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STRATEGIES USED BY ELDERLY COUPLES TO STRENGTHEN MARRIAGES AND MAINTAIN STABILITY WITHIN WESTLANDS SUB-COUNTY, NAIROBI COUNTY

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Abstract

Purpose: The Thesis was a study to strategies used among elderly couples aged over 55 years in Westlands Sub-county of Nairobi.

Methodology: Thirty purposively selected elderly participants with required characteristics were snowball sampled. Ten other respondents were purposively selected; who possessed special characteristics for FGD, making a total of 40 participants. 10 respondents were selected for reliability and validity only. Informants and leaders facilitated with Snow ball sampling method. The study used qualitative, exploratory and descriptive research design. The research tools consisted of questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). Elderly couples shared wisdom on how they maintained stability. Analysis was done using SPSS and NVIVO software. The FGD yielded a summary of frequently recorded words, codes, themes, as well as quoted statements which the elderly envisioned as turning points in their marriages.

Findings: The study found that many marriages were unstable may be because of lack of premarital preparations by the community, the elders, religious institution or the government. However, historically violence, separation and divorce have always been there in relationships but the horrors of homicides and murders were almost unheard of. To-day these sad horrors are of almost daily occurrence among the society. There are social stresses, marital storms, injury o children and suicides. Most of these are caused by psychosocial issues such as irrational behavior within some families. Consummation of alcohol and drug abuse may bring about stresses which may cause emotional stress to families.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The study recommends that all people wishing to enter marriage should be prepared in premarital sessions by qualified professionals. Peer groups could be formed to indicate the type of program for their premarital preparation. The young people at village level, tertiary colleges and Universities should be sensitized about marriages.

Keywords: *Elderly couples, Marriages and stability.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

According to the New Oxford Desk Dictionary American Edition (1995), marriage is a legal union of a man and a woman. Marriage is a relationship that exists between a husband and wife. However, the purpose of the research in question, focused on marriage relations as constituted in the African context in general and as stipulated in the Kenyan Constitution, and Marriage Act No. 4 of 2014 Sections 2,3 and 6. In this context, therefore, marriage is a voluntary union of a man and woman whether in a monogamous or polygamous union and registered according to the Marriage Act. The more traditional African definition of an elder or 'elderly' person correlates with the chronological ages of 50 to 65 years, depending on the setting, the region and the country. In Kenya, the retirement age of the public officers was set at sixty years, from previously 55 years. In Africa age, in general, is given as a combination of chronological, social, cultural and function markers.

This research adopted the age of the elderly as 55 plus years. In that regard, the research question was, “ strategies used by elderly couples to strengthen marriages and maintain stability within Westlands sub-county, Nairobi County?” Many affected Kenyans, have continued to experience apathy due to young newly married couples separating and parting ways soon after celebrating wonderful marriage ceremonies. The said couples have sometimes gone through divorces after other hidden bad experiences like domestic violence, severe injuries or even homicides which happen because of unresolved conflicts among couples. Psychologists and other premarital counselors with long experience on premarital preparations have continued to ponder the question of what went wrong soon after the wedding. As recently as (2015-2016), when over 140 couples were prepared for marriage in Consolata Shrine Parish, it was observed in evaluation document 2015 that 14% of them had separated after one month of celebrating very expensive and gorgeous marriage events stating that their love which they thought was forever was over. What made the ‘‘forever love’’ be a single month’s affair after equally an expensive honeymoon? Possibly stable elderly couples had answers from their wisdom and experiences of long life together. The study attempted to discover and articulate the issues through local in-depth study. The study determined how the elderly stayed together happily; grew older gracefully without much anxiety; avoidance of regrets; and reached end of life with a sense of fulfillment. The findings were documented and will be shared with the society and younger generations. The study again, was an attempt to explore the immediate and urgent answers needed from the experienced elderly couples on strategies they used to achieve stability and success in their marriages and to offer tested, evidence based solutions to the issues such as communication, conflict management, and others, which affect the society. The contemporary society was seeking guidance to accomplish marriage goals in their lives, which currently make them believe that the institution of marriage was under severe threat. Divorce rates continued to increase everywhere and people were waiting longer to get married. The issues of concern sounded like paradigm shift from the old to the new ways of life. There was urgent need to explore and find out and seek answers to the situation and plug the existing knowledge gap, while providing much needed social and psychological solution.

The current situation is that many young couples are undergoing many psychosocial problems, in which they may face challenges and are difficult to handle such as rampant separations, ultimate

painful divorces, and severe injuries from domestic violence. Some of the injuries sometimes lead to death. Some believe the injuries could be avoided or prevented altogether. Despite premarital preparations, counseling and other appropriate interventions sadly the status quo continues. Philosophers, psychologists, spiritual leaders, and so on, point towards the underlying discontent many people feel about their lives, particularly in marriage

1.1 Research Objectives

The key purpose of this study was to explain strategies used by elderly couples in Westlands Sub-county, Nairobi, Kenya, to strengthen marriages and maintain stability

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Sources of information in the area of marriage forming part of secondary information had been derived from the textbooks such as; success in marriage and what every married couple should know Kiura (2012) which touched briefly on communication. The text provided a brief account of understanding one's spouse, the need to acquire good skills of communication and how to experience joy, peace, love and excitement in marriage. She also discussed how to deal with anger in marriage. However, the information though useful is scanty and does not analyze in detail how these issues could be dealt with and sustained throughout marriage as well as indications of what methods work and how to stay married for life. It also did not indicate any lessons learnt from marital experience of stable elderly couples who had maintained stable marriages for a long time. Young couples seek advice from everywhere in the hope of finding solutions to interpersonal problems. They watched TV, read books, sought information from the internet and go for seminars, yet marriages remained dysfunctional. More research could yield new information particularly when sought from true lived experiences of elderly couples. The new knowledge would enhance the already known information and avail it to the young generation. It is not clear from Kiura (2012) the strategies that enabled elderly couples to stay in the stable and successful marriages. Some of these answers were derived from the research information analyzed on how the elderly couples lived their lives together. (Kiura, 2012) has laid good foundation for further research within the African context as she had outlined the core areas. It was realized that research in marriages was not exhaustive as many challenging social and psychological issues emerged all the time. Some of the various issues were the meaning of marriage, understanding one's spouse, living and conflict in marriage.

Macharia, (2004) indicated in *Beyond the Vows* powerful commitment between man and woman who had given themselves to a life-long relationship with each other. He described the relationship between husband and wife and their roles in complementing one another. He further stated that though marriage was a legal agreement between two people, it was also a spiritual union, an act of God according to believers. Couples were said to be joined together, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Pillemer wrote that based on long experience a couple explained that one was much more likely to have a satisfying marriage for a long time when partners were fundamentally similar Pillemer K, (2011). He emphasized similarity in core values. His study relates well with issues of communication management of marital conflicts and strengthening marriages.

The aim of Pillemer was to find out how to make marriage last and came up with useful revelations which could be recommended to the end users and others. He wrote the book “30 lessons for living, tried and true advice from the wisest Americans.” (Pillemer, 2011). He concluded that older people could serve as extraordinary guide to finding fulfillment when life gets difficult. Pillemer and his research assistants also conducted more intimate in-person interviews with over 300 individuals that had been in unions for 30, 40, 50, or more years. Pillemer decided to take a large group for the varied “wisdom of crowds” collecting love and relationship advice of a large and varied cross-section of long married elders in a scientific, reliable and valid way. According to Pillemer, marriage is something that people work at and get better at, but it is never completed” (retrieved from <http://www.usatoday.com/story.2015/01>). Pillemer gathered those insights and many others from the research on retirees where he did in-depth interviews with over 65 years and older couples.

The study ultimately expanded the knowledge of how issues of domestic violence could be reduced or eliminated altogether. The research was particularly relevant to the American situation. There was need to tailor similar research to the African context within African culture where marriage was considered basically as a union between male and female and not otherwise. In other words, Pillemer’s research, carried out on the elderly, maybe tried with modification to suit the African situation in general and Kenya in particular where marriage is the union between male and female and not including same sex marriages. Since conventional wisdom is that members of society learn while growing up through provision of guidance on how to reinforce values, cultural practices and spirituality, it was crucial to get that wisdom from the elderly

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design carried out was a qualitative study which used a descriptive and exploratory design methodology in order to discover new ideas and insights. The population of interest consisted of married individuals still in marriage possessing required characteristics needed for the study. The target population for this study comprised elderly couples aged 55 years and above. The study adopted Snowball and Quota sampling techniques. Quota sampling technique was used to classify respondents according to their locations whereby the population was divided into groups and a given number of cases selected according to the required characteristics of age, marital stability and the actual status of marriage at that time. The study used sample size of 40 respondents. Ten were used for reliability and validity tests, and not included in the target sample. Ten others were used for Focus Group Discussions; making a total of 50 participants. The researcher developed and used both open ended and closed questionnaires to collect data and make observation of respondents, particularly during in depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). Descriptive statistics including frequency counts, means and percentages were used to analyze the quantitative data obtained. The narratives generated during the interview touching on most themes were presented narratively and graphically. Qualitative data was analyzed as appropriately using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and NVIVO. The focus group information gathered was analyzed in a systematic way in order to come to some useful conclusions and recommendation.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter presents the analysis of the study findings based on the data collected from the field. It provides strategies used by elderly couples in Westlands sub-county, Nairobi, Kenya, to strengthen marriages and maintain stability.

4.1 Areas which the elderly couples thought contributed to their marital success.

The couples responded with passion and listed the following which the study presented with the following words which are also presented in the pie chart as drawn;

The respondents stated among other words that acceptance of one's spouse unconditionally was important in contributing to their marriage success. They also said that commitment, quality communication, compromising and conflict avoidance were necessary to keep that spark in marriage. Other strategic issues were having defined roles and discipline particularly in the use of finances were said to play a great role in enhancing marital success. Some respondents emphasized the need to forgive and forget particularly when conflict arises. They outlined that it was essential for couples to be spiritual in their dealings with one another and the in-laws who could occasionally present challenges. Hard work, trust and understanding were also said to be key. All these emphatic words are shown in Figure 1.

The chart gives the common words used which were actually in long sentences but given in summary form according to NVIVO system used. The narratives given for the strategies were similar to the ones given to the focus group discussion. All of them touched on the variables used for the study resolving marital issues such as conflict management, communication and finances. Cognitive theory (CT) has a lot of connection in marriage during conflict resolution, quality communication and financial management. CT is directed towards restructuring distorted beliefs with the aim of changing dysfunctional interactions Beck (1921). Some of the cognitive discussions which need to be focused and modified are self-criticism, negative predictions, overgeneralization and personalization. All these have bearing on stability in marriage.

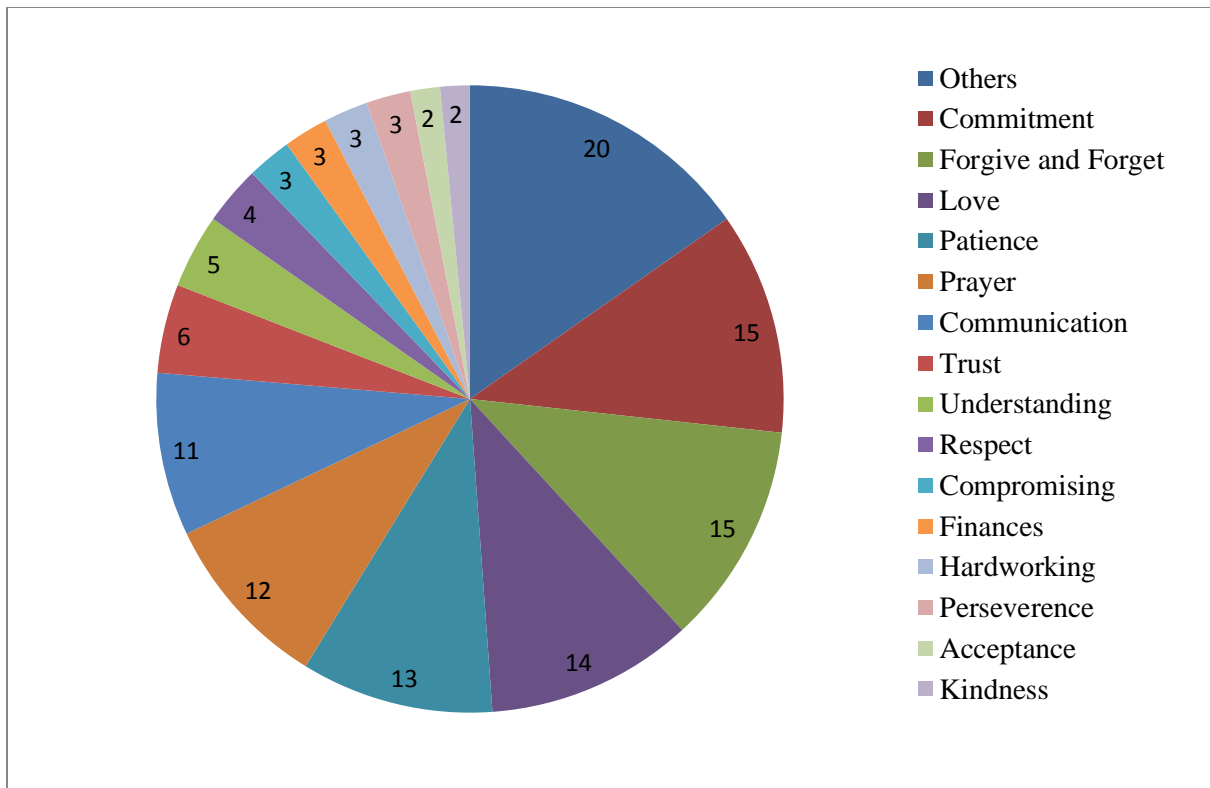


Figure 1: Pie chart of strategies used to strengthen marriage 1st question

4.2: How You Have Managed To Keep That Spark In Marriage For So Many Years.

The elderly couples again respondent eagerly pouring their hearts out on the successes and stability in their marriage. They responded with following words which are also represented in the chart shown; Apology, Caring, Commitment, Community networking, Embracing peace, Enjoying time together the good life, Fear God, Forgiving, Good family friends, Investing in children, Keep love flowing, Kindness, Love, Parental help, Prayers, Respect, Responsibility, Self-acceptance, Trust, Understanding, Unite always, Vows of marriage. Note that these words are repeatedly stated in the first and second question indicating that they were embraced by the couples in their lives

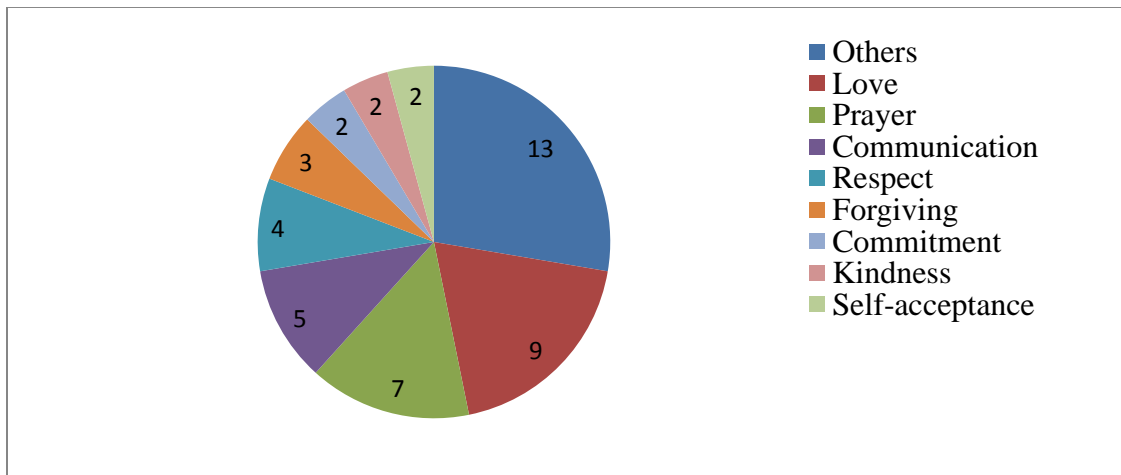


Figure 2: Pie chart of strategies used to strengthen marriage 2nd question

4.3: The Role of Counseling in Any Marriage.

The respondents gave a lot of information on the significance of counseling before and after marriage. Again they described their interactions with other people which were represented in the following words and in the chart; Communication, Embrace forgiveness, Give foresight of understanding, Guidance, Help solve issues, Kindness, May help some times, Mediation, Motivation, Sensitize the couples, Stabilize the marriage, Understanding each other, Unite couples.

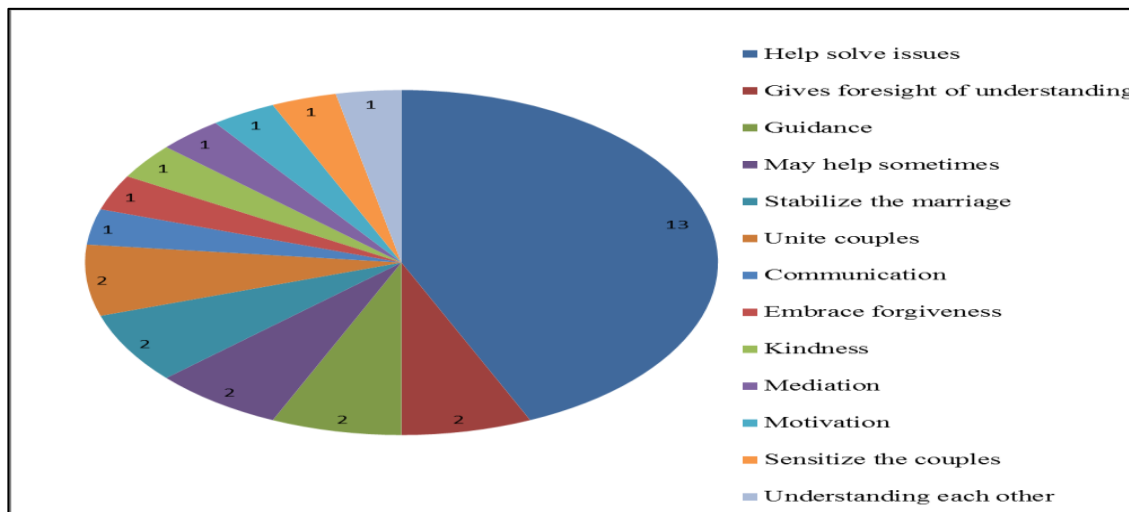


Figure 3: Pie chart of strategies used to strengthen marriage 3rd question

4.4 Current technological advances are good or affect couples negatively or positively.

Respondents once again responded by writing about technological advances pointing out their negative and positive effects as shown in the chart. They took cognizance of the fact that there

were good things about techno industry as well as some aspect of concern that worry people. These aspects are manipulation of people’s minds, Addiction to internet, goggle, Face Book, Twitter and other social media. Affect negatively, Affect positively, Break marriages, Depends on management, Depends on users, Embrace cheating, Good or bad, Good but challenging,

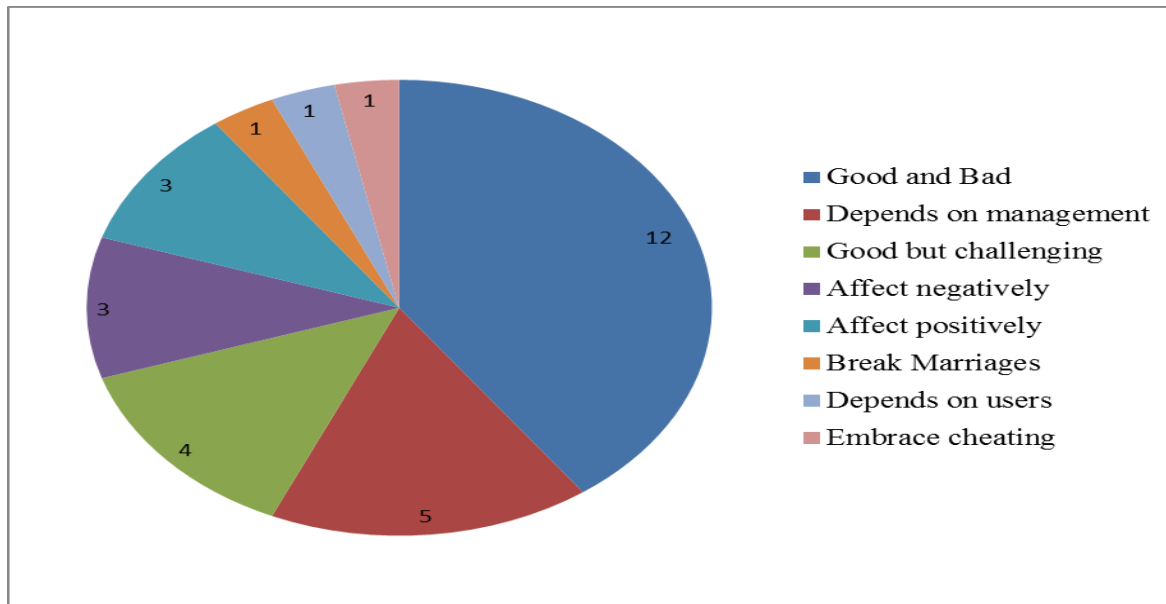


Figure 4: Pie chart of strategies used to strengthen marriage 4th question

In focus group discussion answering question “if conflict arose what was the quickest way of resolving it?” The respondents responded with passion and expressed the ways they resolved challenges using phrases, words and themes which came up before in other questionnaires. These were; listening attentively to one another, understanding what one’s partner was saying and speaking after careful consideration. Also included was to respond after considering the situation, calming down, addressing the issues and seeking for amicable solutions. Respondents also emphasized the need to forgive and forget when hurt by one’s partner. Others added that marriage was not a passive union, but one in which partners needed commitment and patience to work together on issues constantly with trust, resilience and persistence.

One elderly couple explained a situation they managed to resolve before it escalated to serious challenge. George, 65 and Mary, 60 years old, not their real names to avoid confidentiality issues, discussed their holiday plans which created some conflict, but was later on resolved after two days of not talking one another. “It was nil by mouth”.

“George, dear, I have been thinking of us taking our holiday overseas in June Of the year instead of next year” said Mary. George replied “No darling, that could be impossible. Our finances are not sufficient, so we defer it to next year”. Lets’ take a walk to the Park and have a consideration as we relax” A picnic; could hopefully do us some good.’’

The couple took a walk and had a picnic which didn't seem to help. After two days of arguments and shouting; the two thought independently about the issue. They resolved the conflict after Mary realized the magnitude of their finances.

The conflict in this regard would be considered as insignificant but it created tension within the family. Issues of conflict management, communication and resources play a large part in marriages and may be the cause of instability as respondents stated. Certain theoretical issues related to this are cognitive theory that helps to predict behavior. The theory stipulates that dysfunctional behavior is caused by dysfunctional thinking- "as one thinks so one acts". Rational Emotive Behavior Theory (REBT) also states that people could be both rational and irrational, hence the need to be patient and accord oneself the time to think and resolve conflicts in a conducive environment. Participants also added that their experience helped them accept that marriage issues and challenges will exist, but are manageable given time, Optimal consideration and appropriate environment.

Participants who wished to share many more experiences and turning points in their marriage were accorded more time to narrate their interesting stories and experiences (Pillemer, 2011)

The narratives given by some more elderly couples as turning points during their marriage are as listed below; Note that for confidentiality all names used are pseudo names, i.e. not actual names

"My wife admitted before the priest and later to our counselors that she had cheated after about twenty years of marriage. The admission made me start divorce proceedings.

But something like a miracle happened and stopped everything. Our little daughter, five years of age intervened. "Daddy what's wrong with you and Mummy? Both of you are sad and are also in tears."

Felicity had called our best man and best maid and organized a meeting during which she openly apologized to me saying she would never repeat the action. I forgave her. She changed completely and confessed that we needed to see a doctor to assist us in our sexuality. I complied, we were checked and the doctor advised me on the sexuality and other issues which I was not aware of.

This was a turning point for us which actually helped me realize my personal biological issues. The issue for me was medical and it was sorted out. We have since lived happily and in trust of one another. She has never cheated on me ever again. Our children are now grown up and we are proud grandparents". Respondent.

The issue above underlined the importance of Communication, Fidelity and forgiveness in Conflict resolution. During the FGD discussions the issue of fidelity came up severally with the couples underpinning the need for patience and openness in discussing sexuality in relationships. Anger and vengeance will not assist but will escalate issues.

5.0: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of findings

The objective was discussed at length and the elderly couples gave their reasons and suggestions gathered over the years in many areas which they thought had contributed to their marital success. They also explained how they managed to keep the spark in marriage for so many years. The participants explained the significance of counseling and the advice from the elders particularly for the young couples exposed to the internet and globalization. The elders responded on the effect of the technological advances giving all manner of explanations of the factors that affected marriages both positively and negatively. They stated that technological advances had the advantage of empowering the young people and on the flip side have the disadvantage of destroying relationships particularly when the young couples are addicted to the internet. When the two partners are glued to the computer or to the mobile, certain unmet needs are ignored causing conflict in marriages.

5.2 Conclusions

Stability of marriage is positively influenced by quality communication, good conflict management resolutions, resource and financial management abilities and implementation of strategies that could strengthen marriage. However, despite all these, the study found that many marriages were unstable may be because of lack of premarital preparations by the community, the elders, religious institution or the government. However, historically violence, separation and divorce have always been there in relationships but the horrors of homicides and murders were almost unheard of. To-day these sad horrors are of almost daily occurrence among the society. There are social stresses, marital storms, injury o children and suicides. Most of these are caused by psychosocial issues such as irrational behavior within some families. Consummation of alcohol and drug abuse may bring about stresses which may cause emotional stress to families. Some of the stresses may lead to mental health like depression whereby some spouses may bring about physical violence, verbal abuse and fits of anger.

5.3 Recommendations

The study recommends that all people wishing to enter marriage should be prepared in premarital sessions by qualified professionals. Peer groups could be formed to indicate the type of program for their premarital preparation. The young people at village level, tertiary colleges and Universities should be sensitized about marriages. It was found that relationships worked well where there was hope, love, trust, commitment, forgiveness, resilience and acceptance brought about by quality communication, conflict management and financial management among others. The policy makers need to work together with all stakeholders to solve social issues regarding homicides, domestic violence, divorce and suicide within families. Psychological issues and stress as well as character formation of the youth who comprise 80% of the population should be focused. *Nyumba kumi* initiative could be replicated to address spouse violence and offer professional help to families. Research is suggested on core values of the society. These include the role of police, civil society and judiciary in stopping violence before it occurs in relationships. Families are advised to also network positively.

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