

Evidence-Based Premarital Counselling: A Clinical Guide for Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To determine a suitable content for Premarital counselling (PMC) programs in Kenya.

Background: PMC is associated with positive marital outcomes, like stability, quality, and satisfaction. Yet, PMC effectiveness and utilization remain low globally. Inadequate training of the PMC practitioners and inadequate content coverage are contributing factors. No Kenyan study has explored contextually relevant content for PMC.

Method: The research was qualitative, guided by interpretivist and constructivist paradigms of Grounded Theory. A cross-sectional study was conducted involving twelve PMC counsellors, male clergy members offering PMC, and twenty PMC beneficiaries married for 15 to 28 years. The couples and the clergy were conveniently drawn from four churches in Nairobi and Kiambu Counties, while counsellors were recruited from Nairobi County. The data were collected in April 2025 through clergy in-depth interviews, self-administered couple questionnaires, and counsellor-focused group discussions. Data cleaning and frequency analysis were conducted in R, followed by thematic analysis.

Results: Ten themes emerged, comprising: marriage institution and legislation; creating self and spousal awareness; family roles and responsibilities; communication skills and conflict resolution; personality and character; religion, Christianity, and spirituality; financial management; tradition and cultural dynamics; sex, sexuality, and family planning; and social life and modernism.

Conclusion: Utilizing PMC programs with comprehensive coverage of the identified themes can enhance practitioners' training and PMC effectiveness in Kenya and beyond.

Implications: Institutions offering PMC courses should incorporate the home-grown PMC content in their PMC curriculum to improve practitioner competence.

Keywords: Counselling, Content, Curriculum, Couples, Kenya, Premarital, Family of Origin (FOO)

INTRODUCTION

Individuals often have unrealistic marriage expectations, like love, peace, and compatibility (Jordan, 2022) and spending quality time with a humble, accommodating, and submissive partner (Tetteh, 2023). However, disharmony and divorce are imminent globally, driven by factors like education, poverty, unemployment, family interference, sexual expectations, infidelity, and communication breakdown (Ottakkam et al., 2026; Otieno et al., 2023; Otubah, 2024; Rose & Lwangale, 2022). Premarital counselling prepares couples to mitigate such challenges. Its utilization has been associated with positive marital outcomes including low divorce rate in the United States (Clyde et al., 2020), better quality of life in Saudi Arabia (Bahkali et al., 2022), sexual satisfaction in Iran (Aliabadian et al., 2020), good communication skills and conflict resolution in Nigeria (Brown, 2019), marital success in Ghana (Adzovie & Dabone, 2020), stability in Uganda (Muchepe, 2022), harmony,

commitment, cohesion, stability, effective communication, emotional openness and satisfaction in Kenya (Marang'a, 2021; Muluha et al., 2020; Odhiambo, 2024).

The Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (EFCT) (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988) and Acceptance and Commitment Theory (ACT) (Hayes & Pierson, 1999) explain the positive impact of PMC on marriage. The EFCT emphasizes adapting healthy interactions like emotional connection or empathy, while avoiding destructive interactions like criticism, defensiveness, and complaining (Beasley & Ager, 2019; Sutanti, 2020). ACT hinges on unconditionally accepting people for who they are for harmony. Cultures delineate customs, beliefs, or practices, such as bride price, dowry negotiation, wedding rites or rituals (Ali, 2023; Rakonjac et al., 2023), and gender roles (Alsager et al., 2024; Asim et al., 2024). Cultural dynamics in Kenya are critical, given its 45 ethnic groups (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2023), as inter-ethnic marriages may risk marital disharmony. Thus, a culturally sensitive PMC can mitigate marital discord.

Recent studies highlight the need for curriculum innovation, adequate PR actioner training, and improved quality in existing PMC programs to enhance their effectiveness (Adzovie & Dabone, 2021; Gichuri et al., 2024; Moeti et al., 2024). In Nigeria, Brown (2019) recommends a continuous improvement in PMC to enhance marital satisfaction. In Iran, Rajabi and Abbasi (2020) found that the intervention group, which received a relationship education program in nine sessions held twice a week for 90 minutes, significantly reduced unrealistic expectations of marriage among single young adults in Ahvaz City compared to the control group, which received PMC in only one session. Thus, the need for adequate content for PMC needs further exploration.

The PMC challenges in Kenya include inadequate content, short counselling duration, poor counsellor competence, overreliance on biblical materials, and inconsistent guides (Gichuri et al., 2024; Munyoki, 2023). Some churches rely on untrained pastors or clergy, without adequate professional PMC training, knowledge, or skills, and no standardized PMC curriculum or manual (Gichuri et al., 2024; Moeti et al., 2024). Inadequate content coverage inadequately prepares couples for marriage. Gichuri et al. (2024) noted that a lack of affection, strained relationships, separation, or divorce among couples in churches in Turbo Sub-County, Kenya, could be attributed to inadequacies in PMC programs. The perceived low quality and benefits of PMC may reduce recommendations to other couples. This highlights the need for a comprehensive standardized curriculum for PMC programs and adequate practitioner training to ensure effective PMC.

The Counsellors and Psychologists Act No. 5 of 2019 stipulates that counsellors and psychologists must be adequately trained and competent to practice. Additionally, the Board of Counsellors and Psychologists requires that counsellors continuously enhance their counselling skills through ongoing training and research (Kenya National Council for Law Reporting, 2022, p. 7). Despite these requirements, no study in Kenya has studied contextually relevant topics for inclusion in premarital counselling (PMC) to enhance its effectiveness. The present study addresses this gap by drawing on the perceptions and experiences of beneficiaries, clergy, and counsellors from four churches in Kiambu and Nairobi counties. The findings underscore the need for improved training and greater professionalism among PMC practitioners, while also highlighting the importance of aligning PMC with contemporary marital needs to promote successful marriages.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

This study employs a qualitative approach grounded in the interpretivist and constructivist paradigms of Grounded Theory (GT) (Charmaz, 2020; Tshetshe, 2023; Ugwu & Eze, 2023). Interpretivism emphasizes the researcher's role in interpreting and making meaning of participants' responses (McCall & Edwards, 2021). Within this framework, Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) conceptualizes the researcher as a co-creator of knowledge, collaboratively generating theory alongside participants (Charmaz, 2023; Friese et al., 2020; McCall & Edwards, 2021). Charmaz and Thornberg (2020) outline four criteria for CGT: credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness. Credibility requires sufficient, relevant data for insightful questioning, systematic analysis, and meaningful comparisons (Charmaz, 2020). Originality emerges through a co-creation of new knowledge between researchers and participants, rather than rediscovering pre-existing truths. On the other hand, resonance reflects the ability to capture the participants' lived experiences and extend to similar contexts.

Ultimately, usefulness emphasizes contextual interpretation of participants’ realities and generating insights (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). These principles ensure that the findings are data-driven.

Study area

The study was conducted in four conveniently selected churches: the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, Kirigiti Parish, and Word of Faith Church in Kiambu County, as well as Christ Is the Answer Ministries (CITAM), Thika Road, and ACK St. Paul’s South C Parish in Nairobi County. The Churches were chosen due to their closeness to the researcher, easing the outreach to the participants. Additional information was collected from counsellors offering PMC in Nairobi County and affiliated with the Kenya Counselling and Psychological Association (KCPA), an association for counselors and psychologists.

Target population

The target population consisted of three cohorts: PMC beneficiary couples, the clergy administering PMC in Nairobi and Kiambu Counties, and PMC counsellors (marriage and family therapists, clinical psychologists, and counselling psychologists) from Nairobi County. The beneficiaries’ inclusion criteria were Christians, married 15 - 30 years, with a religious wedding.

Sampling frame, sampling technique, and sample size

The sampling frame comprised PMC beneficiaries and clergies offering PMC in four Churches, and PMC Counsellors affiliated with KCPA (Table 1).

Table 1. Sampling Frame and Study Participants

Cohort	Institution	County	Sample [36]	Pilot Sample [5]
Beneficiaries	PCEA Kirigiti Church	Kiambu	5	2
	Word of Faith	Kiambu	5	
	CITAM Thika road	Nairobi	5	
	ACK St Paul’s South C Parish	Nairobi	5	
Clergy	PCEA Kirigiti Church	Kiambu	1	1
	Word of Faith	Kiambu	1	
	CITAM Thika road	Nairobi	1	
	ACK St Paul’s South C Parish	Nairobi	1	
Counsellors	KCPA	Nairobi	12	2

Note. Counsellors comprise Marriage and Family Therapists (MFTS), Counselling Psychologists and Clinical Psychologists; KCPA: Kenya Counselling and Psychological Association.

The study consisted of a convenience sample of 20 PMC beneficiaries, married for 15 to 28 years. The longevity of these marriages contributed to the study by providing insights into lasting family relationships, effective coping strategies, and skills for resolving marital conflicts amicably. The researcher requested Church administrators in each of the four Churches to identify five PMC beneficiaries married for 15 to 30 years. The clergy comprised a convenience sample of four premarital counselling (PMC) providers, aged between 40 and 60 years, who were nominated by church administrators in each church. In contrast, the counsellor sample consisted of 12 participants aged between 30 and 70 years.

Data collection

Data was gathered from three primary methods between April 25 and April 30, 2025. In-depth interviews were conducted with clergy and were audio-recorded and later transcribed into MS Word. Self-administered online questionnaires were distributed to the PMC beneficiaries whereas the FGD participants were counsellors. The FGDs had two group sessions, one from 2:00 pm to 4:00 pm and the other from 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm, including a short break after one hour for refreshments. Each session had six participants and two coordinators, and was supervised by the principal researcher along with a counselling psychologist research assistant. The sessions were recorded using Google Meet and audio recorded via a phone. The principal researcher collaborated with four research assistants. One handled the distribution and collection of questionnaires and data transcription; two supported the interviews and the FGDs; and one aided in data analysis.

Pilot study

A pilot test was conducted to validate the data collection tools. About 10% of the sample size from each cohort was selected for the pilot study. It comprised five participants out of 36 respondents, comprising two married individuals, one clergy, and two counsellors (Table 1).

Study reliability

Reliability in qualitative research is the degree to which a tool consistently measures a variable and produces credible outcomes (Aslan, 2025). The reliability domains comprise: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was assured by triangulation of data across multiple participants comprising PMC practitioners (counselors and clergy) and PMC beneficiaries and drawing objective patterns from the data (Aslan, 2025, p. 385; Forero et al., 2018). Transferability was achieved through in-depth descriptions of the methods for easy replication in similar settings. Dependability was reinforced by adapting a data-driven CGT approach in thematic analysis based on participant voices and ideas (Charmaz, 2020). Confirmability was assured by documenting analytic steps, quotations of respondents' verbatim responses, and peer review to minimise researchers' bias (Noble & Smith, 2025; Charmaz, 2020). Collectively, these principles enhanced the trustworthiness of the study findings.

Study validity

Validity in qualitative research is the suitability of the instruments, methods, and data utilized (Taherdoost, 2021). Noble and Smith (2025) distinguish the core criteria for validity as internal validity (credibility) and external validity (transferability), and for reliability as internal consistency (dependability) and external reliability (confirmability). Construct validity was strengthened by aligning the research questions with the study objectives, subjecting the instruments to expert face validation, and piloting them to enhance clarity and coherence. Internal validity was enhanced through peer debriefing, where academic peers were engaged in reviewing the research process, coding decisions, and emerging themes (Noble & Smith, 2025). Content validity was assured via the administration of open-ended questions for participants to articulate their experiences without being constrained by predetermined responses.

Qualitative data analysis

The data was analysed using a thematic qualitative approach supported by text-mining techniques. The transcribed data were copied to MS Excel and imported into R software version 4.5.0 for analysis (R Core Team, 2025). The data pre-processing entailed tokenization (extraction of words without whitespace, hyphens, punctuation, and symbols such as '/' or '@' and lowercasing), the removal of numerical data, and stop words like 'a,' 'an,' 'the,' 'I,' 'he,' and lemmatization (conversion of words to their fundamental or dictionary root forms (lemma) to avoid redundancy and bias in word frequency analysis). Tokenization was implemented using R's *tokenisers* Package Version 0.3.0 (Mullen et al., 2018) and *Tidytext* Package Version 0.4.2 (Silge & Robinson, 2016). Lemmatization was implemented using *lemmatize_words()* function in R's *textstem* Package Version 0.1.4 (Rinker, 2018). The lemmatized words were subjected to frequency analysis with the Text Mining (tm) Package Version 0.7-16 (Feinerer & Hornik, 2025), and visualised using a word cloud.

The word frequency analysis was done using R to save time associated with manual familiarization and identification of recurring words. Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes reflecting instructional focus across the three respondent groups. In addition, Term Frequency–Inverse Document Frequency (TF-IDF) scores were computed to identify words that were uniquely emphasized within each respondent group (Feinerer & Hornik, 2025). In the current study, the three groups form three separate documents (beneficiaries, counsellors, and clergy). The term frequency (TF) measures how often a term, t , appears in a given document, d , with high values showing higher relevance (Equation 1).

$$TF(t, d) = \frac{\text{Number of times the terms, } t, \text{ appeared in document, } d}{\text{Total number of terms in a document}} \quad (1)$$

The inverse document frequency (IDF) decreases the weight for commonly used words across all the documents, $D = 3$, and increases the weights for the rarely used words. The IDF scores are computed using Equation 2.

$$IDF(t, D) = \log\left(\frac{\text{Number of documents, } D}{\text{Number of documents containing the terms, } t}\right) \quad (2)$$

Higher IDF scores show that the word is meaningful to a given document/cohort. The two terms are then combined to form TF-IDF, which denotes the frequency of a term adjusted for how rarely it is used. The TF-IDF score is the product of TF and IDF, as shown in Equation 3 (Feinerer & Hornik, 2025).

$$TF - IDF(t, d, D) = TF(t, d) \times IDF(t, D) \quad (3)$$

Higher TF-IDF values indicate that the words were most frequently mentioned within a specific participant category (beneficiaries, counsellors, or clergy), hence most important words to them but less common in other groups. The scores were derived using the *weightTfIdf()* function from the *tm* package in R (Feinerer & Hornik, 2025). Themes were then drawn from the relationships between the words. The reporting incorporated respondents' verbatim responses to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings. Moreover, researchers' thoughts, reflections, and interpretations of the respondents' feedback were expressed in an analytical memo writing (Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the [BLINDED] Institutional Ethics Review Committee and the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation. Letters were issued to administrators of the churches and the KCPA to request permission to collect the data from the participants. Participants signed consent forms confirming their voluntary involvement, anonymity via pseudonyms, and personal data protection. No material incentives were offered to the participants and integrity was also maintained throughout the research.

RESULTS

Word frequency analysis

When asked about the topics or content covered during PMC, responses included: personality and character (Couns12), one-flesh relationship (Clergy 04) marriage covenant (Clergy 03); personal backgrounds (religious, education, personal hobbies, age difference, economic standing status, family of origin) (Couns07, 11; Clergy04), communication; conflict resolution (Clergy03); boundaries; relationship with in-laws and friends (Couns01); financial management, roles and responsibilities (Clergy03; Benef01, 02; 05, 08; 16); parenting (Clergy01, 03; Benef01, 05); inter-religious or cross cultural relationships (Clergy07), sex and sexuality (Couns02, 05), sexual purity (Clergy02, 03), sexual intimacy (Clergy01, 03; Benef01), spirituality (Clergy 01, 02, 03 & 04), bible study (Clergy02), nurturing faith (Clergy07), courtship and love (Clergy 02). The top 10 frequently occurring words were marriage ($n = 36$), communication ($n = 27$), role ($n = 27$), conflict ($n = 24$), responsibility ($n = 23$), intimacy ($n = 21$), sex ($n = 21$), parenting ($n = 20$), resolution ($n = 19$), and finance ($n = 18$). Figure 1 shows other common recurring words.

Beneficiaries identified key topics including roles and responsibilities, sex and sexuality, and parenting. The clergy, in contrast, emphasized spiritual dimensions such as spirituality in marriage, Bible study, the nurturing of faith, and relationships grounded in God and covenantal commitment. The counsellors highlighted a broader range of practical and contextual issues, including financial investment, wedding planning and timelines, family unity, education, personality dynamics, conflict resolution, governmental requirements, and contemporary societal influences.

Thematic analysis: contextualised PMC themes

The topics were organized into 10 themes presented below.

Theme 1: Marriage institution and legislation. Theme 1 was built from three subthemes.

Sub-theme 1: Marriage as a transitory stage of life. Counsellors perceived marriage as a transitory phase in life: “*Dynamics of the relationship- the girl moving from being a daughter to being a wife, in-law*” (Couns01); “*Shapes them from a girlfriend and boyfriend to husband and wife*” (Couns02).

Memo. Marriage introduces new social identities, roles and responsibilities. Females become wives with imminent roles like homemaker, mother, and caregiver, while men become husbands and eventually fathers, providers, and household heads. Marriage also introduces in-laws, which requires couples to be respectful for a harmonious integration into the family.

Sub-theme 2: Marriage institution by the church. The clergy members note that the PMC programs are grounded in biblical teachings, of one flesh union, true love and a sacred covenant: “*The program is biblically based*” (Clergy 01); “*Love and courtship - what is true love, the biblical definition of love, reasons for marriage, invalid reasons for marriage, and what to look for in a partner*” (Clergy 02); “*Marriage covenant - meaning and components of a covenant, types of covenants, and marriage as a covenant*” (Clergy 03); and “*One flesh relationship - the significance of one flesh, the state of marriage before and after the fall of man, how Christ redeemed marriage, and the importance of leaving and cleaving*” (Clergy 04).

Memo. Christian marriage is perceived as one flesh” relationship biblically ordained as a sacred covenant (Malachi 2:14), expressed through a spiritual commitment marked by true love and unity. It is depicted as a union of the body, soul, and the spirit of the couple (Genesis 2:24).

Sub-theme 3: Marriage legislation by the Government. A counsellor noted that couples learn: “*Government requirements, for example, announcing marriage bans and the pastor to have a date of the wedding before joining the couple*” (Couns02).

Memo. PMC educates couples to adhere to the legal framework governing marriage. In Kenya, couples intending to marry must give a 21-day written notice to the Registrar of Marriages and the marriage must be solemnized within 90 days from the date of notice (Office of the Attorney General and Department of Justice, 2023). This knowledge helps couples plan their wedding dates.

Theme 2: Creating self and spousal awareness. The theme emerged from two sub-themes explored below.

Sub-theme 1: Marriage awareness. On the topics covered, a clergy member stated: “*... self-awareness and disclosure ...*” (Clergy04). Regarding the PMC benefits, a counsellors noted that it raises self- and partner awareness on their strengths and weaknesses: “*gives them a glimpse of what marriage is all about*” (Couns01); “*... creation of self-awareness since couples are supported towards knowing who they really are in terms of the strengths and areas of growth*” (Couns06); “*Culture- they are supported in having their eyes open so that they understand the culture they are getting themselves into*” (Couns05); “*... learning they are all equal and unique partners...*” (Couns9); “*...time factor; able to learn about each other before they get into the marriage. They are able to learn so much within the sessions*” (Couns12). A beneficiary noted that: “*It provided me with insights into managing my expectations. I was able to reflect or engage in a thought process regarding why I am marrying her*” (Benef08).

Memo. PMC is established to promote self-awareness and spousal awareness. The awareness mentally prepares couples for their identities and roles before marriage and also helps couples identify shared values and to proactively work on the differences for healthy relationships.

Sub-theme 2: Awareness of unresolved past relationship history. On topics covered, a counsellor stated: “*past relationships - are there kids? Was there closure with past romantic relationships? Are there unresolved issues? Are they coming from a rebound?*” (Couns02). Regarding topics that were overlooked, a clergy member noted: “*blended families... you do not want to touch because of the sensitivity.*” (Clergy01), while a counsellor noted. “*Past baggage- not covered because there’s a lot that happens in the family of origin*” (Couns02).

Memo. Pre-marital couples can have children from previous relationships, emotional attachment with former patterns, and unresolved family of origin issues like conflicts, negative communication patterns, trauma, and financial dependency. These issues can resurface in marriage, leading to mistrust or conflict. PMC should encourage open disclosure for early resolution before marriage.

Theme 3: Family roles and responsibilities. Regarding PMC topics, a clergy member noted the need for setting boundaries, stating: “*... marriage enrichment within the follow-up, family priority, the family tree, boundaries, friends and guarding oneself and spouse and understanding oneself*” (Clergy03). A counsellor noted that “*... child naming, and rearing in marriage,*” (Couns02) are covered during PMC. A clergy note that PMC is a: “*a ten-week programme on topical coverage: Biblical foundation of marriage; sexual purity in courtship, African traditions and marriage (dowry negotiations and traditional marriage rites), planning for the wedding, parenting, cultural and marriage; roles and responsibilities in marriage; parenting and guardianship,*” (Clergy03); and another noted that sessions include “*...parenting and child rearing*” (Clergy01).

Regarding the advantages gained from the PMC sessions, beneficiaries reported gaining clarity on role expectations: “*...the lesson on roles and responsibilities was particularly impactful and motivated me to enhance my role as the priest, protector, provider, and prophet within my family*” (Benef02); and “*I got to appreciate my spouse's preferences and my roles as a wife*” (Benef06); “*...spouse roles and responsibilities, especially on financial management*” (Benef08); “*...it prepared me psychologically for some of the things I had not thought of during courtship. For example, the issue of the roles that I am expected to do as a wife*” (Benef011); “*...it prepared me psychologically for some of the things I had not thought of during courtship. For example, the issue of the roles that I am expected to do as a wife*” (Benef015); “*...the lesson on roles and responsibilities came out strongly and encouraged me to up my game in being the priest, protector, provider, and prophet in my family*” (Benef016); “*...how to deal with misunderstanding without involving others*” (Benef017); “*roles and responsibilities*” (Benef01;05); and “*finances, roles and responsibilities, parenting*” (Benef05).

Memo. The family roles and responsibilities emerged as relevant during PMC. Wives take on domestic chores and childcare, while husbands take on leadership roles and financial support. Couples from different cultures should be adaptable to unfamiliar roles to avoid conflicts.

Theme 4: Communication skills and conflict resolution. The theme emerged from two sub-themes.

Sub-Theme 1: Origins of conflicts. When asked about the benefits of PMC, a counsellor remarked: “*...an eye-opener- children and parents can interfere with marriage. PMC helps them to have a wider view in marriage. It makes them know the glue that can bind them together during fights*” (Couns02). Regarding common issues that premarital couples report during their PMC sessions, identified sources of conflict included: “*...misunderstandings because of the different expectations and background*” (Couns011); “*Personality differences; that is, not understanding why the other behaves the way they do*” (Couns012); “*... financial goals and expectations- one could be a spender; the other could be good at budgeting*” (Couns012); “*... they have unrealistic expectations of the partner and the marriage; they think singularly and selfishly*” (Clergy19). On the benefits of PMC, a beneficiary noted: “*equipping us with practical skills like communication, conflict resolution, and financial planning*” (Benef05).

Analytical memo. Marital conflicts were observed to stem from FOO, personality differences, unmet expectations, communication misunderstandings, self-interest, and spending habits. Such differences are

inevitable, especially if a couple come from diverse cultures or backgrounds. Thus, PMC should exploit these issues and suggest proactive mitigative strategies.

Sub-Theme 2: Conflict resolution skills. When inquired, "What benefits did you derive from the premarital counselling sessions you attended before your marriage?" A beneficiary responded: "... premarital counselling sessions have helped me a lot because we were taught aspects of communication, being open to each other, being honest, how to deal with misunderstandings without involving others, solving our conflicts, how to deal with the aspect of finance, forgiveness, intimacy, mutual parenting and sharing of roles and responsibilities" (Benef01). Another beneficiary added: "... helped me to be truthful, to tackle all unsolved issues, also to know good communication is essential" (Benef03). Some beneficiaries also offered: "communication" (Benef01, 05) and "conflict resolution" (Benef05).

When inquired about how PMC aids in fortifying future marriages, the clergy's responses encompassed: "...provides insight into the nature of the marriage institution; individuals acquire tools for navigating marriage through effective communication and conflict resolution skills, while foundational rules for marriage are established to manage relationships in a mature manner" (Clergy03); "...skills in communication (articulating thoughts rather than remaining silent, engaging in open dialogue, striving to resolve conflicts, and identifying issues without assigning blame); conflict and conflict management (various styles of conflict resolution, procedural steps, and the origins of conflict) ..." (Clergy02). A counsellor highlighted the necessity of setting boundaries with individuals outside of a marriage: "... boundaries with people outside a marriage relationship should be clearly marked" (Couns2). Another counsellor noted: "enhancing intimacy which ensures you are not the only one who's growing. When you want to go back to school, consult your spouse" (Couns09). Regarding topics covered, counsellors reported: "leaving and cleaving" (Couns01), "intimacy" (Couns05, 09), and "conflict resolution" (Couns04).

Analytical memo. The study revealed that PMC equips couples with conflict resolution skills such as active listening, open communication, empathy, honesty, boundary-setting, mutual consultation, establishing realistic expectations, forgiveness, intimacy, collaborative parenting, and the distribution of roles and responsibilities. These skills help ensure marital harmony.

Theme 5: Personality and character. The clergy recognized topics on: "... helping them to appreciate temperaments helps in self-awareness and other understanding" (Clergy02); "... getting to know whom they are getting married to, background and temperament" (Couns01); "personality temperaments; honeymoon and expectations; Parenting" (Clergy03).

Memo. Understanding one's and couples' personality and character was recognized as crucial for marital compatibility, harmony, and adaptability. Practitioners can use standardized scales to identify such traits and develop mitigating strategies for managing differences.

Theme 6: Religion, Christianity, and spirituality. A beneficiary noted the PMC helps them build a Christ-centered marriage foundation by stating: "... the premarital counselling sessions prepared me well for marriage by deepening my understanding of its biblical foundation (Ephesians 5:21-33) They also helped us align our expectations and spiritual journeys, laying a strong foundation for a Christ-centred marriage" (Benef05).

Regarding topics covered in PMC, the clergy noted: "family and ministry, spirituality in marriage, and the impact of religion on partner selection." (Clergy01): "establishing a Christian family by creating a family altar, engaging in bible study, and including everyone in the family, as well as fostering a covenant relationship that begins with God and persists even when challenges arise" (Clergy02). When inquired about the prevalent issues raised by premarital couples during their PMC, a clergy member and a counsellor remarked: "inter-religious or faith-related matters necessitate a dialogue on reconciling faith differences and determining the most suitable Church for nurturing their faith" (Clergy07). "Variations in beliefs and values are common challenges presented by premarital couples during their PMC sessions" (Couns11).

Memo. The PMC emerged as an avenue to cultivate and nurture essential Christ-centered religious and spiritual practices, such as praying and Bible reading, and spiritual practices such as reflection, meditation, and covenant-

making. Where couples are inter-religious, PMC practitioners should help them harmonize the differences and determine the most suitable church to serve.

Theme 7: Financial management. The counsellors noted financial management issues, including: “... *how to prepare for the wedding day, for instance, some invest a lot in the wedding and forget to invest in what is needed for the marriage*” (Couns02); “*finances in particular, budgeting since some come from families where they are supporting others*” (Couns02). When inquired about subjects that they do not address, two counsellors responded: “... *financial management and budgeting issues of money are very sensitive. There are differences in financial values, spending habits and money goals* (Couns04); “... *career people change careers, and this can lead to a lower income, which can lead to struggle in power dynamics*” (Couns05).

Memo. The financial planning and management skills, including budgeting and prudent spending behaviours, income sources, supporting each other in managing bills, accountability, transparency, stability, investment goals, supporting the extended family, and power dynamics due to career and income change, emerged as a critical issue to be addressed in PMC.

Theme 8: Tradition and cultural dynamics. The theme of tradition and cultural dynamics was drawn from three subthemes explored below.

Sub-theme 1: Family of origin genograms. When asked about suitable content for PMC, two counsellors responded: “*use of family maps to bring out family patterns*” (Couns05): “*family of origin genograms helps to bring out the kind of family one is coming from*” (Couns07).

Memo. The FOO genogram emerged as a diagnostic tool to help PMC practitioners identify couples’ inherited or behavioral patterns, values, character traits, habits, or emotional connections with FOO that can cause marital strain. Accordingly, the practitioners should develop proactive mitigating interventions for marital harmony.

Sub-theme 2: African marriage traditional practices. The sub-theme relates to traditional marriage practices and rites, including: “*African traditions and marriage dowry negotiations and traditional marriage rites are part of the process*” (Clergy02); “*intercultural marriages*” (Couns08) and “*cultural practices like FGM*” (Couns11). As mitigation, a counsellor noted: “*It is crucial to dispel myths surrounding marriage*” (Couns10).

Memo. African marriage traditions and cultural practices or rites, such as dowry negotiations and customary marriage rituals, emerged as issues to explore in PMC. These practices safeguard cultural heritage, but some, like female genital mutilation (FGM), are harmful. The PMC ought to distinguish progressive and retrogressive practices that do not align with Christian values.

Sub-theme 3: Traditional family roles. The sub-theme of traditional family roles was evident. A counsellor offered: “*The roles they will play may come from traditional expectations. For example, a wife may expect to sit back and let the man take the financial role*” (Couns02). The beneficiaries also reported gaining clarity on gendered role expectations.

Memo. Traditional household roles emerged as a relevant topic in PMC. Responsibilities, like child care, cooking and cleaning, are inclined to wives, whereas husbands are predominantly financial providers. Such cultural expectations are still prevalent today. However, with increasing female education and employment, their financial contribution to the household is substantial. Hence, PMC should advocate for open discussions about role preferences and shared responsibilities.

Theme 9: Sex, sexuality, and family planning. This theme was evident from some of the counsellors’ responses related to sexual expectations: “*premarital sexual expectations*” (Couns02; 05), “*sexual purity*” (Couns03), “*sexual intimacy*” (Couns05), and decisions regarding the “*number and spacing of children*” (Couns019); “*Intimacy and sexual expectations make one feel very uncomfortable.*” (Couns02). The clergy also emphasized that PMC integrate moral guidance on sexual and reproductive health topics comprising: “*finance, sex and intimacy, spirituality in marriage, parenting*” (Clergy01); “...*sexual purity in courtship, ..., sexual intimacy..., sexual and reproductive health*” (Clergy02; 03); “... *family planning and planning a plan*” (Clergy03). Some

beneficiaries also pointed out that sex and sexuality aspects were covered during their PMC sessions: “sex and sexuality” (Benef01); and “Sex and sexuality, Intimacy” (Benef05).

Memo. Beneficiaries identified key themes such as roles and responsibilities, sex and sexuality, and parenting. In contrast, the clergy underscored spiritual dimensions, as well as spirituality in marriage, Bible study, the nurturing of faith, and relationships grounded in God and covenantal commitment. Counsellors, however, highlighted an expansive range of practical and contextual concerns, including financial investment, wedding planning and timelines, family unity, education, personality dynamics, conflict resolution, governmental requirements, and contemporary societal influences.

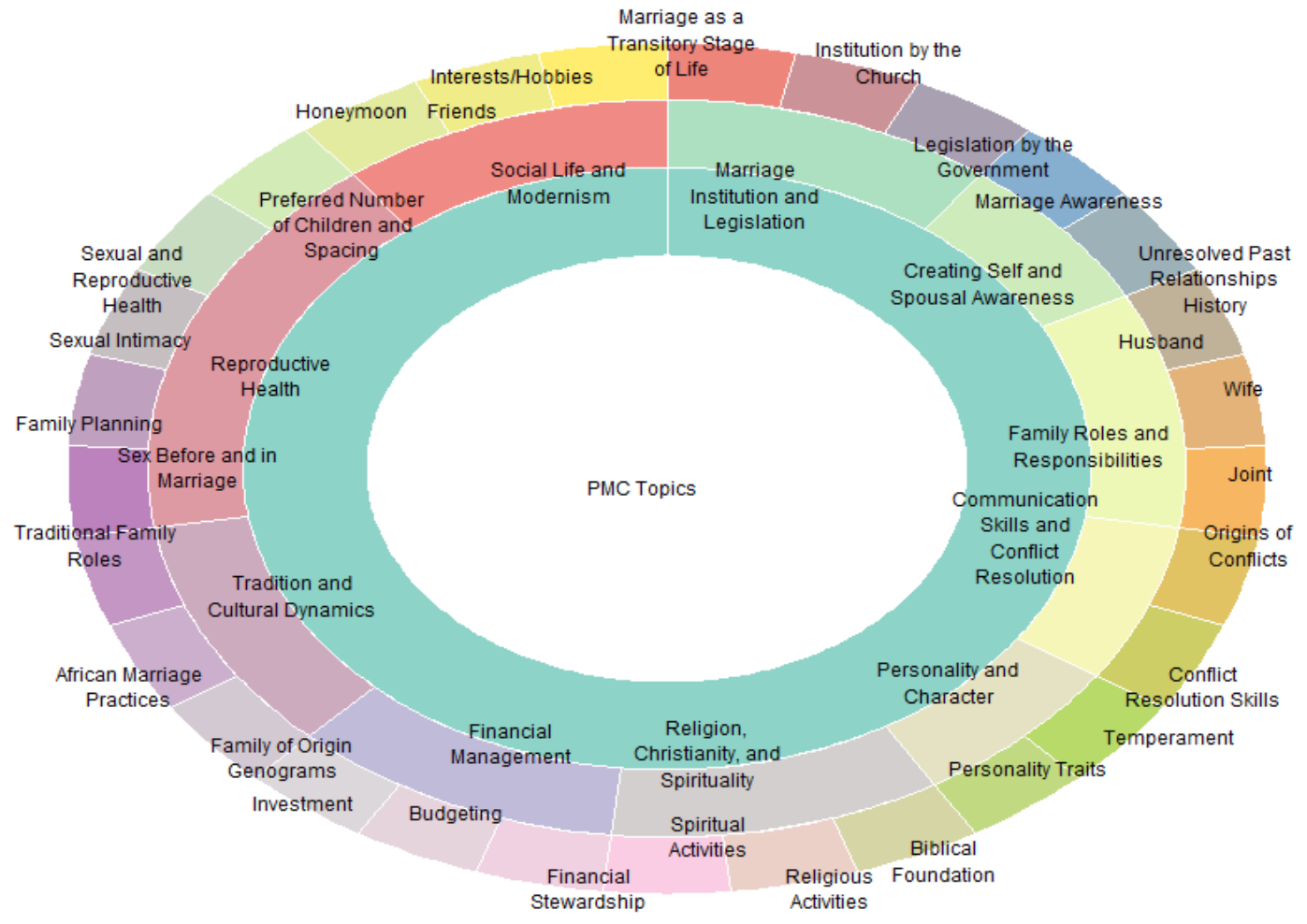


Figure 3. Essential PMC topics

Note. The sunburst chart was generated in R using `ggraph()` with a partition layout transformed into a circular/radial layout. The inner circle represents the PMC Topics, the middle ring displays the major Themes, and the outer ring illustrates the sub-themes.

Theme 10: Social life and modernism. Social and modern issues were highlighted by respondents. A counsellor noted that: “PMC strengthens families, Churches, and society...” (Couns07). The clergy also noted “...cultural differences like backgrounds affect marriage, including religious, education backgrounds, personal hobbies, age difference, social status and economic standing, career” (Clergy04); *honeymoon and expectations*” (Clergy03). The counsellors also indicated that they addressed “*marriage and modernity*” and “*challenges in modern marriage.*” (Couns09); “*We talk about relationships with friends, interests and activities, and honeymoon*” (Couns07 & 12).

Analytical memo. Marriage foundation was perceived to build on a strong social fabric involving relationships with friends, families, and society. However, modernism has motivated individuals to actively seek social or self-fulfilment factors including happiness, honeymoon, excursions, educational, personal interests, hobbies,

friendships, and career aspirations, leading to evolving social norms and marital responsibilities, and associated challenges. All the relevant topics covered in PMC are summarized in Figure 3.

DISCUSSION OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS: CONTEXTUALIZED PMC THEMES

Theme 1 – Marriage institution and legislation.

Marriage emerged as a transitional rite of passage, uniting husband and wife in a covenant ordained by the Church and legalized by the Government. Existing studies recognize marriage as a transitional rite of social passage, marked by changes in social status, obligations, and physiological adjustments in traditional (Mahmud, 2021; Sebbeh, 2020) and faith-based contexts (Moll, 2025; Van Eck, 2020). In Christianity, the Church institutes the process by engaging the elders and the couple's family. The Government requirements for registration, the issuance of a marriage certificate, and ordinance include the national ID cards or passports, birth certificates, two competent witnesses during the wedding, accredited officiant (ministers or clergy) of the marriage, application fees, affidavits for previously married or widowed, and marriage dates (National Council for Law Reporting [NCLR], 2022-a).

The Marriage Act, No. 4 of 2014, Laws of Kenya, Revised Edition 2022 (Legal Notice No. 221 of 2023, Section 25) stipulates that couples intending to marry under Civil, Christian, or Hindu rites must give a 21-day notice of intention to the Registrar of Marriages, and the marriage must be solemnized within 90 days of the notice (NCLR 2022-b; Office of the Attorney General & Department of Justice, 2023). Covering legal issues in PMC is reinforced by existing studies (Dewi, 2024; Kamarusdiana et al., 2022). Marriage legislation benefits include couples' rights to inheritance, joint property ownership, legal recourse in cases of abandonment, abuse, or disputes, medical insurance, next-of-kin identification, child adoption (Ajefu et al., 2024; Kamarusdiana et al., 2022; Moodley, 2021), visa applications, and spousal immigration (Staver & Eggebø, 2023). Education on these legal aspects helps couples prevent future legal marital disputes.

Upon marriage (wedding), women assume new roles as wives, homemakers, mothers, and caregivers, while men take on the responsibilities of husbands, providers, and household head. The biblical foundation of Christian marriage is a sacred covenant (Malachi 2:14-16) and entails separation from one's family and entering a monogamous or a "one flesh" union with a lifelong commitment separable only by death (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6; 1st Corinthians 7:2; Bassey, 2025; Opiyo, 2022; Kirkland, 2025). McLean and Fuller (2025) found that monogamy is associated with emotional stability and long-term commitment. Muchoki et al. (2025) found that religious teachings promote female submission and discourage divorce, even in abusive situations. The couple must also adapt to new family customs and maintain harmonious relations with their in-laws. Thus, PMC should stress the religious and legal foundation of Christian marriage.

Theme 2 - Creating self and spousal awareness.

The study revealed that PMC fosters self-awareness and spousal awareness. Couples should be cognizant of their marital responsibilities, such as parenting, and spiritual, emotional, and financial support for the family. Spousal awareness helps ensure transparency, trust, and harmonize discordance. Gichuri et al. (2024) observed that PMC targeting self-disclosure significantly enhances marital satisfaction and relational stability among married couples. Besides, recognizing unresolved past relationships, emotional attachments and blended families, conflicts, trauma, or FOO dynamics is essential for marital stability as it can resurface in marriage and affect trust, communication, and co-parenting (Carlos, 2022; Hudgins, 2025).

The PMC can also help couples reflect on the new family's cultural dynamics and their daily interactions with in-laws and extended families to support a smooth integration (Tetteh, 2023). The issue of blended families (couples with children from previous relationships) is particularly sensitive and complex. Therefore, past attachments should be openly discussed and resolved to address potential co-parenting and child support in future. Addressing couples' unresolved prior relationships or marriage during PMC with empathy and transparency strengthens the foundation for trust, healing, and deeper connections between couples and their in-laws.

Theme 3 – Family roles and responsibilities.

The study revealed that PMC sessions cover training on Biblical and traditional marital roles and responsibilities. The Bible highlights the complementarity of a wife as a helper of a husband (Genesis 2:18-24). Ephesians 5:22 - 23 acknowledges the mutual support, submissiveness, and love between a wife and her husband. Ephesians 5 depicts that, “*the husband is the head of the wife...*” (v.23) and commands them to “*love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her*” (v.25) and “*to love their wives as their own bodies*” (v.28). Ephesians 5:23 affirms that “*each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband*” (v.33). Colossians 3:19 instructs: “*Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.*” The Bible also encourages couples to embrace their responsibilities. 1st Timothy 5:8 states that: “*However, if anyone does not provide for his own, especially those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*” Generally, men should be providers, exercising leadership characterized by love, protection, and spiritual guidance (Tetteh, 2023). Conversely, wives provide reciprocal supportive roles and responsibilities like child-rearing and household chores.

Recent studies also indicate that traditional gender role expectations continue to exert influence in marriage, even in countries where modernization, education, occupation, and social media are reshaping social norms (Ali et al., 2022; Alsager et al., 2024). In many cultures, men are primarily providers, protectors, breadwinners, and decision makers, while wives take on supportive household chores and child-rearing (Ali et al., 2022; Alsager et al., 2024; Asim et al., 2024; Kassim & Ahmed, 2024). Despite the ingrained gender roles, mutual support in decision making and financial responsibilities is essential. Increasing women's education and employment empowers them to make a significant financial contribution to a household. Barman (2024) established that mutual responsiveness to a partner's needs, expectations, and well-being and appreciation of their efforts and contributions, fosters a happy and sustainable relationship. Thus, PMC should encourage couples to be complementary, loving, and to share family roles and responsibilities.

Theme 4 – Communication skills and conflict resolution.

The first facet of this theme is identifying sources of conflict. The study revealed that misunderstandings, personality differences, unmet expectations, parental influences, and differences in financial behaviours or spending habits can initiate marital conflicts. Premarital couples often enter marriage with expectations like romantic love, compatibility (Jordan, 2022), joyous quality time with their partner, support, a God-fearing, humble, and submissive partner, and a harmonious family life (Otubah, 2024; Tetteh, 2023). Unmet expectations can lead to disputes, avoidance, infidelity, divorce, distress, instability, and stigmatization (Otubah, 2024; Tetteh, 2023). Proactively identifying and addressing these stressors is essential for marital harmony.

The second sub-theme focuses on conflict resolution skills. Established skills included openness, empathy, forgiveness, boundary-setting, reduced avoidance, withdrawal from charged discussions, collaborative decision-making, shared financial goals, and transparency. Recent studies also show that robust interpersonal skills, emotional regulation, forgiveness, and positive communication significantly improve marital satisfaction and lower the likelihood of marriage dissolution (Kanter et al., 2022; Ngunjiri & Muiru, 2021; Wondimu & Zeleke, 2024). Essential communication skills such as openness, forgiveness, and consultation before taking action have also been linked with effective conflict management, marital stability and harmony (Kanter et al., 2022; Otubah, 2024; Tetteh, 2023). Wondimu and Zeleke (2024) found that religiosity, forgiveness, and emotional regulation improve marital satisfaction. Also, Uye et al. (2023) found that effective and quality communication, including respectful interruptions, lessens domestic violence. Moreover, Ngunjiri and Muiru (2021) revealed that effective communication skills, like active listening, open dialogue, and employing humor, enhance marital stability among newly married couples. The highlighted constructive communication skills promote marital harmony.

Theme 5 – Personality and character

Personality encompasses consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that influence how individuals interact with others, whereas character pertains to moral values and the integrity of relationships. These traits have been acknowledged by existing studies to promote marital satisfaction and ensure long-term relational stability. Koch (2023) found that tolerance, manifested through forgiveness and emotional restraint, contributes

to enhanced marital happiness. Koch and Spinath (2025) affirm that agreeableness and conscientiousness correlate positively with marital satisfaction, while neuroticism (characterized by heightened emotional reactivity such as anger or sadness, sensitivity to stress, and mood fluctuations or irritability) leads to dissatisfaction and instability. Agrawal (2024) found that tolerance enhances marital happiness whereas Gurung and Sethi (2025) established that relationship satisfaction was correlated with agreeableness and conscientiousness, while aggression and avoidance were not. Thus, helping couples identify their personality differences and character strengths is essential for harmonious marital relationships.

In practice, PMC practitioners can adapt standardized personality assessment tools such as the Big Five personality test and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to help couples identify their individual traits and temperaments (Javaid et al., 2026; Li et al., 2025). The tools gain insights into areas of compatibility and differences in traits such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, or neuroticism, enabling counsellors to guide couples in developing coping strategies for marital harmony.

Theme 6 – Religion, Christianity, and spirituality.

Marriage was found to be established in Christian religiosity and spirituality. Religion is a structured system of beliefs, rituals, and moral or ethical guidelines guiding human decisions, behavior and social interaction (Eteng, 2024). Religions like Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism approach marriage with diverse expectations on values, rites, roles of spouse, monogamy, polygamy, and divorce (Banoo & Ahmed, 2024; Gogoi, 2025; McLean & Fuller, 2025). The current study focused on Christian marriages majorly guided by biblical principles.

Religiosity is the individual's tendency to commit themselves to religious beliefs, principles, and activities (Agu & Nwankwo, 2019). The Bible encourages individual or communal religious practices, such as prayer and Bible reading as a source of guidance and fulfilment (James 5:16; Psalm 119:105), household devotion to teaching God's word to the family and community (Deuteronomy 6:6 - 7; Joshua 24:15; Proverbs 22:6), regular church attendance and fellowship to encourage each other and eat together (Hebrews 10:25; Acts 2:42). More individualistic religious activities include the fruits of the spirit, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22 - 23), gratitude, altruism, forgiveness, and generosity (de Abreu Costa & Moreira-Almeida, 2022; Eteng, 2024). Exercising these religious practices at home, in the community, and in the church nurtures marital accountability and commitment through leading by example. Besides, it reflects obedience to God's commandments, which comes with God's divine intervention in all aspects of family life.

Existing studies indicate that religiosity enhances marital well-being. Salley (2021) established that Christian practices in marriage, such as meditation, prayer, Bible reading, generosity, and hospitality contribute to marital satisfaction. Fitzpatrick (2025) established that parents' religious involvement, including regular church attendance or worship services, engagement in religious practices such as praying or scripture reading and adherence to moral teachings reduces parenting stress. Religious couples have also been established to exhibit higher levels of commitment, marital responsibility, and satisfaction than non-religious couples or those who possess weak religious beliefs (Aman et al., 2019; Hwang et al., 2021). The findings underscore that religiosity contributes to marital stability and satisfaction. Consequently, PMC should emphasize the couple's religiosity.

Unlike religiosity, which is publicly and collectively expressed, spirituality is a personal or individualized inner experience expressed in practices such as self-reflection, meditation, prayer, contemplation, or personal hymns (Okoli, 2024; Papaleontiou-Louca, 2025; Utomo, 2025) and forgiveness (Mayseless et al., 2024). Studies show that fostering spiritual religious practices like prayer, meditation, and worship helps individuals connect with the divine inner peace, deepen connection with God, build strong marital intimacy, get emotional support, empathy, harmonious and loving relationships (Eteng, 2024; Mahoney et al., 2023; Mayseless et al., 2024; Utomo, 2025) and decreases divorce rates (Shirzadi et al., 2021). Thus, integrating Christian religious and spiritual practices into PMC strengthens marital responsibility, stability, and satisfaction.

Theme 7 – Financial management.

Financial planning, budgeting, accountability, income transparency, and shared financial objectives or investments were identified as essential in PMC. Integrating financial management literacy into PMC is recognized to increase marital stability (Dalhatu & Muhammad, 2024; Kassim & Ahmed, 2024; Koe & Yeoh, 2021; Soejono et al., 2025). Financial management begins from wedding to a lifelong obligation to housing, food, school fees, and clothing expenditures. It requires saving discipline, effective debt management, and transparent financial communication between spouses. Adzovie and Dabone (2021) and Babalola (2024) established that financial conflicts can arise from differing spending habits, undisclosed financial obligations, or imbalanced contributions, all of which undermine trust and collaboration. Soejono et al. (2025) found that high financial literacy among young couples who participated in premarital courses of the Catholic Church, in Palembang, Indonesia, improved their financial planning outcomes, financial decision-making and investment diversification. Koe and Yeoh (2021) found that financial literacy improved financial planning for marriage among young Malaysian couples and recommended financial counselling, education, and discipline for successful marriages.

African studies also recognize the relevance of financial education in PMC. Dalhatu and Muhammad (2024) found a positive association between financial stability and marital satisfaction in polygynous families among polygamous couples in Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria, and that open communication regarding finances fosters trust and cooperation among spouses. In Kenya, Marang'a's study (2021) found that financial management, budgeting, trust in managing family finances, willingness to save, invest, and live within one's means contributed to marital stability among couples in the Langata and Dagoretti South Constituencies of Nairobi County. Financial extended family support is also relevant as it puts pressure on family resources and can cause jealousy and conflicts (Nwanmuoh et al., 2024; Uye et al., 2023). Accordingly, the PMC curriculum should integrate financial literacy topics to ensure financial and marital stability.

Theme 8 – Tradition and cultural dynamics.

Tradition and culture were found to shape marital expectations. Tradition refers to the inherited customs, beliefs, or practices, like bride price, dowry negotiation, wedding rites or rituals (Ali, 2023; Rakonjac et al., 2023). Conversely, culture is a broader system of values, practices, norms, and beliefs that define communal identity and influence (Adaki & Wajim, 2024). As conceptualized by Heersmink (2023), cultural identity is a membership to a cultural group, such as nationality, regionality, religion, profession, hobbies, sports, music, art, socioeconomic class, political affiliation, generation, or family. Unlike tradition, culture is dynamic, as it changes over time, for example, due to migration, changes in profession, shifting interests, or religious views (Heersmink, 2023). Such dynamics can create misunderstandings in multicultural marriages.

Existing studies recognize that African marriage customs, traditions, or culture, like gender roles, dowry negotiation and bride price payments, and wedding ceremonies; continue to shape the expectations and experiences of couples (Asiimwe et al., 2023; Musili, 2022; Nandiemo, 2024). Harmful rite-of-passage practices, such as FGM, are still prevalent in Kenya despite being prohibited (Matanda et al., 2022; Reinholds, 2021; Adan, 2024). Ancestral naming systems are also practiced in several tribes in Kenya, including the Luo (Okello, 2021), Luyia (Kisembe & Wasike, 2024), and the Kalenjin (Soi & Schroeder, 2025) communities. Ancestral names buttress family identity, heritage, and values, and may impose expectations on individuals to embody the traits, behavioral patterns, or characteristics of the person they are named after (Aliakbarova et al., 2020; Folami et al., 2024). Accordingly, interethnic couples must harmonize their customs when conflicts arise in preserving these traditions within Christian family life.

Furthermore, certain cultures have negative views towards intercultural marriages. Couples in inter-ethnic marriages may feel excluded and marginalized during family discussions if done in a local dialect or in accordance with community traditions (Bellé, 2024; Khatib-Chahidi et al., 2021). Tetteh (2023) noted that unmet cultural expectations in marriage can breed negative engagements manifesting as silence, quarrels, fights, distress and marital instability. Such dynamics are relevant in Kenya, with 45 ethnicities and nationalities (KNBS, 2023) and a prevalent inter-ethnic marriage rate of about 8.8% (Bandyopadhyay & Green, 2021, p. 633). Further, Brynly (2023) found that interracial and intercultural couples appreciating one another's culture are

more likely to feel unified, accepted, validated, and experience marital satisfaction. Thus, debunking myths about intercultural marriages in PMC fosters couples' integration and acceptance.

The FOO also emerged as essential in PMC. The findings align with existing studies (Salley, 2022). In most cultures, women's responsibilities are predominantly domestic, such as cooking, cleaning, washing, caring for children, and in-laws, whereas male responsibilities include being a breadwinner, providing for the material needs of the parents, family, and relatives (Ali et al., 2022). Transferring FOO practices across cultures can cause misunderstandings between spouses or with in-laws (Asiimwe et al., 2023). The genograms help couples reflect on spiritual, personality, behavioral and psychological patterns inherited from their FOO and amicably address them before they develop into marital conflicts (Alexander et al., 2022). Retaining non-retrogressive traditions reinforces communal ties and enables couples to build resilient, Christ-centered families.

Theme 9 – Sex, sexuality, and family planning.

The reproductive health education topics, including sex, sexual intimacy, and family planning, emerged as relevant in PMC. Related studies have also highlighted the necessity for PMC, as it enhances their marital satisfaction and stability (Bokaie et al., 2021; Dewi, 2024; Kassim & Ahmed, 2024; Ugwu et al., 2024). Bokaie et al (2021) found that sexual health counselling improves sexual satisfaction and excitability of newly married women who referred to the health center of Jiroft City. Iran. Adu (2023) found that factors leading to the breakdown of Christian marriages in the Accra Metropolis, Ghana, included commitment difficulties, communication challenges, marital role conflicts, financial problems, and sexual intimacy difficulties. In Kenya, Marang'a's study (2021) found that romance fostered cooperation and sexual intimacy, resulting in spousal satisfaction and happiness. Hence, the integration of sexual health education into PMC ensures effective family planning, marital stability and satisfaction.

Several domains of sexual health literacy are beneficial to couples. They include reproductive anatomy and physiological changes over time, contraception, fertility (fertile and infertile periods) and fertility health risks, and deficiencies in the sexual reproductive systems (Birinci & Rahime, 2022; Sciberras, 2020). These biological processes help in family planning, reducing infidelity and emotional divorce (Bokaie et al., 2021; Daneshfar & Keramat, 2023; Ernstmeyer & Christman, 2025; Sciberras, 2020; Ventura-León et al., 2025), and preventing unintended pregnancies in the postpartum period (Thiongo et al., 2022). Information on screening for sexually transmitted infections, including understanding transmission and prevention, is also essential as it protects couples and their infants (Ernstmeyer & Christman, 2025).

Couples should also be encouraged to have open communication on sexual health with partners, healthcare providers, or counsellors. In some cultures, discussions about sexuality are private (Fiaveh & Mensah, 2023; Ugwu et al., 2024). Women may avoid seeking counselling on sexual issues due to the stigma (Mohamadian et al., 2024). Therefore, promoting open dialogue on sexual needs and preferences in PMC can help couples overcome cultural inhibiting barriers. Given the potential interdisciplinary gap, churches might employ an in-service healthcare professional to adequately address reproductive health education during PMC. Studies recognize that healthcare institutions offer PMC (Birinci & Rahime, 2022; Thiongo et al, 2022). However, Birinci and Rahime (2022) found that health workers delivering PMC in Turkiye did not perform optimally due to insufficient time allocated for counselling. This calls for collaboration between healthcare and faith-based institutions to ensure that couples receive comprehensive reproductive health education.

Theme 10 – Social life and modernism.

The modern social and relationship dynamics emerged as a relevant discourse in PMC. The respondents referenced phrases such as marriage and modernity, relationships with friends, career aspirations, lifestyle choices, personal interests, and honeymoon expectations. Recent studies demonstrate that contemporary marital roles and expectations are shaped by educational attainment, career aspirations, occupation, family influences, social status and identities, as well as cultural exposure through social media platforms and films that portray ideals of modern marriages (Adaki & Wajim, 2024; Arya, 2024; Asim et al., 2024). Ugwu et al. (2024) found that modernity and civilization have permeated the traditional family system of Igbo Christian society in Nigeria, thereby influencing moral values. In another Nigerian study, Adaki and Wajim (2024) revealed that urbanization

and Westernization contribute to rising divorce rates by promoting values such as individualism, self-interest, gender equality, and career ambition. In Kitui County, Kenya, Munyoki (2023) suggested that PMC content should incorporate postmodern topics, such as the influence of social media to address issues of sexual infidelity. Thus, the inclusion of modern marriage dynamics in PMC addresses contemporary marital satisfaction and stability challenges, such as shifting gender roles from media influence and career aspirations.

CONCLUSION

Participating in PMC increases positive marital outcomes such as commitment, harmony, coexistence, cohesion, and marriage stability. However, challenges to the effectiveness of PMC include the absence of a comprehensive PMC curriculum to adequately cover requisite content for couples, and insufficient or inadequate training of PMC practitioners. The current study revealed ten appropriate topics for PMC programs based on primary data drawn from the perceptions and experiences of beneficiaries, clergy, and counsellors from four churches in Kiambu and Nairobi counties. Adequately addressing these topics in PMC is vital for enhancing practitioner professionalism and strengthening marital preparedness, thereby fostering enduring unions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutions offering PMC, such as churches, schools, and healthcare centers, should ensure their course outlines cover all ten curriculum topics to enhance practitioners' training outcomes. The curriculum should be organized into 10 sessions with tools such as assessment and evaluation scales, manuals, presentation equipment, practical skills such as role plays, and assignments. Individual practitioners, such as counselling psychologists, clinical psychologists, and marriage and MFTs, should adequately cover these topics in personalized spaces to enhance the effectiveness of PMC in preparing couples for their marital life. Besides, they should consider hiring a specialist in reproductive health and financial issues to bridge knowledge gaps on these topics.

Limitations

The study has some limitations that can limit generalizability. The study is geographically restricted to Nairobi and Kiambu counties and primarily includes Christian participants, reducing applicability to other regions and religions. The sample size is also relatively small and based on convenience sampling and the methods of data collection used (in-depth interviews, questionnaires and FGDs).

Future Studies

The study can be extended to other religions to provide strong external validity of the findings. Besides, future studies can incorporate quantitative methods to examine the relevance of the identified themes in enhancing marital outcomes such as stability and satisfaction.

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Conflicts Of Interest

The authors affirm that there are no conflicts of interest concerning the publication of this article. This manuscript was developed from the author's completed doctoral dissertation in collaboration with academic supervisors,

and no financial, professional, or personal relationships influenced the research process, interpretation of findings, or reporting of results.

Data Availability

Data is available upon request due to confidentiality.

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