

The Role of Catholic Women Association in Promoting Social Cohesion: A Case of St John the Evangelist Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The role of the Catholic Women Association in promoting social cohesion is still overshadowed by men in the Catholic Church. This study sought how the Catholic Women Association at St John the Evangelist Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya has promoted social cohesion as a successful tool to transform society. The study's objective was to examine the role of the Catholic Women Association in promoting social cohesion at St. John the Evangelist Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya. The study was anchored by Emile Durkheim's Social Functionalist Theory and Julian Rappaport's Empowerment Theory. The study adopted a Mixed-Method approach and a descriptive research design. The target population was 2320 from St John the Evangelist Parish, and the sample size driven from the target population was 341 fully registered members of CWA and CMA. Simple random and purposive sampling methods were employed. 2 CWA leaders and 5 priests were sampled purposely. The response rate for both quantitative and qualitative studies was 336(96%), 12 people were not available for the interview. Questionnaires were used to collect data for the quantitative study, while an interview guide was used to collect data for the qualitative study. The data for the quantitative study was analyzed using the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and was presented in tables. In contrast, thematic content analysis was used to analyze the data for the qualitative study. There was a significant moderate positive correlation between the variables, Catholic Women Association, and promotion of social cohesion, which implies that social cohesion when promoted by the CWA leads to a cohesive and inclusive society at St John the Evangelist Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya. The study concluded that CWA has played a great role in promoting social cohesion at St John the Evangelist Parish. However, to create more awareness of the CWA role, there is a need for combined efforts among the church leaders and the congregation to support the efforts of CWA in promoting social cohesion in the church. The study recommends that CWA should have mentorship seminars and leadership training courses as part of their association programmes.

Keywords: Catholic women Association (CWA), Social Cohesion.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary times, the position of women in the administrative work of the church has expanded, albeit contentiously. Women take up meaningful roles in the administration. They serve as theologians, canon lawyers, pastoral associates, and religious education directors. Though the appointment of women to positions within the Vatican bureaucracy is limited, it indicates a semblance of progress. Pope Francis's papacy has in particular increased the presence of women in the church's leadership and decision-making roles. In the current synodal process, Pope Francis emphasizes the active participation of women in the Church, recognizing their diverse roles, and engagement in various church responsibilities such as the promotion of justice and peace in the families hence leading a cohesive and inclusive society (Sarah, 2024).

Globally, Women's Associations like the Association for Women's Rights in Development, the International Anglican Women's Network, the Muslim Women Association, the Jewish Women's Association, and Women for Women International among others, have been key drivers for social change and cohesion, advocating for women's rights and addressing injustices. Women associations participate in activities like advocacy and

community projects, they foster solidarity and empower individuals, contributing to inclusive and resilient communities. These Associations provide spaces for dialogue and networking, bridging divides and promoting understanding among diverse groups, thus playing a crucial role in creating a cohesive and harmonious society. In this regard, the study focused on the role of the Catholic Women Association in promoting social cohesion at St John Evangelist Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya (Helfrich 2021).

Social cohesion is an important measure that aims to connect people and groups locally and globally. It helps in building and sustaining relationships among communities, religious groups, grassroots organizations, and others. The main goal of social cohesion is not only to resolve conflicts, but also to create better societies, institutions, policies, and relationships, leading to sustainable peace and justice. Social cohesion has been successful in promoting peaceful co-existence in various parts of the world, including the USA, South Africa, Ghana, and Botswana. For example, in South Africa, it played a key role in uniting the youth after apartheid, fostering a cohesive and peaceful environment conducive to holistic development (David & Jolanda, 2017).

In Rome, the World Union of Catholic Women organization which comprised of Christian women from Italy, Germany, France, and the United States of America played significant roles in promoting justice and resolutions in helping the church to grant justice to a group of people who were abused immorally by the Clergies. Under the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI, the petition that was presented by the Catholic Women was accepted and the church worked to see that justice was granted to innocent people who had suffered from abuses. This brought about the co-existence of a cohesive community and created a sense of belonging among the Christians (Romano, 2020).

In the USA, the Catholic Women Organization (ACWO) gives priority to the Christian formation of all members of the church by emphasizing unity, a deeper understanding, and participation in the life of the Church leading to a greater understanding of the role of a Christian in today's world. Their principal role is prayer which helps them to live their lives as shining examples of Christian living wherever they are. They actively take part in the liturgy. In addition, they encourage other women to wear the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary through their lifestyle and exchanges. They give counseling to the youth and visit women in their homes by taking care of the sick, refugees, and the vulnerable (Smith 2019).

The Catholic Women Association in France is known for its efforts in fighting racism, which has led to significant changes in society, promoting justice and unity among all races. This has had a profound impact not only in France but also worldwide. In 2012, the Paris Match featured women from different religious backgrounds working with Catholic Women to advocate for the rights of immigrants in France. Their slogan was "We all belong to one God, and love should be based on humanity." This powerful demand for justice and peace in society emphasized the importance of respecting and treating all individuals fairly, regardless of their status (Desan, 2012).

The Catholic Women Association has been a central force, in putting the community to enforce certain rights of its community dwellers in Cameroon after the war. Catholic women took part in conflict resolutions through their traditional methods to ignite peace in the community. The CWA introduced local courts and administered cases and this invention helped to adopt restorative justice in preventing and solving conflicts in the community. This study's gender perspective of peace-building policies and projects at the local level brought order in the affected areas of Buea in Cameroon and facilitated harmony in broken families (Peter, 2016).

The Catholic Women Organization in Malawi, operating under the AMECEA theme "the role of women in preventing children from violent conflicts", has taken assertive action to prevent violent conflicts among children. This proactive stance was instigated by the escalating religious ideological extremism that exposed the youth and children to violence. The CWO is steadfast in its commitment to nurturing a dynamic working relationship to advocate for a nurturing family environment for children. They are actively championing a culture of speaking out against various abuses and violence faced by children, spearheading awareness campaigns within educational institutions to empower young people to eradicate violence against children. Additionally, the CWO is leading constructive dialogues with religious leaders to assess laws and policies aimed at eliminating violence against children, while fortifying all child protection mechanisms (Jecinter, 2023).

The Second Vatican Council (1962–65), through its vision of the Church as the People of God, stimulated a

renewal of ministries for lay people. In Australia, the Catholic Women League (CWLA) participates in areas of lay ministry. Their participation occurs within Catholic education. Many lay Catholic staff see their employment in Catholic education as a means to live out their call to ministry. Catholic women initiated prayer and study groups for social justice, and peacebuilding hence enhancing social cohesion in the society (Johnson, 2022).

In Nigeria, Catholic women under the umbrella of WUCWO advocated for the release of the young school girls who were abducted in 2014 by Boko Haram rebels. With the help of the Nigerian Episcopal Conference and the interreligious council, the catholic women delivered their petition to the government. This was an eye opener in which the government took action to trace the missing children unfortunately all the young girls were not rescued but women with a felt heart of motherhood played an important role that promoted justice peace and cohesion in Nigerian society (Cornel, 2021).

The Catholic women in Eswatini, the Southern African kingdom formerly called Swaziland, have been strong advocates for pastoral support and development aid for refugees. The ECCW office provides care and integrates migrants and refugees into various activities that promote social and integral development. Following a proposal from Bishop Louis De Ponce, the Eswatini Council of Catholic Women (ECCW) pushed for the implementation of resolutions made during the 2019 plenary on migration and settlement of all the refugees. This request was accepted by the Southern African Bishops' Conference, which promoted the acknowledgment of human mobility in Eswatini, thus fostering dialogue and reconciliation in the society (Mathubu, 2022).

The Catholic Women Guild in Uganda has contributed to nurturing and understanding the concerns of children, elderly people, seminarians, and the refugees, whom they have cared for at different stages of conflict. Research carried out by the Episcopal Conference in Uganda on the gender contribution in the Catholic shows that women are more likely than men to rise above their sectoral interests and represent the interests of these groups in decision-making on social cohesion. Catholic Women Guild has also played a vital role in mothering seminarians from different parts of Uganda through providing financial support and counseling sessions hence promoting cohesion in the church (Ssemogerere, 2022).

The Catholic Women Association in Kenya took part in activities aimed at empowering and liberating women. A study on small Christian communities revealed that Catholic women provided training and support to women leaders, thus promoting peace and dialogue, and encouraging women's involvement in peacebuilding processes. This demonstrates the active role of Catholic women in fostering a united society (Jane, 2004). However, it's important to note that this study did not cover the St. John Evangelist Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya, and did not focus on the promotion of social cohesion by Catholic Women Association as identified by the researcher.

Research objectives

The purpose of the study was to examine the role of the Catholic Women Association in promoting social cohesion at St John the Evangelist Parish, Archdiocese Nairobi, Kenya.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Mixed method research approach was adopted in this study in which the Catholic Women Association and social cohesion was examined. Creswell (2014) claims that a mixed method is a research strategy that involves researchers gathering, analyzing, and integrating both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study to address their research concerns.

The study's target population was 2320 from St Johns the Evangelist Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya. Yamane formula was used to get a sample size of 341, Simple random sampling and purposive sampling were employed whereby 2 CWA leaders and 5 priests were sampled purposely. The response rate for both quantitative and qualitative studies were 336(96%). 12 people were not available for the interview.

The data for quantitative study was collected through questionnaires and was analyzed using the descriptive and inferential methods using statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 25. Descriptive analysis was in

form of percentages and frequencies and the findings were presented in tables. The data for qualitative study was analyzed using thematic content analysis. The data was collected through interview guide, transcribed and grouped based on the themes in accordance with the objective of the study.

1.4 The table below presents the data findings on the role of Catholic Women Association in promoting social cohesion at St John the Evangelist Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya.

ITEMS	SA	A	N	D	SD	TOTAL
1. Catechism	150(53%)	102(36%)	32 (11%)			100
2. Visiting the Sick, and charity.	210(74%)	63(22%)	11(4%)			100
3. Scripture reading and Lectio divina.	85(65%)	77(27%)	22(8%)			100
4. Eucharistic Ministers.	76(27%)	103(36%)	83(29%)	22(8%)		100
5. Moderators in the Parish.	36(13%)	41(14%)	65(23%)	89(31%)	53(19%)	100
6. Coordinators in the Parish Projects.	64(23%)	84(30%)	83(29%)	32(11%)	21(7%)	100
7. Empower women to Participate in church activities.	150(52%)	101(36%)	33(12%)			100
8. Support family development	177(62%)	101(36%)	6(2%)			100
9. Advocate for justice and human rights	66 (23%)	93(33%)	63(22%)	36(13%)	26(9%)	100
10. Engage in workshops Seminar & retreats	204(72%)	80(28%)				100
11. Partnership with CMA & other Groups.	180(63%)	85(30%)	19(7%)			100
12. Community outreach & awareness campaigns.	186(65%)	88(31%)	10(4%)			100

Source: Field data 2024

SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, N= Neutral, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly Disagree

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In an attempt to examine the understanding of the participants regarding the role of the Catholic Women Association in promoting social cohesion, the following findings are presented based on the objectives of the study: -

Objective One: Activities Carried out by Catholic Women Association

The study findings showed that out of 284 CWA members, 252 (89%) of the participants either strongly agreed and agreed that Catechism is one of the major activities carried out by the CWA at St. John the Evangelist Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya. 32 (11%) of the participants were neutral on whether or not CWA members are involved in catechism. The majority of the participants agreed that CWA members are involved in teaching catechism. This indicates that CWA members have played an important role in carrying out catechism and preparing Christians to receive sacraments like baptism, confirmation, and matrimony. This was also confirmed

by all the respondents in the qualitative study interview, showing that CWA is very active in instructing people in faith.

Respondent 48 (Interview, 24/08/2024)

The efforts of the CWA members are a seed planted and produced graceful fruits in the church, our children would have been taken by world pleasures without understanding their faith and the rites of the Catholic Church. Catechism has served as an important safeguard against the heresy created by our enemies. CWA members are parents who are always ready to tell our children about God and the Faith of the Catholic Church.

Visiting the sick, needy and Charitable work

From Item 2 in Table, the findings indicated that 273(96%) of the participants 'strongly agreed' and 'agreed' that CWA members visit the sick, and needy and carry out charitable work while 11(4%) were neutral. This was substantiated by the qualitative study where respondents highlighted that CWA visits the sick in hospitals and homes, and they also get involved in charitable work in vulnerable communities and prisons.

Respondent 35 (interview, 23/08/2024) expressed that

"Charity begins at home". CWA members not only care for vulnerable groups but their efforts are also seen in supporting seminarians and priests. Every month end, they provide basic needs for priests in the parish and also extend their charity to slum areas and orphanages.

Scripture reading and lectio divina

The study findings indicated that CWA members participate in scripture reading during the celebration of the liturgy. They also share the word of God in their monthly meetings, demonstrating their strong commitment to prayer and service. 262 (92%) strongly agreed or agreed with this, while 22 (8%) were neutral. Respondents 1 and 8, interviewed on 21/08/2024, confirmed that CWA members participate in monthly liturgical celebrations by reading scriptures and sharing the word of God.

The above findings agree with Emile Durkheim's Functionalist Theory. He believed that society is a complex system made up of interdependent parts with a focus on the social relationship between the individuals and the society and how the two interact. Durkheim reflected on social cohesion and solidarity among small groups with religion that fosters similarity and strengthens a sense of belonging through various activities. He believed that social cohesion lies in the integration of individuals into a shared set of values, beliefs, culture, religion, and norms (Ashley,2020).

Objective Two: Influence of power dynamics

The findings indicated that 179(63%) of the participants 'strongly agreed' and 'agreed' Catholic Women Association members serve as Eucharistic ministers, 83(29%) were neutral on this matter and 22(8%) disagreed. The majority of the participants agreed that CWA members are actively involved in the church as Eucharistic ministers. This was also affirmed by all the respondents to the interview of the qualitative study who agreed that in small Christian communities, women are more influential as they play the part of being catechists and Eucharistic ministers.

Moderators in the Parish

From Item 5 in the Table, the findings illustrate that 77(27%) of the participants 'strongly agreed' and 'agreed' that CWA has been moderators in the parish, 65(23%) were neutral while most of the participants 142(50%) 'disagreed' and 'strongly disagreed' that CWA leaders have been not moderators in the parish.

In an interview on 21/08/2024, Respondent 8 expressed a clear opinion on the issue. He pointed out that there has never been a female moderator at St. John Evangelist parish, even though the CWA always selects their moderator to lead their association. He confirmed that the position of parish moderator is consistently held by

men in the church and suggested that it is high time for CWA to have more involvement in parish leadership, as their perspectives are significant.

Coordinators in the Parish Projects

Item 6 in the table, indicated that out of 284 respondents, 148 (53%) 'strongly agreed' and agreed that the CWA has coordinated various projects in the parish, such as supporting youth and child development projects. 83 (29%) were neutral, and 53 (18%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the role of CWA as coordinators in different projects in the parish. These findings suggest that the CWA has indeed coordinated various projects at St. John Evangelist Parish in the Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya.

All interview respondents acknowledged that CWA members have been effective in coordinating parish projects. Respondent 4 (Interview, 21/08/2024) expressed the opinion that CWA existed before the CMA and they are more experienced in managing church projects. Without CWA, it is hard for the church to run various projects because these mothers love and are dedicated to the church. They always participate in fundraising for the good of the church.

The findings agree with Sarah's (2018) views on the role of women and power dynamics in the Catholic Church. Cardinal Sarah observed that women's involvement in the administrative aspects of the church has increased, although not without controversy. Women now hold significant positions in administration, serving as theologians, canon lawyers, pastoral associates, and religious education directors. This represents a form of progress in modern times. Cardinal Sarah also noted that in the papacy of Pope Francis, there has been a notable increase in the presence of women in decision-making roles within the church.

Objective Three: How CWA leadership has promoted Social Cohesion

Item 7, indicated that 251(88%) of the respondents 'strongly agreed' and 'agreed' that CWA members have empowered women to participate in church activities, and 32(12%) were neutral. This was affirmed by respondents 49, and 51 (Interview 24/08/2024) who portrayed the great role of CWA in empowering women to actively participate in church activities like liturgy, preserving the environment, and taking care of the priests' welfare at St John Evangelist parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya.

Support family development

Item 8 above, illustrated that 278 (98%) of the participants 'strongly agreed' and 'agreed' with the statement, and 6(2%) were neutral. The majority of the participants agreed that CWA has a great influence in supporting family development. Respondent 15 (Interview, 21/08/2024) stressed that CWA members have been involved in molding the children, the youth, and married couples through counseling and guidance. In preparation for the sacrament of matrimony, the CWA has played an important role in bringing married people to the altar of Christ, broken relationships have been restored through their efforts.

Respondent 2 (Interview, 21/08/2024) stated that,

CWA supports women in reaching their full potential by encouraging and enabling their active involvement in family life. The organization inspires women to become exemplary Christians and mothers in society. This has significantly helped women to maintain a practical and positive attitude in supporting their families, and to raise awareness about the development of individuals and society as a whole.

Advocate for justice and human rights in the Church.

Item 9 in the table above indicated that 159(56%) of the participants 'strongly agreed' and 'agreed' Catholic Women Association members advocate for justice and human rights in the church, 63(22%) were neutral on this matter and 62(22%) 'disagreed and strongly disagreed' The majority of the participants agreed that CWA members advocate for justice and human rights in the parish. This was also affirmed by all the respondents in the interview of the qualitative study who agreed that CWA members work with the Committee of Justice and Peace to advocate for the rights of the vulnerable groups in the church.

The findings align with Cornelius (2018) regarding the Irish Catholic Women's Suffrage Association's significant role in advocating for justice for children who were sexually abused by clergy and priests. The Association mediated and negotiated between the church and the victims provided support for rehabilitation and counseling for the young people who had been abused, and offered hope for them to maintain their faith despite the trauma they experienced. Additionally, the Catholic women visited the homes and parents of the victims, spoke privately with the priests who had been arrested for abusing minors and called for repentance and acknowledgment of their actions for justice to prevail.

Objective Four: Ways in which the Catholic women efforts can be reinforced in promoting social cohesion

The data in the table above shows that 284 (100%) of the participants strongly agreed or agreed that the most effective way to support the efforts of the Catholic Women Association in promoting social cohesion at St. John the Evangelist Parish is to involve members in capacity building workshops, seminars, and retreats. Qualitative study respondents emphasized that these activities help to motivate the spirituality of the members and make them feel a sense of belonging within the association and the church as a whole.

The findings align with the Empowerment theory. This theory suggests that individuals and communities can recognize and tackle their own needs and challenges when given the required resources, support, and opportunities. It assumes that every person has the potential to become empowered and that empowered communities stem from empowered individuals collaborating to achieve a common goal for the community (Norris, 2020).

Partnership and collaboration with the CMA and other Association groups

Item 11 in the above table indicated that 265(93%) of the participants 'strongly agreed' and 'agreed' that partnership and collaboration with the CMA and other association groups can help to reinforce the efforts of the Catholic Women Association in promoting social cohesion at St John Evangelist Parish, whilst 19(7%) were neutral on the statement and never took any consideration. This was also supported by the respondents in the qualitative data session who highlighted the importance of togetherness and collaboration as a way to learn and gain experience in the association.

Respondents 43 (Interview, 24/08/2024) highlighted that,

The collaboration and partnership between CWA and CMA have not been so effective because each group has its way of handling programs. However, working together with others is one of the most effective ways to build trust. I believe we need to collaborate more on some activities in the church to accomplish the mission of Christ.

Community outreach and awareness campaigns

Item 12 in the above table shows that 274 (96%) of the participants either strongly agreed and agreed that community outreach and awareness campaigns are essential for advancing the association. 10 (4%) of the participants were neutral on the statement. The majority of the participants expressed their agreement that community outreach and awareness campaigns are crucial for the CWA to progress in promoting social cohesion at St. John Evangelist Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya. This sentiment was also echoed by respondents 10, 12, and 16 during the interview on 21/08/2024. They emphasized that "community outreach and awareness campaigns are important in promoting the association's vision and attracting new members, thus making these activities indispensable."

Respondent 28 (Interview, 22/08/2024) stated that,

I propose mentorship for the CWA to more effectively engage with the youth as they grow to become more like Christ. This mentorship can take both formal and informal approaches, such as structured meetings and outings to different places where they can deepen their relationship with Christ.

Respondent 39 (Interview, 23/08/2024) expressed that:

Introducing various training leadership programmes for the CWA to be more active in church leadership positions. These programs teach women to understand mechanisms of self-defense against oppression and be more confident and determined, thus playing an important role in women's empowerment.

The findings imply that the Catholic Women Association has contributed to promoting social cohesion in society. Once supported by the church, it will be even more effective in creating positive changes in the entire church. Social cohesion is highly recommended for advancing the mission and activities of the church. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the CWA to work towards achieving and promoting activities that enhance social cohesion within the church.

Discussion

The study revealed that participants, in both quantitative and qualitative analyses, recognized the positive impact of CWA's work. They also showed a good understanding of "social cohesion" and the activities that promote inclusion and a sense of belonging in the Church and the wider community. To support the findings, interview respondents further acknowledged the significant role of CWA in nurturing faith within families. They often serve as the primary educators of children in the faith, and their spiritual leadership in the home encourages prayer and church attendance. However, some respondents noted that not all members of the Faithful are aware of these activities. To raise awareness about the role of CWA in promoting social cohesion at St. John the Evangelist Parish, Archdiocese of Nairobi, Kenya, it is important for Church leaders and the laity to work together to support CWA's efforts for the successful promotion of social cohesion in the Church.

The study emphasized the importance of encouraging CWA members to take on leadership roles in the Parish. Many interview respondents pointed out that the absence of a female moderator in the Parish affects the balance of ideas in decision-making within the church. It was also noted that women leaders often foster community and support networks, which enhances the Church's ability to serve its members and the broader society. Therefore, it is recommended that CWA members be involved in such positions to bring about a change in gender perspectives, challenge the traditional hierarchy, and encourage equality and broader participation within the church.

The study revealed that social cohesion is crucial in the Catholic Church because it promotes community, unity, and mutual support among diverse individuals. The interview respondents emphasized the importance of collaborating with different people to reach one's potential and make positive changes. They also pointed out that Catholic social teachings provide a moral framework that guides policies and actions, promoting social equity and solidarity, particularly towards marginalized groups. This helps to strengthen community bonds and advance the Church's mission of serving the common good. Therefore, it is recommended that the efforts of CWA in promoting social cohesion should be strongly supported by church leaders and the congregation.

CONCLUSION

The study observed that the Catholic Women Association (CWA) has helped to promote social cohesion in society by engaging in community service, advocacy, education, and interfaith dialogue. Their role enhances the social fabric and fosters environments where inclusivity, respect, and solidarity flourish. As the Church continues to evolve, recognizing and empowering these women will be essential for building stronger, more cohesive communities that reflect the core values of the Catholic faith. Their proactive engagement not only enriches the Church but also serves as a model for societal harmony and collaboration across diverse group

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