

Faith in action

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demographic change in West Africa

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At a glance

The population of West Africa will increase over the next few decades. By 2050 the number of inhabitants in the 16 countries of that region will almost double from 402 million to around 797 million. High fertility rates are the main driver of this trend, with an average of four to seven children being born to women in those countries between Mauritania and Nigeria. This means in the medium term that more people will be competing for jobs, schooling and health care. Societies and nations have to struggle for socioeconomic progress as a decline in fertility remains the prerequisite for and outcome of development. If governments and inhabitants of these countries fail to offer young people a future perspective, many will lack the opportunity to live self-determined lives.

More gender equality, education of girls and realisation of sexual and reproductive health rights contribute to a decline in fertility rates. When women are able to complete secondary schooling, work in paid jobs and participate in all areas of life, they tend to opt for smaller families and also have their children later in life. However, in the 16 West African countries, patriarchal gender roles still predominate in many places. Girls often receive no, or only, primary education and women are frequently financially dependent on their husbands. In many countries there remains a lot to do until women are able to participate equally in society as social norms and prevailing cultural and religious values have to adjust to the reality on the ground.

Religious communities and their representatives can make a significant contribution to slowing down population growth in West African countries in the medium term. This is because:

- › religious leaders interpret the holy scriptures for believers and provide guidance on applying them to all areas of everyday life – including gender equality, education of girls, family planning and sexuality.
- › alongside traditional and cultural values, people take their faith into account when deciding on the timing and number of children they will have. They trust their imams, priests or indigenous leaders and seek their advice when making important decisions.

Some religious organisations and leaders are already active:

- › They develop gender-neutral interpretations of the Bible, Koran or other religious texts.
- › They debunk popular misconceptions, e.g.: the Koran does not reject family planning per se, though many religious leaders and believers assume it does.

- › They question traditional concepts of masculinity and work with local communities to develop positive alternatives.
- › They compile and disseminate religious arguments in favour for family planning. They argue for instance that maternal and child health is the top priority and further pregnancies should not jeopardize them, or that responsible parenting means having only as many children as parents can reasonably provide for.
- › They empower young people and create a climate in which parents or other religious leaders accept that teenagers want to explore and learn about their own sexuality.

Religious communities advocating for gender equality, family planning or openly addressing the subject of sexuality communicate in their own language. Their messages are based on their religious values and do not always correspond with secular interpretations. For instance, in a generic sense, family planning refers to couples using different methods to plan the timing and number of their children, while imams take it to mean expectant parents should leave sufficient time between pregnancies.

What is the way forward?

Religious groups and local religious leaders can inspire and facilitate such change by reading the Bible or the Koran in a way that supports gender equality, debunking popular misinterpretations and questioning traditional gender roles. In doing so, they need to consciously act as role models themselves. But their secular partners in government, health authorities and civil society should also recognise and strengthen the potential of religious communities to facilitate change.

A. Secular partners of religious organisations should:

- › ...identify the religious organisations, groups and individuals willing to discuss family planning, gender equality and education of girls and promote these ideas within their networks. Influential religious figures are particularly well-equipped to help in this way because many religious leaders and believers look to them for guidance. While those already active in this regard by no means represent the majority of religious communities, it is vital to leverage the existing potential and bring more believers on board.
- › ...involve religious communities and religious organisations more in their strategies to promote gender equality and family planning. Compared to their secular counterparts, representatives of Islam, Christianity and indigenous religions can reach even people with particularly conservative religious attitudes and be heard by them. The multiplier effect of their advice and guidance can help increase acceptance of family planning within their organisations and local communities.
- › ...identify the appropriate language for engaging with religious communities and religious organisations on a long-term basis. On the one hand, they must confront religious leaders with the reality that women are having unwanted pregnancies, teenagers are sexually active, menstruation is a taboo topic in many places, which hinders the schooling of young women, and traditional role models impede personal and social development. On the other hand, they have to find a language that respects people's personal beliefs. This means that secular organisations need to find out what believers actually understand by terms like family planning and what values underlie this understanding.

B. Religious communities, their institutions and local leaders should:

- › ...disseminate interpretations of religious texts that support gender equality and debunk popular myths. The prevailing image of religious communities is still one where women are only seen as mothers and wives. Religious communities are best placed to counter this perception and offer alternative views.
- › ...raise awareness among religious leaders on how important gender equality, family planning and education of girls are to the community's socio-economic development, because equal participation of women in society will have a significant impact on the speed of decline in fertility rates in West African countries.
- › ...extend their networking and develop a trans-regional pool of best-practice solutions. This will encourage religious communities to share ideas, pool their resources and disseminate successful strategies and solutions.
- › ...work towards gender equality and involve men more in their efforts to achieve this. Since men bear the same responsibility as women for sexual activity and family size, religious organisations and their representatives should, for instance, develop alternative concepts of masculinity.

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Foreword

For many countries of West Africa, demographic change presents both challenges and opportunities. Underlying political, social and economic conditions need to be adapted to changing demographics, and most governments within the region are already working on national strategies for demographic development. They are also aware of the close relationship between poverty, education and fertility. Thanks to their status as trustworthy institutions, traditional authority figures and religious communities, which play a significant role in the West African context, are helping to raise awareness of the consequences of population growth. They can help make West African men and women aware of the importance of gender equality, education for girls and family planning, thus promoting a sustainable value shift from within their own communities. This is not only beneficial for the future prospects of women, girls and young people, and for sustainable development in general. Over the medium term, it will also have the added positive effect of changing the age structure of the population in West African countries and thus bringing hope of a surge in economic development.

With that in mind, the Regional Programme for Political Dialogue in West Africa of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung organised some initial regional exchanges over the past few years. At multi-stakeholder workshops in Conakry/Guinea (2018) and Grand-Bassam/Ivory Coast (2019), participants from science, government, religious communities and civil society came up with an action plan, including concrete proposals to align demographic and socio-economic development in the region. Traditional and religious authority figures were given a priority role in that context, particularly in areas like education and family planning. Overall, it was remarkable how much openness there was to the idea of discussing even the more controversial aspects of demographic change.

The Berlin Institute for Population and Development was able to take part in the event in Grand-Bassam in 2019 and make a key contribution to the exchange of ideas and perspectives between participants from West Africa and Europe. This study, "Faith in action – how religious organisations facilitate demographic change in West Africa" is designed to be the next factual resource and a constructive guide to further exchanges and policy formation around all aspects of demographic change. The study is particularly aimed at religious communities, experts in civil society and international cooperation, leaders of educational and health authorities, government representatives and interested members of the general public.

Foreword

In earlier research papers, the Berlin Institute focused particularly on the worldwide opposition of religious and conservative forces to women's right to self-determination and the impact this has on progress in matters of sexual and reproductive health, including family planning, in countries on the African continent and elsewhere. However, in many African nations there are faith communities, religious leaders and organisations actively advocating for more gender equality, family planning and a more open approach to sexuality. So, is there a difference between theory and practice, between the interpretation of religious texts and the way faith is applied in everyday life? What influence do religion, religiosity and cultural norms have on the desire to have children and on family sizes?

In our search for answers to all these questions, we encountered numerous examples which illustrate the great potential of dialogue with religious groups, organisations and their leaders as a means of overcoming demographic challenges in West Africa and leveraging the chances that demographic change brings. We hope this paper is a stimulating read and look forward to a lively discussion of our research findings and recommendations for action.

Abidjan and Berlin, June 2021

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1. Religion and demography - an infinite story

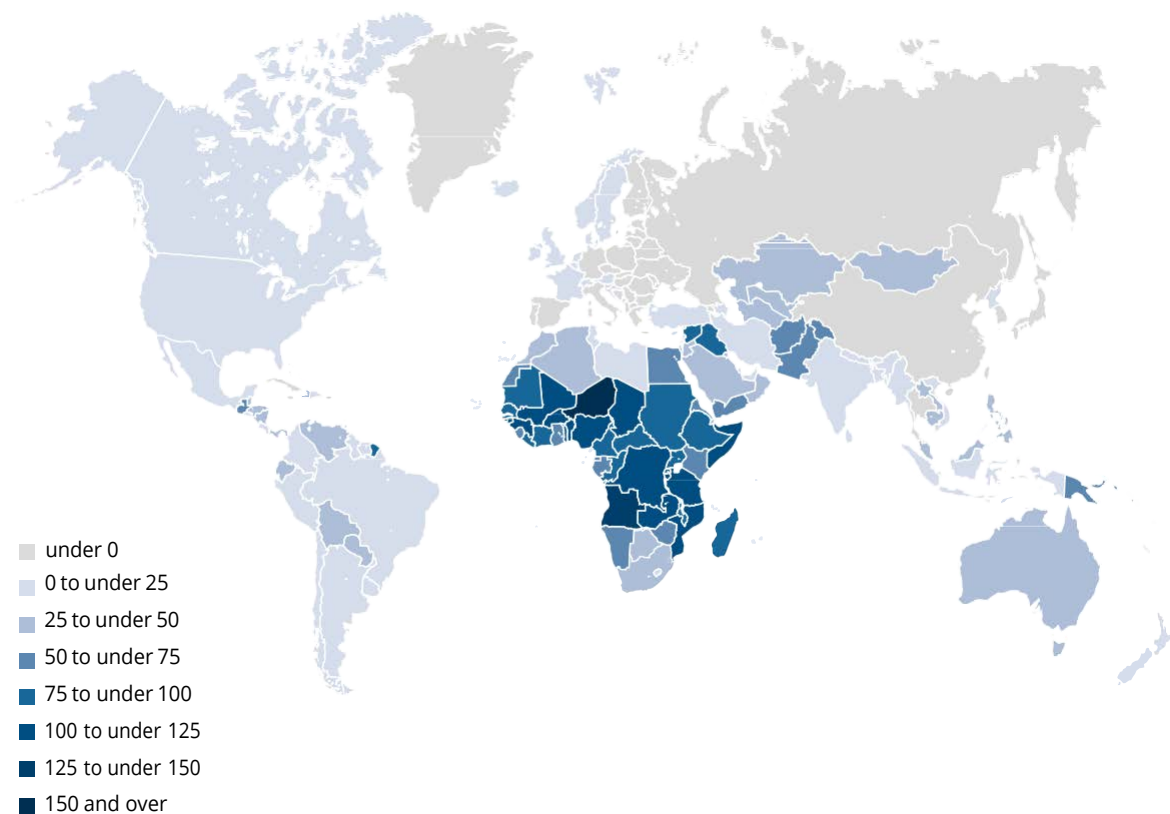


Religious authorities of all faiths and denominations refuse to intervene in the divine order of things when it comes to the birth of children – including those in West African nations¹, whose populations are growing faster than anywhere else in the world. But what is the link between religion and fertility trends?

United Nations statisticians predict that in the year 2050 around 9.7 billion people will live on this planet or almost two billion more than there are now.² However, there are signs that the end of this growth trajectory is in sight. Ever since the 1970s, the growth rate has been dropping in global terms and so far, it has halved to just one per cent.³ In many regions of the world, women are having fewer and fewer children. Instead, they tend to work more and, if they have the opportunity, make their own personal life choices, with motherhood being only one of many options. In industrial nations like Germany, Japan and France, the population is aging, and the population pyramid there now looks more like the dome of the Taj Mahal.^{4,5} But the number of children are not declining universally. In parts of South Asia and on the African continent, the age structure has retained its pyramid shape. Populations in these regions are still growing at a fast rate, with each cohort larger than the previous year group and comparatively fewer people surviving into old age. The base is widening and the top of the pyramid sharpens to a clear peak. Children born between Algeria and South Africa are expected to account for more than half of worldwide population growth over the next 30 years.⁶

Where the population grows

Fig. 1: Predicted population growth worldwide, by percentage from 2020 to 2050



Even if the end of global population growth is on the horizon, there are significantly more people of reproductive age now living on this planet than there were 60 years ago. Every year another 80 million people are added to the world's population.⁷ In less-developed regions, such as West and Central Africa, that growth trend is expected to persist in the future. Since there is already a severe shortage of jobs, health services and education for many people in these countries, they live in precarious conditions.

(Data source: UNDESA⁸)

Particularly in West African nations like Nigeria, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, the population over the coming decades is expected to grow significantly. Today a total of around 402 million people live in the region as a whole, but by 2050 there are likely to be 797 million.⁹ On average, women there have four to seven children each.¹⁰ And they often want to have even more.¹¹ The reasons for this are cultural and social norms, religious views as well as a lack of gender equality, relatively high child mortality rates and few educational opportunities – particularly for women and girls.¹² In the medium term, more people will be competing for schooling and employment due to population growth in these countries.

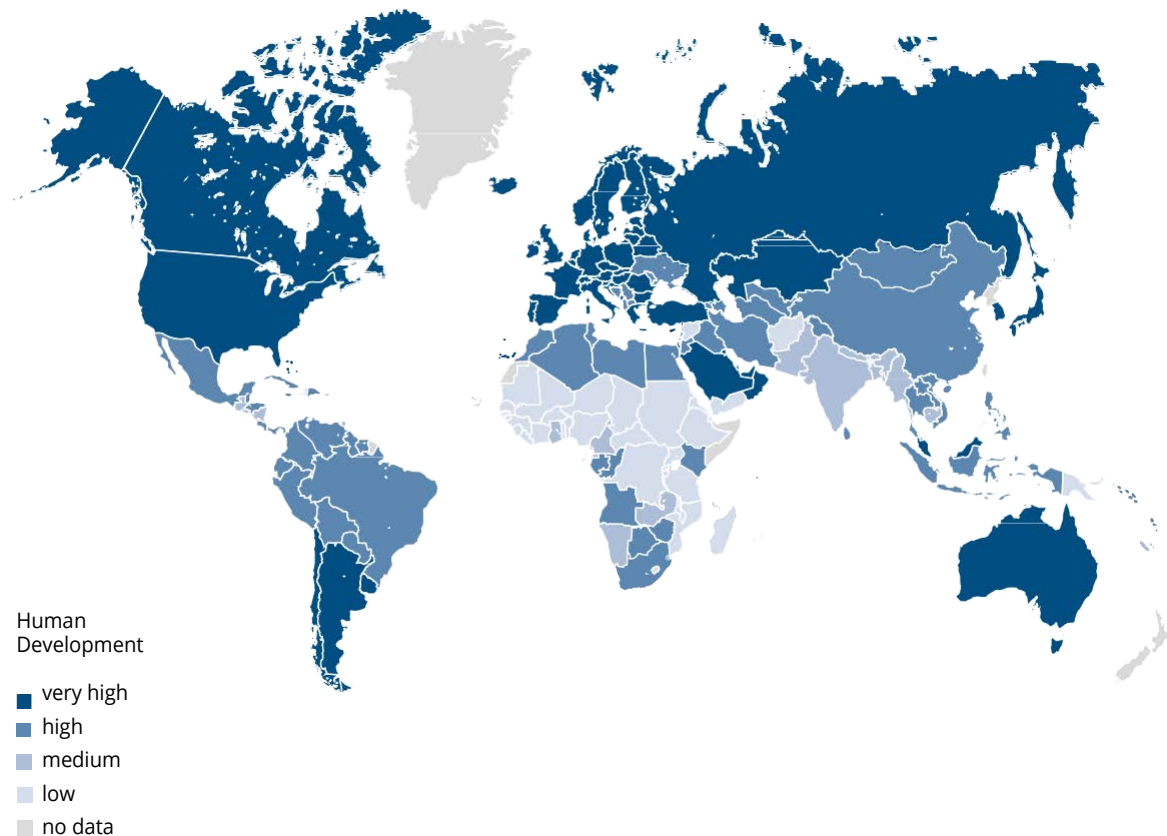
Governments must provide sufficient healthcare and offer young people a future perspective. If nations and societies fail to do so, many people are in danger of losing the right to self-determination.

Everyone born wants to live well

Today, many countries are not able to provide their populations with the necessary healthcare and educational infrastructure.^{13,14,15} In 2019 about 3.7 million children of primary school age did not attend school because they often helped their families to put food on the table, and that figure is unlikely to be the true extent of the problem, since seven of the 16 West African countries do not have current figures for this.¹⁶ In many places, local commerce is also failing to offer young people secure employment.¹⁷ Between 2010 and 2020, the West African labour force grew by an average of 5.4 million people annually, but at the same time there were just nine million jobs available on an average annual basis between 2000 and 2017 in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. Of those, only 2.6 million were formal employment positions. The rest were made up of informal jobs and self-employed work within the agricultural sector.^{18,19} Anyone lucky enough to be born into the aspiring middle or upper classes has some hope of career prospects and the chance to earn a decent income, while the majority has to contend with bleak career prospects. If the population continues to grow, this uneven distribution of wealth and career prospects will only be exacerbated. With each additional newborn, the demand for these social goods increases, because every human being aspires to a good life. By 2030 there are likely to be about 115 million more people trying to claim their rightful place in West African societies than there already are today.²⁰

Progress is urgently needed

Fig. 2: Human Development Index (HDI) worldwide, 2019



On the African continent, countries must work to provide good living conditions for their inhabitants while at the same time dealing with demographic change – both under difficult conditions. This is illustrated by the Human Development Index or HDI, which is how the United Nations measure the level of development throughout the world. The index classifies all countries of the world into four groups according to life expectancy, education and per capita income. Of the West African nations, only Ghana and Cape Verde make it into the third category of “medium human development”. All other countries in the region fall into the fourth category of “low human development”.

(Data source: UNDP²¹)

When countries achieve socio-economic progress, their fertility rates are likely to fall in the medium term. Examples from Latin America and Asia show that women have fewer children when people feel well provided with healthcare services, their children are able to play and learn with classmates and when their incomes are sufficient to feed their families. By the same token, lower child numbers tend to favour positive socio-economic development.²²

When the age structure changes as a result of lower fertility rates and better living conditions, subsequent age groups become progressively smaller and the balance shifts towards the working population. In other words, a particularly large number of working-age people are available to the labour market, who are able to work and be productive. At the same time, the working population has fewer children and young people to look after and provide for. That kind of favourable age structure is referred to as a demographic bonus. Given the right underlying political and economic conditions, this may translate into an economic upswing — or a so-called demographic dividend. However, for the majority of all African nations, a demographically-driven boost in economic development is far from becoming a reality. According to UN projections, only Cape Verde (since 2010), Ghana (2035), Sierra Leone (2040) and Guinea-Bissau (2045) will achieve such an age structure by 2050.²³

All West African governments have already addressed a range of demographic challenges from fertility to the demographic dividend and are pursuing the goal of lowering the number of children in the long term.²⁴ In order to achieve such a change, their population policies must empower women and their families to make conscious decisions about the number and timing of children they want to have. Other African countries like Ethiopia have invested over the past few decades in health, education, jobs, gender equality and family planning, and fertility rates in that country have declined accordingly.²⁵

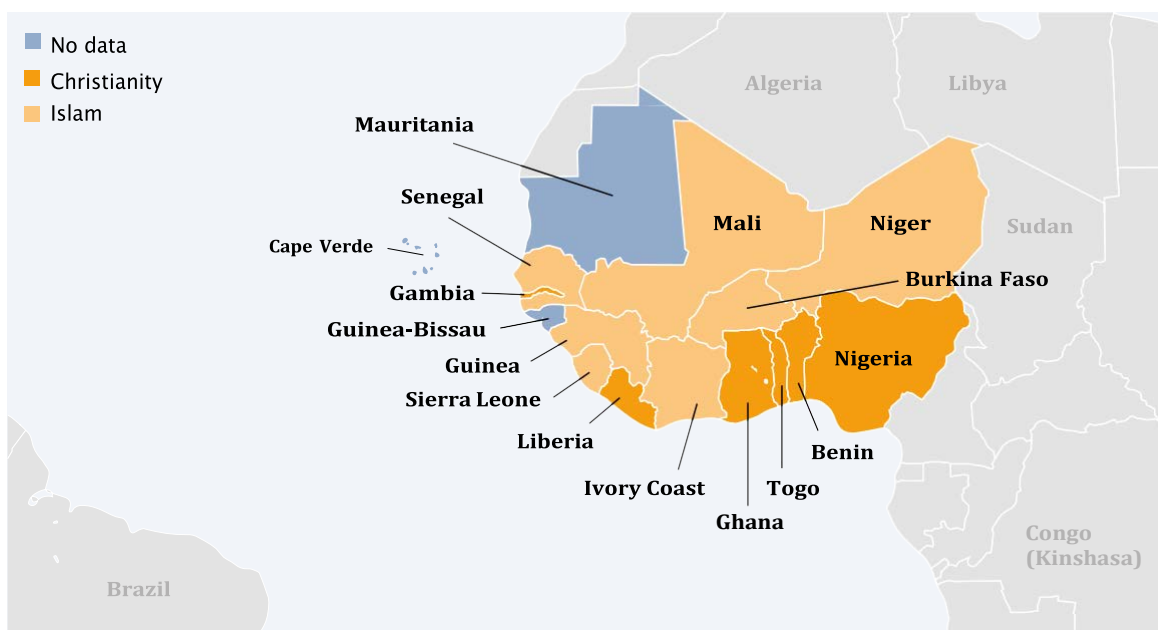
1.1 The divine factor? The link between religion and fertility

If women want to have fewer children or set other priorities in life rather than having family, they often face a more difficult path. Their husbands, parents (in-law) and other family members often object to the idea of limiting the number of children in the family or spacing between two pregnancies. Some women also share such scepticism and negativity.²⁶ Having many children is considered desirable by many people. One reason for this – in rural areas for instance – is that it comes with economic benefits, since every spare pair of hands helps ensure the whole family is well fed and parents are looked after in their old age. Another aspect is that many people, for religious reasons, reject the notion of determining the size of their family themselves, instead preferring to trust their god to make that decision for them.²⁷

1. Religion and demography – an infinite story

Christians and Muslims predominate among believers

Fig. 3: Largest religious group (self-professed information about religious adherence) by country, 2016/2018



Anyone not believing in God or feeling no allegiance to any other religion is likely to have difficulty finding other non-believers in most African countries. The situation is no different in West Africa. In Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Niger nearly one hundred percent of the population belong to a religious community. While most people in the coastal nations of Ghana, Benin, Togo and Liberia frequently consult their Bibles, inhabitants of Niger, Mali and Gambia are more likely to read the Koran. Though Christianity and Islam dominate the religious landscape, indigenous religions are also found in many countries (cf. Fig. 7 “Faith lives on in mixed form” on p. 29). In addition, the major faiths also include a mix of indigenous traditions and religious customs in their religious practices.

(Data source: Afrobarometer ²⁸)

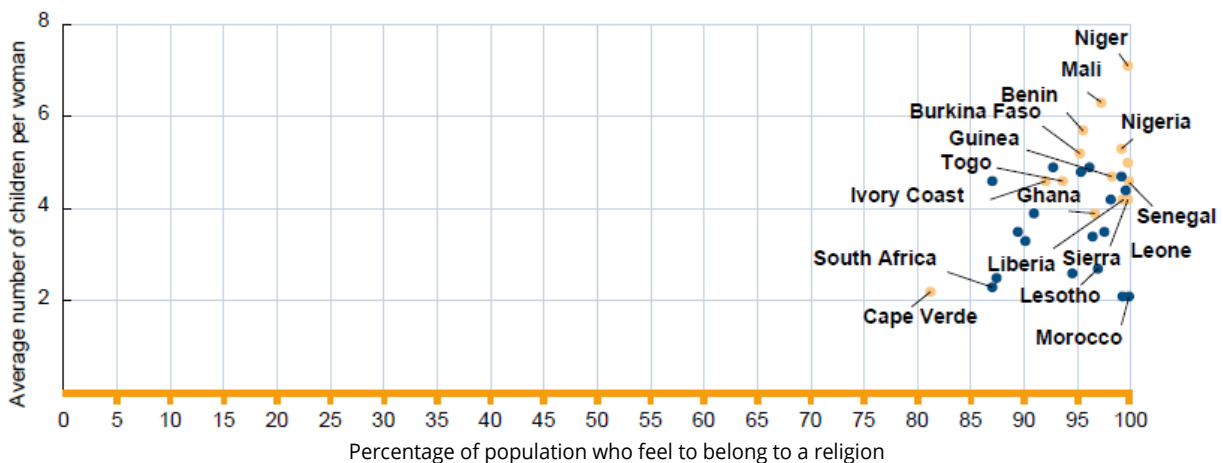
At first glance, one might assume that religion in West African countries contributes to the desire to have many children. Religious leaders play a special role in many communities. According to the Afrobarometer, (a Pan-African research institute), almost three quarters of people trust their imam, priest or other religious authority in many questions of daily life (see box: “Encourage men to reflect on their social roles”, pp. 51–52). Presidents, parliaments and locally elected politicians do not enjoy the trust of such a large segment of the population. They only reach around 47 to 58 percent.^{29,30} This means people do not merely belong to a particular religion on paper. They also live their lives according to their beliefs and the rules of their faith communities, including the religious authority figures who give them guidance. Observers in Africa and elsewhere therefore believe that religion and faith can influence the reproductive behaviour of people.^{31,32,33}

Many believers, many children?

Behind the assumption that religion influences population growth is a simple but important demographic observation from last century, when scientists in the USA discovered that women in Catholic and Protestant communities gave birth, on average, to a different number of children. Initially they were unable to explain the reason for this. Was it due to the communities themselves? Did they have different ideas about how to lead a devout life? Demographers have been searching for answers to these questions since the 1960s. The initial findings from the USA still inspire countless scientific publications today. But over time, interest started to wane because fertility rates of Catholics and Protestants over succeeding decades began to approximate each other more and more. So demographers turned to other religious communities and regions – including the predominantly Muslim countries of the MENA region and South Asia.^{34,35} Since then, research into the fertility rates of religious communities has experienced its second, third, fourth and even fifth revival. In the meantime, interest has turned to the fast-growing regions of the world with West Africa being a prime example, because a particularly high number of people there have a sense of belonging to one religion or another, and the populations of these countries are also growing at a fast pace.^{36,37}

Religious affiliation and high fertility rates do not always go together

Fig. 4: Countries by percentage of people who feel to belong to a religion, 2016/2018 and average number of children per woman (aged 15 to 49), 2019



In West African societies, families with many children are often religious, so it would be natural to assume a link between the two groups. This graph shows the fertility rate and the percentage of population who identify with a religion in 32 African countries. The point cloud is an indication that more factors are likely to account for that high number of children than just religion. For instance, believers in Ghana and Sierra Leone make up close to one hundred percent of the population, but women there only have an average of 3.9 to 4.2 children, or one to two children fewer than the West African average.

(Data source: Afrobarometer³⁸, PRB³⁹)

1. Religion and demography – an infinite story

Demographic research has produced a huge body of literature attempting to explain how religious affiliation, religiosity or faith affects how many children are considered desirable and how many are actually born.⁴⁰ Various explanations have emerged over the past six decades or so of religious demographic research and two of them are particularly relevant to this paper. The *Particularised Theology* approach says different faiths have a different attitude to the merits of large family sizes. The *Social Characteristics* approach, on the other hand, points to socio-economic indicators as the reason for different family sizes in different faith communities.^{41,42}

Do religious adherents follow the principles of their faith?

The first explanation is that people follow their faith when they have children. So if their religious doctrine allows or sanctions family planning and contraception, for instance, they will act accordingly. According to this theory, Catholic, Protestant, Lutheran and Muslim communities hold different positions on childbirth. This explains why fertility rates of religious communities vary according to their teachings. It depends primarily on whether a religion proscribes doctrines on matters that directly affect the sex life of believers. This includes theological positions on motherhood, marriage, divorce and contraception and the term used to describe this approach is *Particularised Theology*.^{43,44}

Some scientists subscribe to this proposition and have come up with a whole list of theological positions directly or indirectly in favour of large family sizes. Children in all religions are seen as desirable per se. In Islam, for instance, the option of polygamy allows men to sire more children than in monogamous relationships. In some religions, when women bring children into the world, it also raises their status within the faith community.^{45,46} But do these general statements about religion hold up and have general applicability? Scientists are not in agreement on this. In Islam, for instance, major schools of thought have very different interpretations of the Koran, and the degree of direction they give to the faithful on how they should behave varies greatly as a result (see chapter: "Different faiths, different perspectives? p. 22).⁴⁷

Yet people make important decisions on matters such as how many children they want to have not just because the local priest or imam expresses a view on the subject in one way or another. In a well-respected essay written in 2004, demographer Kevin McQuillan lists three conditions that must prevail, in his opinion, for people to behave in everyday life in accordance with their religious principles. Firstly, the religion must formulate norms, such as condemning family planning or explicitly approving the education of girls. Secondly, it must be in a position to convince its adherents to follow those norms. And thirdly, religions have a more powerful influence on the reproductive behaviour of adherents if their believers have a particularly strong affiliation with their faith community.⁴⁸ These ideal conditions do not apply in every case and in every location. But they do highlight the status of religious leaders, and indicate how much potential influence a religious community can have on its members.

Over and over again, scientists have used empirical studies to test the veracity of the Particularised Theology theory. Does theology really have an impact on whether a family decides to have another child or not? And what methods do religions use to exert such influence? Their findings are unclear. In statistical modelling, a link between religion and fertility can be drawn – even when other socio-economic factors such as income, educational level and age are factored in.⁴⁹ But the strength of that link varies considerably from one country to another.⁵⁰ This means there must be other factors influencing the correlation between religion and fertility rates. It also accounts for the fact that, in the past, the *Particularised Theology* has met with a great deal of resistance from the academic community.

Quality of data determines validity of findings

If scientists wish to do more than postulate hypotheses about how religion and fertility are linked, they must test their theoretical models. To do so, they need comparable data from various countries to enable them to check whether their assumptions are correct and how much they depend on the cultural context. The most important source of information is national census data and consumer surveys. They contain the number of children, age, educational level and residential location of people. In many countries, the statistics department records the religious affiliation of the population, while others choose not to do so, for various reasons. In such cases, representative surveys such as those conducted by private consumer research institutes may help to fill the gaps.⁵¹

But how much does the data really reveal? For one thing, the information relies on what individual respondents say when interviewed, and the information cannot always be verified. Census workers often only ask about membership of a religious community, such as the Catholic Church or Shia Islam. That is of limited value here, as it gives no indication whether a person's stated religion affects the way they live or make their decisions, and how that changes over the course of their life. Census and survey information is also inadequate as a means of reflecting the religious landscape as a whole. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, many believers have set up new Christian churches and the number of Pentecostal churches has also increased significantly.^{52,53}

The fact that census or survey data in various places presents an unclear picture should not deter scientists from continuing their research. Statistics departments in many countries are working to improve the quality of data they collect, and scientists are continually coming up with new ways of offsetting data deficiencies.

Does social class count more than faith?

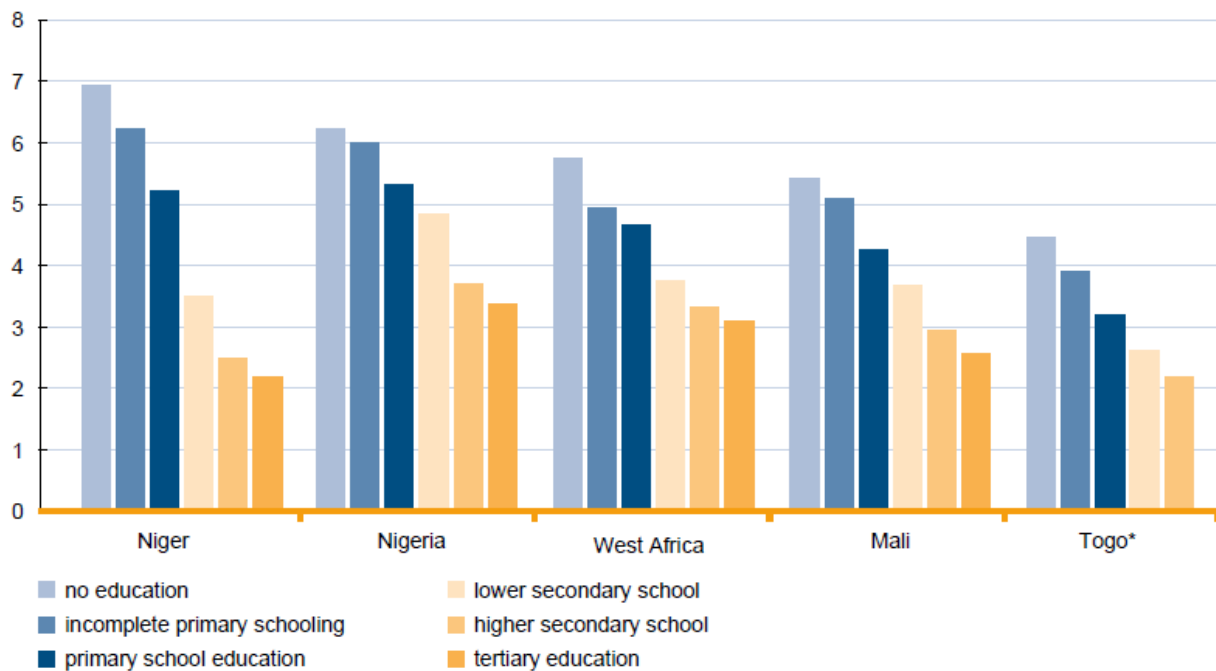
Subscribers to the *Social Characteristics* approach believe religion and fertility only appear to be linked. If the right factors were taken into consideration, that correlation would disappear.^{54,55} Critics of the *Particularised Theology* approach explain high fertility rates by pointing out that children from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to attend school, which means girls have their children earlier and typically give birth to more children than girls from families with higher standards of living.^{56,57}

1. Religion and demography
 - an infinite story

The education example clearly illustrates why any doubts over religion having a direct impact on fertility rates are often legitimate. At first glance, a common pattern may be evident in many countries, with women in Muslim communities for instance having more children than those in Christian communities. One study in 2005 made a more thorough analysis of the data for India, where Muslim women on average gave birth to 3.4 children while Christian mothers averaged 2.3. According to the *Particularised Theology* theory, this would indicate that Indian imams convey a more birth-friendly attitude than local Christian priests. But in a second step, analysts broke down the same figures by the educational level of the women and the picture changed. It turned out religious affiliation of women with higher education made only a marginal difference, while for women with less formal education the difference amounted to roughly one child. They therefore concluded that the more education, the less influence religion has on the fertility rate.⁵⁸

Education curbs population growth

Fig. 5: Average number of children per woman by educational level and country, 2020–2025



*no accurate data available

In most poor countries, the rule of thumb is that women with better access to education tend to have fewer children. The reason is simple. Higher education gives young women more opportunities to decide for themselves how to live their life. They then tend to have their children later in life and generally have fewer children. Without exception, this pattern is repeated in all West African countries. In Niger, women without any education at all have an average of almost five children more than women who have completed secondary school.

(Data source: Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital⁵⁹)

But the influence of religion cannot be dismissed out of hand. Both theology and education can contribute to the way couples decide for or against having another child. Teachers may, for instance, extol the merits of traditional religious role models, where motherhood and large families are the ultimate goal in life, or completely omit the subject altogether (see box: “Adapting health services to the needs of young people”, pp. 45–46). This is another reason why demographers keep trying to come up with statistical models to determine the correlation between the two ideas.⁶⁰

1.2 Many factors determine the number of children

Demographers, economists and social scientists still have problems unravelling the complex web linking religion and fertility. There appear to be no clear answers, but it may be that existing explanations can work simultaneously, although to varying degrees, depending on the regional and cultural context. No single approach offers an exhaustive explanation, but many theories and hypotheses may help provide a more differentiated picture.⁶¹ For instance, members of a religious community in rural areas of Senegal may strictly follow what the local imams tell them and accept family planning measures only under special conditions – in which case theology has a stronger influence on their actions. Equally, it could be more important in the capital city of Dakar as to which quarter people live in, and whether they have access to education and jobs – in which case the socio-economic factors play a bigger role.

Even though many questions remain open, research findings from sixty years of religious demographics make one thing clear. Religion certainly has a measurable influence on the average number of children per woman – albeit sometimes indirectly. The results also show that imams, priests, and other religious authority figures play a not insignificant role. People trust them. According to the latest Afrobarometer, 42 to 50 percent of the people in Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal and Guinea turn to religious leaders for advice on important matters.⁶² These spiritual leaders are familiar with the socio-economic reality in their local area. Some of them are already advocating for better access to family planning methods, education of girls and gender equality.

Our goal in this paper was therefore to find out where religious figures of authority or religious organisations are already engaged in the demographically relevant areas. Their everyday work on the ground interested us. What projects have they initiated? What obstacles have they encountered along the way and when were they successful? These were some of the key questions we posed at the start of the research project. However, Christianity, Islam and indigenous religions have different attitudes to the subject of family size and family planning. So we have summarised the key commonalities and differences between them in the following pages of this paper.

1. Religion and demography – an infinite story

- 1 By West Africa we mean, based on the United Nations definition: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. Unlike the UN we have chosen not to include Saint Helena.
- 2 United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs, Population Division (2019). World Population Prospects 2019, Online Edition. Rev. 1. File POP/1-1: Total population (both sexes combined) by region, subregion and country, annually for 1950 – 2100 (thousands), Medium fertility variant, 2020–2100. New York. population.un.org/wpp/ (24.03.21).
- 3 United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs, Population Division (2019). World Population Prospects 2019, Online Edition. Rev. 1. File POP/2: Average annual rate of population change by region, subregion and country, 1950 – 2100 (percentage). Estimates 1950–2020. New York. population.un.org/wpp/ (24.03.21).
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1. Religion and demography – an infinite story

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2. Different faith, different perspective ?



Christianity, Islam and indigenous West African religions set very precise moral values which believers are expected to align their (family) lives to. So where do these religions stand on family planning and gender equality?

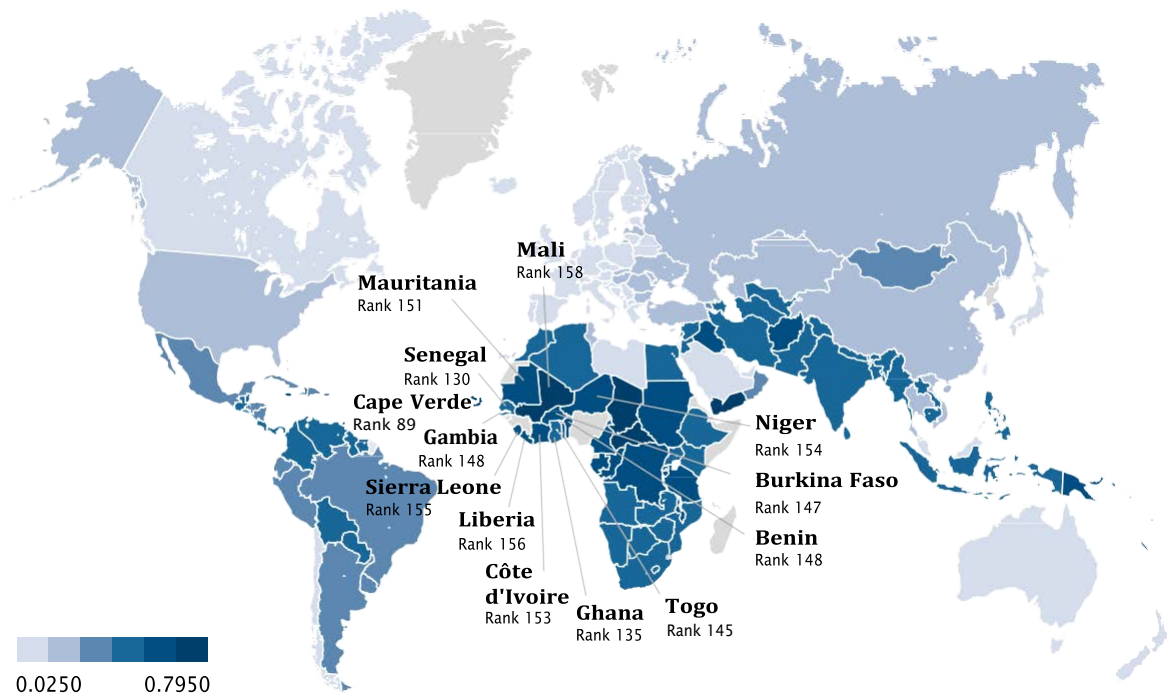
Churches, mosque communities and other religious groups advise and support their members on all key questions of life, such as: How should we educate our children? What is the best way to exercise my responsibility as a father or mother? Over the centuries of their existence, churches have each come up with their own code of conduct. Drawing on different sources, they issue numerous recommendations, instructions and examples to teach their followers how to lead a devout life.^{63,64} That religious “compass” gives them direction, especially on matters of family life.⁶⁵ It specifies the values parents should be imparting to their children and explains how couples should behave towards each other.⁶⁶

All major religions view the family as the most important social unit, and the starting point for all life, which is why all of their social-conduct recommendations relate to family life.⁶⁷ For one thing, much of religious practice takes place there, with families praying together, passing on religious knowledge and associated customs to the next generation and participating as a family in key religious festivals. Another reason is that the family is the place where – in theory at least – all new life begins. So ever since time began, religious values have also included ideas on how people should conduct their sex life. The questions range from when and under what circumstances should people have sex to which specific roles are designated for men and women within the family and in society as a whole? All religions have answers to these and similar questions.⁶⁸

2. Different faith,
different perspectives?

Women have little say

Fig. 6: Worldwide gender inequality according to the Gender Inequality Index (“0” = absolute gender equality, “1” = high gender inequality) by indexed ranking of each country (1 to 162), 2019



In many ways, particularly women in poorer countries are still discriminated against men, in terms of access to education, the labour market and political participation. According to the Gender Inequality Index, most West African countries have a poor record on gender equality. Apart from Cape Verde, all of the countries within that region are ranked within the lower third of the index. Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Mali even score below the ten nations worldwide with a particularly high degree of inequality.

(Data source: UNDP⁶⁹)

The spectrum of guidelines ranges from specific details about which contraceptive methods are compatible with the faith to more general moral values.⁷⁰ Religious texts, myths and images also tend to push the needle on the religious “compass” more towards restriction rather than self-determination. How restrictive those rules really are differs not only from one religion to another but also between the strands of a particular faith community.⁷¹ What all religious communities have in common, however, is that priests, imams, scholars or other religious figures of authority stand between the messages and their recipients. They are very familiar with their community members, provide advice to their families and are able to encourage people to make decisions on family life from a religious point of view (see box: “Every community has its own approach”, pp. 49–50). But the advice they offer ultimately stems from what their sacred scriptures and belief systems teach them, which is why it is particularly interesting to examine what Islam, Christianity and indigenous African religions have to say about demographically relevant issues. Where do they stand, for instance, on gender equality in general or on family planning and contraception in particular?

2.1 Islam: children cannot live on air and love alone

A Muslim woman discussing issues with an Islamic scholar frequently hears the following claim: Over the course of history, Islam has extended the rights of woman more than any other religion. That may well be true, in historic terms, according to Riffat Hassan, a leading female Islamic theologian from Pakistan, but these days patriarchal interpretations of the Koran predominate, which only exacerbate existing social inequalities between men and women.⁷² The situation is similar on questions of sexuality and family planning. A widespread assumption among believers in many countries is that Islam rejects family planning.^{73, 74} The number of children a woman brings into the world lies in the hand of God, not in her own, is the message imams and other religious leaders preach to their adherents.⁷⁵ This could be one reason why Muslim women in 17 countries of sub-Saharan Africa want to have larger families on average than non-Muslim women. An analysis of data from *Demographic and Health Surveys* (DHS) taken in 2015 supports this theory.⁷⁶

However, contrary to popular opinion, a large proportion of Islamic scholars view family planning as a legitimate approach – including many representatives of the influential Al-Azhar University in Cairo, as well as numerous imams and sheiks, like Sufi Islam leaders in Senegal (see box: “Encourage men to reflect on their social roles”, pp. 51–52). Depending on the family situation, they may even advise letting more time elapse before having another child or limiting the number of children altogether. Economic and health reasons should lead couples to make conscious and personal decisions about their own family size and adjust their sex life accordingly. The Koran requires of parents, for instance, that they treat their children equally. Some Islamic strands recommend that children should sleep “in their own little realm”. While such expectations do not directly force parents to have just one or two children, they do demand from them a certain standard of living which would enable their children to live a good life.⁷⁷ Children must eat, need clothing and should be educated. Newborns should have a healthy start to life and pregnancies should not endanger the health of mothers.^{78, 79} These are a few of the arguments scholars have derived from the Koran and cite as examples on the subject of family planning.

2. *Different faith, different perspective?*

How schools of thought interpret religious texts

Different Islamic strands – like Sunni and Shiite Islam or Sufism – interpret the sacred scriptures in their own way. Different schools of thought within these strands differentiate these groups even further.⁸⁰ Even though many imams agree that family planning and faith are compatible, when and under what conditions that is the case varies by country and community. Some strands are directly opposed to the idea of couples using contraception or consciously limiting the number of children they have.⁸¹

The various schools of thought with their differing views reach imams and believers across the entire African continent. Among religious leaders of Sunni Islam, the Al-Azhar University in Cairo is considered the authority on matters of faith and is an important centre of Islamic teaching. Imams, with permission from the Egyptian government to preach in mosques, study the Koran and the Sunna there, i.e., the way of life, morals and customs of Mohammed. They study the Hadiths, the sayings of the prophet, and are trained in Islamic law. This university influences Sunni communities and Muslims well beyond the borders of Egypt.⁸²

There is an increasing tendency for Islamic scholars like academics at the Al-Azhar University to debate the issue of demographic change. In dialogue with their respective governments or international partners, they are increasingly addressing the issue of rapid population growth – particularly in West Africa – and the challenges faced by society in these countries. Maternal and child health is also moving up on their list of priorities. In addition, women in many places, like Riffat Hassan, are now studying Islamic texts and arguing for more gender equality (see box: “Include women at all levels”, pp. 38–39).⁸³ In other words, the Islamic world is no monolithic block. Rather, in all West African countries, it encompasses conservative, liberal and progressive strands, all advocating for their own interpretation of the scriptures.

Practice example: guidelines and supporting arguments make existing knowledge freely available

Some religious networks and organisations already make resources available to help persuade their adherents of the importance of family planning, education of girls and gender equality. The following organisations offer brief papers outlining which arguments are contained in the Koran or the Bible and explain in practical guidelines the aspects religious leaders should consider when putting these issues on the agenda in their community. The papers draw on information, case studies and other documents from all over the world:

Faith to Action Network (cf. p. 54)

<https://www.faithtoactionnetwork.org>

Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities

<https://jliflc.com>

Cadre des Religieux pour la Santé et le Développement (cf. pp 51–52)

<https://crsdsenegal.org/index.php>

Tearfund (cf. p. 52)

<https://learn.tearfund.org>

2.2 Christianity: the system of “passing on the gift of life”

Unlike Islam, many Christian denominations, especially the Roman Catholic Church, are much more tightly organised. No other religion with wide reach in West Africa has such a centralised and hierarchical structure, with the power to influence religious communities all over the world.⁸⁴ This also has an effect on the prevailing sexual mores, as the highest Catholic institution, the Vatican – led by the Pope as head of the church – issues edicts with particularly strict positions on the subject.⁸⁵

Abstinence rather than contraception

In 2015, a statement made by the head of the Catholic Church made journalists sit up and take notice. On his return from a visit to the Philippines, the Pope granted them an in-flight press conference. When asked what he thought about population growth in the island nation, Pope Francis went on record as saying: good Catholics should be responsible parents and make conscious decisions about the number of children they bring into the world.⁸⁶ His answer caused a sensation worldwide. After all, for decades the Vatican, bishops, priests and devout Catholics had debated the attitude of the Catholic Church to family planning and modern contraception methods. But up until then, nothing in the official guidelines had ever changed. The principle of “responsible parenting” in concrete terms meant: married couples should exercise abstinence, curb their sexual desires and thus “plan” the size of their family.⁸⁷

2. Different faith, different perspective?

What the Catholic Church thinks about sexuality and family planning is contained in the papal encyclical “*Humanae Vitae*”. Pope Paul VI published this document in 1968 and the positions stipulated there still apply to this day. Sexuality belongs within a marriage between a man and a woman. The primary purpose of this is to create human life – wholly in keeping with the divine creation. Contraception or, perish the thought, abortion are therefore incompatible with Catholic sexual mores. Unwanted pregnancies, sexual relations between unmarried people or teenagers have no place in the world view of “*Humanae Vitae*” (see box: “Adapting health services to the needs of young people”, pp. 45–46).⁸⁸

A broad spectrum of opinion

Beyond the actual doctrine, Christians – Catholics as well as Protestants – hold a variety of views on demographically relevant subjects such as family planning, education of girls and gender equality. While Catholics and Protestants, as well as other Christian strands, all refer to the Bible, they focus on different aspects of it in practising their faith. Some protestant traditions, for instance, emphasise the equality of men and women before God and reinterpret the biblical texts accordingly (see box: “Include women at all levels”, pp. 38–39). According to these branches of Christianity, women should be able to live a self-determined (family) life and make conscious decisions about contraception and family planning.⁸⁹ There are many degrees of separation between organisations like *Catholics for Choice*, (which has advocated since the 1970s for gender equality, good access to reproductive health services and the right to abortion), and other groups which completely reject the notion of family planning.

The very broad spectrum of Christian opinion is illustrated by differences in pastors, priests and bishops. Even though they all belong to the clergy, they do not always share the prevailing doctrine. When talking to members of their community or preaching during mass, they may criticise the position of the Vatican – given the socio-economic realities of their communities. In the Catholic Church within sub-Saharan Africa, there have been repeated cases of representatives criticising the edicts issued from Rome. For instance, Bishop Kevin Dowling from Rustenberg in South Africa spoke out against the call to reject condoms, as required by the Vatican. He was in favour of condoms being distributed. Dowling argued that in many situations it is simply impossible to rely on people living in abstinence before marriage or remaining faithful to their spouse. Given the high number of HIV/AIDS cases in sub-Saharan Africa, the ultimate priority for the clergy, in his view, was to protect human life.⁹⁰

2.3 Indigenous religions: sons to honour their ancestors

Christianity and Islam are the dominant religions in West Africa today. But as in many other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, many indigenous religions exist between the borders of Mauritania and Nigeria, including the Ashanti, Edo and Yoruba faith.⁹¹

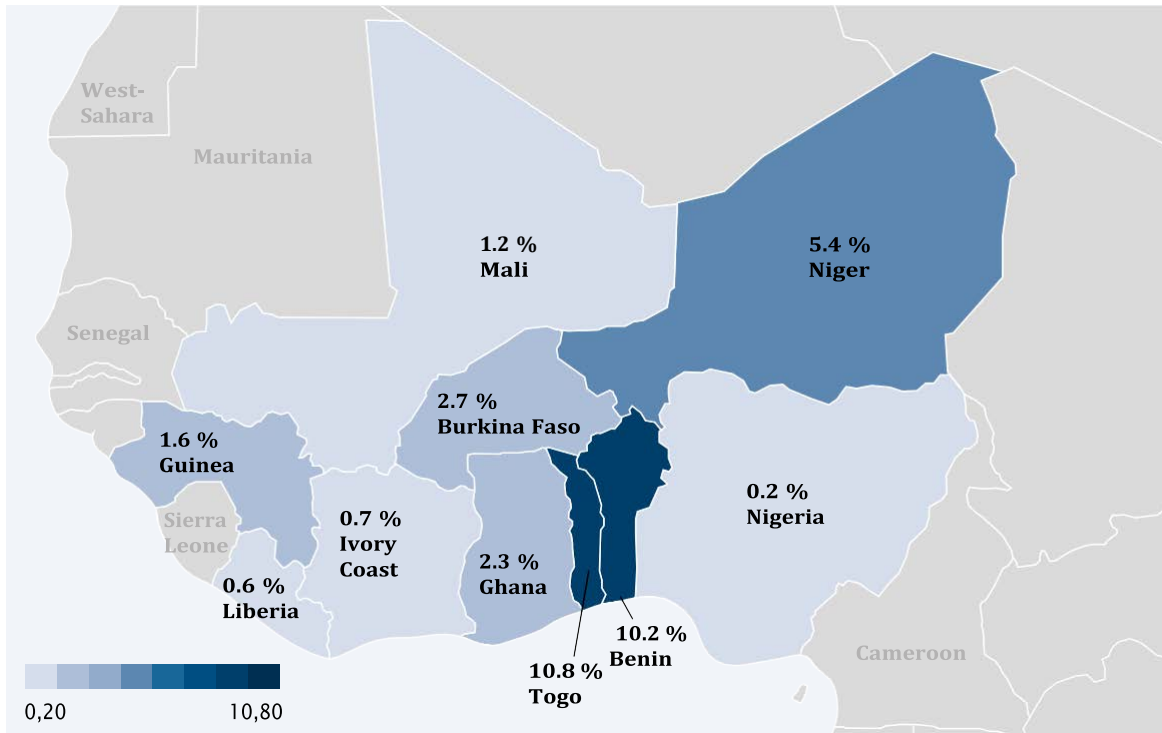
Some indigenous religions date back to the earliest human communities in the region. By comparison, Christianity only made it to Sub-Saharan Africa in the 15th century and Islam spread after the death of Mohammed over several periods, initially in North African countries in particular and later in the west of the continent.⁹² Over the past few decades, indigenous faith communities in parts of West Africa have been increasingly losing ground. In Togo and Benin, around ten percent of the population belong to an indigenous religious community.⁹³ In many places, mixed forms have arisen, with remnants of indigenous religions making their way into Islamic or Christian myths, rituals and prayers. For instance, a traditional charm might contain a Bible or Koran verse. At the same time, many believers in the African diaspora are reviving indigenous religions and also taking them back with them to the region.⁹⁴

Unlike Islam or Christianity, adherents of indigenous religions do not draw on written sources for their doctrine, but rely on oral traditions handed down by word of mouth and on myths, proverbs and sacred objects. However, just like the two major religions in West Africa, many indigenous faith communities have established their own sexual mores. These often ascribe a special role to women because they have the power of bringing children into the world. At the same time, however, the opportunities for women to flourish outside of marriage and motherhood are limited. These and similar social norms stem from the creation stories of indigenous population groups.⁹⁵

2. Different faith, different perspective?

Faith lives on in mixed form

Fig. 7: Percentage of population with a sense of belonging to an indigenous African religion, 2016/2018



If you were to ask a hundred people on the streets of Djougou, a medium-size city in North West Benin, which religion they belonged to, about ten people would respond that they are members of an indigenous African religion. Only in Togo is a similar number likely to be found. In the rest of the region, the percentage is dwindling to a very low level. This reflects the decline of indigenous faiths in the regions, while Islam and Christianity have widespread appeal. However, the surveys conducted in this field do not take into account how indigenous traditions and customs have infiltrated aspects of Islamic and Christian faith. Even if they are only practised in pure form by a minority, many indigenous religions continue to exist in various mixed forms.

(Data source: Afrobarometer⁹⁶)

It's a man's world

Devout followers of indigenous religions not only wish to act in accordance with the divine will. They also have to placate other sacred beings, in order to prevent them from ruining their harvests or punishing them with other forms of adversity. Such figures include natural spirits or the ancestors which rule within indigenous belief systems somewhere between earthly life and God. Expectations often arise for followers as a result of this belief⁹⁷ for instance, that women should bring many children into the world and sons in particular. This is because in many – but not all – indigenous faith communities in West Africa, fathers hand over their social and economic privileges to their sons. They give them their name and pass on their legacy to them. This means women in these communities tend to bring more children into the world than they want to, until there are sufficient men in the family.

This acts as a form of social protection for them too, because, when their husband dies, they receive access to his inheritance and possessions via their sons.⁹⁸ This means it is not just religious rules requiring women to bring many children into the world. It may also be in their own interests if they live in the kind of patriarchal societies that are dominated in a social and legal sense by men.

In addition, the community itself, with its ancient traditions and customs, also demands things of women and puts them under pressure. For instance, the fertility of potential wives among the Yoruba population in Nigeria plays an important role in any marriage. Should the couple not be able to have children, it is considered legitimate for the husband to enter another relationship. The possibility that men may also be infertile themselves is often ignored in that situation.⁹⁹ Jacob K. Olupona, a religious researcher and Professor of Harvard University, has found a compelling way to describe the communal pressure exerted on women. He says that women in indigenous religious communities do not experience pregnancy on their own. To some extent the entire community takes part in the process of expecting a newborn.¹⁰⁰ Development researcher Funmi Togonu-Bickersteth concludes that such social norms prevent women from living a self-determined life, including making decisions about their own sexuality.¹⁰¹

Practising what is preached

A glance at all three faith communities shows “the blessing of children” plays a universally significant role. Their followers view birth as the incorporation of divine creation. Traditional roles for men and women stem from this belief (see box: “Everyone around the table”, pp. 54–55). Islam, Christianity and indigenous religions associate the image of a “proper” woman primarily with her potential for motherhood and her role of caring for the family. The status of a woman rises if she has (many) children and at the same time the community expects this of her, in order for her to be “fully valued”.^{102,103} These religious views seem to go hand in hand with cultural norms and traditions.

In reality, theoretical doctrine is seldom practised by believers in their everyday lives. Most people do not adhere to religious rules, but interpret them as they wish and live with the apparent contradictions between theory and practice. Accordingly, researchers point out that, while a person’s beliefs may often influence the way they think about sexuality, they seldom influence how many sexual partners a person has. Surveys of Catholics on almost all continents have shown that couples completely ignore the edicts of the Vatican, in accepting and using modern methods of contraception.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, this does not rule out the possibility that they might prefer a large family themselves, while publicly advocating for contraception or family planning.¹⁰⁵ Around 20 years ago, a study reached the conclusion that many followers of indigenous religions in West Africa (indirectly) argue both for and against family planning at the same time. The women consulted in that survey, for instance, described having a large number of children as a divine blessing for their own family, while simultaneously acknowledging that mothers and children would have a better chance of leading a good, healthy life if families were to plan the number of children they brought into the world.¹⁰⁶

2. Different faith, different perspective?

Even religions change

People's lifestyles change over time and religions gradually change too. Such change is driven by the followers of religion themselves. In Islam, Christianity and indigenous religions, texts, myths and images give couples more freedom to make decisions in keeping with their faith. Anyone wishing to advocate for gender equality or encourage people to determine for themselves how many children to have can build on that.

Priests, imams and indigenous authorities have the ability to present progressive readings of their sacred texts or myths within their local communities and advocate for better living conditions. After all, they are aware of the realities their communities face – of poverty, unemployment and unwanted teenage pregnancies. In many places they are already strengthening initiatives for family planning, awareness raising, education of girls and greater gender equality (see box: "Religious leaders advocate for secondary school education", pp. 42–43). In addition, they often put these issues on the agenda of community meetings. Their contribution can include providing advice to members of the community, training colleagues in religious arguments in favour of family planning, networking with them at national conferences and sharing ideas about barriers and successes. It is how they aim to ensure that families are informed well enough to make decisions for themselves which are still aligned to their faith.

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3. How religious organisations facilitate demographic change



Faith communities and their representatives already advocate in many places for women's reproductive health, universal access to family planning and girls' education. How do they and which success have they had?

In November 2022, the Sixth International Family Planning Conference is scheduled to take place in Pattaya on the east coast of the Gulf of Thailand.¹⁰⁷ Most of the delegates will be working in a professional or voluntary capacity to ensure all couples can choose for themselves which methods they use to determine the number and timing of their children. The delegates will be country representatives or employees of international development organisations or civil society initiatives and networks.

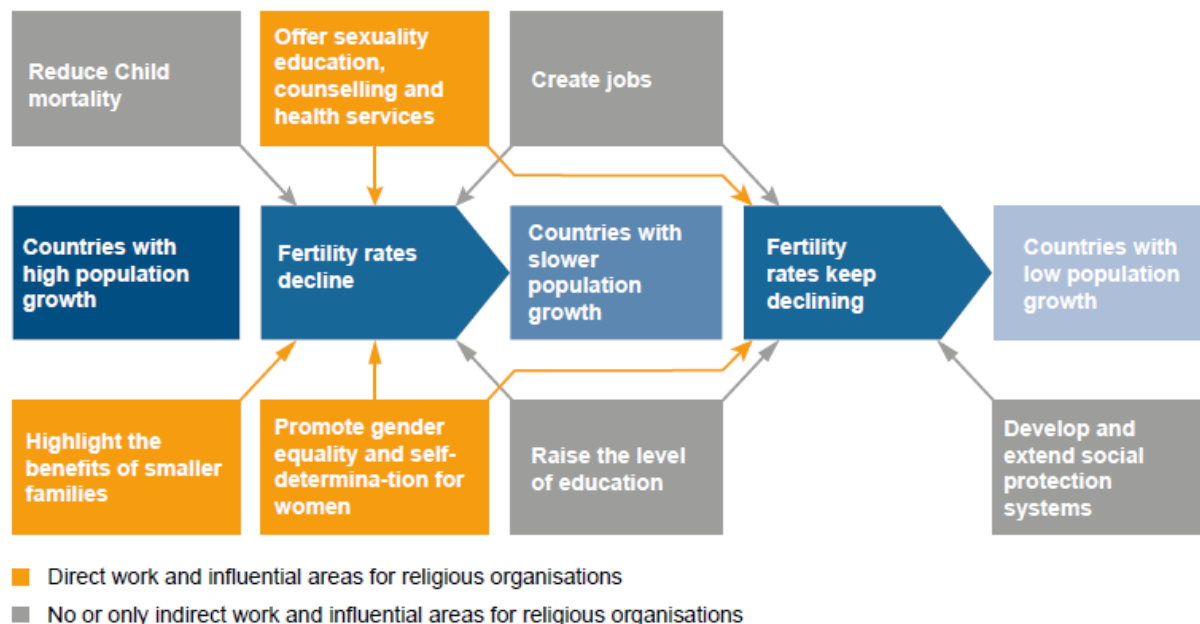
Ever since the first conference in 2009 in Uganda, religious organisations like the Ghanaian NGO *Muslim Family Counselling Services* (MFCS), the worldwide *Faith to Action Network* and Christian development organisation *World Vision* have been involved. During panel discussions, delegates explain how religious representatives can successfully advocate for things like family planning.¹⁰⁸ Religious leaders themselves explain how they have succeeded in convincing sceptics or organising community meetings on family planning.¹⁰⁹

Aside from conferences, the international community is interested in how religious representatives and their organisations can help advance the decline in fertility – particularly in fast-growing regions like West Africa in their day-to-day work. Representatives at all political levels, from health departments to national governments, are trying to collaborate with religious groups, faith communities and individual religious leaders. They know that people trust their imams, priests or indigenous leaders and take their religious views on family planning seriously.

3. How religious organisations facilitate demographic change

Faith can influence demographic change

Fig. 8



Religious communities can directly and indirectly influence fertility rates. Religious leaders can, for instance, highlight the benefits of smaller families while religious organisations can offer sexuality education, counselling and health services. This gives them direct reach within their own communities. At the same time, they can advocate for more self-determination for women by, for instance, promoting the education of girls or questioning traditional gender roles. These methods have a more indirect impact on factors that will be effective in the demographic transition.

(Own graphic based on BMZ¹¹⁰)

Governments, health authorities and development organisations rely on religious communities and their representatives to increase acceptance of family planning among their members or even press for changes to achieve greater gender equality. The imams, priests, bishops and sultans and their associated organisations act as local facilitators between government and society. They advise families and individuals (see box: “Every community has its own approach”, pp. 49–50). Frequently clinics or counselling centres financed by religious organisations provide part of the health infrastructure. This means there is good reason to assume religious communities can contribute to more gender equality and prepare the way for a higher uptake of family planning methods and greater demand for contraceptives. However, faith communities tend to advocate for strict sexual mores, where lust plays no role, and often their representatives fundamentally oppose contraception. But is this an accurate image?

In reality, religious organisations, networks and individual leaders in many West African countries are already engaged in areas influencing population trends:

1. Gender equality
2. Girls education
3. Sexual health
4. Family planning
5. Engagement of boys and men and
6. Networks and multipliers.

What challenges do they have to overcome and how are they going about it?

3.1 Gender equality: more progress is necessary

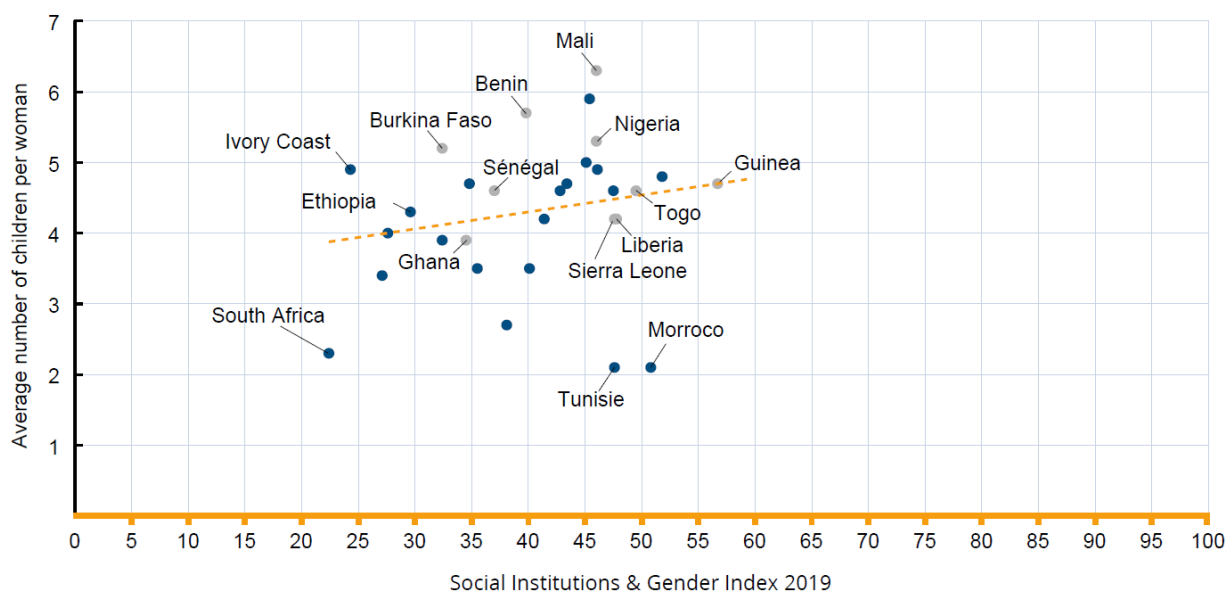
In many parts of West Africa where traditional, patriarchal values determine everyday life, women do not have the same rights as men. In some countries, for instance, they cannot file for divorce. They are often financially dependent on their husband and their primary role is that of the care-giving wife and mother.¹¹¹ Women with no ability to earn their own income may have no choice but to stay with a violent partner.¹¹²

But the cause of inequality does not rest solely with the local judicial system. For instance, property ownership is not only very unequally distributed between social classes but also between sexes. Most employees in the agricultural sector are women but only a fraction of the fields they work in belong to them.¹¹³ In West African parliaments, only an average of around 16 percent of representatives are women. In South and East Africa they make up almost a third of all members of parliament – comparable to the proportion of female MPs in Western and Southern European parliaments.^{114,115}

3. How religious organisations facilitate demographic change

When gender equality rises, the number of children falls

Fig. 9: Average number of children per woman depending on gender inequality according to the Social Institutions & Gender Index (0 = absolute equality; 100 = absolute inequality), 2019



*The **Social Institutions & Gender Index** of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) measures the extent to which women are discriminated against in various ways of life. It includes laws and their implementation as well as attitudes of the population. In countries with a high score on the Index – i.e. where there is a particularly high degree of inequality – the only options open to many women are motherhood and marriage, and alternative roles, if any do exist, are hard to come by. However, the more women and girls participate in society as a whole – from education and culture through to decent and paid work – and the more their reproductive rights are guaranteed, the more likely they are to opt for smaller families.*

(Data source: PRB¹¹⁶, OECD¹¹⁷)

Discrimination means that newborn girls face limited future opportunities, where they are unable to participate to the same extent as newborn boys in the political, economic and social life of their country (see box: “Religious leaders advocate for secondary school education” pp. 42–43). Where this is the case, they tend to have more children.^{118,119} They are expected to look after their children and often their own (grand-) parents while simultaneously doing the housework. This has economic consequences for the entire region. According to an OECD team, the current level of discrimination against women and girls in West Africa accounts for a loss of around 120 billion US dollars in potential income.¹²⁰ Less inequality would lead to more income, because women could work for wages instead of having to perform unpaid work looking after children and the elderly.

Women's movements demand participation

Traditional gender roles have come under increasing criticism all over Africa over the past few years. On 15 May 2019, twelve young women from Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, and Mauritania wrote an open letter to the West African heads of state. The appeal by representatives of girls and women's rights organisations was printed in five transregional daily newspapers.¹²¹

In their brief letter, the authors not only asked governments to promote female participation in the labour market. They also wanted an all-out effort to achieve better living conditions for women. Governments should advocate for physical self-determination, allow more girls to access higher education and thus enable them to shape their own future. At the same time, they asked their leaders to provide financial support to women's organisations and include women in decision-making bodies.¹²² This was not compatible with the traditional idea that a woman's primary role was to perform unpaid housework and childcare duties.

That open letter is just one example of how many women are now exerting their right to participate in society – regardless of whether they are mothers, childless, married or single women. They are challenging authority figures in government, industry and their religious communities and pushing them to address the issue of gender equality. But in religious communities in particular – even those currently more open to measures like family planning – the traditional view of a woman's role is still a barrier to progress.

Practice example: include women at all levels

Anyone lobbying for more gender equality needs tenacity, some convincing arguments and great powers of persuasion. Employees in the office of the *All Africa Conference of Churches* (AACC) found that out for themselves. The ecumenical umbrella organisation based in Nairobi, Kenya, represents by its own account, more than 140 million Christians all over Africa. It also has member organisations in ten of the 16 West African nations and runs a regional office in Lomé, Togo.

At its headquarters in Nairobi, a whole team is working on the subject of gender, women and young people and advocating for more gender equality. But each member organisation has its perspective, which does not always coincide with the positions held by head office.¹²³ So the female lawyers within the AACC head office were delighted when, at their Annual General Meeting in 2018, "Gender, Women and Young People" was chosen as the strategic theme for the next five years.¹²⁴

The employees of the AACC are now gradually putting into practice the goals set by that Annual General Meeting. For instance, they offer young people a platform where they can put forward their perspectives and be heard. In late 2020, for example, the AACC honoured ten young winners of an essay competition at an online award ceremony. They stood out over the 121 young people from all over Africa who had written essays about extractivism (i.e., a development model based on mining and exporting raw materials), gender issues and inequality.

3. How religious organisations facilitate demographic change

The ten award-winning essays will be published as an online collection.¹²⁵ But there are also changes needed within their own organisation. In the medium term, more women should be working in leadership roles within the organisation and its member churches. Most of the active members in any religious community are women, after all, yet they rarely have a say in the decision-making processes.

Leadership qualities are human, not male attributes

The prevailing prejudices are one reason why few women hold high positions in religious communities. Many Christians think that women cannot or should not lead men. The AACC therefore faces the task – as do many other religious associations – of opening up leadership roles to women and also debunking the underlying social prejudices.¹²⁶ For instance, the organisation offers training courses at its head office with the purpose of empowering and encouraging women as potential leadership figures. But equally important is their work on interpretation of the holy scriptures, which are directed at men and women, since Christians all refer to the Bible, whether they are for or against the idea of women holding religious office.

The Bible preaches equality

Time and time again, the AACC head office team encounters Christians who interpret individual passages of the Bible in a way which reinforces traditional gender roles and entrenches gender-specific discrimination. When the Bible says: “Be fruitful and multiply (...)” (Moses 1:22) is it to be taken literally?¹²⁷ And how is that command to be understood in the context of population growth and poverty? AACC staff discuss these and other questions with priests in their member churches, and together they develop responses that take into consideration the prevailing widespread poverty in many areas, as well as the many unwanted teenage pregnancies and women suffering from gender-based violence.

The aim of the AACC is to offer an alternative to the more conservative interpretations of the Bible. One way of doing this is to form small Bible study groups and read the holy scriptures from a gender-equity perspective.¹²⁸ Participants in these groups learn which Bible verses contain gender equity messages and how they can be interpreted. According to the AACC team, the most important Biblical principle is: God created women and men in his own image¹²⁹ and gender inequity is not compatible with that premise, is their assertion.¹³⁰ The member organisations share and discuss their findings at annual symposiums. Ultimately it is also about introducing this positive way of reading the Bible to as many Christians as possible. The long-term goal of the AACC in doing this is make religion and culture a positive force for change.

3.2 Education of girls: more schooling offers them a better future

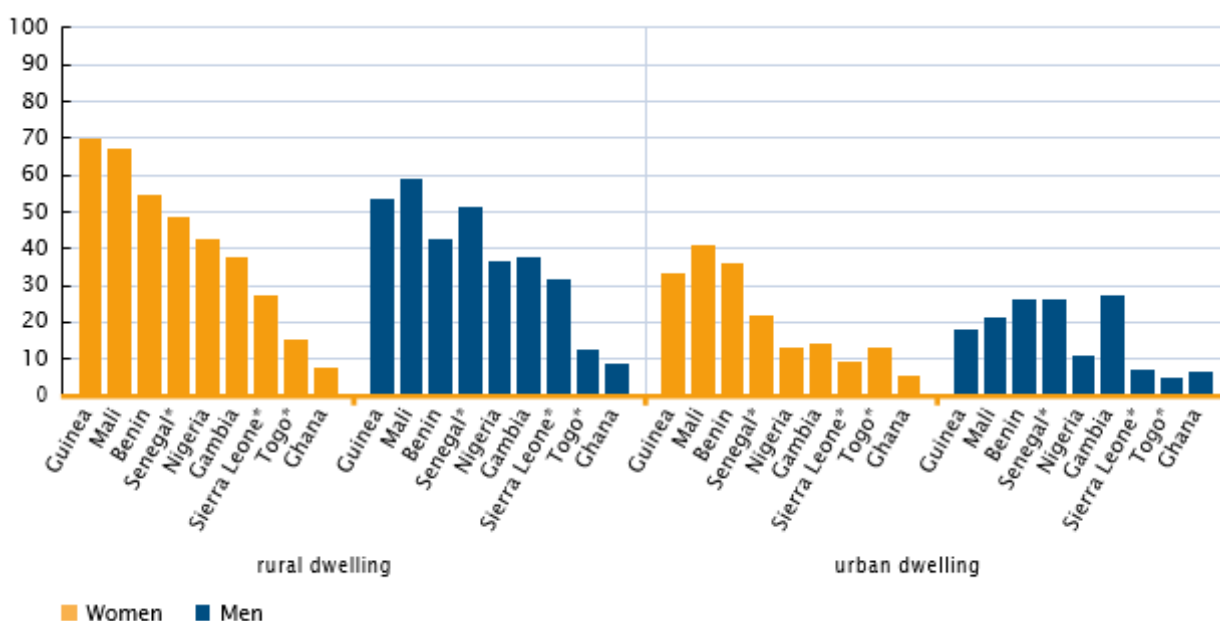
In January 2018, a 21-year-old women’s rights activist led the Education Ministry in Dakar, Senegal for a few days. Marie-Augustine Dieme hails from the south of the country, where she advocates for the rights of girls. She used her temporary post within the ministry to lobby for better education of girls among government representatives. She landed this role courtesy of the NGO Plan International, which every year assigns symbolically important roles to young people all over the world as part of a “takeover” campaign.^{131,132,133} Many (young) women like Dieme are now demanding good education for girls. In the medium term, religious communities will not be able to dismiss the idea without losing trust among their followers.

There are more than enough reasons for Dieme and other female activists to advocate for better education for girls. In some countries of West Africa, opportunities for girls and

young women are better than in other nations, but a total of around 2.4 million girls of secondary-school age did not attend school in 2017. The real number may well be higher, because this figure does not include any statistics from seven of the 16 West African nations, including Nigeria, which is the most populous in the region.¹³⁴ The situation is particularly bad in the French-speaking countries, where 37 to 59 percent of young women of secondary-school age did not attend school in Senegal, Benin, Mali and Guinea in 2018. By comparison, the number of young men not attending school there was 36 to 50 percent.¹³⁵

Young women in rural regions have the worst educational opportunities

Fig. 10: Percentage of young people of secondary school age not attending school by country, gender and place of residence, 2017 and 2018



In all West African countries, there is an educational divide between rural and urban communities. Young women are usually more severely affected by this than men. In remote areas of Guinea, for instance, around 70 percent of secondary-school-aged girls do not attend school, while the out-of-school rate for girls living in Guinean cities is just 33 percent.

(Data source: UIS¹³⁶)

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Another reason for such a high overall *out-of-school rate*¹³⁷ for secondary-school-age students in some countries of the region is that many young people have either never been sent to any school or their educational career ended before they started secondary school. In rural areas in particular, children often have to help feed the family, according to a 2015 World Bank report. That is less often the case in cities, where more schools and also childcare facilities are available. Overall, children living in cities therefore have better access to education. In addition, many parents have neither the time nor the skills to help or encourage their children to learn, and this vicious cycle tends to repeat itself from one generation to the next.¹³⁸

In rural areas of West Africa, girls have the worst educational opportunities. The very fact that young women menstruate and often cannot afford sanitary towels means they stay home, miss exams, and fail to complete any school leaving qualification.¹³⁹ Their school career frequently ends earlier than that of boys, because they tend to marry young and have children. By then, if not before, children and family are their first priority, and any school or higher learning certificate becomes worthless.¹⁴⁰

Lack of education hampers individual and social progress

The consequences are dire. Most young people who never or only attend school for a few years are unable to earn their own living. They are condemned to precarious living and working conditions and surviving on odd jobs. Those who have no or only primary schooling are therefore often financially dependent on other people or rely on state assistance – if indeed any official support is available to them. This means families bear great responsibility when they make decisions about the education of their own children. Ultimately it comes down to whether their children have the best possible start.¹⁴¹

Not only that, the education of every child also affects society as a whole. After all, secondary schooling gives young people the chance to improve their own life and the conditions of those around them. The sum of those chances determines the social development potential of an entire community. Better education can reduce socio-economic inequities and at the same time lead to smaller families. Women who complete their secondary schooling want smaller families and have children later in life.¹⁴² When West African nations deny girls the chance of higher education, the positive effect they could have on their national economy is also lost to the country as a whole.¹⁴³

For two reasons, religious communities are key partners when it comes to the education of girls. For one thing, they have been running schools for decades in many of the poorer countries, where they offer places to children in regions with less chance of participation in formal schooling.¹⁴⁴ The second reason is that many followers of religious communities reject the idea of comprehensive education for girls because Christianity, Islam and indigenous African religions tend to view women merely as mothers and caregivers (see chapter: “Different faith, different perspective?” p. 22).

Theological arguments for educating girls are therefore essential in order to convince followers that the issue is relevant to their own future and important for the social development of their entire community.

Religious leaders already advocating for family planning, who are quite familiar with the theological arguments in favour of it, can therefore benefit from speaking with young activists like Dieme. After all, young people are in the best position to explain why good education is important and outline the goals they want to achieve in life as a result.

Practice example: religious leaders advocate for secondary school education

Some religious leaders in West Africa have been advocating for the education of girls for a long time now, like the Sultan of Sokoto, the religious leader of about 90 million Muslims in Nigeria. He views education as the most important tool children can be given, as in the long run it helps everyone learn to live together in peace. This is why he is lobbying for imams and other religious leaders to bring up the subject within their communities and thus help change the minds of sceptical parents and politicians.¹⁴⁵
¹⁴⁶ But why is it so important for high-ranking religious leaders like the Sultan to lobby for the education of girls?

When religious principles are misused to argue against the education of girls or women, it is often unhelpful for secular organisations to take up the battle against them. But religious communities and their representatives have the advantage of being able to highlight different perspectives while maintaining their credibility. Imams, bishops and authority figures of indigenous faith communities can be persuasive among parents within their own circles and convince politicians that every girl should have access to secondary schooling. In West African countries, some religious representatives have already adopted this role of advocacy, but the individuals taking such initiatives tend to work too much in isolation, instead of working together to share their best arguments for convincing sceptics and identify the meeting formats that have been the most successful within their communities.

For this reason, in 2019, the Sultan of Sokoto joined with Ronald E. F. K. Muwenda Mutebi II, the Chief of Buganda, a pre-colonial kingdom in current-day Uganda, to open the pan-African *Keeping Girls in School Conference* (for other conferences of religious organisations, cf. Fig. 13: "Family planning has a foothold in religion", p. 53). In the Nigerian capital Abuja, leading figures from Islam, Christianity, indigenous religions and representatives from government and international development organisations came together on that occasion to discuss the status of education for girls in Africa at that time. Delegates at that conference shared ideas for solutions and discussed the next steps towards making progress in this quest.¹⁴⁷

However, the predominantly male religious leaders did not just talk amongst themselves at the two-day conference. Female leaders and representatives of youth organisations from all over Africa travelled to Abuja to attend the conference. Together they talked about the many reasons why girls do not attend school – everything from parents not considering education important through to addressing the needs of girls who are menstruating. At the end of the conference, the women and young people announced they wanted to help the religious leaders with their planned efforts in local communities.

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The Sultan of Sokoto challenged his colleagues in political office to take their responsibility to their communities seriously and actively work to ensure girls are able to complete their secondary schooling. The delegates resolved to set up national and local networks where they could share successful strategies from their own communities and work together to lobby hard for the education of girls.

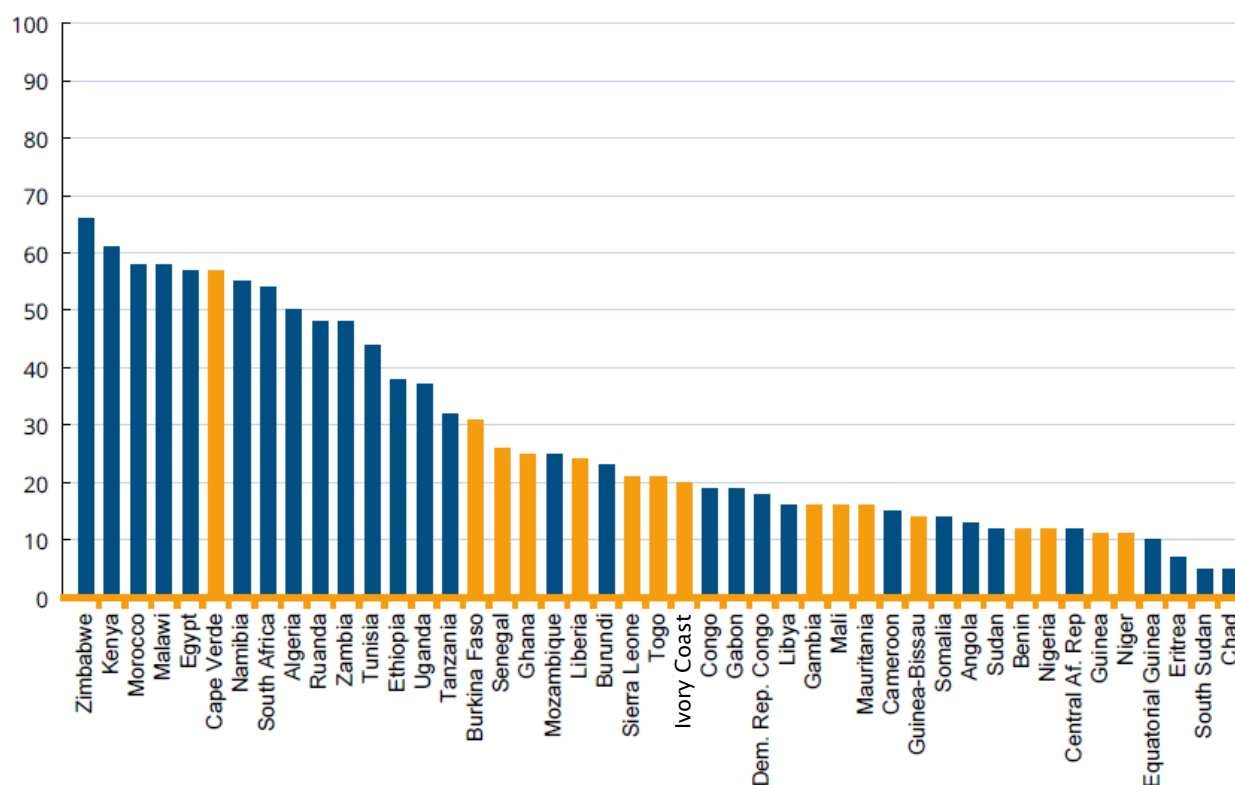
Initially these were just declarations of intent. But in the medium term, encounters between influential religious authority figures like the *Keeping Girls in Schools Conference* will continue to have an impact on religious organisations and local communities. For one thing, there is huge difference between highly-ranked religious authorities like the Sultan of Sokoto demanding better education for girls and “mere” local imams calling for it. The engagement of both is important. In addition, at events like that conference, participants learn which arguments to use in order to convince sceptics (see box: “Practice example: guidelines and supporting arguments make existing wisdom freely available”, p. 26) and which mistakes to avoid when approaching parents or local politicians. Seeing how successful colleagues in other regions have been can also motivate other religious leaders to be more pro-active.

3.3 Sexual health: not everyone has access to contraceptives and accurate information

When people want to make free, responsible and well-informed decisions about the timing and number of their children, they need accurate information and also the means to do it. Most people have been familiar with modern contraceptives for some time now and know how they work, thanks in part to the many awareness-raising campaigns of NGOs and governments. In Benin, for instance, the national health authorities lobbied to have the subject put on top of the national priority list and were ultimately successful. They developed an action plan, including many different educational and information campaigns which were gradually implemented by the health authorities from 2019 to 2023 (see box: “Everyone around the table”, pp. 54–55).¹⁴⁸ At the same time, in Mauritania, by comparison, no comprehensive sexuality-education programme has ever been run, despite the fact that one in three women there is unfamiliar with any form of modern contraception.¹⁴⁹

Modern contraceptives are still the exception in many places

Fig. 11: Percentage of married women (aged 15 to 49) using modern contraceptives, by country, 2019; West African nations are marked in orange



In eight of the 16 West African countries, less than 20 percent of married women use modern contraceptives. Across the entire region, this averages out to 16 percent. In comparison with the rest of Africa, only Central Africa has a similarly low percentage uptake of modern contraceptives.

(Data source: PRB¹⁵⁰)

However, it is not just a matter of knowing which contraceptives are fundamentally effective. In many places, misconceptions about pregnancy and sexuality persist. According to a study carried out by the Guttmacher Institute in 2007, every second young man in Ghana between the age of 15 and 19 knew nothing about the fertile days of a woman's monthly cycle. Only 21 percent were aware that a woman can also become pregnant the first time she has sexual intercourse.¹⁵¹ In addition, more recent studies confirm that many people believe, for instance, that some contraceptives make women infertile over time, or cause cancer.¹⁵²

Awareness-raising alone is not enough

The fact that most people in West African countries know something about modern contraceptives does not mean they also use them. Of the ten African nations with the lowest uptake of modern contraceptives, four lie in West Africa: Benin, Guinea, Nigeria

3. How religious organisations facilitate demographic change

and Niger. Only ten to twelve percent of married women and their partners in those countries use modern contraceptives. In many other West African nations, the figure is between 20 and 30 percent. Only Cape Verde, with almost 60 percent uptake, stands out.¹⁵³

In many places there are not enough affordable contraceptives available to meet the needs of potential users. And not everyone can pay for the contraceptives supplied by health centres or simply lack the money to reach one of the outlets where they are sold.¹⁵⁴ But women choose not to use contraceptives for other reasons too, even if they want no (further) children. They may be worried about the side effects that hormonal contraceptives can have, for instance. In many places, there is also general resistance to contraception within their local community. That puts pressure on each individual to conform to the prevailing social norms.¹⁵⁵ Ultimately, however, believers must decide whether they can reconcile the idea of contraception with their religious values. The answer is likely to vary from one location and cultural context to another and it also depends on people's personal attitudes to sexuality. Religious communities have relatively clear positions on this (see "Different faith, different perspective?", p. 22). But these do not always match the reality. Most, for instance, fail to take into account the fact that young people are also exploring the boundaries of love, partnership and sexuality.

Practice example: adapting health services to the needs of young people

In many communities, it would be unthinkable for religious leaders to help young people talk to their parents about sexuality. Yet that is precisely what some imams and priests in Benin, Cameroun, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo did – with the project *Jeune S3*¹⁵⁶, which from 2016 to 2020 was led by the international Catholic NGO *Cordaid*. The name stands for *Santé, Sexualité, Sécurité* (Health, Sexuality, Security) and the project was designed to empower and inspire young people to ask their parents, local politicians and employees of hospitals and health centres to address their needs with regard to sexuality.

When young people in West Africa do know more about the fertile days of the month, menstruation and transmission of the HI virus and want to use contraceptives, they often meet with incomprehension from their parents or other adults. Particularly in very religious environments, sex is considered appropriate only within marriage. The fact that this is often at odds with reality is overlooked by defenders of this strict moral code. This explains why the young delegates at *Jeune S3* initially had to convince their sceptical parents to talk to them about these issues. The priests and imams involved acted as go-betweens in some communities between parents and young people, breaking down emotional barriers and thus creating an open atmosphere for dialogue to flourish. Many parents eventually agreed to their children taking part in some of the many project activities, and around 500 young people were trained as leaders in the art of lobbying.

Jeune S3 also aimed to improve existing sexual health services to better meet the needs of young people. Young people, for instance, explained that many counselling centres tended to put young people off rather than help them. In addition, they often failed to address typical, age-related problems or made young people feel ashamed by the way they approached the issues. For instance, when the undertone of brochures handed out by counselling centres is that sexual activity between young people is inappropriate, this tends to scare young people away. So several hundred young people were shown how to use a simple classification method of systematically rating the quality of their local counselling services on HIV, contraceptive methods, menstruation problems and pregnancy. They then went out and visited clinics, health centres and counselling centres. In some cases working „undercover“, they were able to determine the quality of their local services by registering for fake counselling sessions. They sent their final verdicts back to the health professionals concerned and talked with them about areas for improvement.

In many places, the fact that young people have taken their interests into their own hands has paid off. In Banikoara in Benin, for instance, young people brought together their parents, religious leaders, community members and health service providers to point out common failings to the assembled adults, like the high number of teenage pregnancies. They demanded that their local authorities allow young people to be tested for sexually transmitted diseases at local clinics free of charge and receive free contraceptives there too. In 2019 their demands were implemented and, not only that, an additional, dedicated budget was made available to local health authorities for them to work with young people on sexual and reproductive health services. Young people can now hold those authorities to account for using the available budget for the intended purposes and improving the situation for young people as they learn and explore their own sexuality.

3.4 Family planning: dialogue on an equal footing

In July 2017, over 1,200 primarily Muslim leaders met in N'Djamena, the capital of Chad, to discuss family planning. The aim of the regional symposium “Islam, the demographic bonus and family well-being” was for them to learn from one another and encourage each other to lobby within their communities for family planning from a religious perspective. Hussain Hassan Abakar, the religious head of Muslims in Chad, did not mince his words: “Islam supports family planning and every initiative aimed at women’s wellbeing.”¹⁵⁷

The meeting was organised by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) as part of the SWEDD project¹⁵⁸ run under the auspices of the World Bank. The goal was to recruit imams and other Muslim leaders as local supporters to reinforce the work already being done by government ministries, local authorities and NGOs (cf. see box: “Everyone around the table”, pp. 54–55). The project was designed with the aim of reducing birth rates in the six Sahel countries of Chad, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Niger, Mali and Mauritania where the average woman brings between five and seven children into the world.¹⁵⁹

3. How religious organisations facilitate demographic change

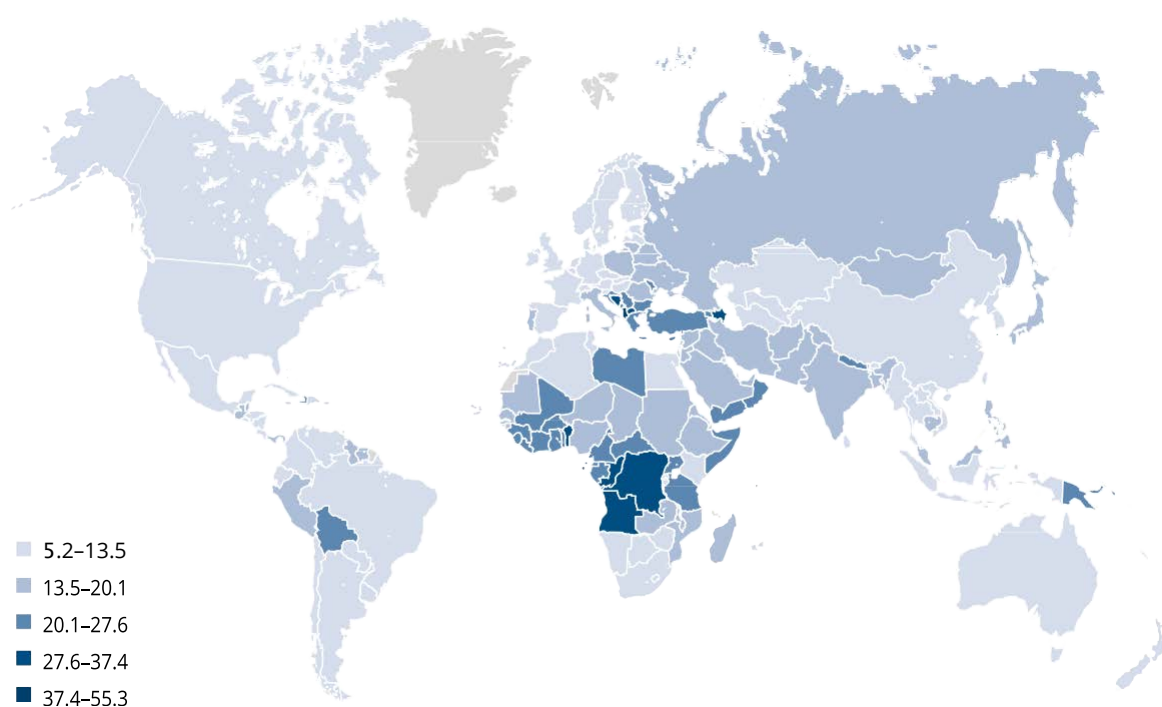
Many West African nations set themselves clear goals a long time ago. In 2013 in London, for example, when representatives of many developing countries met with international organisations for a family planning summit. Representatives of Senegal agreed to provide better information in that country about family planning methods and improve the availability of affordable, modern contraceptives in rural and hard-to-reach areas in particular. Employees of Senegalese public authorities launched media campaigns on the subject of family planning and promised to decentralise the supply chains for contraceptives to avoid bottlenecks.^{160,161,162} Such efforts have proved worthwhile. According to a current UN report on family planning, some countries in sub-Saharan Africa have made great progress over the past 20 years, including Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone and Senegal.¹⁶³

In many cases, couples want to plan their families, but for various reasons fail to do so

Yet, despite the successes, by no means all women wishing to avoid or at least delay the onset of pregnancy have access to modern contraceptives like pills or condoms. The United Nations refer in this context to an unmet need for modern family planning. In most West African countries this affects around 20 to 28 percent of all women, but for married women the figure is as high as 35 percent.¹⁶⁴

Where self-determination in family planning is lacking

Fig. 12: Percentage of (projected)¹⁶⁵ unmet need for modern family planning worldwide, 2020.



As in the past, by no means every West African woman wishing to have fewer children or delay the next pregnancy can fulfil that wish. After countries like Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo, the unmet need for modern family-planning in West Africa is among the highest on the continent. Various factors contribute to this. Many people, for instance, lack the money to pay for contraceptives, there are insufficient affordable contraceptives available for them to buy in many cases, and in other places women are concerned about the side effects of hormonal methods.

(Data source: UNDESA¹⁶⁶)

Whenever wars break out or natural disasters exacerbate their already precarious living conditions, fewer people tend to use contraceptives because they are no longer available, or they lack the money to pay for them. The Ebola epidemic, for instance, disrupted the distribution of contraceptives in the affected countries.¹⁶⁷ While robust data is scarce, the Covid-19 pandemic is bound to have had a similar effect. Moreover, during a pandemic, health centres only have limited resources to advise couples on family planning, which for some people may delay any decision-making for or against a certain contraceptive method.¹⁶⁸

When it comes to debates on family planning, however, it is not always about the substance but rather about the form. Typical questions are: Who speaks and with which legitimacy? What terminology do advocates of family planning use to describe it? What does each term actually mean? And which groups are being targeted?

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Many religious communities would probably narrow the scope of the targeted groups more than the United Nations. Within religious communities, for instance, family planning often means that married couples allow more time between pregnancies or consider how many children they may be able to provide with a healthy life and a good start for the future that is also compatible with their faith.

Practice example: every community has its own approach

The fact that religious adherents reject family planning, are sceptical about some of the methods or maintain a strict moral code on sexuality is something staff of the organisation Muslim Family Counselling Services (MFCS) in Ghana encounter over and over again. The organisation has existed since 1990, a time when society as a whole there treated family planning as a taboo subject. From the beginning, MFCS staff have counselled and educated people in precarious situations about family planning and sexually transmitted diseases in particular.

Many followers of ultra-conservative Islamic strands believe that family planning is a Western strategy to limit the size of the Muslim population.^{169, 170} Critics view the contraceptive methods more as a control instrument than an opportunity to have a positive influence on people's individual living conditions. At times, employees of the MFCS have even had to beat a hasty retreat, when radical members of the community drummed up supporters to protest against the organisation. All the MFCS staff could do was leave behind their brochures, pamphlets and work materials.¹⁷¹

Awareness of different faiths and values is essential

Ever since they started this awareness-raising work, members of the NGO keep asking themselves how best to conduct respectful dialogue about pregnancies, sexuality, and contraceptive methods without appearing to have lost touch with reality. When is the right time to broach the subject of family planning? Which values are particularly important to the communities in which they work? How can MFCS leverage these values to start a conversation? And who do they have to convince at the local level in order for the project to be successful? These questions clearly show that local cultural and religious values must always be taken into account when the subject of family planning is raised.

For this reason, MFCS initially approaches the local authority representatives and religious leaders of a community and gradually builds the necessary trust. In doing so, they rely primarily on the support of imams and priests. If they are able to win them over to their work, it will improve the atmosphere on site before they even begin to broach sensitive topics like family planning. Members of the faith community then no longer fear that MFCS wants to undermine their faith.

In their talks with religious leaders, MFCS employees always have the Bible and the Koran at hand, because their first priority is to debunk widespread misinformation, unravel myths and correct popular misconceptions. Many devout Muslims, for instance, believe the Koran rejects family planning and permits unlimited polygamous marriages. So MFCS staff point to individual passages of the Koran to prove this is not the case. (cf. "Different faith, different perspective?" p. 22)

Only when MFCS staff and religious leaders have established a relationship of mutual trust and have reached agreement on key religious positions, they can begin their work in the communities. This is also how MFCS ensures its staff in each community is heard and accepted.

Over the years, the staff of the MFCS has acquired the necessary knowledge and experience that can also be very valuable to secular organisations. They know, for instance, which words to use when broaching sensitive issues. Employees of many religious organisations like MFCS often speak within Muslim communities of birth spacing or extending the time between two pregnancies. Devout Muslims are then more likely to enter into a discussion on the topic rather than engage with the idea of “prevention” or “limiting the size of the family”.

MFCS always struggles to find enough funding to continue its programmes and remunerate its staff. Without voluntary helpers, the organisation could not complete its work. Moreover, many people within their target group live in remote areas that are difficult to reach. They cannot reach everyone with the two old motorbikes parked in front of their office. Despite these obstacles, it can be counted as a success that MFCS has been working with religious authorities for 30 years, is able to win over religious leaders for its work and counsel devout Muslim on matters of sexuality and family planning. The priests and imams, thanks to the theological authority of their position, can thus assure people that their faith allows them to bring children into the world at longer intervals and take preventative measures for that purpose.

3.5 The other half of humanity: men must pull their weight

For a long time, family planning programmes have concentrated primarily on women. Men were often not considered at all or inadequately addressed.^{172,173} Yet men bear the same responsibility for a healthy sex life and are frequently the ones who object to using condoms. So when programmes seeking to improve access to accurate information and contraception tailor their services only to women and fail to include men, they ignore the underlying reasons for high fertility rates – such as traditional gender roles. Using this as the starting point would seem vital to ensuring more men accept the use of modern contraceptives.

What men think about family planning makes a difference

In most West African countries, women decide for themselves or with their partner whether or how they want to delay a pregnancy. But that is not the case everywhere. In Mali, Senegal and Guinea, when men are opposed to prevention, their wish prevails in up to a third of all cases. They thus prevent women from deciding for themselves or making a joint decision with their partner on the number and timing of their children.¹⁷⁴

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How much men know about family planning, what they think about it and how they see their role within the family can affect the success of appropriate programmes in various ways. Firstly, men can contribute to their effectiveness by reflecting on whether and how they participate in decisions about family planning. The second thing they can do is increase acceptance within families and communities by advocating for family planning themselves. Thirdly, the long-term and correct use of contraceptives increases when men and women pay equal attention to it.¹⁷⁵

Few religious organisations have so far worked explicitly with men, although they do have an input into the design of their programmes on reproductive and sexual health. Yet more explicit work with men would be beneficial. In particular, the questions of how men define themselves, what role they assign themselves within the family and how that can harm others, would help increase the effectiveness of family planning programmes.

Practice example: Encourage men to reflect on their social roles

The NGO founded in 2014 in Senegal by the name of *Cadre des Religieux pour la Santé et le Développement [Religious Framework for Health and Development]* (CRSD) aims to promote dialogue between religions and contribute to national development, with family planning being a key focus of their work. Unlike many other organisations, it primarily works on winning over men to the idea of family planning. CRSD is made up of various so-called Islamic families, or groups within Islam, as well as the Catholic church and protestant/Lutheran churches.

The idea for this initiative came from the national health ministry, which works closely with CRSD. Together the two partners first identified the key problems – like widespread misconceptions about the position of Islam on family planning. It soon became clear that men frequently block the idea of modern family planning methods on religious grounds.

It depends on who raises the idea of family planning

Perhaps contrary to expectations, this organisation does not start by addressing the general public. Instead, CRSD primarily focuses on imams and other Muslim authority figures, with whom its staff discusses various interpretations of Islam. They then train them in religious arguments in favour of family planning and try to win them over to their work in the long term as key influencers. Employees of CRSD have also developed a Fact Sheet debunking some of the prevailing myths – like the view that Islam forbids family planning (cf. bold heading: “Guidelines and supporting arguments make existing wisdom freely available”, p. 26).

Only once the Islamic leaders have discussed the ideas with one another and are familiar with the relevant religious arguments for family planning, do employees of CRSD approach men within their communities. In workshops, participants meet with Islamic leaders and CRSD staff to question the religious arguments many men cite in their opposition to family planning.

The participating imams are the central religious authority for believers, so their word holds more weight and reaches the men more effectively than secular NGO employees could, since both men and women accept the authority of imams on matters of faith and culture.

Unlike the CRSD programmes, *Tearfund* initiatives are aimed directly at men and their families. The international Christian NGO launched the project *Transforming Masculinities* in 2013 to prevent gender inequality and gender-specific violence. Liberia, Niger and two West African countries are among the nations targeted by this project.

The key instrument of this project is community dialogue. *Tearfund* also works with local priests, imams and preachers to encourage them to discuss gender inequality with their believers from a religious perspective. The organisation has developed a set of guidelines with detailed information and practical tips to help individual priests encourage men in their community to address their masculinity, (see box: "Guidelines and supporting arguments make existing wisdom freely available" p. 26).

For instance, these guidelines include specific exercises to help participants talk about the essence of masculinity today. Together they reflect on how Jesus behaved in his role as a man, which was quite at odds with the established ideals of masculinity of his time. The aim is for participants to learn how the social role of man or husband also has the potential to harm others and to reflect on the key elements of a more positive male image.¹⁷⁶

3.6 Networks and multipliers: learning from one another worldwide

How long-lasting is the work of religious organisations advocating for sexual and reproductive health? And how can religious communities and their representatives achieve long-term success? This depends to some extent on the financial resources they have at their disposal. In order to work with people in remote regions, cars, technology and a higher number of employees are needed who also have to be remunerated for their work. Above all, however, the success of religious organisations depends on whether relationships between men and women become more equitable and whether women are able to decide for themselves what kind of role they want in life. The prerequisite for this is cultural change.

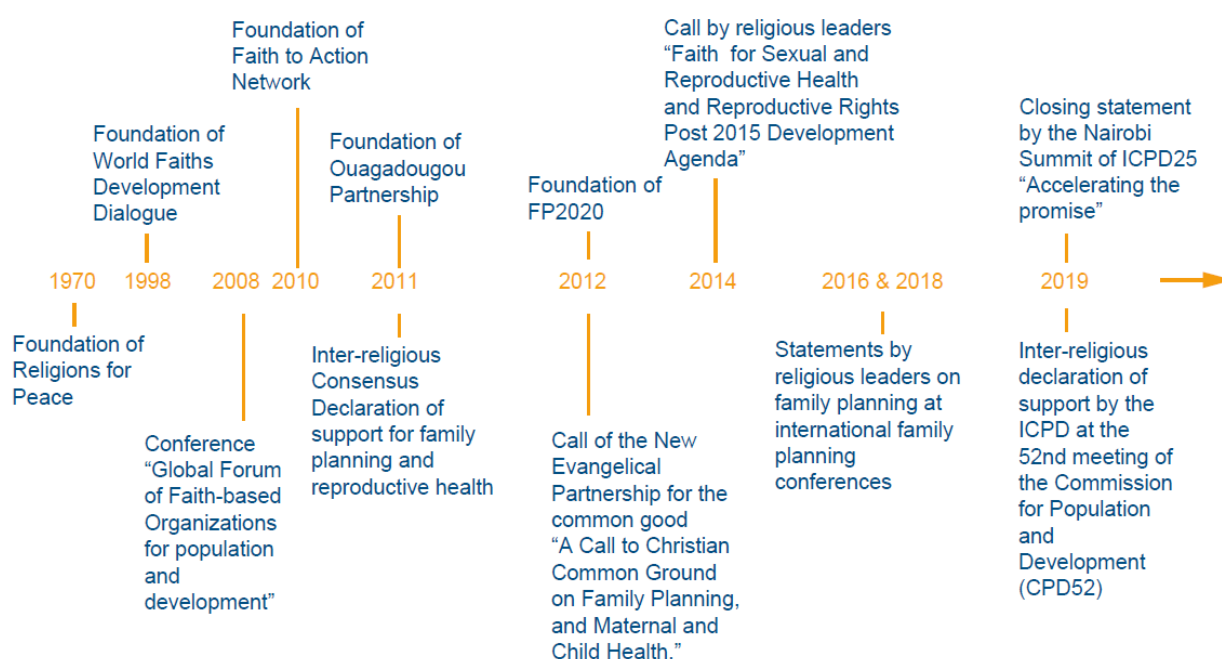
While the material requirements can easily be solved by finding suitable promotional funds, and simplify the task in the short term, cultural change takes longer. After all, social norms develop and evolve over several generations. Strong networks and social influencers active within religious communities and the secular sphere of society can promote and maintain such change. In the long term, they can help ensure fewer people reject family planning for religious reasons.

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In other words, religious organisations can make a great contribution to the long-term effectiveness of initiatives for gender equality, education of girls and family planning. They have the ability to lobby their local governments and can also make an effort to step up the pace of change within their own religious communities.

Family planning has a foothold in religion

Fig. 13: Declarations, public calls, plus networks and organisations founded by religious activists lobbying for sexual and reproductive health and human rights



For a long time now, religious organisations like Religions for Peace have addressed development issues, population growth or family planning. But it has only been in the last ten years that the subject has gained renewed momentum. Ever since then, the key players have formed networks and worked together on presenting their ideas everywhere, from international conferences in the cities to local meetings in remote villages.

(Own diagram, based on Hoehn¹⁷⁷)

Practice example: everyone around the table

Culture, society, government and religion are very closely interwoven in West Africa. This means attitudes to family planning, gender equality and education of girls can only change when state institutions or civil society organisations bring all the key social groups together.

This is precisely the aim of the *Ouagadougou Partnership*. The network was founded in 2011 at a regional conference on family planning in francophone West Africa and now has an office in Dakar coordinating its activities. When the network was founded, its members set themselves the goal of persuading a total of 2.2 million more people to use contraceptives, but they surpassed their own expectations. By 2019 they had already convinced 3.1 million. To achieve this goal, the partnership supported media campaigns and helped the countries involved introduce new budget streams for family planning. But the Ouagadougou Partnership also seeks to strengthen the degree of coordination and cooperation on family planning within the region.¹⁷⁸

The network was quick to include religious leaders in the dialogue at an early stage of its development. An alliance of religious authority figures in the French-speaking countries of West Africa emerged as a result of this, along with numerous working groups at the national level, who cooperate with one another and share ideas. Furthermore, the partnership repeatedly brings together employees of health ministries and religious representatives and has helped solidify this degree of contact between the sectors.¹⁷⁹

Religious leaders drive change within institutions and on the ground

The Faith to Action Network also promotes active exchange between religions, but within a larger framework and across Africa as a whole. Like the Ouagadougou- Partnership this network was also founded in 2011. Representatives of various world religions and other faiths formulated the Nairobi Declaration at a conference in 2019, where they committed to the goal of using their networks to provide better information about family planning. In addition, they lobby at the political level to ensure everyone who wants to use contraceptives also has the means to do so, while their member organisations promote women's rights and social pluralism.¹⁸⁰

The Al-Azhar University in Cairo and African Council of Religious Leaders (part of the organisation Religions for Peace) are among the initiators of this network, which has been coordinated by a Secretariat in Nairobi since 2015. Faith to Action undertakes lobbying and public relations work, research and training of religious leaders, but most of all promotes dialogue with and among religious communities themselves.

The network runs many conferences, meetings and training workshops, with the aim of reflecting the diversity of religious positions on gender equality, family planning and sexuality. Employees place particular emphasis on facilitating dialogue between equals and fostering mutual respect, with the events run by Faith to Action tailored to the target groups in each case. After all, their aim is to stimulate fruitful discussions between the quite conservative and more progressive participants, without either side feeling pressured by the other.

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However, not all positions are able to be reconciled with one another. For instance, people or organisations who reject any form of contraception or lobby for the universal right to abortion rarely take part in such events.

Apart from perpetuating regular exchange of ideas between religions, members of this network also work hard to ensure initiatives and ideas are not forgotten. They document them and evaluate the results, asking: Where have which approaches worked well? Which ideas have really taken off in local communities? In this way, a fount of good-practice knowledge is being built up over time with the potential to inspire change in other countries of the region and more widespread acceptance of family planning.

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4. Where to from here?



Religious communities and their representatives can make a crucial contribution to slowing down population growth in West African countries in the medium term, as indicated by the examples cited above. In addition to their traditional and cultural values, many people are guided by their faith when deciding on the timing and number of their children, which is why they take very seriously where their imam, priest or indigenous religious leader stands on gender equity, education of girls, family planning and sexuality. After all, they are considered as the authority on religious questions, interpret the sacred scriptures for their believers and provide guidance on applying them to their everyday lives.

In many parts of West Africa, patriarchal gender roles still predominate. Girls often receive no secondary schooling and women are frequently financially dependent on their husbands. That degree of gender inequality prevents more self-determination in matters of family planning and is a key factor in the high birth rates of countries from Mauritania to Nigeria. For these rates to fall in the medium term, women must be able to participate equally in society, but many countries still have a long road to go in terms of adjusting the social norms and prevailing cultural and religious values to the current reality.

Religious groups and local religious leaders can inspire and facilitate such change by reading the Bible or the Koran in a way that supports gender equality, debunking popular misinterpretations and questioning traditional role models. In doing so, they need to consciously act as role models themselves. But their secular partners in government, health authorities and civil society should also recognise and strengthen the potential of religious communities to facilitate change. The following are a few recommendations for action for religious communities and their partners:

A. Secular partners of religious organisations

- 1. Governments, their authorities and civil society organisations should identify the religious organisations, groups and individuals willing to discuss family planning, gender equity and education of girls and promote the ideas within their networks.** Influential religious figures are particularly well-equipped to help in this way because many religious leaders and believers look to them for guidance. While those already active in this regard by no means represent the majority of religious communities, it is vital to leverage the existing potential and bring more believers on board.
- 2. Health and education authorities should recognise the potential of religious communities and involve them more in their strategies.** Compared to their secular counterparts, representatives of Islam, Christianity and indigenous religions can reach even people with particularly conservative religious attitudes, and be heard by them. The multiplier effect of their influential advice and guidance can help create a climate where it is often possible to talk about things like family size, contraceptive methods, or even teenage pregnancies. In this way, religious communities can increase acceptance of family planning.
- 3. Governments and civil society should identify the appropriate language for engaging with religious communities and religious organisations on a long-term basis.** In the conventional sense, family planning refers to various methods used by couples to plan the timing and number of their children, while imams take it to mean that expectant parents should leave sufficient time between pregnancies. Secular partners of religious communities must become familiar with these subtle differences and the religious and cultural values that underpin them. That is the only way they will be able to engage in dialogue with them on an equal footing and achieve successful, longer-term collaboration. Every community has its own approach to these sensitive issues, which are viewed as taboo topics in many places. In some instances, organisations will first have to win over the local religious leaders as influencers, while in other communities they will be able to work directly with their believers.
- 4. Governments should increase the funding of successful programmes specifically targeted at religious figures of authority.** Organisations like MFCS, with a successful track record of convincing religious leaders to act as community influencers and involving them in their programmes, often lack the necessary money and resources to do more. They are unable to employ enough staff, or lack the necessary vehicles to extend their work to remote areas. Governments and health authorities should therefore provide better financial support for the successful initiatives of religious organisations. But not all state or secular organisations consider religious communities to be the right partners for family planning programmes, which is why in many places religious organisations will have to keep working to dispel these reservations.

B. Religious communities, their institutions and local leaders

5. **Religious organisations and religious leaders disseminate gender-neutral versions of religious texts and debunk popular myths.** The prevailing image of religious communities is still one where women are only seen as mothers and wives. Religious communities are best placed to counter this perception and offer alternative views. Organisations like CRSD and the *Faith to Action* network make it abundantly clear, for instance, that Islam does not reject family planning per se. The AACC also develops readings of the Bible that support gender equality, which organisations should disseminate more widely, both within and beyond their own circles. They could use social media to spread the word, train more religious leaders in theological arguments for better gender equality or publish guest articles and give radio and TV interviews.
6. **Religious leaders should make their colleagues aware of the socio-economic importance of gender equality, family planning and education of girls.** After all, participation of women in society will have a significant impact on the speed of decline in West African fertility rates, which is necessary for any development progress to be made in the region. Only then will there be any improvement in the chances of each and every person to find paid employment, live a healthy life and, with the help of education, develop their own interests. Religious organisations should therefore become experts on the links between population growth and sustainable development and pass on their knowledge to their member churches or mosque communities. Religious leaders could then learn about the individual and social benefits of falling birth rates and discuss them within their local communities.
7. **Religious organisations, their staff and religious leaders should extend opportunities for exchange of ideas and networking to develop a trans-regional pool of best-practice solutions.** Networks like *Faith to Action*, the organisation *Religions for Peace* and the *Ouagadougou Partnership* bring together religious and secular leaders and practitioners on a regular basis. This encourages the exchange of ideas and pooling of resources. Both are essential to promoting gender equality, education of girls and family planning within religious communities. In addition, such meetings are very valuable to the religious leaders themselves, as each of them can learn how colleagues in their own communities have developed alternative images of masculinity that are still in line with their faith. This motivates them to do more, and in the end everyone benefits from the experience. At the same time, organisations and networks must prevent good examples from becoming buried in report writing. While there is sufficient documentation of projects like *Jeune S3*, so far there has been no platform to store systematically developed recipes for success with men or suggested strategies for community dialogue. The benefit of having such a widely accessible resource is clear. Newly recruited partners or volunteers could then adapt ideas from other places or directly implement existing concepts so that good ideas find their way into practice.

4. Where to from here?

- 8. Pro-active religious leaders and religious organisations should confront the leaders of their faith communities with the current reality and the need for social change.** Even though West African bishops generally reject modern contraceptives, local priests often recommend the use of condoms to address the social problems they observe within their communities. After all, they know that women frequently have unwanted pregnancies. The managers of religious communities should not ignore these realities. Religious organisations can promote this by bringing together religious leaders of all levels with young people and their parents, as in the *Jeune S3* project. In direct conversation with one another, young people can then explain why they want different and better advice on sexuality and family planning. And they can make it clear to the adults that they are of an age where they want to explore love and sexuality, even though the sexual mores of their religion advise against it. In the best-case scenario, this would create the degree of understanding and trust required for them to work on solutions together that will enhance the life of the local people.
- 9. Religious communities should work towards gender equality and expand their work with men.** Since men bear the same responsibility as women for sexual activity, family size and gender-specific discrimination, religious organisations and their representatives should focus more on men than they have in the past. They should encourage them to reflect on how their social role of “man” or “husband” can harm others, develop alternative concepts of masculinity, and extol the benefits of family planning. Few religious organisations, like CRSD and *Tearfund*, have so far carried out such projects, yet working with men is essential to ensuring women participate equally in society.

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