

A Systematic Review of the Implications of Alternative Rites of Passage on Youth Transitions

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Abstract

Alternative rites of passage (ARPs) have emerged as culturally sensitive strategies designed to replace harmful traditional practices like female genital mutilation with positive, empowering experiences. ARPs aim to preserve cultural identity while promoting health, safety, and gender equality. Despite their growing popularity, there is limited understanding of the impacts of ARPs on different outcomes for the youth (10-18 years). This paper utilizes systematic review methodology to assess gaps in literature on Implications of Alternative Rites of Passage on Youth Transitions. A search from databases yielded 115 articles with only a sample of 11 meeting exclusion and inclusion criteria like article type (primary research article), publication language and peer-reviewed articles. Preliminary findings indicate majority of the studies (36.4%, n=4) focused on health-related outcomes, 27.3%, n=3 explore effect on abandonment of harmful practices, 18.2%, n=2 examined ARP adoption while research on ARP impacts on educational and religiosity remain limited at 9.1%, n=1 each. Most of the studies (35.7%) were conducted in Kenya, 21.4% in the United States, 14.3% in Ghana and 7.1% in Papua New Guinea. Majority of the studies (54.5%) did not mention any theory while the remaining 45.5% were anchored in ecological framework (9.1%), Africentric theory (9.1%), life events theory (9.1%), Edwards Wilson's theory of gender (9.1%), human rights approach (9.1%), ritual process paradigm (9.1%), and social cultural theory (9.1%). The most researched target population were girls (72.7%), mixed adolescent sample (54.6%), women (27.3%), and community stakeholders like teachers (36.4%). Overall, findings support the potential of culturally sensitive ARPs as effective, sustainable tools to promote health, deter the proliferation of harmful cultural practices, and promote education and religious participation. This is likely to contribute to development goals aimed at fostering healthier, more equitable societies. The reviewed studies lack a unified theoretical framework, limiting understanding of underlying mechanisms. Contextually, research is concentrated in Kenya and the US, with limited exploration of diverse cultural settings and religious influences, especially on education and religiosity. Methodologically, most studies focus on health outcomes, and few employ longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to assess long-term impacts. Empirically, there is a scarcity of data on effects of ARPs on educational attainment and religious participation, restricting comprehensive evaluation of their broader social implications. Addressing these gaps can enhance culturally tailored interventions and inform policy for sustainable youth development. Future research should further explore education and religious dimensions to strengthen intervention strategies, incorporate comprehensive contextually relevant theories, adopt mixed-method approaches to deepen insights, and expand research to include culturally diverse contexts.

Keywords: Alternative Rites of Passage, Health, Education, Resilience, Culture, Adolescent, Youth

Introduction

1.0 Background of the Study

Rites of passage are experiences created and directed by communities with aim of transmitting cultural values and knowledge to individuals during major transition times (Gennep, 2004). Rites of passage not only guide an individual during transition to the new phase of life, but also creates public events that celebrate the transition and reaffirm community values, which guide expectations for behaviour essential for group survival. Archives show that rites of passage have existed in all cultures for thousands of years serving as vital cultural symbols of transition, community membership, and spiritual growth. Adolescent rites of passage are events, ceremonies or experiences that marks an individual's transition from childhood to adulthood. These rites often involve a period of separation, a transformative transition stage where skills and values are learned, and incorporation into adult roles and responsibilities within the community. According to Weichold et al. (2023), over 70% of communities around the globe have some kind of rites of passage for adolescents. The rites of passage have various benefits including provide individuals with a sense of new identity as they assume a more respectable position within the community.

Globally, adolescence is a transformative and complex developmental stage marked by rapid biological, psychological, social, and cultural changes (WHO, 2018). During this critical period, young people navigate pivotal milestones that influence their social standing, responsibilities, and identity within their communities. These milestones are often celebrated through traditional rites of passage, culturally sanctioned ceremonies that mark the transition from childhood to adulthood, marriage, or spiritual maturity (Lloyd & Warner, 2019). Practices vary globally but often involve physical challenges, spiritual teachings, and elaborate ceremonies that prepare adolescents for future societal roles emphasizing virtues such as bravery, responsibility, and community service (Meyer & Mkhize, 2020). However, Blumenkrantz and Goldstein (2010) observed that rites of passage in the modern American society is typified by cultural practices and secular strategies and do not effectively aid children transition to adulthood. There is a lack of clearly established rites of passage in the American society due to ambiguity regarding when and how an individual becomes an adult. Adolescent in America desperately look for public and community markers to verify their entry to adulthood with many resorting to markers that are based on media and peer

values. This explains why behaviours like binge drinking, drug use, getting tattoos and teenage sex have become common as most youth view them as passage to adulthood.

Transition to adolescence in Sub-Saharan Africa is characterized by deep-rooted cultural practices that serve as core social and moral frameworks. Traditional rites of passage in this region are diverse and deeply embedded within ethnic identities, often symbolizing key transitions such as into adulthood, warriorhood, or spiritual maturity (Ogunleye, 2017; Kaiser, 2016; Malianga, 2018). These rituals typically involve bodily modifications such as circumcision, scarification, or seclusion accompanied by storytelling, moral teachings, and community participation. They reinforce core values like bravery, respect, responsibility, and social cohesion. According to Weichold et al. (2023), over 30% of boys initiation ceremonies in the SSA region encompass some form of painful ritual like beating, bullying, and circumcision. Some initiation ritual encourages early sexual debut due to sexual education or heightened sexual awareness. A study conducted in Zambia found that an estimated 87% of women had undergone an initiation rite at puberty that entailed sexual education and labia minora elongation (Martinze Perez et al., 2016).

In Kenya, adolescence is a period marked by profound changes and cultural rites that symbolize transition into adulthood, spiritual maturity, and social responsibility. These rites are central to many ethnic groups such as the Maasai, Kikuyu, Kalenjin, and others, and serve as vital social institutions that reinforce cultural identity and moral values (Lloyd & Warner, 2019). Initiation ceremonies often involve circumcision, storytelling, spiritual teachings, and community celebrations that prepare youth for their future roles as responsible members of society. Male circumcision is prevalent in most communities with 94.2% of all men aged 15 years and above reporting being circumcised in the 2022 Kenya Demographics and Health Survey (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The prevalence of FGM in the 2022 survey was 15%, which was a marked decline from 32% in 2003 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

Despite their cultural importance, many traditional practices pose significant health and human rights risks. Physical harm is common, especially when procedures are performed under unsafe conditions without trained personnel, leading to infections, excessive bleeding, and death (WHO, 2018). For example, circumcision and FGM practices performed often without medical supervision result in infections, hemorrhage, long-term reproductive health problems, and even

death (WHO, 2018). Early marriage and seclusion also restrict girls' educational opportunities and perpetuate gender inequality (UNICEF, 2020). These practices often reinforce subordinate roles for girls and women, limit their agency, and contribute to cycles of poverty and marginalization. Psychological trauma, social exclusion, and economic burdens are also associated with involuntary participation or coercion within these rites.

In response, communities and organizations have promoted Alternative Rites of Passage (ARPs); programmes designed to uphold cultural values while eliminating health risks and human rights violations. These programs incorporate symbolic ceremonies, community dialogues, mentorship, and arts-based activities that serve as safe milestones for youth (Karanja et al., 2019). These initiatives emphasize education, voluntary participation, safety, and community dialogue, using culturally relevant methods such as school-based ceremonies, faith-based programs, and arts-driven initiatives (Karanja et al., 2019). Evidence suggests ARPs can reduce physical harm, improve psychosocial wellbeing, and increase awareness about health and rights (Mutua & Wainaina, 2022). They can also foster community cohesion, promote gender equality, and empower marginalized groups when effectively implemented.

However, scaling up ARPs remains challenging. Deep-rooted cultural resistance persists, with elders and community leaders often opposing reforms due to fears of losing cultural legitimacy and social cohesion (Muthoni & Wambui, 2019). Myths and gender stereotypes, along with resource constraints and weak enforcement of laws, hinder widespread acceptance. Social norms that uphold traditional rites over alternative practices continue to dominate, and external mistrust of change initiatives hampers progress (Njoki et al., 2020). Cultural resistance persists in many communities, where traditional rites are perceived as inviolable markers of identity and social order (Otieno & Kamau, 2021). Elders and community leaders often oppose reforms, fearing cultural erosion or loss of social prestige.

1.1 Statement of Problem

Adolescence is a pivotal period marked by rapid physical, psychological, social, and cultural transformations that influence an individual's journey into adulthood. In many cultures worldwide, traditional rites of passage serve as significant markers of this transition, symbolizing social maturity, cultural identity, and spiritual growth (Lloyd & Warner, 2019). These rituals are often

elaborate, community-centred ceremonies that reinforce collective values, moral responsibilities, and social cohesion. However, despite their cultural importance, numerous traditional practices linked to rites of passage such as female genital mutilation (FGM), early circumcision, seclusion, and early marriage pose substantial health, social, and human rights challenges, particularly for adolescents. Recognizing the harm caused by certain traditional rites, many communities and organizations have championed the development and promotion of Alternative Rites of Passage (ARPs). These culturally sensitive programs aim to uphold the core values of transition, social cohesion, and moral education while eliminating health hazards and human rights violations associated with harmful practices. ARPs encompass a broad spectrum of approaches including school-based ceremonies, community-led cultural adaptations, faith-based initiatives, and arts-driven activities. These programs seek to provide safe, inclusive, and meaningful milestones that foster positive psychosocial outcomes, improve health and educational indicators, and promote gender equality among adolescents (Karanja et al., 2019).

Well-implemented ARPs hold the potential to foster safer transitions, enhance health outcomes, promote gender equality, and strengthen community resilience. Yet, despite the growing body of anecdotal and programmatic evidence supporting ARPs, there remains a significant gap in comprehensive understanding of their overall impact, sustainability, and the factors influencing their success or failure. Most existing studies are context-specific, lacking systematic synthesis, and often focus narrowly on health or cultural aspects without a holistic assessment of psychosocial, educational, and socio-economic outcomes. As a result, policymakers, practitioners, and community stakeholders lack consolidated evidence to inform best practices, scale-up strategies, and policy frameworks that can support effective ARP implementation. Given this landscape, a systematic literature review is urgently needed to critically evaluate the existing evidence on the impacts of ARPs on adolescents. This review sought to synthesize diverse research findings, identify gaps in knowledge, and generate insights into what works, under what circumstances, and why. It also sought to provide a robust evidence base to guide culturally sensitive, health-promoting, and rights-based programmes aimed at transforming harmful practices into positive, safe, and empowering rites of passage. This scholarly synthesis is instrumental in informing future interventions, policies, and community engagement strategies that

seek to realize the full potential of ARPs in safeguarding adolescent health, rights, and development.

1.2 Research Questions

1.2.1 Overarching Question

What are the implications of alternative rites of passage on adolescents' transition?

1.2.2 Literature Review Sub-Questions

The review was guided by the following research sub-questions:

- a) What are the documented outcomes of ARP interventions?
- b) Which theoretical frameworks underpin ARP research?
- c) In what contexts and settings has ARP research been conducted?
- d) What is the empirical focus of ARP research?
- e) What gaps exist in the current evidence base regarding ARPs?

2.0 Methods

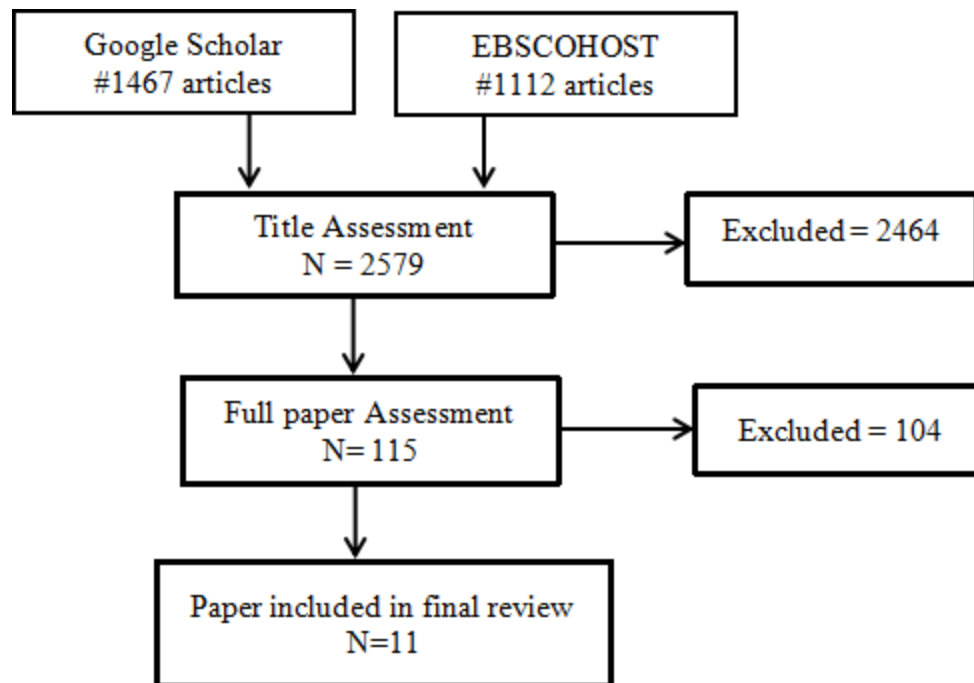
A search was conducted in Google Scholar and Ebscohost research platforms using the search phrase: Alternative Rites of Passage + Impacts on Girls + Impacts on Boys, Education, Health. The search was enhanced by considering synonyms such as "Alternative rite of passage," "Alternative initiation rite," "Alternative initiation ritual," "Alternative initiation practices," and "Alternative initiation programmes" enriched the search by capturing various terminologies used across different studies and cultural contexts. This approach ensured a broader retrieval of relevant literature that might use different wording to describe similar concepts. Including specific combinations like "impact on girls," "impact on boys," "education," "health," and "moral behaviour" further refined the search, targeting studies that examine gender-specific effects and specific outcomes (Muchandeyi et al., 2024). Using these varied search phrases increased the likelihood of identifying diverse research findings, reports, and case studies, thereby providing a comprehensive overview of how alternative rites influence girls and boys across educational, health, and moral domains. The foundation of a comprehensive literature review lies in a

meticulously designed search strategy that captures all relevant studies pertaining to the research topic (Chigbu et al., 2023). In this context, the search was conducted using two prominent research platforms: Google Scholar and EBSCOhost. These platforms are widely recognized for their extensive databases covering peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, theses, and other scholarly outputs (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020). This systematic expansion minimized missed literature and enhanced the depth and breadth of the review. Inclusion criteria include:

1. Studies focused on alternative rites of passage, initiation rites, rituals, practices, or programmes.
2. Research examining impacts on girls and/or boys, including educational, health, or moral outcomes.
3. Articles published in peer-reviewed journals.
4. Publications available in English.
5. Empirical research articles providing substantial data or insights on the impacts of alternative rites.
6. Must be a quantitative or mixed-method article with inferential statistics

While the exclusion criteria were:

1. Articles not related to rites of passage, initiation rituals, or similar practices.
2. Articles that do not present findings of empirical research.
3. Non-peer-reviewed sources, opinion pieces, theses or anecdotal reports lacking rigorous methodology.
4. Publications in languages other than English.
5. Qualitative studies and quantitative studies without inferential statistics



Data extraction was systematically conducted using structured Excel templates to ensure consistency and comprehensiveness. Each row represented a study, with columns capturing specific details like Title of study, Dependent variable, Underlying theory, and Country of study. This structured approach facilitated efficient data organization, comparison across studies, and identification of patterns or gaps in the literature.

3.0 Findings and Discussion

3.1 Documented Outcomes of ARP Interventions

In order to systematically analyse the various impacts of alternative rites of passage reported across the reviewed studies, the outcomes have been categorized and organized based on the specific variables they address. Table 1 presents a detailed overview of the frequency and proportion of studies investigating each outcome, providing insights into the primary areas of focus within the existing literature.

Table 1: Organization of the Studies by Outcomes

Outcome	Frequency	Percent
Health	4	36.4
Harmful cultural practices	3	27.3
Alternative Rite of Passage Acceptance	2	18.2
Religiosity	1	9.1
Education	1	9.1

The analysis of the 11 reviewed studies on the impacts of alternative rites of passage reveals a diverse array of outcomes investigated by researchers, with health emerging as the most frequently examined variable. Specifically, health was the focus in four of the studies, accounting for 36.4% of the total. This emphasis underscores the importance placed on understanding how alternative rites influence physical and mental well-being, especially given concerns about traditional rites that may pose health risks. These studies explored aspects such as the reduction of injury, infection, or trauma associated with traditional ceremonies, and how alternative rites can promote safer, healthier transitions into adulthood.

The second most commonly investigated outcome was harmful cultural practices, which appeared in three studies (27.3%). This reflects ongoing concerns about traditional practices that may be deemed harmful or detrimental to individuals' well-being. Researchers examining this outcome probably aimed to evaluate whether alternative rites successfully mitigate these harmful aspects, such as mutilation, psychological trauma, or social exclusion often linked to traditional ceremonies. The focus on harmful practices highlights the role of alternative rites as potential tools for cultural change and health promotion.

Alternative rite of passage acceptance was examined in two studies (18.2%), indicating significant interest in how communities and individuals perceive these new ceremonies. Acceptance is crucial for the sustainability and effectiveness of alternative rites, as community buy-in determines whether such practices can replace or coexist with traditional ones. Studies in this category might have assessed factors influencing acceptance, such as cultural compatibility, perceived benefits, or resistance from traditionalists.

Religiosity was explored in only one study (9.1%), suggesting that while religious beliefs are relevant, they are less frequently analysed in relation to alternative rites of passage within the reviewed literature. This outcome might encompass how religious identity or spiritual beliefs influence the perception and adoption of alternative ceremonies, or how these rites align with or challenge religious doctrines.

Finally, education was the focus of a single study (9.1%), indicating limited but notable interest in understanding how alternative rites impact educational outcomes. This could include effects on literacy, knowledge about health and rights, or broader educational engagement. The limited number of studies on this outcome suggests that educational impacts are an emerging area warranting further research.

3.2 Theories that Underpin ARP Research

Understanding the theoretical foundations guiding research is essential for interpreting findings and framing the implications of studies on alternative rites of passage. This section provides an overview of the various theories employed across the 11 reviewed studies, highlighting the diversity in conceptual approaches and analytical perspectives.

Table 3: Organization of the Studies by Theory Used

Theory	Frequency	Percent
No theory mentioned	6	54.5
Ecological framework	1	9.1
Africentric theory	1	9.1
Life events theory	1	9.1
Edwards Wilson theory	1	9.1
Human rights approach	1	9.1
Ritual process paradigm model	1	9.1
Sociocultural	1	9.1

The analysis of the 11 reviewed studies on the impacts of alternative rites of passage reveals a diverse landscape of theoretical frameworks employed to understand and interpret the phenomena. Notably, over half of the studies (54.5%) did not explicitly mention any theoretical foundation,

indicating a potential gap in theoretical rigor or an emphasis on descriptive or qualitative approaches without anchoring in established frameworks. This absence of theory may reflect exploratory research phases or pragmatic considerations where the focus was on gathering data rather than interpreting it through specific lenses.

Among the studies that did employ theoretical frameworks, each was represented by a single study, indicating a lack of diversity and integration in theoretical approaches. The eclectic mix included ecological models, Africentric paradigms, life events theories, gender-focused theories like Edwards Wilson's, human rights perspectives, ritual process paradigms, and sociocultural frameworks. While these varied perspectives highlight some recognition of the multifaceted nature of ARP, their isolated use suggests that no single, comprehensive framework has yet emerged as dominant or universally applicable in this research area.

The limited and fragmented application of theory has several implications. First, it constrains the depth of analysis, as many studies may lack the conceptual tools to fully interrogate complex issues such as cultural identity, gender dynamics, social cohesion, or human rights within the context of rites of passage. Second, it hampers the ability to synthesize findings across studies, as differing frameworks can lead to inconsistent interpretations and conclusions. Third, it diminishes opportunities for theoretical innovation, which could open new pathways for understanding how ARP functions within diverse cultural and social contexts.

3.3 Geographical Context of ARP Research

Understanding the geographic distribution of research on the impacts of alternative rites of passage is crucial for appreciating the cultural, social, and contextual factors that influence these practices worldwide. This section provides an overview of the countries where the reviewed studies have been conducted, highlighting the diversity of settings and the extent of scholarly attention given to each. Table 2 summarizes this information.

Table 2: Organization of the Studies by Country

Country of Study	Frequency	Percent
Kenya	5	45.5
United States	3	27.3

Ghana	2	18.2
Papua New Guinea	1	9.1
Total	11	100.0

The analysis of the 11 reviewed studies on the impacts of alternative rites of passage reveals a diverse geographic distribution, highlighting the global interest and varying contexts in which these practices are examined. The data indicates that Kenya is the most frequently studied country, accounting for 45.5% of the total studies with five investigations. This prominence suggests that Kenya has been a focal point for research on alternative rites, likely due to its rich cultural diversity and ongoing debates around traditional initiation practices. Kenyan communities have historically relied on traditional ceremonies such as circumcision and coming-of-age rituals, some of which have been associated with harmful practices. The country's active efforts to reform these customs, coupled with governmental and NGO involvement in promoting alternative rites, have probably spurred academic interest. Researchers have thus been keen to evaluate the health, social, and cultural impacts of these alternatives within the Kenyan context.

Following Kenya, the United States has been the subject of three studies, representing 27.3% of the total. The United States' involvement in this research is particularly noteworthy given its diverse population, including immigrant communities from regions where traditional rites are prevalent. These studies may focus on the experiences of immigrant populations seeking to preserve cultural practices while adapting to a different societal context. Additionally, the US-based research could explore how alternative rites of passage are perceived within Western frameworks, examining issues such as cultural identity, integration, and health outcomes among diaspora communities. The presence of studies from the US underscores the global relevance of these practices beyond their traditional settings and highlights the interest in understanding how they evolve in multicultural societies.

Ghana is the focus of two studies, representing 18.2% of the total. Ghanaian communities also have longstanding traditions related to rites of passage, some of which have been scrutinized for potentially harmful elements. The research in Ghana examines community perceptions of alternative rites, their acceptance, and their effectiveness in promoting safer and more culturally sensitive transitions into adulthood. The relatively fewer studies from Ghana compared to Kenya

and the US may reflect differences in research priorities or resource allocation, but the presence of these studies indicates an ongoing interest in reforming and evaluating traditional practices within Ghanaian society.

Papua New Guinea, represented by a single study constituting 9.1%, highlights the reach of research into Pacific Island communities. While the number of studies is limited, this inclusion emphasizes the importance of understanding how alternative rites are viewed and implemented in diverse cultural settings with unique social structures and practices. Papua New Guinea's traditional ceremonies often involve complex rituals that are integral to community identity. Investigating alternative rites in this context can shed light on the adaptation of cultural practices in response to health, human rights, and modernization concerns.

The distribution of studies across these countries underscores the global relevance of alternative rites of passage and the importance of context-specific research. The substantial focus on Kenya and the United States reflects both regional and diaspora interests, while the inclusion of Ghana and Papua New Guinea broadens the scope to different cultural and social frameworks. This geographic diversity enriches the understanding of how alternative rites are perceived, accepted, and implemented across various societies. It also highlights the need for continued cross-cultural research to develop culturally sensitive, safe, and effective alternatives that respect traditional values while promoting health and human rights. The varying levels of research activity across these countries suggest areas for further investigation, especially in regions where cultural practices are deeply rooted but less studied, such as in certain Pacific communities. Ultimately, this geographic analysis underscores the importance of context in shaping the outcomes and acceptance of alternative rites of passage worldwide.

East Africa (Kenya) and diaspora communities in Western countries (United States) are highly represented. Kenya's prominence reflects ongoing reform efforts and active academic and policy interest in addressing harmful traditional practices. The US studies highlight the experiences of immigrant communities and cultural adaptation in multicultural settings. Many regions with longstanding traditional rites, such as West Africa (beyond Ghana), North and Central Africa, parts of Asia, the Middle East, and numerous Pacific Island nations, are notably absent or minimally

represented. These areas often have deeply rooted cultural practices related to rites of passage that may include harmful elements, yet they appear underexplored in current research.

3.4 Empirical Focus of ARP Research

Understanding the focus of research studies on the impacts of alternative rites of passage requires an examination of the populations they target. Understanding which groups are prioritized is essential for assessing the focus and scope of existing studies, as well as identifying potential gaps. The distribution of study populations provides insight into the priorities, perspectives, and cultural considerations that shape this body of research. This section analyses how the 11 reviewed studies are organized according to their primary target groups.

Table 4: Organization of the Studies by Target Population

Target Population	Frequency	Percent
Girls	8	72.7
Mixed adolescent sample	6	54.6
Community stakeholders like teachers or elders	4	36.4
Women	3	27.3

The analysis of the targeted populations across the 11 reviewed studies on the impacts of alternative rites of passage reveals significant insights into the focus areas and demographic priorities of researchers in this field. The data indicates that girls are the predominant population group studied, with 8 out of the 11 studies (72.7%) explicitly focusing on female adolescents. This high proportion underscores the centrality of girls in discussions about rites of passage, particularly in contexts where such rites are closely linked to gender identity, social status, and cultural traditions. Given that many traditional rites of passage, such as those associated with female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), directly affect girls, it is not surprising that research efforts prioritize understanding their experiences, perceptions, and the impacts of alternative practices on their development.

In addition to girls, a substantial number of studies—6 out of 11 (54.6%)—target mixed adolescent samples. These studies likely include both boys and girls, or adolescents across different age groups, reflecting an interest in examining gender dynamics, comparative impacts, or broader developmental issues related to rites of passage. Such an approach allows researchers to capture a more comprehensive picture of how these rites influence adolescent growth, social integration, and identity formation across genders. The inclusion of mixed samples also suggests an awareness of the interconnectedness of male and female experiences within cultural practices and the importance of understanding these processes in a holistic manner.

Beyond individual adolescents, community stakeholders such as teachers, elders, and community leaders feature prominently in the studies, with 4 out of 11 (36.4%) focusing on these groups. Their involvement highlights the recognition that rites of passage are embedded within community systems and social structures. These stakeholders often serve as custodians of cultural traditions, facilitators of rites, or agents of change advocating for alternative practices. By including community figures, studies aim to understand the social and cultural contexts that sustain or challenge traditional rites, as well as the community-level perceptions of alternative practices. Such insights are critical for designing culturally sensitive interventions, fostering community buy-in, and ensuring sustainable change.

Finally, women as a target population are explicitly studied in 3 of the reviewed works (27.3%). While this is a smaller proportion compared to studies focusing on girls or mixed adolescents, it emphasizes the importance of understanding women's perspectives, especially considering their roles as mothers, guardians, or community leaders in rites of passage. Women's experiences and attitudes can influence the acceptance, adaptation, or rejection of alternative rites, making their inclusion vital for comprehensive evaluations of these practices. Their perspectives often shed light on intergenerational influences, reproductive health implications, and gender-related social norms.

3.5 Gaps in ARP Research

The review reveals several notable gaps across multiple dimensions including outcomes studied, theoretical grounding, contextual diversity, empirical focus, and methodologies used, which collectively highlight areas needing further exploration and development. Regarding outcomes,

the existing literature demonstrates a predominant focus on health-related variables, with 36.4% of studies examining physical and mental health impacts. While this is crucial, other significant areas such as social cohesion, cultural identity, psychological well-being, and community acceptance are less extensively explored or absent altogether. For instance, outcomes like religiosity and education are addressed only minimally, each in just one study (9.1%), leaving gaps in understanding how ARP influences spiritual beliefs or educational attainment. This narrow focus limits a holistic understanding of the multifaceted impacts of ARP and may overlook critical factors that influence the sustainability and effectiveness of alternative practices.

In terms of theoretical frameworks, over half of the studies (54.5%) do not specify any theory underpinning their research, suggesting a lack of conceptual rigor or a tendency toward descriptive approaches. Among those that do incorporate theories, each framework is used in only one study, indicating a fragmented and isolated application of theoretical perspectives. This limited and dispersed use constrains the depth of analysis and hampers the ability to synthesize findings across different contexts. The absence of integrated or comprehensive theoretical models restricts nuanced understanding and impedes the development of robust, generalizable insights into how and why ARP succeed or fail.

From a contextual standpoint, the geographic distribution shows a concentration in Kenya, the United States, Ghana, and Papua New Guinea, with Kenya and the US being the most studied. Other regions with deeply rooted traditional rites, such as West Africa beyond Ghana, North and Central Africa, parts of Asia, the Middle East, and numerous Pacific Islands, are notably underrepresented. This uneven geographic focus limits the global applicability of findings and leaves many culturally distinct practices and communities unexamined. Such gaps hinder the development of culturally sensitive, locally adapted interventions and policies.

Empirically, the target populations are predominantly girls (72.7%), with less emphasis on boys, community stakeholders, or women in general. While girls are central due to the direct impact of many rites on them, this focus leaves gaps in understanding the experiences and perspectives of males, elders, community leaders, and other key stakeholders. For example, the roles of men and women as custodians, facilitators, or critics of traditional and alternative rites are underexplored. This narrow demographic lens limits insights into the social dynamics, intergenerational influences, and community-level factors that shape the acceptance and effectiveness of ARP.

4.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, this systematic review highlights the multifaceted nature of research surrounding the impacts of alternative rites of passage (ARPs) on youth transitions across diverse cultural contexts. The findings reveal that the majority of studies focus predominantly on health-related outcomes, underscoring the importance placed on physical and psychological well-being in evaluating the effectiveness of ARPs. Additionally, there is considerable attention to the role of ARPs in reducing harmful cultural practices, which reflects a growing recognition of their potential to serve as culturally sensitive strategies that promote health and human rights.

Geographically, research efforts are concentrated mainly in Kenya and the United States, with notable but limited representation from Ghana and Papua New Guinea. This distribution indicates a regional emphasis on African and diaspora communities, with less exploration of ARPs within other cultural settings. The diversity in cultural, social, and religious backgrounds across these studies underscores the contextual variability in how ARPs are perceived, accepted, and implemented. Such variation highlights the importance of understanding local norms, values, and community dynamics when assessing the impact of these programs.

Theoretical frameworks employed across the studies are diverse, but a significant proportion lack explicit theoretical grounding. Where frameworks are used, they tend to emphasize ecological, cultural, or social paradigms, reflecting an understanding that rites of passage are embedded within complex social systems. However, the absence of unified theoretical approaches limits the depth of understanding regarding the mechanisms through which ARPs influence youth outcomes, suggesting a need for more rigorous theoretical integration in future research.

Target populations in the reviewed studies are primarily adolescent girls, with substantial representation of mixed adolescent samples and community stakeholders, including elders and teachers. This focus aligns with the recognition that girls are often the most directly affected by traditional rites like female genital mutilation/cutting and early initiation practices. The inclusion of community figures underlines the social embeddedness of rites, emphasizing that community acceptance and participation are crucial for the sustainability of alternative practices. The relatively smaller focus on women's perspectives highlights an area for further exploration, especially considering their influential roles in shaping attitudes and decisions related to rites of passage.

Overall, the existing literature affirms the potential of ARPs as culturally appropriate tools that can promote health, reduce harmful practices, and support positive youth development. Nonetheless, the review also reveals notable gaps, including limited research on long-term impacts, educational and religiosity outcomes, and the influence of religious contexts. The concentration of studies within specific geographic regions and the lack of consistent theoretical frameworks suggest that future research should aim for broader cultural representation and methodological rigor. Addressing these gaps will be critical for advancing a comprehensive understanding of ARPs and their role in fostering healthier, more equitable adolescent transitions worldwide.

5.0 Recommendation

5.1 Recommendation for Policy

Based on the comprehensive findings of this systematic review, several policy recommendations emerge to enhance the implementation, scaling, and sustainability of alternative rites of passage (ARPs) as effective tools for youth development, health promotion, and cultural preservation. These recommendations aim to guide policymakers, practitioners, and community stakeholders in fostering culturally sensitive, evidence-based, and rights-based approaches to rites of passage.

1. Develop and Integrate Culturally Sensitive Frameworks: Policymakers should prioritize the formulation of policies that recognize and respect local cultural practices while promoting health and human rights. This involves supporting the development of culturally relevant guidelines that incorporate indigenous knowledge and values, ensuring that ARPs are tailored to specific community contexts. Embedding such frameworks within national development and health strategies can foster community buy-in and legitimacy.

2. Promote Intersectoral Collaboration: Effective implementation of ARPs requires coordinated efforts across sectors such as health, education, social welfare, and human rights. Governments should establish multi-stakeholder platforms that include local leaders, faith-based organizations, NGOs, health professionals, and youth representatives to design, monitor, and evaluate ARPs. This collaborative approach ensures that interventions are holistic, addressing psychological, social, educational, and health dimensions.

3. Strengthen Legal and Policy Environment: Laws and policies should explicitly recognize and protect voluntary participation in ARPs while criminalizing harmful traditional practices like female genital mutilation/cutting and early forced marriages. Clear legal frameworks can facilitate enforcement and protect adolescents from coercive rites. Additionally, legal provisions should support the rights of adolescents to participate freely and safely in culturally meaningful rites.

4. Invest in Capacity Building and Community Education: To address cultural resistance and myths surrounding ARPs, policymakers should invest in community education campaigns that raise awareness about the benefits of alternative practices. Training community leaders, elders, teachers, and health workers on the importance of health, rights, and culturally appropriate alternatives can foster acceptance and active participation. Building local capacity also includes training facilitators to implement ARPs effectively.

5. Support Research and Data Collection: Policymakers should fund longitudinal and mixed-method research to evaluate the long-term social, educational, and health impacts of ARPs. Establishing national and regional data repositories can inform evidence-based policymaking, enable monitoring progress, and identify best practices. Emphasizing research in underrepresented cultural settings and religious contexts will also broaden understanding and applicability.

6. Facilitate Community-Led and Youth-Centred Approaches: Policies should empower communities and youth to actively participate in designing and adapting ARPs. Youth engagement ensures that programs are relevant, appealing, and aligned with their aspirations. Community-led initiatives tend to be more sustainable and culturally authentic, fostering local ownership and resilience.

7. Incorporate Religious and Cultural Dimensions: Given the limited exploration of religiosity and spiritual influences, policies should encourage dialogue with religious leaders and faith-based organizations. Engaging religious authorities can help reconcile traditional rites with religious doctrines, reducing resistance and misconceptions. Recognizing religious diversity and practices enhances the inclusivity and effectiveness of ARPs.

8. Ensure Accessibility and Inclusivity: Policies should aim to make ARPs accessible to marginalized groups, including girls, women, and adolescents with disabilities, ensuring that no

one is excluded or coerced. Providing safe spaces and facilitating voluntary participation are essential to uphold adolescents' rights and promote equitable social participation.

9. Allocate Resources and Funding: Governments and development partners should allocate dedicated funding for the design, implementation, and evaluation of ARPs. Financial support can facilitate training, community outreach, and the development of culturally appropriate materials, ensuring that programs are sustainable and scalable.

5.2 Recommendation for Practice

Based on the findings of this systematic review, development practitioners working in adolescent health, education, and cultural preservation should consider several strategic approaches to effectively support and expand the positive impact of alternative rites of passage (ARPs). These recommendations aim to optimize the design, implementation, and sustainability of ARPs within diverse cultural contexts, ensuring they serve as effective tools for health promotion, gender equality, and social cohesion.

1. Foster Community-Led and Participatory Approaches: Practitioners should prioritize engaging community members like elders, religious leaders, youth, and women in the planning and execution of ARPs. Community ownership is crucial for cultural legitimacy and sustainability. Facilitating inclusive dialogues can help align ARPs with local values while addressing concerns about cultural erosion or loss of identity. This participatory process enhances acceptance and ensures that programs are culturally sensitive and relevant.

2. Strengthen Intersectoral Collaboration: To maximize impact, practitioners should promote collaboration across sectors such as health, education, human rights, and social services. Establishing multisectoral platforms can facilitate integrated approaches that address health risks, promote educational opportunities, and challenge harmful traditional practices. For example, integrating health education and reproductive rights into ARPs can foster comprehensive youth development.

3. Incorporate Evidence-Based and Contextually Relevant Frameworks: Recognizing the current gaps in theoretical grounding, practitioners should utilize culturally appropriate frameworks—such as ecological models or social norms theories—to inform program design and

evaluation. This approach aids in understanding the complex social systems influencing rites of passage and tailoring interventions that resonate locally.

4. Invest in Capacity Building and Training: Building local capacity is vital for the effective and ethical delivery of ARPs. Training community facilitators, teachers, health workers, and youth leaders on the principles of safe, voluntary participation, gender sensitivity, and human rights can enhance the quality and safety of rites. Capacity-building efforts should also include skills for monitoring and evaluating program outcomes.

5. Promote Awareness and Education Campaigns: To overcome resistance rooted in myths, stereotypes, and social norms, practitioners should implement targeted awareness campaigns emphasizing the health benefits, human rights, and social advantages of ARPs. Utilizing local media, storytelling, and peer education can enhance message penetration and foster positive attitudes toward alternative practices.

6. Support Longitudinal and Rigorous Evaluation: Practitioners should advocate for and participate in research initiatives that employ longitudinal, mixed-method designs to assess long-term impacts of ARPs on health, education, gender equality, and social cohesion. Such evidence is critical for refining programs, demonstrating effectiveness, and securing ongoing support from policymakers and funders.

7. Ensure Inclusivity and Equity: Programs should be designed to include marginalized groups, such as adolescents with disabilities, those in remote areas, or minority communities. Ensuring voluntary participation and safeguarding against coercion is essential to uphold adolescents' rights and promote equitable access to safe rites.

8. Leverage Religious and Cultural Leaders: Given the influence of religious doctrines and cultural norms, engaging faith leaders and traditional authorities can facilitate acceptance and integration of ARPs within existing belief systems. Religious and cultural endorsement can dispel misconceptions and legitimize alternative practices.

9. Secure Funding and Policy Support: Practitioners should advocate for policy frameworks that recognize and institutionalize ARPs as legitimate alternatives within national and local strategies.

Securing funding from governmental and international agencies ensuring program sustainability, scalability, and integration into broader development goals.

10. Document and Share Best Practices: Establishing platforms for knowledge exchange and documentation of successful ARP models can inspire replication and adaptation across different settings. Sharing lessons learned helps build a repository of culturally sensitive, effective strategies that can inform future interventions.

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