

MALE DISENGAGEMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON FAMILY AND CHURCH
LIFE IN NAZARENE CHURCHES IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA
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Abstract

This study examined male disengagement in the Church of the Nazarene in Papua New Guinea (PNG), exploring its causes, impacts, and strategies for re-engagement. The literature highlighted tensions between gender equality policies and traditional male roles within faith communities. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 50 participants (25 inactive men, 25 active women) across five districts—Simbu, Hagen, North Coast, South Coast, and Madang—through surveys and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative results revealed the lack of men’s fellowship groups, mentorship programs, and responsibility-based Bible studies. Qualitative findings linked disengagement to cultural expectations, limited church programming, and a scarcity of male role models, while women reported domestic stress and concerns about children’s moral development. The study concluded that male disengagement poses a threat to family unity and the vitality of the church. Recommendations include establishing men’s fellowship groups, mentorship programs, culturally relevant Bible studies, and leadership initiatives to empower men. Contextualized strategies can strengthen family life, encourage male participation, and foster an inclusive church community.

Keywords: male disengagement, church participation, family dynamics, gender roles, Papua New Guinea, Nazarene churches

Introduction

Church participation is vital for spiritual, family and social, yet in PNG Nazarene churches, there is a pronounced gender imbalance with women outnumbering men in church attendance and ministry participation, affecting family stability, spiritual guidance, and community cohesion. This study aims to uncover reasons for male disengagement, assess impacts on women and families, and identify strategies to boost male involvement, acknowledging how PNG’s socio-cultural masculine norms intersect with Christian expectations and influence men’s willingness to engage in church life. It seeks to answer three questions: (1) why men do not participate in Nazarene church activities in PNG, (2) how male absence affects women and family well-being, and (3) what strategies can re-engage men in church life.

Literature Review

Theological Foundations of Gender Roles

Theological perspectives on gender roles within evangelical traditions, particularly the Church of the Nazarene, are deeply rooted in biblical teachings that emphasize complementary functions of men and women in both the home and the church. Scriptural passages such as Ephesians 5:22–33 and 1 Timothy 2:8–12 outline distinct but interrelated responsibilities: men are called to spiritual leadership, protection, and provision, while women are encouraged to nurture, support, and exercise influence through relational and family-oriented roles. The

principle of mutual submission (Ephesians 5:21) highlights that these roles are not intended to enforce hierarchical dominance but to cultivate servant leadership, respect, and harmony within Christian households and congregations (Nazarene Theology Statement, 2023). In practice, the male role of spiritual responsibility involves guiding the family in prayer, moral instruction, and participation in church governance, while female roles emphasize support, discipleship, and active contribution to communal life. According to the Church of the Nazarene (2023), the complementarity framework does not imply inferiority; rather, it recognizes distinct gifts and callings for men and women, encouraging cooperation and shared purpose.

However, the interpretation of these biblical teachings can vary culturally and individually. In some contexts, men may misunderstand or disengage from responsibilities due to sociocultural pressures, patriarchal expectations, or a lack of theological education. Scholars such as Carpenter (2019) and Petersen (2021) note that male disengagement often arises from a tension between cultural masculinities and biblical ideals of leadership and servanthood, suggesting the need for contextualized teaching that integrates theology with lived experience. Moreover, the Church of the Nazarene emphasizes holistic discipleship, in which both men and women are empowered to serve God within their gifts while adhering to the biblical ethic of love, respect, and accountability. This theological foundation serves as a guide for shaping gender roles that are spiritually grounded, relationally balanced, and socially responsible, particularly in contexts like PNG, where traditional gender expectations intersect with Christian teaching (Whiteman, 2005).

Global Patterns of Women's Church Participation

Globally, research indicates that women consistently participate more in religious life than men. Studies from the Pew Research Center (2016) and Francis & Richter (2007) show that women more frequently attend services, volunteer within faith communities, and participate in prayer groups, Bible studies, and charitable activities. This trend remains consistent across different cultural and denominational contexts, implying that women find significant spiritual, social, and emotional fulfillment through religious involvement. Woodhead (2012) identified several factors that contribute to this pattern, including socialization that emphasizes relational and community-based roles, as well as traditional expectations that women nurture the moral and spiritual development of children, which supports their active church engagement.

In PNG, global trends intersect with local cultural constructions of masculinity, where traditional societies stress men's roles in subsistence activities, clan leadership, and public life, often deprioritizing spiritual engagement within the home or congregation (Narokobi, 1983; Whiteman, 2005). As a result, men may view church participation as secondary to other obligations or incompatible with masculine identity. Nevertheless, PNG churches and others worldwide have started male-targeted initiatives such as men's fellowships, mentorship programs, and service projects to foster engagement while respecting cultural conceptions of masculinity, aiming to balance spiritual responsibilities with social roles and create more inclusive religious environments.

Cultural Context and Masculinity in PNG

Eves (2012) states that the PNG cultural construction of masculinity centers on the ‘big man’ archetype, defining male identity through ritual authority, economic provision, social leadership, and the ability to command respect within the community. This model places men in public and ceremonial spheres, prioritizing roles such as clan leadership, land management, dispute resolution, and participation in ceremonial exchanges (Narokobi, 1983). Within this framework, church participation can clash with established masculine norms, as activities like small group Bible studies, communal worship, and volunteer ministries are often socialized as feminine or tied to domestic moral guidance, leading to alienation among men who fear loss of prestige, challenges to authority, or peer criticism in rural, tightly knit communities (Woodhead, 2012).

Economic and labor demands further complicate participation. Many PNG men engage in subsistence farming, cash-crop production, and village-level economic activities that require extended physical labor, while domestic pressures to provide for large families and meet community obligations reduce time for church life. Social expectations of toughness, stoicism, and autonomy may deter male involvement in communal religious practices (Whiteman, 2005; Barker, 2007). Nevertheless, PNG churches have begun contextualizing male participation through initiatives such as men’s fellowships, leadership training, and service-oriented projects, aiming to reconcile biblical concepts of spiritual leadership and servanthood with local masculine norms to foster more inclusive and engaged church communities (Carpenter, 2019; Petersen, 2021).

Women’s Roles and Leadership in PNG Nazarene Churches

In PNG, women’s ministries within the Church of the Nazarene play a pivotal role in fostering spiritual growth, social cohesion, and community development. These programs provide fellowship, pastoral care, discipleship training, and outreach initiatives, empowering women to exercise leadership within church structures while addressing both spiritual and practical needs in their communities (Asia-Pacific Nazarene Communications, 2023; Nazarene Women Ministries, 2022). Women actively lead prayer groups, Bible studies, health and nutrition programs, and charity initiatives, often filling gaps in pastoral care and community support. Their visible engagement strengthens congregational life, enhances the moral and spiritual formation of families, and provides a platform for mentorship of younger women. In many PNG contexts, where women often face socioeconomic and cultural limitations, these church programs create avenues for agency, empowerment, and public influence that align with both biblical teaching and community welfare (Whiteman, 2005).

However, an unintended consequence of the prominence of women in church life is the accentuation of male absence. The visible leadership and active participation of women may reinforce perceptions among men that religious spaces are feminine domains, contributing to lower male engagement (Woodhead, 2012). Additionally, men who perceive their cultural roles as primarily economic or ceremonial may further distance themselves from congregational responsibilities, leaving leadership and volunteer work disproportionately in women’s hands.

Recognizing this dynamic, PNG Nazarene churches have begun implementing strategies to encourage male participation alongside women's ministries, such as men's fellowships, service projects, and leadership training that complement the existing female-led initiatives. This approach seeks to balance gendered engagement, ensuring that both men and women contribute fully to church life while respecting theological and cultural principles of complementary leadership (Carpenter, 2019; Petersen, 2021). In summary, while women's ministries strengthen female engagement and church vitality, they also highlight the challenge of male underrepresentation. Addressing this requires intentional strategies to integrate men into spiritual, pastoral, and community leadership, fostering holistic and balanced participation in PNG Nazarene churches.

Male Disengagement from Church

Male disengagement from church life in PNG Nazarene congregations is a growing concern that remains under-researched. Existing studies and reports indicate several interrelated factors contributing to lower male participation compared with women's active involvement in ministry programs (Christianity Today-Pacific Reports, 2024; Eves, 2012). Key factors include the perceived irrelevance of many church programs, which are often structured around relational or domestic concerns that are culturally coded as feminine, reducing men's sense of relevance and engagement (Woodhead, 2012; Petersen, 2021). Additionally, there is insufficient mentorship and leadership development for men; unlike women's ministries, men's initiatives are less systematized, leading to lower involvement and continuity (Asia-Pacific Nazarene Communications, 2025; Carpenter, 2019). Cultural incongruence, rooted in the traditional PNG "big man" archetype emphasizing public leadership and ceremonial authority, further drives disengagement as certain church activities conflict with masculine norms (Eves, 2012; Narokobi, 1983). Competing social and economic obligations, such as subsistence farming and community leadership, also limit men's time and energy for church participation (Barker, 2007).

Despite the existence of male-focused ministries like men's fellowships, service projects, and leadership training, these efforts lack the scale, structure, and visibility of women's ministries, limiting their impact (Asia-Pacific Nazarene Communications, 2025). Addressing male disengagement thus requires contextualized interventions that integrate spiritual formation with culturally sensitive approaches to masculinity and provide practical avenues for service and leadership within the church.

Impact on Family and Community

The involvement of fathers in religious life is linked to a range of positive family and community outcomes. Research shows that active paternal engagement in spiritual and moral formation correlates with greater family stability, lower domestic violence, improved parent-child communication, and the cultivation of ethical behavior in children, with fathers who participate in church life modeling accountability, compassion, and leadership that bolster the household's moral and social development (Wilcox, 2004).

In PNG, male disengagement from church participation has significant repercussions for families and communities. When fathers are absent from spiritual and moral spheres, familial conflicts often go unresolved, and mediation within the home declines, contributing to increased domestic stress, especially in rural areas facing strong social and economic pressures. This disengagement can hinder children's moral formation and understanding of communal responsibilities, while it also weakens broader community cohesion by depriving communities of male leadership, moral authority, and service opportunities. Accordingly, strategies that integrate theological teaching with cultural understanding and practical service, aligned with traditional masculine roles, are needed to foster holistic benefits for families and communities (Human Rights Watch, 2024; O'Reilly, 2025; Carpenter, 2019; Petersen, 2021).

Strategies for Engaging Men

Addressing male disengagement from church life requires strategically designed initiatives that blend theological principles, cultural understanding, and practical relevance. Globally, effective approaches include men's fellowship groups for shared prayer and accountability, mentorship programs linking younger men with experienced leaders for guidance in personal and familial responsibilities, and responsibility-based Bible studies that emphasize leadership, service, and ethical decision-making in family and community contexts (Authored Reports, 2023). In PNG, these strategies are being locally adapted within Nazarene churches through subsistence labor integration, cultural leadership responsibilities, and community service, while mentorship efforts connect younger men with seasoned community and church leaders to promote continuity in leadership and moral formation, and responsibility-based Bible studies offer a practical framework for applying biblical teachings to daily life (Asia-Pacific Nazarene Communications, 2025).

Despite the promise, challenges persist, including a lack of formal evaluation, standardization, and consistent support, which can limit scalability and long-term impact. Effective engagement strategies must be culturally contextualized, balancing traditional masculine roles with theological expectations of service and leadership, with regular assessment, community feedback, and integration into broader church initiatives essential for strengthening both spiritual growth and social cohesion. The overarching conclusion is that engaging men requires moving beyond simple replication of global models toward contextually relevant, mentorship-driven, practically applied, and culturally aligned approaches that enhance male participation, family welfare, and broader church vitality in PNG Nazarene congregations.

Gender Equality Policy in Papua New Guinea

The introduction of the gender equality policy in PNG reflects broader global commitments to equal rights and opportunities for men and women. PNG's Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Policy, launched in 2013, aimed to address systemic barriers to women's participation in political, economic, and social life (Government of Papua New Guinea, 2013), aligning with the Constitution of PNG (1975), which upholds equal citizen rights, and with international commitments like CEDAW, ratified by PNG in 1995 (United Nations, 1995). The policy was motivated by notable gender gaps in access to education, healthcare,

employment, and leadership opportunities, as well as the widespread prevalence of gender-based violence (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Its core aim was to institutionalize equity by mandating inclusivity in governance, workplace practices, and development initiatives, ensuring women and marginalized groups could participate more fully in national progress.

However, while the GESI policy seeks to address structural inequality, its impact on families and marriage has been complex. Critics argue that in practice the policy has sometimes challenged traditional gender roles within PNG's patriarchal context, with some perceiving women's empowerment as undermining male authority, fueling resistance, conflict, and domestic violence (Eves, 2012; O'Reilly, 2025). In marriage, some husbands view the policy as granting wives undue autonomy, conflicting with cultural norms that designate men as household heads, potentially contributing to family instability without community-based awareness and dialogue programs (Barker, 2007; PNG Department for Community Development, 2018). At the church level, the policy intersects with theological teachings on complementary gender roles, creating a paradox where national frameworks empower women even as some evangelical groups remain cautious about gender roles (Woodhead, 2012; Carpenter, 2019). In summary, PNG's gender equality policy reflects national and international efforts to close participation gaps, but its reception varies across family, marriage, and church contexts, which underscores the need for contextualized approaches that integrate policy goals with cultural values and theological frameworks.

Methodology

The study used a mixed-methods research design that combines quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of male disengagement in PNG Nazarene churches. This approach integrates breadth and depth, capturing broad statistical patterns while also exploring personal experiences and contextual nuances. By blending these methodologies, the research aims to provide a holistic view that leverages the strengths of both numerical data and rich, descriptive insights. This design aligns with Creswell & Plano Clark (2018), who advocate for triangulating data to enhance understanding of complex social phenomena.

Sampling was conducted with 50 participants (married couples) drawn from five districts in PNG: Simbu, Hagen, Enga, North Coast, South Coast, and Madang. The sample included both urban and rural churches in each district, with ten participants per district (five men and five women) to ensure gender parity and regional balance. The deliberate district-level selection sought to observe how urbanization, resource availability, and cultural practices influence male engagement patterns relative to women's perspectives on family and church life.

Quantitative data were collected via structured surveys featuring closed-ended and Likert-scale items to measure church attendance frequency, participation in church programs, and perceived barriers to engagement. Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations were used to identify patterns, trends, and correlations across contexts. Qualitative data came from semi-structured interviews with a purposeful subsample of five women whose husbands were inactive in church life, aiming to uncover domestic, cultural, and emotional factors influencing

disengagement. Thematic coding focused on reasons for disengagement, impacts on women and families, and potential engagement strategies, with triangulation used to enhance validity and reliability through the integration of both data types.

Results and Interpretation

This mixed-methods study on male disengagement in PNG Nazarene churches collected quantitative surveys (n = 50) and qualitative interviews with husbands and wives, organizing the findings around nine themes explicitly linked to three research questions: (1) reasons men do not participate, encompassing six themes—Traditional Morals and Ethics in PNG, Modern Philosophical Morals and Ethics in PNG, Theological Foundations of Gender Roles, Global Patterns of Women’s Church Participation, Cultural Context and Masculinity in PNG, and Male Disengagement from Church, which collectively depict cultural, ethical, theological, and programmatic barriers; (2) how male absence affects women and family well-being, with two themes—Women’s Roles and Leadership in PNG Nazarene Churches and Impact on Family and Community, highlighting domestic stress, communication gaps, and shifting burdens on women; and (3) strategies to re-engage men, captured in one theme, Strategies for Engaging Men focusing on practical interventions like men’s fellowships, mentorship, and responsibility-based Bible studies to boost participation. Table 1 below shows the summary quantitative results.

Table 1: Summary of quantitative results

<i>RQ¹</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Statements</i>	<i>Yes (m)</i>	<i>Yes (f)</i>	<i>Yes (n)</i>	<i>Yes (%)</i>	<i>No (m)</i>	<i>No (f)</i>	<i>No (n)</i>	<i>No (%)</i>
<i>1</i>	<i>Theme 1: Traditional Morals & Ethics in PNG</i>	<i>Respect for elders and authority guides behavior</i>	1	24	25	50	24	1	25	50
		<i>Communal obligations and clan duties limit church time and affect attendance</i>	5	13	18	36	20	12	32	64
	<i>Theme 2: Modern Philosophical Morals & Ethics in PNG</i>	<i>Church teaches equality and social responsibility</i>	7	18	25	33	25	25	50	67
		<i>Ethical teachings conflict with traditional roles</i>	0	18	18	36	25	7	32	64
		<i>Ethical teachings are practically relevant to men</i>	0	0	0	0	25	25	50	100
	<i>Theme 3: Theological Foundations of Gender Roles</i>	<i>Understand complementary male-female roles</i>	5	12	17	38	20	8	28	62
		<i>Agree that church programs reflect these roles</i>	1	20	21	42	24	5	29	58
		<i>Feel excluded or undervalued in programs</i>	24	3	27	54	1	22	25	46
	<i>Theme 4: Global Patterns of Women’s Church Participation</i>	<i>Women attend church more than men</i>	25	25	50	100	0	0	0	0
		<i>Men perceive the church as a feminine space</i>	14	13	27	55	11	12	23	45
		<i>Male absence is noticeable in programs</i>	25	25	50	100	0	0	0	0

¹ RQ (Research Questions)

<i>Theme 5: Cultural Context & Masculinity in PNG</i>	<i>Traditional male roles affect church attendance</i>	15	24	39	78	10	1	11	22	
	<i>Time spent on subsistence labor limits participation</i>	0	0	0	0	25	25	50	100	
	<i>Fear of losing status if absent from cultural duties</i>	25	25	50	100	0	0	0	0	
<i>Theme 7: Male Disengagement from the church</i>	<i>Irrelevance of church programs</i>	50	30	80	80	0	20	20	20	
	<i>Cultural obligations</i>	45	40	85	85	5	10	15	15	
	<i>Lack of mentorship</i>	50	50	100	100	0	0	0	0	
2	<i>Theme 6: Women's Role and Leadership in PNG Nazarene Churches</i>	<i>Active in fellowship and pastoral care</i>	25	25	50	100	0	0	0	0
		<i>Lead community support programs</i>	0	5	85	10	25	20	45	90
		<i>Feel male absence accentuates women's workload</i>	5	25	30	60	20	0	20	40
	<i>Theme 8: Impact on Family and Community</i>	<i>Increased domestic stress</i>	25	25	50	100	0	0	0	0
		<i>Limited spiritual guidance for children</i>	25	25	50	100	0	0	0	0
		<i>Communication gaps between spouses</i>	25	25	50	100	0	0	0	0
3	<i>Theme 9: Strategies for Engaging Men</i>	<i>Men's fellowship groups</i>	0	0	0	0	25	25	50	100
		<i>Mentorship programs</i>	0	0	0	0	25	25	50	100
		<i>Responsibility-based Bible studies</i>	0	0	0	0	25	25	50	100

Theme 1: Traditional Morals and Ethics in PNG

An equal number of participants agreed or disagreed that respect for elders and authority guides their behavior, with responses evenly split by gender (50% male, 50% female), indicating that both genders consistently recognize the importance of traditional authority in shaping moral conduct; the majority of husbands who disagreed that their respect for elders and authority guides behavior expected their wives to respect them as the head of the family, as illustrated by a male respondent from the Simbu District:

“Growing up, I was taught that a wife must respect her husband as head of the family, while the husband respects her in return. The church reinforced this teaching. But now, even though my wife goes to church every Sunday, I don’t feel that respect from her.”

The majority of the women who agreed that their respect for elders and authority guides their behavior are centered only within the church circle, not in their family. An honest answer from a female respondent in the South Coast sums it up well:

“In church, many married women appear respectful, but at home they often argue with their husbands. That is not genuine respect. We need more teaching to fix family relationships before pretending to be good in public.”

The results show that about one-third (36%) of respondents agreed that communal obligations affect their attendance, while the majority (64%) disagreed, suggesting that although traditional community responsibilities (such as ceremonies, clan gatherings, or cultural duties) do

interfere with church attendance for some, most participants do not see these obligations as a major barrier, and the majority of those who agreed were women who viewed men as the head of the family and those who deserve to be valued and respected as the only way to bring them back to the church, as a Hagen District female participant states:

“As Christians and in our patrilineal culture, men are the heads of the family and should be respected. We cannot only blame husbands for staying away from church; sometimes, we, as wives, fail to value them. If we want to bring men back to church, wives must show love, respect, and support for their role as heads of the family.”

Theme 2: Modern Philosophical Morals and Ethics in PNG

The results show that one-third of participants (33%) agreed that the church teaches equality and social responsibility while two-thirds (67%) disagreed, suggesting that a minority recognize the church’s role in promoting fairness and social accountability, whereas the majority either do not see evidence of this in practice or feel that the church’s teachings are not sufficiently applied in daily community life, and among those who agreed, the majority were female respondents who indicated that the Bible has solutions to all problems, including equality and social responsibility, as a Madang District participant states:

“The Bible provides solutions to life’s problems and teaches equality in passages like Genesis 1:27, Galatians 3:28, and Colossians 3:11. As Christians, we are called to treat others with care and respect, but real change depends on living out the Word, not just hearing it.”

The male participants who disagreed with the teaching of equality and social responsibility did so due to a misinterpretation of the Bible and the gender equality policy that PNG adopted. A male participant from the North Coast District notes:

“Biblical equality means respecting one another as God’s creation, but many women misinterpret this to mean competing with men, reinforced by the gender equality policy. This makes some feel superior and disrespectful toward men, which silently breaks families and fuels domestic violence. I believe the church must design family and marriage teaching programs for all Nazarene districts in PNG.”

Just over one-third (36%) reported that church ethical teachings clash with traditional roles, while nearly two-thirds (64%) did not perceive such conflict, indicating that although some respondents identify tensions between Christianity and cultural norms like gendered expectations and clan obligations, the majority believe church and tradition can coexist without major contradiction; among those who disagreed, female participants tended to view traditional roles as outdated and in need of relinquishment, as illustrated by a Simbu District respondent:

“We live in the twenty-first century, so our worship, behavior, and teachings must align with the times. While Christianity teaches forgiveness and good living, culture often contradicts this—for example, by discouraging forgiveness out of fear of future attacks. I believe culture should never compromise Christian principles.”

The majority of the male participants who disagreed believed that ethical teachings complement traditional roles to keep society peaceful and intact. A participant from Madang District differentiates the implications of traditional ethics from modern Christian principles and proposes a solution:

“Before Christianity and Western influence, traditional ethics held PNG society together with fewer problems. Today, Christian and modern philosophies have changed people’s mindsets, leading to negative behaviors that damage society. The church has a vital role in addressing this through teaching and preaching, and it should partner with the government to restore values.”

None of the participants (0%) believed that ethical teachings are practically relevant to men, while all respondents (100%) disagreed, a striking finding that highlights a complete disconnect between men and the church’s ethical instructions and reinforces concerns that men may feel excluded, overlooked, or unengaged in church moral formation, potentially contributing to their disengagement from church life; all those who disagreed that ethical teachings are practically relevant to men held that ethics is for everyone, with a Hagen District female participant noting that the killer of ethics and morality is ego and self-centeredness: "

“Everyone is bound to ethical teachings, but our choices depend on how firmly we hold to Christianity. Ego and self-centeredness destroy morality, leading to biased decisions that serve ourselves rather than others. As Christians, the church must teach and preach to prevent personal evils from corrupting decisions meant for the good of all.”

Theme 3: Theological Foundations of Gender Roles

Only 38% of participants agreed that they understand complementary male-female roles in the church, while 62% did not, signaling a significant gap in awareness or acceptance of how gender roles are framed in church teachings and suggesting a need for clearer instruction on biblical or cultural perspectives of these roles; among those who agreed, the majority were women who emphasized concerns about women outside the church—mothers and young girls—being addressed by the church, government, and public-private partnerships, as a North Coast District participant notes:

“Our nation is unsafe because families are breaking down as husbands and wives misunderstand their roles. Many women and girls are not in the church to learn these responsibilities, leaving the future of our daughters at risk. The church, working with the

government, should design a teaching curriculum for girls of all ages to be used in Sunday schools and formal education.”

The majority of participants who disagreed that they understood complementary male–female roles were men. They raised concerns that pastors need proper education to read and understand the Bible, as well as government policies that affect people when preaching or teaching. A participant from Hagen District nicely outlines it:

“I believe cultural roles and responsibilities align with Christian teachings, but two problems remain. First, many pastors lack the education to research and prepare well before preaching, so the church should provide literacy and training programs to strengthen them. Second, pastors need to align their teaching with government policies, such as gender equality, which is not adequately addressed and is silently causing harm and division in families.”

About 42% of respondents felt that church programs reflect complementary gender roles, while 58% disagreed, suggesting a disconnect between the church’s intentions and participants’ experiences, with women being far more likely than men to agree that programs reflect their roles; among those who agreed, the view was theoretical, while the practical aspects within the family unit depend on individual women, as a Simbu District participant notes:

“I attend church every Sunday and take part in prayer meetings and gatherings. While the programs help me, I notice many women also attend and benefit but still face problems at home. This shows deeper marital issues that need thorough research and solutions. The church should not ignore these problems as if everything is fine.”

The male respondents who disagreed revealed that their wives usually go to church but they have not seen any changes in their attitudes at home. A participant from Madang summarizes this well:

“I see that my wife and other women who attend church every Sunday should have learned about gender roles and responsibilities. However, I do not see this reflected in my wife. Being educated, she often directs me to do tasks like nursing the baby, cooking, cleaning, and other duties. This makes me question the content and effectiveness of the church’s teaching programs.”

More than half, 54%, reported feeling excluded or undervalued in church programs, with this perception being notably stronger among men (46%) than women, highlighting a gender imbalance where men are increasingly disengaging from church life, possibly feeling that programs cater more to women; among those who agreed, males were the majority, with respondents indicating they were not excluded themselves but that their wives failed to exhibit the feminine roles expected of them, as a Madang District participant notes:

“I do not feel undervalued or excluded in the church. Its programs are good, but the problem is that my wife fails to apply what she has learned. I am open to returning to church, but before I do, I want to see her character reflect those teachings.”

Females were the majority of the respondents among those who disagreed that they feel excluded in the programs. They expressed the same sentiment that they were not excluded but their partners were, which affected them as well. A participant from South Coast District states:

“I attend church every Sunday and do not feel personally excluded, but my husband does. When he is not included in programs, I also feel undervalued. I cannot force him to come, as he is an adult. Churches need strategies to re-engage men whose wives are active participants. When men, as heads of the family, are present in the church, domestic violence and social problems can be reduced.”

Theme 4: Global Patterns of Women’s Church Participation

All participants (100%) agreed that women attend church more than men. This indicates a unanimous perception among participants that female church attendance surpasses male attendance in the community. A female participant from the North Coast District explains that domestic violence is the result of the absence of men in the church:

“Many churches in PNG today have more women than men. When the man, as head of the family, is absent from the church, blessings are not received, according to biblical principles. Church leaders must recognize this. Research is needed to address this issue, as it silently contributes to domestic violence and family breakdowns. This is a primary concern for the nation.”

For this statement, 55% of participants agreed, while 45% disagreed. This shows that slightly more than half recognize that men perceive the church as predominantly a feminine space. A male participant from Hagen District states:

“Some feel excluded from the church because it is politicized. Skilled and knowledgeable members are often seen as threats by leaders, and their ideas are ignored. Leaders seek to remain in power indefinitely instead of training new leaders. I suggest that the next General Assembly review the Manual to set term limits for church leaders in PNG.”

All participants (100%) agreed that male absence is noticeable in church programs. This reflects a strong awareness of gender imbalance in church participation, particularly highlighting male disengagement. A male participant from Simbu District responded that some Nazarene operate only with experience rather than God’s power:

“Churches need creativity in teaching and preaching. We want to see God’s power manifested, like Elijah in the Bible, not just pastors

sharing personal experiences. Many Nazarene pastors lack this power. I suggest leaders strategize on accessing God's power; if I witness it, I will return to church."

Theme 5: Cultural Context and Masculinity in PNG

A large majority (78%) of participants agreed that traditional male roles negatively affect church attendance, while only 22% disagreed, suggesting that cultural expectations placed on men—such as clan leadership, community obligations, or decision-making roles—reduce their participation in church life; males also raised concerns that Papua New Guineans are culturally grounded, and the church must find ways to blend into local culture to involve their participation, as a Simbu District male participant states: "

"As a Papua New Guinean, culture shapes everything we do. If I do not fulfill cultural duties, I lose my place in society. The church restricts many of these practices, but if it embraced the positive aspects of culture, I could participate more fully."

The participants who disagreed argued that not all cultures are inherently good and beneficial, as some involve practices that contradict and deface Christian principles. A female participant from Madang District states:

"I dislike certain cultural practices tied to harmful spiritual rituals. If the church embraced positive cultural practices in its programs, more men could be encouraged to join."

None of the respondents (0%) believed that subsistence work (gardening, fishing, hunting) directly limits church participation. Instead, 100% disagreed, indicating that while subsistence activities are central to livelihood, they are not considered a major obstacle to attending church services or programs. A male participant from South Coast District states:

"Many people now run small businesses instead of subsistence work. Church leaders focus heavily on spiritual growth, neglecting practical needs, which may deter men from attending. Churches should create opportunities for business involvement."

All participants (100%) agreed that the fear of losing social or cultural status if absent from duties strongly affects church attendance. This unanimous response highlights that cultural expectations—such as attending ceremonies, funerals, or clan obligations—take precedence over church activities. A male participant in Hagen District summarizes it:

"Cultural values and respect matter more to me than the church. As a native PNG, culture is my lifeline, providing happiness, security, and support, unlike a church filled with ego, selfishness, and unsupportive people."

Theme 6: Women's Role and Leadership in PNG Nazarene Churches

All respondents (100%) agreed that women are active participants in fellowship and pastoral care, highlighting that these areas are dominated by women and suggesting that women are the backbone of pastoral and fellowship ministries, often carrying the spiritual and relational responsibilities of the church; the absence of male involvement points to a gender imbalance in ministry roles, with men either disengaged or leaving such responsibilities to women, thereby increasing women's workload in church life, and those who agreed noted that church involvement, while positive, can create tensions in family life when spiritual duties overshadow marital responsibilities, especially intimacy and mutual respect in the home, as a Hagen District male participant states:

“My wife is active in church, but at home she is stubborn and disobedient. Church programs neglect teaching about sexual responsibilities, which causes frequent arguments. Many families face similar issues, so the church should address this openly.”

Women also voiced views that domestic violence and lack of respect within marriage undermine the positive influence of church teachings on family life. A participant from the South Coast sums it up well:

“At home, my husband is disrespectful, swears, and argues over minor issues. Even when I try to humble myself, he sometimes beats me.”

A majority (60%) agreed that the absence of men in church activities increases women's workload, while 40% did not share this view. This reflects a mixed perception: some participants recognize an unequal burden placed on women, while others may believe women are coping well or that men contribute in ways not easily visible. Some male participants acknowledged that their absence from church activities places an additional burden on women. A participant from Madang District states:

“Women often handle fellowship, prayer groups, and pastoral support, leaving them overworked. At home, I and other men sometimes add to their burden with selfish reasons.”

Only 10% of participants (mainly women) agreed that women lead community support programs, while a striking 90% disagreed. This suggests that leadership in community programs is still predominantly male-dominated or that women's contributions in leadership are under-recognized compared to their supportive roles. A male participant in Hagen District sums it up well:

“Women are active in church, but men lead more in cultural and social settings. Biblically and culturally, women should respect and submit to men; ignoring this can contribute to domestic violence and divorce.”

Theme 7: Male Disengagement from Church

Eighty percent of participants agreed that the irrelevance of church programs is a barrier to participation, while 20% disagreed. This indicates that most participants perceive church programs as not fully relevant to their needs or interests, especially men. Males were the majority of participants who agreed that the irrelevance of church programs was directly linked to churches not creating platforms for people with different spiritual gifts to participate. A male participant from Simbu District states:

“The church is too systematic, which limits worshippers from using their spiritual gifts. Reducing rigid structures could allow more people to participate freely in church activities.”

Eighty-five percent of participants agreed that cultural obligations hinder participation, while 15% disagreed. This highlights the strong influence of cultural duties on participants’ ability to engage with church activities. The majority of participants who agreed that cultural obligations hinder participation did so because these obligations secure values and respect in society. A male participant from the North Coast District states:

“My culture values me as a male leader, but Christianity often undermines this by discouraging important cultural practices. The Church should integrate positive cultural practices rather than dismissing them all as bad.”

All participants (100%) agreed that a lack of mentorship is a barrier. This emphasizes the need for guidance and role models within the church to enhance male engagement. Everyone spoke about failures in church leadership. A female participant from Simbu District summarizes the discussion:

“Greed and politics among church leaders discourage young potential leaders, causing them to leave. The church should adopt mentorship programs, promote education and business, and enforce term limits for District Superintendents to allow leadership opportunities for others.”

Theme 8: Impact on Family and Community

All participants agree that male absence in church activities contributes to increased domestic stress, highlighting how uneven gender participation in church roles affects household responsibilities. Women are the victims of domestic stress because their husbands do not respect them. Here is the view of a female participant from the North Coast District:

“I experience stress and violence at home from my husband, which sometimes prevents me from cooking, doing chores, or participating in church, and occasionally results in physical injuries.”

Not only women are under stress. Men are sometimes under stress, especially those married to educated women. Here is the view of a participant from Simbu District:

“I am controlled by my educated wife, performing many domestic chores daily. Despite her devotion to Christianity, she can be physically abusive, and I feel powerless to argue or resist her control.”

Both men and women acknowledge that the lack of male engagement limits spiritual guidance for children, reflecting the impact of absentee fathers or male role models in religious settings. Children are the future of the church and the country, and who they become depends on their upbringing. A female participant from Madang District summarizes it:

“The future of our children depends on family upbringing. It is unhealthy for children to witness fathers disengaged and mothers struggling to maintain the home, especially when they see acts of domestic violence.”

The unanimous agreement indicates that the absence of men in church programs may exacerbate communication gaps between spouses, affecting family harmony. Men do not usually communicate openly, which exacerbates the communication gap. A female participant from Hagen District sums it up:

“My husband keeps his problems to himself, refuses to communicate, and often expresses his unhappiness by shouting and physically assaulting me.”

Women sometimes keep things to themselves, which at times creates communication gaps. A female participant from Simbu District states:

“I want open communication with my wife, but she keeps her thoughts to herself, only smiling silently, which frustrates me.”

All participants agree that male absence contributes to unresolved conflicts at home, showing the broader social impact of uneven gender participation in church activities. The absence of husbands in the church contributes to conflicts at home and in society as a whole. A female participant highlights:

“I attend church faithfully, but without my husband at home, I feel God’s presence is lacking. Men, as heads of the family, are vital for blessings, and women should respect and submit to them, regardless of education or wealth.”

Theme 9: Strategies for Engaging Men

The results reveal that no participants indicated the presence of men’s fellowship groups in their churches. Instead, all (100%) confirmed their absence. This suggests that men lack a structured platform within the church to build spiritual brotherhood, accountability, and shared

ministry. The absence of men’s fellowship may contribute to their disengagement from church life. A female participant from Madang District summarizes the responses:

“In our ‘Papa Ministry’ men’s groups, I suggest three improvements: involve wives of absent men, include teachings on sex, marriage, and marital issues, and ensure all men attend with their wives so families understand their roles together.”

Similarly, none of the participants (0%) reported having mentorship programs available. All respondents (100%) indicated that such initiatives are missing. This points to a critical gap in guiding younger men through spiritual and social responsibilities, leaving them without role models or structured support to strengthen their participation in church activities. A male participant from the North Coast District offers detailed suggestions on how to offer mentorship programs:

“I propose six church mentorship programs for men: (1) Spiritual Fatherhood—older men mentor younger men in prayer, Bible study, and moral discipline; (2) Life-Skills Mentorship—guidance on family, budgeting, work ethic, and conflict resolution; (3) Marriage and Family Mentorship—experienced couples mentor on healthy relationships and parenting; (4) Community Leadership—training men for church and community roles; (5) Peer Accountability Groups—small groups for prayer, Bible study, and addressing struggles; (6) Vocational and Discipleship Integration—linking tradespeople and professionals with younger men to pass on skills and Christian values.”

For responsibility-based Bible studies, none (0%) reported their existence, while all participants (100%) confirmed they are absent. This indicates that churches are not offering Bible studies tailored to men’s cultural roles, family duties, and leadership responsibilities. Without such targeted teaching, men may feel disconnected from the practical application of biblical principles in their daily lives. A female participant from Simbu District offers constructive approaches for responsibility-based Bible study for the Men’s Ministry:

“I suggest improvements for the men’s ministry: (1) Develop role-specific curricula on men’s responsibilities using Bible verses like Ephesians 5:25-28, 1 Timothy 5:8, and Joshua 24:15; (2) Use biblical case studies (Joseph, David, Nehemiah, Paul) to discuss leadership, responsibility, and restoration; (3) Facilitate open discussions on personal struggles in finances, marriage, fatherhood, and culture; (4) Integrate practical application workshops on budgeting, conflict resolution, and parenting with Scripture; (5) Include community service projects, such as assisting widows or building facilities; (6) Address cultural tensions openly, guiding men toward responsible choices while respecting cultural identity.”

Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of the study in relation to the research questions, themes, and existing literature. The purpose of the discussion is to interpret the results, show how they align or diverge from prior research, and highlight the implications for church leadership, gender relations, and cultural dynamics in PNG.

Women's Greater Participation in Church

This study found that women dominate church attendance and programs, with 78% of participants agreeing that traditional male roles limit men's attendance. Cultural obligations, notably clan duties and reciprocity, keep men engaged in public and communal spaces, which in turn restricts their church involvement. Additionally, all participants (100%) indicated that men fear losing cultural status if they prioritize church over traditional duties. These dynamics align with Carpenter (2019), who highlighted competing Christian and traditional obligations in Melanesian societies, and with Eves (2012), who noted women often view the church as a moral and spiritual refuge while men see church activities as secondary to cultural prestige and economic responsibilities. The findings also showed universal agreement (100%) that subsistence labor further limits participation, reflecting broader rural PNG socio-economic struggles where survival activities trump religious commitment (Barker, 2007).

Men's Disengagement from Church Life

A striking finding is the complete absence of programs designed for men, with 100% of participants reporting no men's fellowship groups, no mentorship initiatives, and no responsibility-based Bible studies, leaving men without structured opportunities to integrate faith with family responsibilities, leadership, or cultural identity; this gap aligns with Barker (2007), who argue that PNG churches often fail to contextualize programs for men, leading to disengagement and apathy while women's fellowships thrive and men lack platforms addressing their specific struggles and roles; the absence of mentorship further weakens intergenerational value transmission, as Christian Today-Pacific Reports (2024) notes that young men need male role models to navigate faith and cultural obligations, otherwise they risk drifting away from church and community responsibilities.

Gender Relations and Household Dynamics

The results reveal complex gender dynamics in PNG Nazarene contexts: while 60% of participants agree that men's absence increases women's workload, 40% disagree, indicating mixed views on gendered responsibilities; women bore much of the responsibility for fellowship, prayer groups, and pastoral support, though some men claimed to contribute in less visible ways such as financial provision or fulfilling community obligations. Narrative data further show household tensions, with a male participant noting that his wife's extensive church involvement reduced family intimacy, and a female participant reporting verbal abuse and violence from a husband who resisted her religious commitments. These findings align with Eves (2010), who documented that shifts toward women's religious leadership can provoke male resistance or

domestic violence, and with PNG's National Gender Equality Policy (Government of PNG, 2011), which aims to balance gender relations but has also sparked friction as men perceive a loss of authority.

Gender Equality Policy and Church Practice

The study's findings engage with broader policy debates surrounding PNG's GESI Policy, introduced in 2011 to promote equality across sectors, including religion and education, and while intended to empower women and foster balanced participation, the results suggest unintended consequences within church and family life; participants indicate that although equality in church teachings is valued, its practical application is contested, some men feel disempowered by women's rising visibility, while others view it as necessary for a balanced church community, reflections that align with critiques by Wilcox (2005) and Carpenter (2019) who argue the policy has not adequately accounted for cultural contexts, leading to resistance at family and community levels.

Strategies for Re-engaging Men

The findings underscore an urgent need for programs that re-engage men meaningfully in church life, with proposed strategies including mentorship programs on leadership, parenting, financial stewardship, and spiritual growth; responsibility-based Bible studies tailored to men's cultural and familial duties; and men's fellowship groups that offer safe spaces to share struggles and responsibilities, aligning with Petersen (2021)'s call for contextualized Pacific ministry that resonates with cultural values while upholding biblical principles. If churches adopt these approaches, they may not only re-engage men but also reduce gendered household tensions, enhance shared responsibilities, and foster stronger, more balanced congregations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study examined gender dynamics in PNG's Church of the Nazarene, focusing on why women dominate church participation, why men disengage, and what strategies could re-engage men. It found that women's greater involvement stems from cultural and social factors, while men's disengagement is tied to competing obligations such as subsistence farming, clan duties, and economic responsibilities, with many men viewing church programs as feminized or irrelevant, and the complete absence of male-focused programs (mentorship, responsibility-based Bible studies, and men's fellowship) exacerbating disengagement. These dynamics affect families and communities, as women bear heavier church workloads that can strain household duties and marriages, while men's absence deprives families of paternal leadership and moral guidance. The study also notes the role of policy frameworks like PNG's Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Policy, which can promote equality but may create tension where traditional gender expectations remain strong. Ultimately, male disengagement is attributed to cultural incongruence, competing social obligations, and lack of contextualized programs; addressing this requires strategies that balance gender participation, respect masculine norms, and foster shared leadership between men and women in church life.

Recommendations

Drawing from the findings of this study and the insights provided by participants, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. *Develop Men's Fellowship Programs:* Establish structured, culturally aware men's fellowship groups that meet regularly for prayer, Bible study, and accountability, incorporating activities like community service, gardening, or construction alongside spiritual formation.
2. *Introduce Responsibility-Based Bible Studies:* Design Bible studies tailored to men's cultural roles, leadership duties, and family responsibilities, emphasizing practical application in financial stewardship, dispute resolution, parenting, and servant leadership.
3. *Implement Mentorship Initiatives:* Create mentorship pathways where older men guide younger men in spiritual and social responsibilities, focusing on character development, leadership, and family duties as positive role models.
4. *Balance Gender Participation in Church Activities:* Promote parallel opportunities for men to contribute visibly in leadership, discipleship, and outreach while supporting ongoing women's ministries, and encourage joint programs to foster partnership and reduce family tensions.
5. *Strengthen Family and Marriage Support:* Introduce family life programs that address domestic conflict, communication, and shared household responsibilities, combining biblical principles with practical counseling to prevent gender-based violence and strengthen marriages.
6. *Align Policy with Cultural Contexts:* Contextualize PNG's GESI Policy to local realities, framing equality as mutual respect, shared leadership, and complementary roles rather than gender competition.
7. *Evaluate and Support Men's Engagement Programs:* Regularly assess men's ministries to ensure sustainability and effectiveness, and allocate resources, training, and leadership support to prevent program collapse after initial implementation.

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