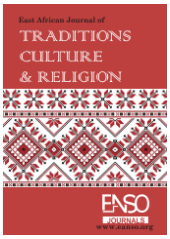

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Original Article

Childlessness among Agìkūyū Women in Rūaka, Kìambu County: Evolving Norms from Tradition to Contemporary Realities

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ABSTRACT

Among the Agìkūyū of Kenya, motherhood is a deeply ingrained cultural expectation, with childlessness—whether involuntary due to infertility or voluntary by choice—often leading to stigma, social exclusion, and even domestic violence or marital breakdown. Traditionally, a woman's value has been closely tied to her ability to bear children, a belief further reinforced by the practice of *rūraacio* (bride wealth), which presumes fertility as part of the marital contract. The failure to conceive is frequently viewed as a violation of this expectation, exposing women to emotional and social vulnerability. However, contemporary influences such as formal education, urban living, Christianity, medical advancements, and shifting gender norms are beginning to reshape these rigid perceptions. Increasingly, childlessness is understood in more complex and diverse ways, including voluntary childlessness, delayed childbearing, and infertility caused by medical or socio-economic factors. These changes are gradually opening space for a broader recognition of reproductive autonomy and multiple expressions of womanhood. Using Cultural Adaptation Theory advanced by Berry (2005), this study examines how women in Rūaka, Kìambu County, navigate the tension between traditional and modern expectations. The theory emphasises how individuals and communities adapt to cultural shifts by negotiating evolving identities, behaviours, and values. This study uses a qualitative, descriptive approach to explore the experiences of childless Agìkūyū women in Rūaka, Kìambu County, focusing on three support groups. Data were gathered through participant observation, informal interviews, and document analysis, with attention to cultural, religious, and modern views on childlessness. Thirty women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds participated, selected through snowball sampling. Thematic analysis using NVivo software revealed key patterns, and ethical standards, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly followed. The study revealed that while cultural norms remain powerful, many women are actively redefining their roles beyond motherhood. The article proposes recommendations for addressing the issues faced by childless women, emphasising the need for legal reforms, the

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enhancement of public health education, improved access to reproductive healthcare, and a reimagining of cultural and religious narratives that often tie womanhood solely to motherhood. The study calls for a more compassionate and inclusive societal framework that acknowledges the diverse reproductive experiences of women and promotes gender equity.

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INTRODUCTION

Globally**,** childless women represent a growing and increasingly visible demographic whose experiences are shaped by a range of cultural, economic, and personal factors. While childlessness has long been stigmatised, particularly for women, shifting social norms are gradually redefining womanhood beyond motherhood. In high-income regions such as North America and Europe, many women are voluntarily choosing to remain childless, asserting greater control over their reproductive decisions. In the United States, projections indicate that by 2030, 45% of women aged 25 to 44 will be single and childless, up from 41% in 2018 (Jones, 2023). Similar trends are seen in Southern and Western Europe, where nearly 25% of women born in the 1970s are expected to remain childless into their 40s (OECD, 2024). In Finland, growing numbers of women are choosing to delay or forgo motherhood in favour of professional growth and independence (Financial Times, 2024). These women often prioritise education, careers, or personal autonomy, and many cite financial insecurity and shifting family values as reasons for not having children. In East Asian countries like Taiwan and South Korea, childless women face intense societal pressure amid workplace inequality and limited state support for work-life balance. These global trends suggest that childless women are increasingly challenging traditional expectations and contributing to broader conversations about gender, identity, and reproductive rights.

Childless women in Africa face complex social, cultural, and emotional challenges that vary across regions, often depending on whether their childlessness is involuntary or voluntary. In traditional African thought, fertility is seen as a manifestation of cosmic balance, with the belief that the ancestors' blessings are necessary for procreation to occur (Magesa, 1997). Childlessness, therefore, is sometimes perceived as a sign of spiritual imbalance or a failure to honour ancestral spirits, which can lead to social exclusion,

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emotional distress, and a sense of personal inadequacy. In many African societies, especially in rural and traditional settings, a woman's identity and social status are strongly tied to her ability to bear children. According to Musili (2025), barrenness in both biblical times and in African traditions is detested. Involuntary childlessness—often caused by infertility—affects approximately 2–3% of women in Sub-Saharan Africa as a result of untreated infections, poor access to reproductive healthcare, and limited awareness (Mascarenhas *et al*., 2012). In Nigeria, for example, 2.6% of women are childless due to primary infertility, and 15.7% due to secondary infertility, leading many to face rejection, emotional abuse, or even divorce (Larsen, 2000). In Ethiopia, childless women often experience intense stigma, isolation and are sometimes accused of being cursed or bewitched (Araya et al., 2025). Mkhwanazi (2014) explores the dynamics of early childbearing in South African townships, asserting that up to 12% of women aged 40–49 are childless, many by choice, reflecting shifting norms in urban, middle-class contexts. Nevertheless, childless women across the continent often face marginalisation in marriage, religious spaces, and inheritance rights, underscoring the urgent need for greater reproductive justice, education, and policy reform to protect their dignity and autonomy.

In Kenya, approximately 30% to 40% of women experience involuntary childlessness, which often leads to social stigma, marginalisation, and, in some cases, domestic violence (BMC Women's Health, 2022). This societal pressure underscores the deeply ingrained belief that womanhood is defined by fertility, placing an immense burden on women who are unable to conceive. Historically, the Agĩkũyũ community in Kenya has held strong cultural views regarding the role of women in reproduction, where motherhood is seen as a core aspect of womanhood (Kenyatta, 1978). In this community, childlessness, whether voluntary or due to infertility, often leads to significant social stigma, with women facing exclusion from certain rituals and social roles. This marginalisation stems from the deeply ingrained belief that a woman's worth is directly tied to her ability to bear children. Among the Agĩkũyũ, ancestral spirits play a significant role in everyday life, and their influence extends to matters of fertility. A woman who is unable to conceive may be seen as failing in her role to continue the family lineage, which could be viewed as a direct disconnect from ancestral blessings. Fertility, in this context, is considered a divine gift, and the inability to bear children may be linked to spiritual shortcomings, requiring ritual interventions to restore balance. The Agĩkũyũ practice of rũraaciõ (bride wealth exchange) further reinforces the importance of fertility. The expectation that a woman will bear children to continue her husband's lineage is embedded within the rũraacio process. If a woman fails to conceive, the marriage may be perceived as unfulfilled, and the woman may face blame and exclusion from both her marital and natal families (Kenyatta, 1978). This cultural framework underscores the high value placed on fertility in traditional Agĩkũyũ society and the societal pressures that result from a woman's inability to conceive. For women who struggle with childlessness, religious or spiritual interventions are often sought. Andũ Ago -spiritual healers/ diviners may be consulted to mediate between the living and the ancestors to remove any perceived spiritual blockages to fertility. Rituals and prayers are conducted to restore fertility, and women may be encouraged to make offerings or perform specific rites to appease the spirits and enhance their chances of conception.

Purpose of the Study:

This study seeks to explore how Agĩkũyũ women in Rũaka, Kĩambu County, experience and respond to the tensions between culturally prescribed roles rooted in fertility and emerging frameworks of reproductive autonomy and identity. It examines how women negotiate these competing expectations and how these negotiations reflect broader

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processes of cultural adaptation and gender transformation.

Research Objectives:

- To analyse traditional Agìkūyū conceptions of motherhood and their social, spiritual, and marital implications.
- To investigate the lived experiences of childless women—both involuntary and voluntary—in Rūaka and how they navigate societal expectations.
- To assess the influence of education, urbanisation, Christianity, and medical knowledge on shifting attitudes toward childlessness.
- To evaluate the coping strategies and support mechanisms women adopt in the face of cultural stigma.
- To propose context-specific recommendations that promote reproductive justice and gender equity.

Research Questions:

- How is childlessness perceived within traditional Agìkūyū cultural and spiritual frameworks?
- In what ways are these perceptions shifting in urban, modern contexts such as Rūaka?
- How do childless Agìkūyū women navigate the dual pressures of tradition and modernity?
- What forms of agency and resistance emerge among women redefining womanhood beyond motherhood?
- How can policy, public health, and cultural narratives be reimagined to better support childless women?

Significance of the Study:

This research contributes to the growing body of African feminist and anthropological literature on reproductive justice by centering the experiences of childless women within an African cultural context. It highlights the nuanced ways in which traditional beliefs continue to shape gendered experiences, even as modern influences create space for alternative identities. By using Cultural Adaptation Theory (Berry, 2005) as an analytical lens, the study offers an in-depth understanding of how women negotiate identity amid cultural transition. The findings have implications for policy, healthcare, education, and religious discourse, advocating for a more inclusive societal framework that recognises diverse reproductive experiences and affirms women's autonomy.

The Agìkūyū Women in Rūaka, Kìambu County, provides a distinctive case study in how cultural beliefs and societal expectations shape perceptions of childlessness. In contemporary Rūaka, urbanisation and access to education are reshaping these traditional views. Agìkūyū women in this region, particularly those with higher levels of education and economic independence, are more likely to delay childbirth or even embrace voluntary childlessness in favour of pursuing careers and personal goals (Mūriūki, 2021). This shift reflects broader changes in gender roles, where women are increasingly empowered to make independent decisions regarding their reproductive lives. Despite these progressive trends, childlessness remains a sensitive issue, with women who cannot conceive still facing societal pressures to seek medical intervention, such as assisted reproductive technologies. This ongoing stigma leads to feelings of isolation and emotional distress, reinforcing the tension between traditional cultural expectations and modern reproductive choices (BMC Women's Health, 2022).

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Traditional Perspectives on Childlessness

In a traditional Agìkūyū society, childlessness was considered one of the gravest misfortunes a woman could endure. A woman who failed to bear children was often viewed as suffering from a curse or spiritual misfortune. This belief stemmed from deep cultural and religious views, where fertility was seen as a divine blessing and childbearing as an essential role for women (Kenyatta, 1978). Social and family expectations placed immense pressure on women to conceive, with the blame for infertility typically falling upon them, irrespective of other potential factors such as male infertility (Gikandi, 1987; Kenyatta, 1978). Children were of immense social, cultural, and spiritual value in traditional Agìkūyū society. Beyond ensuring the continuity of the family and clan, children held religious significance as well. As noted by Kenyatta (1978), only after the birth of a first child could a couple fully participate in community religious rituals. Therefore, childbearing was not only a personal matter but a societal expectation that tied a woman's worth and respect to her reproductive ability.

Fertility prayers, often led by elders invoking blessings from both God (Ngai) and ancestral spirits, were a common practice in the Agìkūyū community. Childlessness was interpreted as a sign of spiritual imbalance or ancestral displeasure, and various rituals were used to restore fertility. A woman whose children died young or were stillborn faced increased stigma, with their misfortune believed to reflect poorly on her. Infant loss was particularly traumatic, as it was seen not just as a personal loss but as an indication of spiritual fault or a lack of divine favour (Kenyatta, 1978). Several cultural explanations were offered to account for childlessness. According to Leakey (1977, Vol. II), three primary causes were recognised:

- Ancestral or Familial Fault: Barrenness was often attributed to a curse from a woman's father or due to the failure of her family to observe essential rituals or taboos during her upbringing.
- Clan Curses: Negative thoughts, unresolved grievances, or maledictions within the woman's clan could be believed to block fertility.
- Warrior Curses: If a woman rejected sexual advances from men in the warrior class before marriage, she could be cursed with infertility.

In these cases, ritual remedies and sacrifices were required to lift the curse, often involving the family, clan elders, or the aggrieved warriors.

Rūraaciō, the traditional Agìkūyū bride wealth process, is deeply connected to societal expectations of fertility and childbearing. It symbolises not only the union of two families but also the expectation that the woman will bear children to continue the lineage. When a woman is childless, particularly involuntarily, the value of rūraaciō is often questioned, and she may face rejection or pressure for the rūraacio to be returned, reflecting the transactional nature of fertility within marriage (Wangila, 2007). In such contexts, childlessness can lead to strained marital relations, diminished status for the woman, and sometimes the threat of polygamy or divorce as the husband seeks children elsewhere (Macharia, 2013). Thus, rūraaciō reinforces the cultural linkage between a woman's worth and her reproductive capacity among the Agìkūyū.

Cultural Adaptation Theory

Cultural Adaptation Theory (Berry, 2005) offers a comprehensive framework for analysing the experiences of childless women in Rūaka by focusing on the processes of cultural negotiation and transformation as individuals and communities navigate shifts in their sociocultural environments. This theory is particularly well-suited for studying the intersection of traditional Agìkūyū values related to fertility and modern approaches to womanhood and family life, especially in a cosmopolitan town like Rūaka, where local,

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national, and global influences converge. The theory highlights how individuals retain core cultural practices while integrating new cultural norms, providing valuable insights into how childless women in Rūaka reconcile traditional views on motherhood with evolving societal expectations. Key elements such as cultural continuity, the integration of medical and traditional practices, and the psychosocial implications of adaptation underscore the theory's relevance in understanding how women navigate the emotional and cultural complexities of childlessness. Additionally, the theory's emphasis on the role of social support networks, such as the "Rūaka Childless Support Group," further facilitates an understanding of how women cope with the societal pressures of childlessness while maintaining cultural identity. Thus, Cultural Adaptation Theory is ideal for exploring the adaptive strategies employed by childless women in Rūaka as they balance enduring cultural norms with contemporary reproductive realities.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of childless women within the Agìkūyū community, focusing on three purposively selected women's groups in Kìambu County. The three groups are Rūaka Childless Support Group, Mothers of Tomorrow, and Silent Voices. These groups were chosen based on their active engagement with childless women, offering social, emotional, and spiritual support. Data were collected through participant observation, informal interviews, and document analysis, with particular attention paid to cultural, religious, and modern perspectives on childlessness. The research also considered the rural-urban divide in Kìambu, with the study conducted in Rūaka, a rapidly urbanising area within Kìambu County. Rūaka, with a population of 15,348 as per the Kìambaa Constituency population report, is part of the larger Karuri area, which had a population of 194,342 in the 2019 census, reflecting a 49.6% increase from 2009 (Cytonn Report). The area's growth and mix of rural and urban characteristics make it an ideal setting to capture the intersection of traditional and modern influences on childlessness. Thirty childless women participated, and snowball sampling was used to ensure a diverse and representative sample from different socio-economic backgrounds. Data analysis employed thematic analysis with NVivo software to identify key patterns, ensuring a systematic exploration of issues such as stigma, identity, and evolving perceptions of womanhood. Ethical protocols, including informed consent and confidentiality, were rigorously followed throughout the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysed using NVivo software revealed several key themes that shed light on the experiences of childless women within the Agìkūyū community. Contemporary views on childlessness highlight the shifting perspectives on childlessness, driven by modern social norms and changing gender roles, as well as the increasing autonomy of women in reproductive decision-making. The role of religion and community structures examines how religious beliefs and traditional community frameworks shape the experiences of childless women, influencing both support systems and marginalisation. The intersection of rūraacio and childlessness explored the cultural practice of rūraacio and its impact on childless women, particularly the societal pressures tied to marriage and procreation. The communal and spiritual role of support groups emphasised the critical role of women's groups in providing emotional, spiritual, and social support, helping women navigate societal expectations, and fostering a sense of community. Finally, the theme challenges faced by childless women: cultural, social, and institutional dimensions addressed the multifaceted difficulties childless women face, including cultural stigma, social exclusion, and barriers to healthcare and legal protections. Collectively, these themes offer a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural

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dynamics surrounding childlessness among Agìkūyū women in Rūaka, Kìambu County, Kenya.

Contemporary Perspectives on Childlessness among Agìkūyū Women in Rūaka

This study reveals that 60% of women participating in support groups in Rūaka experience involuntary childlessness**,** while 20% each fall into the categories of voluntary and situational childlessness. Despite their different trajectories, all groups endure varying levels of stigma**,** emotional distress, and cultural pressure. Notably, religious institutions**,** customary practices, and the legal system often fail to adequately recognise or **s**upport the realities of these women's experiences. These findings are based on qualitative data collected from three women's support groups, analysed thematically to explore how contemporary experiences of childlessness intersect with changing cultural norms, urbanisation, and evolving conceptions of womanhood within the Agìkūyū community of Kìambu County.

Involuntary Childlessness: Medical and Social Exclusion

The majority of respondents (60%) described their childlessness as involuntary, attributed to infertility, recurrent pregnancy loss, or unexplained medical conditions. These women expressed deep emotional trauma, exacerbated by social ostracism and the failure of medical, spiritual, and traditional remedies to provide relief.

> *"I have prayed, fasted, gone to hospitals, even tried herbal remedies, but still, no child. Sometimes I feel like less of a woman." (Participant A, 34-year-old married woman)*

Women in this category reported experiences of emotional abuse**,** marital instability, and stigmatisation from in-laws. The association of fertility with cultural expectations—such as the completion of rūraacio and the continuation of lineage—often leads to devaluation of the woman's identity.

> *"Even in church, they pray for us as if we are cursed. It's humiliating." (Participant B, 40-year-old congregant)*

The involuntary childless face a dual burden: personal grief compounded by communal narratives that equate womanhood with motherhood.

Voluntary Childlessness: Autonomy and Resistance

A smaller but increasingly vocal segment (20%) comprised women who have consciously chosen not to have children**.** Most of these respondents were urban, educated, and economically self-sufficient**.** They cited reasons including career ambition**,** bodily autonomy**,** and resistance to patriarchal domestic expectations.

> "*I love my freedom. I'm not selfish; I'm just not ready to give up my dreams for diapers and school fees." (Participant C, 29-year-old tech consultant)*

Despite exercising personal agency, these women often face social pressure**,** familial disappointment**,** and cultural invalidation**.**

> "*My mother keeps asking when I will make her a grandmother. She doesn't understand that I'm happy as I am." (Participant D, 31-year-old entrepreneur)*

This category underscores the impact of urbanisation, feminism, and global discourses on reproductive autonomy, yet also illustrates the limits of acceptance within traditional frameworks.

Situational Childlessness: Structural Barriers and Misrecognition

The final 20% of participants were women who remained childless due to situational or circumstantial factors, including late marriage**,** poverty**,** divorce**,** widowhood**,** imprisonment**,** or custodial loss of children**.** These cases reflect the structural and relational dimensions of childlessness that are often underrecognized.

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> "*I had a child, but after the divorce, he went with the father. In the eyes of the community, I'm now 'childless' again." (Participant E, 37-year-old high school teacher)*

Others cited the impact of marginalisation and trauma on their reproductive paths:

> *"I was in prison for two years. When I came back, no one wanted to marry me or talk about children."*
> *(Participant F, 41-year-old formerly incarcerated woman)*

This group reveals how external socio-economic and legal conditions, rather than personal choice or biology alone, can lead to reproductive exclusion.

Across all categories, the lived experiences of childless Agìkūyū women in Rūaka reveal that childlessness is not a singular or monolithic experience. It is informed by complex intersections of health, agency, social circumstance, and structural inequality. Furthermore, prevailing cultural institutions—both traditional and religious—remain largely unresponsive to these diverse realities, perpetuating a narrow and exclusionary definition of womanhood.

> *"We are not barren—we are whole women, just living different stories." (Participant G, 36-year-old member of a support group)*

These findings call for a critical reevaluation of cultural norms and the development of inclusive social policies**,** religious dialogue**,** and legal reforms that acknowledge and support the dignity and rights of women regardless of their reproductive status.

Role of Religion and Community Structures in Shaping Attitudes toward Childlessness

Religious teachings, particularly within Christian communities, often frame motherhood as a divine blessing, which can make it difficult for childless women to escape the perception that they are spiritually incomplete. One participant from the *Rūaka Childless Support Group* shared her experience:

> *"In church, they always talk about the blessing of children, how it is God's will to have children. But no one talks about what happens when you can't have them. You're made to feel like you're incomplete, that there's something wrong with your faith if you don't have children."* (Participant, Rūaka Childless Support Group, 2023).

This framing by religious institutions reinforces the notion that childlessness is not just a social failure but a spiritual one, causing emotional and psychological distress for many women. Religious leaders and church members may offer prayers for fertility but rarely acknowledge the broader emotional struggles that accompany childlessness, which often results in feelings of isolation and marginalisation for these women. In addition to religious influences, family structures also play a pivotal role in shaping societal perceptions of childlessness. Traditional Agìkūyū society places great importance on family, with childbearing viewed as a core responsibility of women. As a result, childlessness is often seen as a failure to fulfil familial duties. However, the study indicates that attitudes are shifting, particularly among younger generations and urban residents, who tend to view womanhood beyond the narrow confines of motherhood. One participant from the *Mothers of Tomorrow* group highlighted this shift:

> *"I live in Rūaka, and the people here are different. There's more understanding, more acceptance of women who choose not to have children. I don't feel judged here as I do when I visit my rural home."* (Participant, Mothers of Tomorrow, 2023).

This statement illustrates the evolving perspectives in urban areas like Rūaka, where younger generations are more likely to accept diverse life choices for women, including the choice to remain

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childless. These findings contrast with the more rigid expectations found in rural areas, where traditional views on womanhood and motherhood still hold strong sway.

Intersection of Rūraacio and Childlessness

The rūraacio process is a significant cultural institution among the Agìkūyū, symbolising the formalisation of marriage and the onset of reproductive expectations. In the Ūgūrani wa Agìkūyū broadcast, Kanyonga (2023) discussed that once rūraacio is paid, the woman is fully integrated into her husband's lineage, and her primary role is expected to be childbearing. In this context, fertility is not merely a biological function, but a cultural and social obligation.

Fieldwork conducted revealed how the inability to bear children reshapes the dynamics of rūraacio and marriage. Specifically, involuntary childlessness often results in the dissolution of marital relationships. Several participants shared that their traditional marriages were terminated, and the rūraacio was returned to the husband's family to enable remarriage. One participant from the *Silent Voices* group recounted:

> *"After seven years of marriage and no child, my husband's family said I was holding him back. They called my parents and asked for the bride price to be returned. That's when I knew my marriage was over."* (Participant, *Silent Voices*, 2023)

This testimony underscores the conditional nature of marital legitimacy when fertility is considered central. In these instances, rūraacio becomes not only a symbol of union but a transactional marker of reproductive success. The failure to fulfil this implicit expectation often leads to the dissolution of the marriage, as seen in the above account, where the return of rūraacio becomes a means for exiting a marriage.

Another participant from the *Rūaka Childless Support Group* described her experience as follows:

> *"My mother-in-law kept asking, 'Why are we feeding a woman who gives us no heirs?' After many family meetings, my husband said he had no choice but to marry again. To do that traditionally, they returned the rūraacio to my family so that he could start afresh."* (Participant, *Rūaka Childless Support Group*, 2023)

In these contexts, rūraacio serves not only as a cultural practice but as an exclusionary tool, enabling husbands to exit marriages where childbearing has not occurred. This mechanism facilitates remarriage within the traditional framework without cultural or spiritual obstruction.

Even in the more urbanised setting of Rūaka, where modern values and legal protections are increasingly evident, traditional norms surrounding fertility persist in shaping community expectations. Many women reported that, although their marriages remained legally intact, their social roles were undermined as childlessness continued. One participant from the *Mothers of Tomorrow* group shared:

> *"People don't say it directly, but they talk about how my* rūraacio *was a waste. One aunt even said I should let my husband marry someone else who can give him a child. That comment broke me."* (Participant, *Mothers of Tomorrow*, 2023)

These narratives illustrate how childlessness disrupts the symbolic and social role of rūraacio**,** positioning women as perceived failures in contributing to lineage continuity. As a result, these women are subjected to stigmatisation, not only within their marriages but within broader kinship networks, where the absence of children is seen as a breach of both cultural and spiritual duty.

Community-Based Support Groups as Sites of Healing and Spiritual Continuity

Support groups in Rūaka have become critical platforms for addressing the psychosocial and

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spiritual needs of childless women, offering spaces where emotional support, communal understanding, and solidarity coalesce. Within the Agìkūyū cultural framework—where personhood is deeply relational and spiritual well-being is grounded in communal life—these groups serve not only as sites of social refuge but also as loci for the continuation and reinvention of cultural values.

Participants consistently reported that support groups provided forms of care and affirmation that were often absent in formal religious institutions. Many expressed that churches, particularly within Christian denominations, frequently reinforced narratives equating motherhood with divine favour. In contrast, support groups offered non-judgmental spaces where women could articulate their experiences without spiritual or moral condemnation. As one respondent from the Rūaka Childless Support Group shared:

> *"The support groups have been my source of healing. I couldn't find the kind of healing I needed in the church I once attended, where I was occasionally made a prayer item because of my childlessness. Here, I've found a community that understands me and lifts me up without judgment."(Participant, Rūaka Childless Support Group, 2023)*

This testimony underscores the emotional alienation some women experience within religious settings, where childlessness may be problematized through prayers for healing or implicitly associated with spiritual inadequacy. In contrast, peer-led support groups offer a relational model of care rooted in empathy, shared experience, and cultural solidarity. Importantly, these support groups can also be understood as expressions of ũtugi—the Agìkūyū ethos of mutual aid and communal responsibility. Despite operating in an urbanised and increasingly individualistic environment, such groups retain and reinterpret traditional values, suggesting that Agìkūyū spirituality continues to evolve in ways that are responsive to modern socio-cultural realities. In this sense, they are not only coping mechanisms but also counter-narratives to dominant constructions of womanhood and value. The existence and growth of these support groups highlight the agency of childless women in resisting marginalisation and reshaping community discourses around reproductive identity. Through collective action, these women challenge entrenched societal norms while forging spaces of dignity, belonging, and spiritual affirmation.

Challenges Faced by Childless Women: Cultural, Social, and Institutional Dimensions among the Agìkūyū of Rūaka, Kenya

Among the Agìkūyū of Kenya, womanhood has historically been defined through the lens of motherhood. Fertility is regarded as both a spiritual blessing and a social obligation. Consequently, childlessness—particularly when involuntary—carries significant stigma and marginalisation. In Rūaka, Kìambu County, conversations with three women's support groups—Rūaka Childless Support Group, Mothers of Tomorrow, and Silent Voices—reveal how cultural expectations, religious discourses, healthcare misconceptions, and legal gaps intersect to shape the lived realities of childless women.

One of the most deeply embedded cultural institutions influencing these experiences is the practice of rūraacio. Traditionally, rūraacio signifies a woman's expected role as a child bearer and her incorporation into the husband's lineage. When this expectation is not fulfilled, it can lead to marital instability and loss of status. As a 42-year-old member of the Rūaka Women's Forum shared:

> *"When I couldn't conceive, his mother said they had been 'cheated' during rūraacio. They asked if their cows could be returned. I felt like property whose value had dropped."*

This testimony highlights how infertility is perceived as a violation of marital and communal

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expectations, reducing a woman's identity to her reproductive capacity.

Childless women also face profound social stigma and exclusion. Within Agĩkūyū communities, they are often labelled Mūtumia wa karu—a woman with no legacy. This term encapsulates the belief that childless women have failed their social purpose. A member of Rūaka Women's Group, aged 36, noted:

> *"I am never invited to naming ceremonies or weddings anymore. They say I bring bad luck. I sit at home and wonder if I am even a woman in their eyes."*

This exclusion from communal rituals and celebrations often results in psychological distress, ranging from anxiety to deep depression. The pain is compounded by the perception of spiritual failure, with many religious institutions subtly reinforcing the notion that fertility is a divine reward and barrenness a sign of spiritual deficiency. Religious experiences among childless women are often marked by alienation rather than solace. A participant from the Rūaka Childless Support Group stated:

> *"In church, they always talk about the blessing of children, how it is God's will to have children. But no one talks about what happens when you can't have them. You're made to feel like you're incomplete, that there's something wrong with your faith."*

These spiritual narratives contribute to internalised guilt and a sense of estrangement within religious spaces that are otherwise central to communal life. The desperation for motherhood has rendered many women vulnerable to exploitation by religious leaders and traditional healers. One participant narrated her ordeal.

> "*I gave over 70,000 shillings to a prophet who promised a miracle baby. After months of fasting and giving, he disappeared. I felt robbed twice—of hope and dignity."*

Some women undergo "cleansing rituals" or take unsafe herbal remedies, which can cause harm and delay access to legitimate medical care. These experiences reflect how unregulated religious and traditional practices prey on the emotional vulnerability of women desperate for children.

Infertility also frequently triggers gender-based violence and marital instability. The societal narrative that equates a woman's worth with her ability to bear children often emboldens abusive partners. A participant shared her experience:

> *"He brought in another woman without telling me. Said I was 'not a full wife.' I begged for counselling, but he said I was cursed*."

Many women are left with few options, fearing retaliation or lacking the financial independence to leave abusive relationships. Even where legal protections exist, social stigma and systemic barriers often prevent women from seeking justice.

Misinformation and cultural myths surrounding infertility further compound these challenges. Some women are blamed for their condition based on unfounded beliefs. Notably, the topic of male infertility remains taboo, with the burden of diagnosis and blame falling disproportionately on women—even when medical evidence indicates otherwise. The social consequences of childlessness extend into older age. Within Agĩkūyū kinship structures, elderhood is traditionally tied to having descendants who can carry on the lineage and perform burial rites. Childless women are often denied elder status or leadership roles in both family and community institutions.

M, a participant, 58, shared:

> *"At the funeral, they didn't let me speak. One elder said, 'What will she say? She has no children to bury her.' I wept for days."*

In churches, schools, and local councils, leadership and social authority are commonly reserved for

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those with parenting experience, further marginalising women without children.

Despite these challenges, the support groups in Rūaka offer crucial spaces of emotional, spiritual, and psychological support. These groups provide safe environments where women share experiences, affirm one another, and build resilience. These groups embody enduring elements of Agìkūyū spirituality, rooted in collective belonging and communal healing. They reflect how traditional values can be adapted to support women in contemporary contexts, challenging the dominant narratives that frame childlessness as a failure. Through solidarity and shared strength, these women redefine dignity, reclaim agency, and advocate for inclusive understandings of womanhood beyond biological motherhood.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of childlessness among women, particularly within the Agìkūyū community of Rūaka, reflects a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and societal structures that continue to marginalise and stigmatise women who do not meet normative reproductive expectations. In this context, motherhood is often viewed as a defining aspect of feminine identity and social value, placing significant pressure on women to conform to traditional reproductive norms. Women who are unable or choose not to bear children, therefore, face a variety of challenges that intersect across emotional, economic, spiritual, and legal domains. Despite advancements in reproductive medicine and a growing understanding of infertility as a medical issue, the social burden on childless women remains significant. These women often navigate a landscape where biomedical, religious, and traditional discourses intersect, resulting in experiences that are frequently pathologised, spiritualized, or morally judged. This ongoing marginalisation exacerbates emotional distress and social exclusion.

However, one of the key findings that emerged from the fieldwork is the transformative role of economically and socially aware women in shaping their reproductive choices. These women, empowered by economic independence and social consciousness, often view the ability to make informed choices about their reproductive futures—whether to have children or not—as a vital aspect of their autonomy. The freedom to make such choices without societal pressure or fear of stigma becomes a critical factor in asserting their dignity and personal rights. For example, some women expressed how their economic stability and access to education have enabled them to resist the pressure to conform to traditional expectations surrounding motherhood.

To address the challenges faced by childless women, a paradigm shift is needed in both policy and public perception. This shift must reposition fertility not as a definitive aspect of womanhood but as one of many possible expressions of feminine identity. A crucial part of this change is recognising dignity as a universal human right, regardless of reproductive status. To realise this vision, comprehensive legislative reforms are necessary to prohibit discrimination and abuse based on reproductive status, with specific legal protections for childless women in areas such as marital rights, inheritance, and access to judicial remedies.

Furthermore, public health policies should incorporate scientifically-based fertility education in national campaigns and school curricula, aiming to dispel myths surrounding infertility and promote a gender-equitable understanding of reproductive responsibilities. Accessible fertility-related healthcare services, including assisted reproductive technologies, should be available across both urban and rural areas. In addition, reproductive counselling and psychological support must be integrated into healthcare systems as essential components of fertility care.

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Cultural and religious institutions must also play a pivotal role in reforming traditional narratives that link womanhood exclusively to motherhood. Religious and cultural leaders should be engaged in promoting inclusive practices that recognise the intrinsic worth of all women, regardless of their reproductive histories. This approach must be both compassionate and evidence-based, emphasising mental health, equitable access to reproductive services, and a sense of belonging in spiritual and communal life. By addressing these challenges, we can shift from stigmatisation to solidarity, silence to visibility, and marginalisation to full societal inclusion of childless women.

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