

Correspondence

COVID-19, weddings and dynamic consent

Reports about the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreaks linked to wedding receptions pose a greater threat to non-compliant ceremonies.¹ Mass gatherings have already shown the high communicability of COVID-19, especially at weddings.² A correspondence about ordinations takes note of this,³ but weddings are more frequent gatherings and they also relate as the other side of life commitment events. This correspondence article looks into the public health perspective on weddings and its take on the policy and ethical interventions.

Public health practice suggests the avoidance of large gatherings to mitigate transmission. Direct correspondences with newly-weds in the Philippines have noted policy variations depending on the state and church policies. A couple correspondent notes that in their wedding during the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) phase of the pandemic, there are only two witnesses, the priest, three choir members and two photographers or videographers. This was different when the author attended a wedding at the start of the pandemic in March 2020 with a relatively higher number of guests when church policies had not yet strictly enforced the pandemic protocols.

Catholic weddings are adjusting to the crisis and several factors are at play. An implicit link can be correlated to the baby boom phenomenon from the lockdown⁴ and the deeply entrenched socio-religious belief that one marries who one knocks up or the pregnancy intentions leading to marriage transitions.⁵ A problem that might be proved later is that modifications of mass weddings to suit health protocols into ‘masked’ weddings are still questionable given the number of attendees so that depending on prevalence, transmissibility remains a crucial factor. With religious authorities prohibiting costly and fancy weddings in favor of intimate ones with fewer attendees, and the wedding industry adapting and popularizing new wedding trends, even if there would be easing of measures starting March 2021, ‘intimate weddings are here to stay in the foreseeable future because of the uncertainty of vaccination and cost-cutting measures’.⁶

Nikahs or Muslim weddings, which are affluent and grandiose, have a fair share of prevention experiences. With the publication of risk mitigation protocols for minimizing community exposure in festivals and religious congregations

have taken effect through the National Action Plan for Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) Pakistan, for example, enforced by its National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC), lavish weddings especially indoors have been significantly toned down, if not prohibited. With the gradual easing of restrictions beginning 15 March 2021, indoor wedding ceremonies can be allowed again but still following COVID-19 procedures.⁷ There is an economic factor in this regard because ‘50 percent of Pakistan’s industries are linked to weddings’.⁸

With new mutations of the virus and the rising of new cases, steadfast looking into prevalence rates must allow withdrawal or instantaneous modifications of policies to stricter measures. The same conditional—that is ‘if the vaccine does not interfere with transmission’⁹—can be applied to large gatherings. This does not mean overreactive judgments like prohibiting married couples from their public display of affection such as holding hands and kissing, or no back-ride policy for people living under the same roof, which have been met with justified criticisms. The ethical take here is that while policies shape participation in life commitment events such as weddings, on a personal level, the duty in part of the participants must not explicitly mean broad—open, implied, public—consent but dynamic—flexible, re-evaluating—consent¹⁰ that can adhere to health standards more responsibly. The dynamic consent approach can create more room for prudence and allows citizens to be conscious of their quotidian and lifetime decision making.

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