

## ABSTRACT

The Catholic Church is perhaps one of the oldest religious institutions with sustainable structures in the whole world. Its sustainability is founded on a long tradition, inspiring scripture, clear leadership and a worldwide network of parishes and dioceses. In the mission of the Catholic Church, Women religious orders serve in a range of ministries, often with the most marginalized in the society. The types of ministries and services associated with Sisters and Sisters are education, catechetical institutions, health care, and social work. What has been less understood in Kenya is the enduring nature of the origin, organization, work, and possible challenges that these women of religious orders face. It is also observed that there are limited studies on local African religious women. There exists literature on the church as a family of God but from a Eurocentric context but in the last decade there has been growing interest in the history of individual catholic women congregations in Kenya. This study examined the history of the Kenyan Province of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin (SBV) in Nyanza since 1964. Right from its inception, the congregation has undergone a lot of challenges and has transformed itself in order to offer greater and relevant service to the Kenyan Society. However, these significant contributions and challenges have not been evaluated in a book length or academic treatise which this research has done. This study discussed the establishment of the Catholic Church in Kenya before 1964; examined the factors leading to the establishment of the Blessed Virgin Sisters Congregation and ministries in Nyanza; assessed the charism and contributions of Sisters of Blessed Virgin Congregation in Nyanza since 1964 and analyzed opportunities and challenges that Sisters of Blessed Virgin Congregation has undergone in Nyanza since their inception. The study was guided by the theory of Patriarchy developed by Everts which focuses on gender inequality which contends that although professions are progressing from their former exclusion practices towards an integration of women, gender relations remain far asymmetrical therefore existing patterns of gender inequality can and should be changed for the benefit of all members of the society. The study was carried out amongst SBV congregations in the Catholic Dioceses of Kisii, Homabay and Kisumu through descriptive survey design. Based on this design, interviews were conducted to a sample of individuals that have related with the sisters of this congregation, ordinary members of the congregation at various stages and some sisters who have been in-charge of various communities of the congregation. These informants were selected purposively based on their long experience with the congregation of Sisters of the Blessed Virgin. Key informant interviews were conducted among the 7 sisters in-charge of the seven convents of the SBV, 3 bishops, 12 members of the convents who are not superiors, the provincial superior and the sister in charge of formation and 7 alumnae of their schools. Secondary data was collected from the congregation's archives, Diaries and diocesan offices. This study has provided a detailed textual historical account for SBV congregation in Kenya thereby promoting vocations to religious life through the reading of this historical account. It has also highlighted the contributions of Catholic Women Christian missionaries in Kenya in terms of ministerial and leadership functions in the last 50 years. To exhaustively analyze the history of the Kenyan province of the congregation of the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin in Nyanza Kenya (1964-2014), thematic and content analysis was used to develop comprehensive description of data under study. Interviews recorded in tapes were transcribed and divided into meaningful analytical units to allow for their content to be analyzed and interpreted. Information from both primary (archival church records, biblical texts), Key informant reports and secondary data were corroborated for authenticity and validity. Guided by specific research questions and objectives, the study found out that SBV sisters go through deep struggle in their lives to accept the conviction of entering and persevering in the convent thus the study recommends that, in order to understand the opportunities and handicaps of Sisters in the Catholic Church, it is important to comprehend the basis from which they do operate.