

Faith in Action

How religious organisations facilitate
demographic change in West Africa

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 more people will be competing for jobs, schooling and health care. Societies and states have to struggle for socioeconomic progress as a decline in fertility rates is a prerequisite for and outcome of development. If governments and inhabitants fail to offer young people a perspective, many will lack the opportunity to lead self-determined lives.

More gender equality, education of girls and realisation of sexual and reproductive health and 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 countries of West Africa, 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.

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At a glance

- › ... alongside traditional and cultural values, people also 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 new interpretations of the Bible, Koran or other religious texts based on gender equality.
- › 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 for family planning. They argue for instance that maternal and child health is the top priority and that 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 equal rights, 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 might 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 even reach 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 appropriate language to engage 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 have unwanted pregnancies, teenagers are sexually active, menstruation is a taboo topic in many places, which hinders the schooling of young women, and traditional gender roles impede personal and social development. On the other hand, they have to find a language that respects people's personal beliefs. This means secular organisations have to find out what believers think terms like family planning actually mean and what values underpin that 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.
- › ... make it clear to religious leaders 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 equal 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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The **Berlin Institute for Population and Development** is an independent think tank that deals with issues of regional and global demographic change. The Institute was founded in 2000 as a non-profit foundation and has the task of raising awareness of demographic change, promoting sustainable development, introducing new ideas into politics and developing concepts for solving demographic and development policy problems. In its studies, discussion and background papers, the Berlin Institute prepares scientific information for the political decision-making process.

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