

Widowhood and desperation for food: Retelling Ruth in the context of human trafficking!

(Fulata L. Moyo, PhD)

Widowhood and desperation

For many women especially in the global south, widowhood is not just the death of a spouse but also the degeneration to desperation. The realities of unjust global economic systems which deprive the majority while unjustly rewarding the privileged few, has helped paint this desperation in clearly distinguishable contrasting colours. In the colours of the desperate, the women often bear the most colourful ones as the most desperate of the desperate.

Among the Ngoni-Tumbuka in Malawi, when a widow sitting next to the coffin containing the remains of her spouse narrates her mourning story “*Muyeni wane!* (My beloved),” with heaving and trembling, she can already envision the utter desperation for survival that this departure entails for her, her children and other dependants. The book of Ruth in the Hebrew Testament articulates this widowhood desperation in ways that should help today’s Christian reader to contextually address questions like: How do we challenge to transformation social systems that have unjustly subjected widows to desperation where sometimes the commoditization of their bodies for food is the only viable option? Why should some women consider being trafficked to another land as the only way to gain food sovereignty?

Ruth as a trafficked widow?

Ruth, a Moabite, married Mahlon, probably a privileged Hebrew migrant who offered possibilities of a better life. When he died, she decided to stick to her mother-in-law and go to a foreign land. Naomi and Ruth were two desperate dispossessed widows who had to glean for food. As sonless widows, they had no means of reclaiming ‘their’ land. They have each other but without a man, this solidarity is not enough for their survival.

Naomi, not so much unlike powerful traffickers, has to use the young beautiful exotic Ruth. Ruth's body is commoditized in a subtle way. She uncovers Boaz¹'s feet and lies down (Ruth 3:7). This action carries sexual overtones that capture the act of selling sex but Ruth hoped for a more legally-binding end that ensured repossession of land for Naomi.

Some questions for reflection

1. According to you, what is this story about?
2. What possible themes comes out of this story?
3. Who are the main characters of this story and what do you know about each one of them?
4. Do we have women like Ruth and Naomi in our communities?
5. What are their stories?
6. How can we effectively journey with them?
7. How can we prophetically challenge socio-economic systems that keep on making widows vulnerable?
8. As a community of women and men, how can we ensure that we have kind hearted and un-abusive Boaz's that will work for gender and socio-economic justice for all?

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¹ From the response of Boaz (v.10-11), it is clear that he was old enough to be Naomi's husband but it was young Ruth who had the possibility of producing a male heir to facilitate for repossession land.
A 2010 Lenten Study compiled by the World Council of Churches, the World Student Christian Federation and the World YWCA <http://women.overcomingviolence.org>.