

## Mongo Women's Survival Strategies in the Context of HIV and AIDS: Revisiting the Book of Ruth

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### ABSTRACT

*The past two decades have experienced a growing female labour participation in the Democratic Republic of Congo due in part to the weakening of men's absolute earning power and the increased rates of unemployment and underemployment. Women's growing earning power and commitment to the paid workforce together with the stagnation of men's social mobility make some families more financially dependent on women. As such, women are engaging in any kind of business or activity, which sometimes put their lives at risks. Due to gender inequities, women seek favour from men in order to succeed, making them vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. The story of Ruth in Ruth 2–3, in which she is forced to go out to find food for herself and Naomi is similar to that of many Congolese women who are forced by poverty to go out and offer their bodies to men at the risk of being infected by HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Therefore, a gender-sensitive reading of the Bible of women's experiences can lead to the emancipation of women, especially Mongo women in their struggle for survival.*

**KEYWORDS:** Ruth, Women, Mongo, HIV and AIDS, Democratic Republic of Congo

### A INTRODUCTION

There is increasing recognition that poverty in Africa is a critical factor in the transmission of HIV and AIDS. At a macro level, some theorists have described HIV and AIDS as one of the diseases of poverty.<sup>1</sup> Though HIV and AIDS is one of the major threats to development, economic growth and poverty alleviation in most of Africa, it is not yet acknowledged by all the communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo especially those living in the rural areas. HIV infection is mostly confined to the poorest, who constitute the most infected in Africa. Many of the poorest in Africa are women. In their search for a living, many women in the Democratic Republic of Congo, often engage in activities

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\* Submitted: 02/09/2022; peer-reviewed: 29/03/2023; accepted: 10/04/2023. Maleke M. Kondemo, "Mongo Women's Survival Strategies in the Context of HIV and AIDS: Revisiting the Book of Ruth," *Old Testament Essays* 36 no. 2 (2023): 412–427. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2023/v36n2a7>.

<sup>1</sup> Pempelani Mufune, "Poverty and HIV/AIDS in Africa: Specifying the Connections" [cited 3 November 2021]. Online: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/sth.2014.14>.

that require a man's favour and that expose them to sexual transactions as survival strategies for themselves and their dependents. It is not at all surprising in these circumstances that due to poverty, women engage in behaviours which expose them to HIV infection.

Many reports on HIV and poverty have shown that poverty and HIV and AIDS work in a cycle. Research has proved on one hand that poverty increases the spread of HIV and AIDS and on the other hand, HIV and AIDS increase poverty. An African scholar, Kamaara claims that HIV and AIDS plays a significant role in the advancement of poverty:

While it is not just confined to the poor, poverty contributes enormously to the spread of HIV and to the development from HIV to AIDS. On the other hand, HIV and AIDS contribute enormously to poverty. This means that a vicious circle exists where poverty contributes to HIV and AIDS and vice versa complicating the situation.<sup>2</sup>

However, the consequences of poverty have been associated mostly with migration, sexual trade, forced marriage and polygamy, gender discrimination, war, the negative impact of globalisation as well as church interpretation of the Bible and traditional beliefs in the society characterised by social inequalities. It is not simply that information, education and counselling activities are unlikely to reach the poor but that such messages are often irrelevant and inoperable given the reality of their lives.<sup>3</sup> Some understand the message but many times, they do not have the incentive or the resources to adopt the recommended behaviours. The association between relative economic stability and risk of HIV infection may be linked with women's survival strategies in the face of absolute poverty.

Entrenched economic and gender inequities are the driving forces behind the globally expanding HIV and AIDS epidemic among women. With all the conflicts that have lasted many years, the challenge of HIV and AIDS has become real in the country as it spreads with exceptional speed.<sup>4</sup> Congolese women do suffer the effects of poverty and HIV and AIDS. The question is do they have the means to resist? Poverty and gender inequities also operate in a vicious cycle. The many manifestations of poverty—insufficient income, limited

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<sup>2</sup> Eunice, Kamaara, "Stigmatization of Persons Living with HIV/AIDS in Africa: Pastoral Challenges," *African Ecclesial Review* (2004): 38.

<sup>3</sup> Noel Dzimmenani Mbirimtengerenji, "Is HIV/AIDS Epidemic Outcome of Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa?" [cited 6 May 2021] Online: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2205968/#R5>.

<sup>4</sup> According to National Multisectoral Program for the Fight against AIDS, more than 94 000 adults living with AIDS were registered in 2021, 58 524 of which were women and 34 386 men.

access to education and jobs and little autonomy in decision-making—are caused by gender-based norms and values that reinforce women's lower social and economic status. According to Thomas, "women's vulnerability to HIV infection is particularly heightened by their economic dependence on men, lack of access to education, poverty, sexual exploitation, coercion and rape as well as by their engagement in informal and commercial sex work."<sup>5</sup>

The past two decades have witnessed a sharp decline in men's role as provider, caused in part by growing female labour participation and in part by the weakening of men's absolute earning power due to increased rates of unemployment and underemployment.<sup>6</sup> Women's growing earning power and commitment to the paid workforce together with the stagnation of men's social mobility make some families more financially dependent on women. Women would go to any length to provide for the basic needs of their families and more. As Christians, the Bible remains their only inspiration of hope. The story of Ruth among other stories features mostly in sermons addressed to women. It encourages them to go out in search of provision for their survival and that of their family. As such, women engage in all kinds of businesses or activities even those classified by the patriarchal culture as men's activities, which sometimes involve currying a man's favour, in order to provide for the needs of their family. The story of Ruth in Ruth 2 and 3 is similar to that of many Congolese women today who are forced by poverty to offer their bodies for their own survival and that of their families at the risk of being infected with the HI-virus. Given that poverty and some patriarchal practices contribute to the spread of HIV and AIDS, how can African women theologians interpret Ruth's behaviour in Ruth 3 in which she visited a man at night in order to survive? Reading and interpreting the Bible from women's experiences and gender perspectives can lead to the emancipation of women, especially the Mongo<sup>7</sup> in their bid for survival. Many women in Africa have already taken responsibility and have begun to empower themselves through education, small businesses, access to healthcare ranking and labour force participation.

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<sup>5</sup> Linda E. Thomas, "What the Mind Forgets the Body Remembers: HIV/AIDS in South Africa. A Theological and Anthropological Issue" [cited 6 May 2021 ] Online: <http://findarticles.com/p/article>.

<sup>6</sup> Jessie Bernard, "The Good-Provider Role: Its Rise and Fall," in *Family in Transition* (ed. A. Skolnick and J. H. Skolnick; New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 117–135 (3); William J. Goode, "Why Men Resist," in *Family in Transition* (ed. A. Skolnick and J. H. Skolnick; New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 137–149 (5).

<sup>7</sup> The Mongo ethnic group forms one of the largest ethnic groups in the DRC. The people originated from the Equatorial Region.

## **B WOMEN'S VULNERABILITY IN THE EQUATORIAL REGION: SITUATIONS THAT MAKE WOMEN VULNERABLE TO HIV TRANSMISSION IN THEIR BID FOR SURVIVAL**

The DRC has the third largest population of the poor globally. Poverty in DRC is high and remains pervasive. The situation is getting worse because of the many ebola outbreaks in the country and the impact of COVID-19. "In 2018, it was estimated that 73% of the Congolese population, equalling 60 million people, lived on less than \$1.90 a day (the international poverty rate). As such, about one out of six people living in extreme poverty in SSA [Sub Saharan Africa]-live in DRC."<sup>8</sup> The Equatorial Region, like other regions in the DRC is by its demographics dominated by women who represent 52 per cent of its population. However, gender parity in the workplace has not reached the levels required by law even though effort is being made by the provincial authorities for women to assume senior positions.<sup>9</sup> In general, the situation of women leaves much to be desired. Poverty is being feminised due to the poor access that women have to basic services, goods and resources and to decision-making. Opportunities for wage labour jobs and professional positions remain rare for women while the decline in the economy has increased women's labour.

The economic crisis has increased intensive informal activities. Women are responsible for the majority of the subsistence tasks such as cutting firewood and hauling on their heads large buckets of water for cooking, doing laundry, sowing and harvesting the fields, collecting palm nuts, cooking, pounding and sifting the local cassava roots. They also engage in house-cleaning, tending domestic animals, bearing children, child-care, training the children and making baskets and pottery for sale at local markets. In short, women carry their families on their shoulders. They have to emulate the Woman of Worth (see Prov 31:10-31), as they have been taught in the church. The responsibility of the household falls more solidly on women's shoulders as the society becomes ever more dependent on farming. Many women have recently flocked to urban areas in the hope of selling their handiwork, becoming hairstylists or participating in the underground economy. The underground economy here refers to illegal activities in which taxes are unpaid. Often, the woman is the family's primary breadwinner and that makes her vulnerable to HI-virus. Some of these activities are illegal while others are not. The informal business sector in the DRC is bigger than the formal sector of the economy. The economic crisis has resulted in many companies becoming bankrupt, causing high unemployment rates that compel a

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<sup>8</sup> The World Bank in DRC [cited 2 November 2021]. Online: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/drc/overview>.

<sup>9</sup> Maleke M. Kondemo, "Women's Security through Heterosexual Marriage in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: An African Woman's Reading of the Book of Ruth" (MTH diss., University of South Africa, 2011), 37.

significant portion of the population to join the informal sector eventually.<sup>10</sup> The economic crisis also shows the impact of the role-played by women within the Congolese family. The latter does not depend only on the contribution and importance of men as father and provider for the family. Women are also involved in small businesses, even at night, including the sale of vegetables, cassava, spinach, soap, oil, salt and so on.

Consequently, a young girl who is 15 years' old or less is forced by poverty to engage in a sexual relationship with a man, mostly older than her, so that he can provide for her family. According to the Congo Economic Review, almost 80% of Congolese people survive on one USD a day. With such catastrophic situations, the Equatorial Region, according to the Programme des Nations Unies pour le Développement (PNUD) is considered the poorest region and where living conditions are among the least satisfactory. It is also the region with the highest prevalence of AIDS in the DRC. Almost half of the population in the Equatorial Region lives on fishing, agriculture and petty trading. In such a situation, women bear almost all the responsibilities of meeting basic needs of the family, even though they are systematically denied the resources, information and freedom of action they need to fulfil these responsibilities. Due to the economic crisis and high level of unemployment as well as the influence of women's stories in the Hebrew Bible, for instance the "Woman of Worth" in Prov 31:10, a woman who rises early, goes to bed late and works hard. Like Ruth, many women have become the breadwinner in the family and do whatever they can to survive. Even though they are full of energy and potentials, most of them have to look for men's "favour" in order to succeed in their various endeavours. The traditional male roles in the patriarchal society are now played by women, increasing women's vulnerability to HIV and other sexually transmitted disease.

## 1 A field for farming

Given that women cannot inherit property in the Mongo patriarchal culture as elsewhere in Africa, they have to curry the favour of male landowners in order to have a piece of land. Like Ruth, they have to find "favour" from male owners of forestland to obtain land at no or little cost. They sometimes make themselves sexually available to the men. As argued by White, "Poverty places women in a situation where they engage in sexual activities which they would otherwise avoid if they had more income at all."<sup>11</sup> I agree that poverty places women in a

<sup>10</sup> N. M. T. Salayumbu, « Des femmes seules, chef de ménage, à Kikwit (RD du Congo). Strategies pour la survie » [cited 8 November 2010]. Online: <http://www.google.fr.Des+Femmes+Seules%2C+Chefs+de+Mamage%2C+a+Kikwit>.

<sup>11</sup> Seodi White, "Extreme Poverty and Its Impact on Women's Vulnerability to HIV Transmission: A Rights Issue" [cited 4 July 2019]. Online: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233178533\\_Extreme\\_poverty\\_and\\_its\\_impact\\_on\\_womens\\_vulnerability\\_to\\_HIV\\_transmission\\_A\\_rights\\_issue](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233178533_Extreme_poverty_and_its_impact_on_womens_vulnerability_to_HIV_transmission_A_rights_issue).

position of powerlessness. The risk of becoming sick or even dying does not scare the women especially when they are faced with the immediate needs of food or the problem of paying their children's school fees when they are sent away from school for many days for not paying their fees. This contributes to the rapid spread of HIV and AIDS.

## **2 Selling fish**

Located in the middle of the equatorial forest through which the Congo River flows is one of the largest fishing activities in the country. Fishing in the Equatorial Region is exclusively a male activity. To survive, most women buy/get fish from the anglers from whom they find favour in order to resell at the local markets. I would agree with White who wrote from the Malawian context that:

The genderisation of this labour market brings along sexual dynamics which reflect the gender dynamics of inequality, inclusion, and exclusion as well as economic dependency. These gender dynamics also reveal that sex is perceived as a commodity that can be bought and sold using fish as the purchasing tool. Thus, it is common for women who want to buy fish to trade sex in order to be given the 'favour' of accessing fish, particularly during the low fishing season. Simply accessing the fish is a 'favour' because during the low fishing season fish is scarce; few fishermen have it and thereby decide who to sell it to. The women do not get to buy it for a discounted price because the opportunity to buy itself is a favour given in the low season when demand is high, and supply is low. During the high fishing season, women exchange sex for getting a good bargain when purchasing fish for daily consumption.<sup>12</sup>

The economic situation in many African countries put women in danger every day. Depending on the level of favour one seeks, some women are given fish at a lower price. There are also instances where they are given fish from the anglers to help them trade and the profit after sale belongs to them. Given the profit that comes with it, there is competition among women to secure this form of livelihood. However, the situation also results in many women exchanging sex with the anglers to enable them undertake the trade.

## **3 Merchandise shipping**

Another activity similar to the above is that of women seeking favour from men to transport goods mostly from the capital to the region. As noted above, some women are engaged in petty trading, selling items such as onions, salt, soaps, spices, lotions, cloves, and shoes to those who have more money. Years ago, some of these women called *maman commercante* (businesswomen) had to travel for days by boat to reach the capital to sell and buy goods. Today, with the

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<sup>12</sup> White, "Extreme Poverty and Its Impact," 83.

dire situation in the country, it takes weeks, sometimes, even months to reach the capital. To assist the population, some businessmen have created agencies to facilitate transport and money transfer from the capital to other cities. This is faster as it only takes some days or a week for the merchandise to arrive. It saves time and money since there is no need to travel. Due to the competition, some women seek sexual favour of the owners or male agents to enable them to collect their goods free or at reduced rates.

In big cities, women are increasingly seizing new opportunities to do business. They are now doing more than selling onions in local markets; they engage with the global system while navigating local economic structures characterized by gift-giving logic. A woman with little purchasing power may rely more heavily on her contacts that are mainly men, asking for their financial assistance and protection. It is believed that the favour that the women obtain from men outside their own kin, is reciprocated with intimacy, or the promise of intimacy. Regarding the contribution of women to the economy of Zaire, MacGaffey writes, "Success over the long run is highly uncertain for women unable to call upon favours from powerful political patrons or wealthy relatives."<sup>13</sup> In his research on a similar topic, Braun found that ambitious women who want their business to flourish, at one point or another, must forge contacts or have a relationship with powerful patrons. Whether these relationships were strategic or not, these women talk of the necessity of having someone at your back to mitigate the threat of extortion.<sup>14</sup> These networks subsequently render it difficult, if not impossible, for traders to marry, because once a woman establishes a rapport with a man in power, she is suspected of being romantically involved with him. Some indeed, maintain several boyfriends at once and men with the potential resources also have different girlfriends which further reinforces negative images of these women and expose them to HIV and AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. "To succeed, women inevitably require patronage and protection, a notion called *encadrement*. This means that a woman must be managed, led, accompanied, protected, or supervised by a man as she negotiates the public sphere."<sup>15</sup> Though some of these women are fortunate enough to have family members who provide them with money or political protection, others must find other ways of navigating the system.

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<sup>13</sup> Janet MacGaffey, *The Real Economy of Zaire: The Contribution of Smuggling and Other Activities to National Wealth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 126.

<sup>14</sup> Lesley Nicole Braun, "Wandering Women: The Work of Congolese Transnational Traders" [cited 3 June 2021]. Online: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/africa/article/abs/wandering-women-the-work-of-congolese-transnational-traders>.

<sup>15</sup> Braun, "Wandering Women," 23.

#### 4 Employment and *point sexuellement transmissible*<sup>16</sup>

Due to the situation in the country, it is almost impossible for a woman to succeed simply by merit. From school to the workplace, at her home or in the public space, women are objects of attraction for men's pleasure. Even in the formal sector, women have to use sex to bribe their superiors in order to be given a job or be promoted. Indeed, as Beya says,

Those who exercise the oldest profession in the world, (including) ... the crowd of students who sell their bodies to their teachers to have their diploma and rich fellows who support them and sometimes help finance their studies, there are workers who occasionally give in to sexual harassment by a superior or a colleague to ensure their place, even in the informal sector, there are all those who complete a modest income or buy a favour in exchange for their charms.<sup>17</sup>

Women do whatever they have to do to ensure that their families survive. As reported in the above quotation, many Congolese workers endure sexual harassment in order to gain employment or promotion. In schools and on university campuses, many young women offer themselves to their teachers in exchange for marks in order to pass from one class to another.

#### C RUTH AS A BREADWINNER: RUTH 2–3

For several millennia, the book of Ruth has charmed readers by its narrative beauty. Meyers describes the book as "the women's book of the Hebrew Bible."<sup>18</sup> Ruth is the leading character in the book which bears her name and narrates the story of two heroines, Ruth and Naomi, who were childless and widows. The reader of the book is also introduced to the reciprocal love between the two characters. It is a feminine book from the beginning to the end.<sup>19</sup> The book of Ruth is also a beautiful story of the life of a young Moabite woman who faced hardship but who successfully navigated her way through her difficulties.

<sup>16</sup> "*Points sexuellement transmissible*," meaning sexually transmitted marks, is a popular saying in university settings. This phenomenon, which pervades the Congolese university system and threatens the academic environment, describes the situation in which some university lecturers award undeserved marks to some of their students in return for sexual gratification.

<sup>17</sup> Mbuy B. Beya, "Human Sexuality, Marriage and Prostitution," in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (ed. M. A. Oduyoye and M. R. A. Kanyoro; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 155–179 (171–172). The translation does not offer the exact meaning, hence the addition of a footnote to explain. Even though I write in English, I am also mindful of the French readers.

<sup>18</sup> Carol Meyers, "Returning Home: Ruth 1:8 and Gendering of the Book of Ruth," in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (ed. A. Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 85–114 (92).

<sup>19</sup> Andre LaCocque, *Ruth: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 2.

Some have viewed the book as a positive story that empowers women to take initiative and use their potential for their wellbeing but others have found in the book, a story that marginalises women who are expected to play according to the patriarchal rules. The story of Ruth and Naomi is a story of women facing many life struggles, women who believe that they cannot survive without men. Ruth was young, intelligent, independent, strong and courageous. Despite the observation that their lives had potential, it appears that this did not mean much without a man by their side. Once she arrived in Bethlehem, Ruth showed her commitment to Naomi, an old woman who was unable to work. Although she was a widow, childless and a foreigner, Ruth became the breadwinner in their shared home. It seems that Ruth had a plan for her life and no obstacle could stop her from achieving that plan. She is an example of a woman making a decision for her future destiny. She shows freedom of choice, whether with or without marriage, to decide on her own as a free human being. According to Masenya, Ruth is an "independent thinker."<sup>20</sup> Ruth is viewed as a woman who did not hide herself in the patriarchal system of her time; she felt free to decide her own destiny. She made the decision to follow Naomi and on arrival in Bethlehem, went out to find food for both of them.

In my view, the key words in Ruth 2 are "gleaning" and "finding favour" or "finding grace" (Ruth 2:2). Ruth, like her mother-in-law, was a childless widow, a woman without a son in a patriarchal society and a foreigner who, at the same time, had to work for her survival and that of her mother-in-law. She chose not to stay at home even though she was in a foreign land. Ruth was well aware that she would be the one to provide for both Naomi and herself since Naomi could not work because of her advanced age. As prescribed in Israelite law, gleaning was a primary means of support for the destitute (Lev 19:9-10, 23:22; Deut 24:19-22). The edges of the field were not to be harvested. What the harvesters of the grain-stalks (gleaners) did not pick was to be left for the alien, the poor, the orphan and the widow. As a poor non-Israelite widow, Ruth engaged in this subsistence task, which was designated by Israelite law.<sup>21</sup>

In chapter 2, Ruth is presented as the breadwinner who went out to glean in order to provide food for herself and Naomi. Her action in the fields show how resourceful Ruth was. Ruth, the Moabite woman, provided bread by gleaning for her mother-in-law and herself. She did this even though the older woman still had social contacts that could probably offer solidarity and support (Ruth 2:20). She claimed the right to legal aid, namely to glean, which widows and orphans

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<sup>20</sup> M. J. Masenya, "Ngwetši (Bride): The Naomi–Ruth Story from an African-South African Woman's Perspective, *JFSR* 2 (1998): 90.

<sup>21</sup> Katharine D. Sakenfeld, *Ruth: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999), 39.

were entitled to (cf. Deut 24:19).<sup>22</sup> Writing from the context of a fourth-generation South African Indian Christian, Nadar sees Ruth as anything but "docile and dependent." "Ruth's character is independent, autonomous, strong-willed and even subversive."<sup>23</sup> In sections that correspond to the chapters in the book of Ruth, Nadar views Ruth as taking the male role of provider in her relationship with Naomi. Ruth provides for Naomi in the innovative way of going among the gleaners in Boaz's field. LaCocque argues that Ruth does not claim a right but asks for a favour. This favour is quite extraordinary: "Instead of gleaning what was left by the harvesters, Ruth asks permission to glean among the sheaves, that is, what was put in piles by the workers for winnowing. Ruth's request was beyond what ordinarily was granted."<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, and with specific reference to Ruth 3, the story of Ruth is that of a woman who believed that the only way for a woman to survive in a patriarchal society is through her relationship to a man. The circumstances may differ from one place to another and from one culture to another but "it remains exceedingly difficult for women's independent initiative to succeed in those settings where men control most of the economic wealth."<sup>25</sup> Naomi advised Ruth to put on her best clothes that night (3:3) and make herself known to Boaz when he lay down on the threshing floor, after he had eaten and drunk. Then, she should "uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do" (3:4). Ruth agreed (3:5), proceeded to the threshing-floor (3:6) and carried out Naomi's instructions: "And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain." According to feminist interpretation, Ruth's behaviour in Chapter 3 is not to be considered favourably by women today because "to uncover a man's feet" in today's context would be nothing less than prostitution.<sup>26</sup> Commenting on the risks connected to harvest time and the threshing floor, Masenya<sup>27</sup> quoting May Say Pa, says that: "It (harvest time) was a time when young men and women, under

<sup>22</sup> Irmtraud, Fischer, "The Book of Ruth: A Feminist Commentary to the Torah," in *Ruth and Esther. A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (2nd series; ed. A. Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 24-49 (36).

<sup>23</sup> Sarojini Nadar, "South Africa Indian Womanist Reading of the Character of Ruth," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. M.W. Dube; Geneva: WCC, 2001), 159-175 (161).

<sup>24</sup> LaCocque, *Ruth*, 66

<sup>25</sup> Katharine D. Sakenfeld, *Just Wives? Stories Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2003), 41.

<sup>26</sup> Tom Bradford, "Rediscovering the Old Testament" [cited 7 February 2010]. Online: <http://www.torahclass.com/old-testamentstudies/51-old-testament-studies-Ruth/707-lesson6ruth-3>.

<sup>27</sup> Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), 2010. "Is Ruth the 'ēšet Hayil for Real? An Exploration of Womanhood from African Proverbs to the Threshing Floor (Ruth 3:1-13), *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (SHE), XXXVI (2010): 253-272 (266).

cover of darkness, could engage in sexual acts. Night-time was the time for lovers' trysts... The threshing floor itself was a dangerous place. It was used not only for agricultural purposes but also for sexual licentiousness of the fertility cult." In a similar fashion, Caspi<sup>28</sup> explains that, "Located in the fields, the threshing floor is a place where overt sexuality is permissible and welcomed." According to the above comment, the threshing floor was not such a good place for a woman to go especially at night. Even if Ruth did not have any sexual relations with Boaz, the detail that she visited the threshing floor at night gives readers something to think about.

Feminists also point out that Ruth's sexuality was used for her survival, something akin to what present-day sex workers do. The fact that she slept at a man's feet does not serve as a model particularly for modern day female readers of this story. The scene on the threshing floor was punctuated by sexual innuendos. Ruth told Boaz to spread his "wing" over her (Ruth 3:9). "Now this term can just like the Hebrew word 'feet' (Ruth 3:4, 7), designate the penis (see 1 Samuel 24:4–12). Ruth was offering herself to Boaz who would be simply an object of manipulation."<sup>29</sup> In his commentary on Ruth 3, Linafelt confirms the sexual meaning of the verb "to lie down" and "to know" in the Hebrew Bible. The verb "to lie down" that occurs eight times in Ruth 3 and the verb "to know," which appears six times have the connotation of "engaging in sexual intercourse."<sup>30</sup> Any of the actions carried out in the middle of night, alone behind a pile of grain, would imply a sexual encounter. Before the reader tries to decide what Naomi intended to happen on the threshing floor, some attention must be given to the secondary weight these words must have carried in the minds of a Hebrew-speaking audience. As argued above, Naomi tells Ruth to uncover Boaz's "feet" which also may be used commonly as a euphemism for "private parts."<sup>31</sup> Whatever the term feet mean, one agrees with Masenya that "the narrator of Ruth employs language which is highly suggestive of a sexual encounter between Boaz and Ruth."<sup>32</sup> Finding words with such a meaning in the Bible may not be helpful to the modern reader in a context where the Bible has become the standard for peoples' behaviour. In the context of HIV and AIDS, Masenya challenges women and men to be informed by thinking critically about how the Bible is used. She suggests three specific ways to effectively engage the Bible in the context of HIV and AIDS. Firstly, "it is by being very conscious about the dynamics of the context of the interpreter;

<sup>28</sup> Mishael Caspi, *Women on the Biblical Road: Ruth, Naomi, and the Female Journey* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1996), 158.

<sup>29</sup> LaCocque, *Ruth*, 84.

<sup>30</sup> Tod Linafelt, "Ruth," in *Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (ed. D.W. Cotter; Minneapolis: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 1–90 (49).

<sup>31</sup> Rowland Croucher, "The Old Testament and Sex." [cited 8 June 2010]. Online: <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/2853.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Is Ruth the 'ēšet Hayil for Real?, 253–272.

second by taking this context seriously in our Bible translation processes and third by affirming the dignity of all people as human beings created in the image of God."<sup>33</sup>

Masenya raise important points that should be taken seriously in our contextual reading of bible stories. We all bring our contexts with us when we read and interpret the Bible. Contextual reading recognises that we are all shaped by our contexts, and that our contexts are influenced by our readings of the Bible. Community realities needs to be taken into consideration to guide our reflection. Hence, for those who continue to have the authority to interpret the Christian Bible, caution needs to be taken regarding the need for life-giving interpretations of the Bible. Since the culture of the African reader has more influence on the way the Bible is understood and used in communities, the reader's context has to be taken seriously. Interpreters should take into consideration both the context of the reader and that of the text. Points of resemblance between the text and the reader's context need to be applied in an empowering way to the lives of women as well as men. However, a critique must also be made since both cultures contain both oppressive and liberating elements. These oppressive elements are not only considered in the context of the lives of women but where possible, they should be identified in the biblical text too. Such a view will curb the indiscriminate application of dangerous cultural sayings, reinforced by apparently similar sayings from the Bible, to the lives of powerless women. There has to be a change in the interpretation of biblical stories so that as much as possible, patriarchal norms, with their devaluation of women's self- identities, can be resisted and done away with. A liberationist reading of Ruth consequently demands that the people of God create a new kind of community by redeeming and liberating those who are marginalised and exploited for any reason.

As Ruth and Naomi struggled with emptiness, with no man to provide for them, Ruth, with Naomi's approval, decided to glean in the field to get food for herself and her mother-in-law (2:2-3). By so doing, she became Naomi's provider. In the present context of the crisis in the Congo, women too have become providers for their families. This has been a voluntary movement brought about by a common willingness to fight poverty. It relates to all women living alone, with or without children and with household dependents. Included in this category are widows, single mothers, divorced or abandoned women. In fact, by combining several activities, women play an essential role not only in the family's subsistence but also by supplying the urban centres with needed

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<sup>33</sup> Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "For Better, for Worse: Revisiting the Use of the Christian Bible in HIV and AIDS African Context," Forum of the Bible Agencies International HIV and AIDS Consultation, September 30-October 4, 2007, Nairobi, Kenya, 37.

products. It is interesting to note the self-confidence and responsible attitude of these women, especially those from the rural areas.

In Ruth 2:14-18, Boaz invited Ruth to eat with him, telling her that he was impressed by all she had done for her mother-in-law. Ruth ate her full portion and put the rest in a "take-away container" for Naomi. Boaz advised her to stay with his harvesters and drink from the water barrel when she was thirsty. He warned his men not to bother her and she continued to glean until the evening. Boaz also instructed his servants to allow Ruth to glean "even among the standing sheaves" (2:16). The "empty" foreign widow has been "discovered" by the "full" prominent man of Bethlehem. She went home "full", and with enough barley for the family.<sup>34</sup> Caspi says that Ruth went to town heavy with provisions; the gift of barley lends to Ruth the image of a prostitute.<sup>35</sup> Ruth found favour in Boaz's eyes and she was invited to eat and drink with him. She was allowed to glean every day in his field to provide for herself and her mother-in-law.

Similarly, many women today, specifically, Mongo women try to find favour with men. Once they get the attention of their boss, their position becomes secure, that is, as long as they also remain attractive and are ready to offer themselves to the boss. All these behaviours are directly linked to the high transmission rate of HIV and AIDS, as the women seldom know the man's serological status. Thus, the present economic crisis has not only highlighted women's very active role in maintaining the family financially but also shown that they could be independent and survive through their own efforts. Ruth also is presented as the breadwinner who went out to glean in order to provide food for herself and Naomi. Ruth was a resourceful woman trusting God and did not accept poverty and death or allow the patriarchal system to define her by waiting for a man to provide for her needs (2:17). Though God is not visible, throughout Ruth's story, God can be found somewhere in the mixed motives, somewhere in the struggle for survival, anywhere there is redemption. God worked in a hidden and mysterious way to transform Ruth life and that of her mother-in-law..." As we encourage women to fulfil their potential and take initiative, women should be discouraged from seeking favour by any means. Women must find their own ways, with or without a man's support, to secure their own wellbeing and that of their families, realising that God is at work to help them succeed.

By using the existing system to their advantage, Naomi and Ruth provide a model of a strong and independent woman. Ruth did not let these systems define who she was, even as she used them to empower herself. Mongo women have to reach the stage where the narrative of Ruth, and those of other women

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<sup>34</sup> Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele), "Struggling with Poverty/Emptiness: Rereading the Naomi-Ruth Story in African-South Africa," *JTSA* 120 (2004): 46–59.

<sup>35</sup> Caspi, *Women on the Biblical Road*, 81.

in the Christian Bible, have to be read critically. This can hopefully help women to find their way out of the patriarchal system even if they have to use the system to do so. Ruth does not follow in letter Naomi's advice. "Ruth tells Boaz what she wants him to do. Ruth shows her strength of character here. This is an example for African women to follow— to guide the course of their relationships— in order to have influence in the context of the HIV and AIDS ravaging the African continent".<sup>36</sup> Women must have freedom to express themselves and not keep on acting uncritically according to the patriarchal system into which they were socialized.

## **E CONCLUSION**

As long as poverty, discrimination and marginalisation of women due to some patriarchal norms, church beliefs and male control over women's body persist, the fight against HIV will never be won but women's vulnerability will continue to increase.<sup>37</sup> Rereading Ruth 2–3 in which Ruth played according to the rules of the patriarchal game in a context where the Bible has become the standard for people's behaviour may not be helpful. However, Ruth's story can encourage Congolese women in their struggle against poverty to become agents of change for the welfare of their families. Ruth's freedom to take initiative and go out to work in the field is commendable but her means of survival, based on her actions at the threshing floor, should be challenged. Women's potential, initiative and independent actions that enable them to become their families' breadwinners are to be encouraged, especially when they act outside of male power. However, the successful ending of Ruth's story, in the context of poverty, HIV and AIDS, violence against women in our churches and our patriarchal cultures and Ruth's actions to reach such a happy ending must be challenged vis-a-vis women's wellbeing in the Congolese society today. The promotion of women to high positions of power in some African countries and elsewhere in the world reminds us that, even in a patriarchal environment, women can find their own way to survive without being tied to men. The story of Ruth can help women understand God's different ways of working to help them succeed.

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<sup>36</sup> Maleke M. Kondemo, *Finding a Husband and Finding Life? One African Woman's Reading of the Book of Ruth in the Democratic Republic of the Congo* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012), 112.

<sup>37</sup> Maleke M. Kondemo, *Finding a Husband and Finding Life*, 113.

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