematic data.
- Research assistants used the data to gain a broader picture of correlations or patterns across the interviews.
- Biweekly meetings were conducted between the entire research group (including primary researcher Dr. Williams and all research assistants) to discuss the progress of the project, standout themes in the interviews and data, and questions regarding background information of Tanzania or nuanced cultural references.

RESULTS

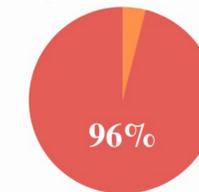
Gender and Age of Interview Subjects



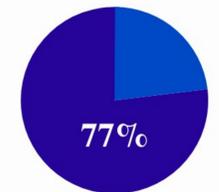
Gender-Based Social Issues



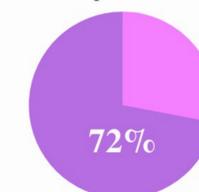
Percentage of Interview Subjects of Christian Faith



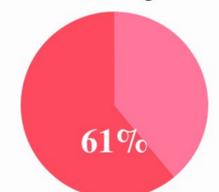
Percentage of Interview Subjects with Positive View of the Church



Percentage of Interview Subjects Who See Societal Improvements for Women



Percentage of Interview Subjects Who Attribute Positive Change to the Church



The demographic and thematic data from these interviews revealed persisting social issues in Tanzanian society relating to gender equality. While men traditionally provide for their families financially, the interviews revealed a growing issue of alcoholism in men and absent husbands who fail to provide financially or leave their families entirely. Women are primarily responsible for child-rearing and household labor, and many have found themselves also responsible for supporting their families financially. Women have historically lacked property rights, as well as equal access to education and employment opportunities. More severe examples of women’s historic socioeconomic oppression in Tanzania are domestic or gender-based violence, and husbands withholding income from their wives. However, a majority of the interview subjects stated they’ve seen improvements in the socioeconomic status of women. Interviewees often cited examples of hardships women faced in their parents’ generation for comparison, indicating a generational change. Almost all of the interview subjects were Christian (mostly Lutheran), and most of the interview subjects displayed a positive view of the church as an institution. Additionally, most of the interview subjects linked positive change to the church and its various social programs relating to education, financial assistance, women’s empowerment, and more. Interview subjects also linked positive social change in Tanzania to social norms established by Christianity and the church. In other words, Tanzanian women maneuver Christian norms of spiritual virtue and social respectability to create better, more meaningful lives for themselves. Tanzanian women also use opportunities provided by the Evangelical Lutheran Church to uplift themselves, their families, and their communities socioeconomically.

REFERENCES

Interviews with Beth Ann Williams. Personal collection. Tanzania and Kenya. 2016-2018.