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Dignity, Life-Affirming Advocacy and Compassionate Solidarity

By Nyambura J. Njoroge¹

Abstract

In “Special Issue: Overcoming Violence against Women and Children” in the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (No. 114, Nov. 2002), the guest editors Tinyiko Sam Maluleke and Sarojini Nadar wrote:

Given the great cloud and intricate network of witnesses and conspirators who subscribe to the covenant of death, standing up against this covenant of death and violence is costly. It often results in the isolation and rejection of those who dare to speak. Therefore, the voices of those who dare to stand up against the covenant are often like voices in the wilderness (7).

In this essay, I will focus on the lessons I learned from a few strategies and tactics to covenant with dignity and life to uphold *Ubuntu*.² I will draw inspiration from my mothers in faith who one hundred years ago in Kenya shielded the dignity of Gĩkũyũ girls and women against female genital mutilation and other dignity and life-denying cultural practices and beliefs, which are contrary to *Ubuntu* and the sustaining of life. I will conclude with a summary of collective actions I have taken with the women and men who have been my professional companions in my work as an ordained minister of word and sacrament with the Presbyterian Church of East Africa.

Keywords: Ubuntu, East Africa, African theology, Female genital mutilation, Violence against women, Feminist agency

Voices and Actions of Girls³ and Women

In Kenya, on 5th January 1925, Wandia, a 15-year-old girl, defied all odds and said “No” to female circumcision.⁴ Her eldest son, Timothy Murere Njoya, dramatically and graphically narrates Wandia’s actions in *Selfhood: The Divinity of the Clitoris* (Njoya 2020). Fortunately, Wandia’s voice was not alone. Growing up in a village in Kenya in the 1960s, I

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² *Ubuntu* is an “African traditional ideology of justice and fairness based on the philosophies of humanness, communitarianism, solidarity and interdependence (Tamale 2020, xv).

³ Throughout this essay, I include girls and adolescents (0-18 years) because I want to acknowledge Africa’s demography, which has more than 50% of the population under the age of 18. Some of the adolescent girls look and act older than their age and are easily mistaken to be adult women.

⁴ According to UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on Female Genital Mutilation, female circumcision or female genital mutilation (FGM) is a human rights violation that involves altering or injuring the female genitalia of a girl or young woman for non-medical reasons. The practice can cause very serious short-and long-term health and psychological complications. Globally, it is estimated that 200 million girls and women alive today have undergone some form of female genital mutilation. In Africa, 29 countries practice FGM. International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation is a United Nations-sponsored annual awareness day that takes place on February 6 as part of the UN's efforts to eradicate female genital mutilation. It was first introduced in 2003.

learned about other young women who resisted female circumcision in the 1920s from my missionary trained midwife mother, Mary Muthoni Githanji (née Waruguru).⁵ During my doctoral thesis, I decided to research these women who started a movement to shield and protect their daughters from the “knife” or what has become commonly known as FGM. In 2022, the movement to shield and protect the girls from the knife, later institutionalized and renamed the PCEA (Presbyterian Church of East Africa) Woman’s Guild, marked its 100-year anniversary.

In this essay, I endeavour to amplify the voices and actions of girls and women who dare to rise to affirm and shield their dignity and the freedom to defend their *Ubuntu*, fullness of life, and justice in the face of cultural violence and patriarchal domination (Likimani 2021). In this essay, I do not confine myself only to FGM, but examine other cases of girls and women’s human rights violations more generally. As a new convert to Christianity, Wandia and her contemporaries stood up against other Gĩkũyũ cultural violence like dowry,⁶ polygamy, wife inheritance upon the death of the husband, and child marriage. Most of the time, the girls who resisted these acts of violence took shelter in mission stations and newly started schools against the will of their parents, not surprisingly, to the protest of many Gĩkũyũ men who had converted to Christianity under the Church of Scotland Mission (CSM). The protest sparked the 1929 female circumcision controversy and the breakaway from missionary Christianity, starting a new movement of independent churches and schools, which strongly affirmed patriarchal traditional cultures and embraced faith in Jesus Christ (Gatu 2016, 65-70). By the 1950s, this new movement of independent churches fuelled the struggle for land and freedom, commonly known as the Mau Mau War, against the missionaries, European settlers, and the colonial British government (Thiong’o 2010). Nevertheless, according to Njoya (2020), it is very crucial to acknowledge and magnify that Wandia’s actions sparked the social, economic, and political independence movement in Kenya, which is largely overlooked by researchers and scholars.⁷ Sadly, some of the women who had escaped the “knife” and/or protected their daughters from FGM faced torture by Mau Mau freedom fighters and died defending their actions and in the name of their Christian faith (Njoya 2020, 15-18).⁸ It is no exaggeration to acknowledge that the girls and women’s agency to shield their dignity and life-affirming advocacy for selfhood, *Ubuntu*, and life during the colonial and missionary era remains undocumented and interrogated. In *Her-stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa* (Phiri et al. 2002), members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians⁹ (hereafter known as the Circle) attempted to give voice to our foremothers’ agency in affirming our *Ubuntu* and struggle for the fullness of life, but more archival research is long overdue.

⁵ The Church of Scotland Mission (CSM) in Kenya was founded in 1891 at Kibwezi and in 1898 Gĩkũyũ mission station was established followed by Tumutumu mission in 1908 where my mother was born, raised, and attended school.

⁶ Dowry or bridewealth remains one of the most practiced rituals in many African families. However, as John Chitakure’s (2016) research among the Shona people of Zimbabwe has demonstrated, it is a practice that violates the dignity and wellbeing of women in more than one way.

⁷ Njoya, *Selfhood*, 365-367 highlights five empirical factors for how Wandia shaped Kenya’s political history and independence movement.

⁸ There were men who also faced death for refusing to denounce their Christian faith and to participate in the Mau Mau War. See Njoya (2020).

⁹ Mercy Amba Oduyoye with 65 women founded the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in 1989 in Accra, Ghana with the main objective of addressing the dearth of theological literature from African women of faith from multiple religious and cultural backgrounds.

Changing Trajectory—Cultural and Biblical Hermeneutics

The trailblazers of the PCEA Woman's Guild planted seeds of shielding the dignity and wellbeing of Gĩkũyũ girls and women, which continue to bear fruit as we confront escalating violence against girls and women. In their limited ways, they interrogated Gĩkũyũ cultural practices that diminished their worth as human beings and created a formidable platform in the growing Kenyanized/Africanized church which patriarchal missionary leadership could not ignore. Even though women were not ordained as church elders and ministers of word and sacrament among the first Gĩkũyũ church leaders in CSM,¹⁰ the girls and women took advantage of learning how to read the Gĩkũyũ New Testament (NT) bible the missionaries translated.¹¹ Certainly, the presence of the Gĩkũyũ NT bible resulted in many things, among them the opportunity to “hear” the word of God from their own mouth as they read in Guild meetings and other prayer groups with women missionaries. The young women pioneers at *Mambere* (progress) school began to learn about the women in the bible. In the early 1930s, young women were trained as evangelists who were commonly referred to as parish sisters and bible women (Njoroge 2000, 36-42). Through these trailblazers, we see the changing trajectory with young women interrogating their social, political, economic, and cultural reality through the realities of the women in the bible. The seeds of cultural and biblical hermeneutics were planted and germinated, which the Circle has nurtured into beautiful gardens and forests.¹²

Nevertheless, these torchbearers knew shielding their *Ubuntu* and advocacy for fullness of life required them being at the seat of decision, policymaking, and leadership at all levels of the church and schools. They knew exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination against leadership and theological education alongside men diminished their capacity and power to address root causes that fuelled violence against girls and women, for instance. They looked for opportunities and possibilities for equal treatment like their brothers in the church and society experienced. Inspired by women in the bible and tribal myths,¹³ they aspired to be included among church elders and ministers of word and sacrament and other positions of authority in the society. Characters like Deborah, Miriam, Priscilla, Dorcas, Martha, and Mary stirred them to action.¹⁴ At the dawn of political independence in Kenya, their daughters stepped up to take on the struggle to restore dignity of young women who fell through the cracks as teenage mothers, orphans, widows and single mothers, elderly women, and children and people with disabilities who often suffer rejection, disgrace, stigma, and a life in poverty (Njoroge 2000, 88-97).¹⁵ Whereas these actions may appear insignificant in the face of insurmountable violence against girls and women in the face of HIV and the

¹⁰ The first church elders were ordained in 1920 and clergy in 1926. In the Presbyterian leadership church decisions related to doctrinal, discipline and policy, matters are in the hands of elders and clergy.

¹¹ For more on translation work, see Scott (1932, pp, 243-248). The first Gĩkũyũ NT bibles were dedicated on 14th March 1926 during the ordination of 5 clergymen at Tumutum Mission. 3 other men had been ordained on 7th March 1926 at Gĩkũyũ Mission.

¹² For instance, see Oduyoye (1995), Dube (2000), and Kanyoro (2002).

¹³ *Gĩkũyũ* (man) and *Muumbi* (woman) which describes the beginnings of the Gĩkũyũ people in Kenya based on the nine plus daughters. Recently Ngugi wa Thiong'o retold this myth from a feminist perspective in *The Perfect Nine: The Epic of Gĩkũyũ and Muumbi* (2020).

¹⁴ In 1964, the fourth General Assembly of PCEA approved the ordination of women as church elders. First women ordained elders in 1965, and most of them were members of the Guild. In 1976, at eighth General Assembly the church approved theological education for women and subsequently their ordination as ministers. The first woman joined seminary in 1978-80 and was ordained minister on 5th September 1982. The PCEA General Assembly is the highest decision and policy-making body and meets every 3 years. The first assembly was held in 1956 in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya.

¹⁵ It is noteworthy that Gĩkũyũ Christian women in PCEA have worked alongside women from other churches and non-government organizations by joining organizations like the Young Women Christian Association (YWCA) and Greenbelt Movement.

COVID-19 pandemic, they demonstrate critical awareness that what is broken can be fixed. At the core is the bravery, spirit, wits, and wisdom of saying no to indignity and destruction of *Ubuntu* and creation.

The first and second generation of Gikūyū Christian women who endured the wrath of violent colonial power, economic exploitation, sexual violence and living in fear taught my generation to respect and cherish the fruits of their hard labor and struggle for freedom and life. Today, in the PCEA, we have no shortage of girls and women who are actively safeguarding their *Ubuntu* and life against decades of backlash with support from programs and initiatives that ensured women have a seat at the decision and policy-making table.

Learning from and in Solidarity with Catalysts

As I pointed out above, the leaders of the PCEA Woman's Guild in the late 1950s and 1960s strategically worked with all male leadership in the church to ensure that women were ordained church elders and that women were accepted to undertake theological studies that resulted in ordination into the ministry of word and sacrament. These astute leaders acted as catalysts in the major changes that have taken place in the entire Presbyterian Church of East Africa in the last 60 years all the way from the villages, towns, cities, and beyond. As Agnes Abuom, the moderator of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Central Committee, puts it, "women of faith are protagonists of human dignity, peace and healers of creation" ("Dr. Abuom, 2021).

Professionally, I have been part of this intricate network of witnesses and protagonists of *Ubuntu*, life-affirming advocacy, and compassionate solidarity despite of or because of "the great cloud and intricate network of witnesses and conspirators who subscribe to the covenant of death" as succinctly put by Tinyiko Sam Maluleke and Sarojini Nadar (2002, 7). I am inspired by women and men who have refused to be silent and silenced by powerful authorities, during the last twenty years since Maluleke and Nadar wrote these words.¹⁶ In a way, even though it is not directly connected to the "shield of dignity" as in the *Kiama kia Ngo* (Council of the Shield) movement of the 1920s, there are other movements like "Tamar Campaign: Break the Chains of Silence" and "Thursdays in Black: Towards a World without Rape and Violence" which beg our scrutiny. Today, we use every available tool and skill including God-given gifts of tears as in weeping, crying, screaming, and demonstrating as we learn at the feet of girls and women and others in our collective story. We speak up and shout without fear of intimidation or slander. We have retrieved intergenerational storytelling, and we interrogate our life experiences and contributions in families, local communities, and faith institutions at different levels. Most importantly, girls and women of faith are tackling root causes of female genital mutilation, child marriage, the escalating use of rape as a weapon of war, and the devastating domestic violence that often occurs during humanitarian, racial, environmental and health crises.

Furthermore, girls and women are breaking silence on incest and rape through contextual bible studies, and others are documenting their experiences (Watson and Hoad 2014).¹⁷ Consequently, girls and women are at the forefront of providing care and other essential services in the context of violence following spiritual and faith-inspired values of love, solidarity, and compassion (Mukuna and McKee 2021). Nonetheless, for too long,

¹⁶ I am a direct product of the PCEA Woman's Guild as they struggled for equality in church leadership as the first woman to undertake theological studies and to be the first ordained woman in the ministry of word and sacrament in 1982.

¹⁷ Originally, when I received a copy of the book *I Am Now Free: Diaries of a Survivor of Child Rape & Sexual Abuse*, edited by Watson and Hoad, the author had not disclosed her identity. After turning 19, Ashley disclosed her identity. On 7th February 2017, I had the opportunity to meet her. I listened to how her life has been transformed into a young independent adult.

women of faith in leadership have been silenced, and little is known in mainstream media and in diplomacy at the high-level platforms of human rights and peace negotiations, even in religious circles. Considering this conspiracy of silencing we must do everything within our means to acknowledge the bravery of catalysts of change and ensure that posterity will know the truth.

Hence, as Christians, the retelling and interrogating of rape narratives like the one of Tamar, daughter of King David, raped by her half-brother Amnon (2 Samuel 13:1-39) and many others in our families and communities of faith should no longer be silenced and ignored. In my intricate network of those who have refused to be silent and silenced, I have witnessed the transforming power of Tamar Campaign and Thursdays in Black in my own life and in many others in my circle of influence at the ecumenical global level and in Africa. In this essay, I will focus on the Tamar Campaign.¹⁸

A brief narrative of how I became part of the Tamar Campaign is in order. I still remember the day; I met Gerald West¹⁹ for the first time in the early 2000s. He challenged me as a staff of the World Council of Churches,²⁰ saying that the organization, or rather the global ecumenical movement, had failed to be socially engaged, especially in the affairs of Africa. I listened carefully to West explain how Ujamaa Centre was socially engaged in KwaZulu-Natal communities using the bible with women to address escalating violence, in particular sexual violence, and the consequences of the HIV and the AIDS pandemic. I shared with him that in 2001 the WCC had launched the Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV) 2001-2010 and that the HIV and AIDS program would focus on sub-Saharan Africa. I was immediately inspired and realized I had an ally. Through my research on Gĩkũyũ Christian women in Kenya during doctoral studies and engagement in the Circle as a founding member, I knew African women were ready to take up this charge.²¹ After this initial encounter with West, I embraced contextual bible study (CBS) methodology and became part of the Tamar Campaign.²² I believe in the ripple effect. As part of my responsibility at WCC, I decided the best way to implement DOV in Africa was to have trained facilitators on contextual bible study methodology and to launch the Tamar Campaign through theological institutions. In April 2005, during a five day workshop at St. Paul's United Theological College (SPUTC), Limuru, Kenya, Gerald West, the late Phumzile Mabizela née Zondi, and Lilian Siwila trained forty-five theological educators, clergy, and activists from more than twenty-five African countries as facilitators of CBS methodology. We used the occasion to launch the Tamar Campaign in Africa by planting thirty trees of hope and life at the grounds of SPUTC (St Paul's University--SPU since 2007).²³

The process of launching the Tamar Campaign at SPUTC was filled with life-affirming advocacy and compassionate solidarity involving several staff of the college,

¹⁸ While writing this essay, I received a critique on Thursdays in Black (TiB) campaign. As one who with my colleagues have extensively promoted TiB, especially among children, adolescents, young people, and women some of whom are widows and others victims and/or survivors of SGBV for over a decade, I believe the critique requires time to digest, reflect, and engage with the author and others. See Chisale (2021).

¹⁹Gerald West at the time was professor of Old Testament and Biblical Hermeneutics in the School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu- Natal, South Africa and director of the Ujamaa Centre for Community Development and Research.

²⁰I joined the World Council of Churches in March 1999 as programme executive and coordinator of Global Ecumenical Theological Education.

²¹See Wamue and Getui (1996).

²² As the editor on *Ministerial Formation* (WCC-Ecumenical Theological Education biannual journal), I invited Gerald West to share the story of the Tamar Campaign. See West and Zondi-Mabizela (2004).

²³WCC Publications, *Overcoming Violence: The Ecumenical Decade 2001-2010* (2011), 33-35. I acknowledge the leadership of Esther Mombo, who at the time was the academic dean at SPTUC who ensured that the college was on board. She has continued to use CBS methodology and promote the Tamar Campaign as I write. Currently, Mombo is associate professor, Faculty of Theology, SPU, Limuru.

Fellowship of Councils of Churches in the Great Lakes, and Horn of Africa (FECCLAHA), and Christian Aid in Nairobi Kenya. The planting of trees among other things was crucial and symbolic. In the narrative we read:

Her brother Absalom said to her, “Has Amnon your brother been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart.” *So Tamar remained, a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom’s house.* ²¹ When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry, but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn.^[a] ²² But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad; for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had raped his sister Tamar... ²⁸ Then Absalom commanded his servants, “Watch when Amnon’s heart is merry with wine, and when I say to you, ‘*Strike Amnon, then kill him. Do not be afraid; have I not myself commanded you? Be courageous and valiant.*’” ²⁹ *So the servants of Absalom did to Amnon as Absalom had commanded.* (2 Samuel 13:20-22, 28-29, New Revised Standard Version, NRSV, my emphasis).

On more than one occasion, when I presented the Tamar narrative in contextual bible study, I was questioned on how this is a powerful transforming story when the end is not life-giving, especially because Tamar is said to have lived a desolate life and Absalom ordered Amnon to be killed. In every contextual bible study, participants are asked to name an action plan, what they will do with the insights and lessons learned from the text and the study. Therefore, as organizers of the workshop and the launch, we wanted to challenge ourselves to take action that would inspire all of us to do more and to be able to retell the story in tangible ways. We even encouraged all the participants to go home and plant trees of hope and life which would ensure the Tamar(s) in our lives would not be silenced and would not be desolate but that we would all work on prevention and response to cases of rape to bring healing, restore dignity, *Ubuntu*, and life. Besides, we wanted participants to know that the story did not end with the death of Amnon and the fleeing of Absalom from the sight of his angry father:

²³ So Joab set off, went to Geshur, and brought Absalom to Jerusalem. ²⁴ The king said, “Let him go to his own house; he is not to come into my presence.” So Absalom went to his own house, and did not come into the king’s presence. ²⁵ Now in all Israel there was no one to be praised so much for his beauty as Absalom; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. ²⁶ When he cut the hair of his head (for at the end of every year he used to cut it; when it was heavy on him, he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head, two hundred shekels by the king’s weight.

²⁷ *There were born to Absalom three sons, and one daughter whose name was Tamar; she was a beautiful woman...*

³² Absalom answered Joab, “Look, I sent word to you: Come here, that I may send you to the king with the question, ‘Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better for me to be there still.’ *Now let me go into the king’s presence; if there is guilt in me, let him kill me!*” ³³ *Then Joab went to the king and told him; and he summoned Absalom. So, he came to the king and prostrated himself with his face to the ground before the king, and the king kissed Absalom.* (2Samuel 14: 23-27, 32-33, NRSV, emphasis mine).

This scandalous, patriarchal, tragic story of deceit, conspiracy, abuse of power, betrayal, rape, silencing, despair, death, rejection, and deep-seated anger, sounds familiar. Most significantly, Absalom made sure Tamar lived on in his daughter. In my Gikūyū culture, naming his daughter Tamar is a sign of restoration of life, a rebirth, a new beginning and affirmation of *Ubuntu* and life in the face of desolation and death.

In 2015, ten years later, some of us returned to SPU and put a plaque at the forest of Tamar trees of hope and life, to guarantee that posterity will learn about Tamar and our efforts. The late Phumzile Mabizela, a great champion of CBS methodology and the Tamar Campaign, unveiled the plaque. A bench at the forest of trees welcomes curious sojourners who learn more about the Tamar Campaign and its ripple effect throughout the continent and beyond. In 2020, fifteen years later, through a hybrid event due to Covid-19 travel restrictions and holding large gatherings, we gathered physically and online to launch “Lois and Eunice Theological Fund for Women,” which includes a component of Tamar Campaign research project on the status of sexual gender-based violence in Christian families and faith communities. The research project aimed to contribute data and narrative evidence-based research on (SGBV) carried out by secular institutions, governments, and United Nations agencies. During these significant events, more trees were planted on the compound of SPU to continue the spirit and inspiration of the Tamar Campaign to remind the students, faculty, administration, all other employees and visitors that we have an obligation to stop violence and to safeguard healthy environments and lives. Our actions must be holistic, life affirming, and life-giving in all we do.

The solidarity with FECCLAHA gave birth to a volume of contextual bible study manual on Tamar Campaign, whose ripple effect begs for in-depth research, analysis, and documentation (Nyabera and Montgomery 2007). After ten years of exhausting the 12 bible studies in the FECCLAHA volume and due to popular demand for more learning, life-affirming advocacy, and compassionate solidarity in the region, whose *Ubuntu* and life are in unsurmountable danger, FECCLAHA had to go back to the drawing board and produce a new volume (FECCLAHA, 2017).²⁴ FECCLAHA continues to offer workshops and seminars using these resources.

On the part of World Council of Churches (WCC), CBS as a methodology and Tamar Campaign were promoted beyond Africa through the global Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE) programme. Nonetheless, in April 2007, I shifted professional responsibilities from WCC-ETE to WCC- Ecumenical HIV and AIDS in Africa (WCC-EHAIA, renamed WCC-Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy in 2014, maintaining same acronym), I knew CBS and the Tamar Campaign would bring value to SGBV and HIV responses, taking cue from Ujamaa Centre. I ensured all staff²⁵ and key collaborating partners were trained as facilitators. Once again, Gerald West and his team at Ujamaa Centre worked with us in 2008. With time, in workshops, the story of the male co-conspirators of the incestuous rape of Tamar by Amnon in the house of a man who had found favor in the eyes of God raised fundamental issues about socialization of men and women in African cultures, families, and Christian communities. On one hand, some men church leaders complained that all men were being portrayed as rapists as the Tamar narrative gained popularity in churches and theological institutions. Others posed, reflected, analysed, and accepted that there are rapists, enablers, and those who create a conducive environment for rapists to get away with it, as David did with Amnon, and that the aggrieved often take matters into their own hands, like Absalom. There were men theologians and church leaders who accepted that *Ubuntu* and life are in great danger and at a point of no restoration unless

²⁴ Esther Mombo was the team leader in the production of the 2017 manual.

²⁵WCC-EHAIA has staff based in Nairobi, Harare, Kinshasa, Luanda, and Lomé. I am the team leader and coordinator based in Geneva, Switzerland.

they act with urgency. In 2007, some men were already seeking these ideas, diligently unpacking men's socialization and prevailing masculinities, especially in Southern Africa, once again using the Tamar narrative. This new dimension in our programmatic work in WCC-EHAIA changed the cause of our approach and insisted that more men must be on board in addressing SGBV and its link to the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, a mammoth devastation to *Ubuntu* and life, in the first place. It became more devastating as people and especially the childbearing population became more aware of thousands of children born HIV positive. Sex, a God-given gift and a life-transmitting act, had become a major threat to *Ubuntu* and life. Some of us stayed up at night wondering how to change the trajectory of deadly behaviors and attitudes in our sexual lives and how to stop sexual gender-based violence, especially targeting children, adolescents, and young women. The onslaught of COVID-19 has magnified what we already knew was causing immeasurable suffering, death, grief, and various types of mental illnesses as we listened to testimonies of SGBV victims and/or survivors who are HIV positive and others raising children because of rape. Grandmothers who are left to care and provide for grandchildren left behind because of AIDS-related deaths share some of these testimonies. In "Reframing women's agency in #Blessed Sex: Intersectional dilemmas for African women's theologies," Beverley Haddad (2021) has reminded us of the nightmare that is just unfolding.

Back at WCC-EHAIA, we embarked on studying African masculinities and encouraging more men to come on board to interrogate their own socialization, behaviors, and attitudes towards women, sex, sexuality, and life, with Gerald West revisiting the Tamar story's contribution towards the whole discourse (West 2021). The emerging discourse demanded contextual bible studies on masculinities. WCC-EHAIA responded, knowing too well that our contribution was a drop in the ocean given the magnitude of violence against girls and women, with men being the main perpetrators with patriarchal structures, systems, and leadership firmly entrenched in many societies and institutions, especially churches (Chitando and Njoroge 2013). In Africa, girls and women's mission to shield our dignity, wellbeing, wholeness, and life in its fullness have put our fellow brothers, fathers, spouses, sons, and uncles on notice that *Ubuntu* and life cannot be achieved and enjoyed by one sex, whether heterosexual or otherwise. In equal measure, adolescents, and young people under the age of twenty-five of both genders and diverse sexualities, have not remained silent and silenced in the continent of Africa, albeit the speed is slower in faith communities than in secular ones. Significantly, WCC-EHAIA is critically aware that Africa is a youthful continent with more than two-thirds of the population being under 35 years old. Once again, we embarked on producing a new resource focusing on children and young people.²⁶

Like good learners, staff was confronted by new challenges. First, adolescents and young people demanded to be at the table with adults and in particular senior faith leaders for intergenerational conversations on matters of sexual reproductive health education and services and an end to sexual gender-based violence in the context of HIV and AIDS. Second, young women acknowledged that alongside toxic masculinities are many life-denying types of femininities, which should be interrogated. As the team leader, I looked for ecumenical partners who could work with intergenerational conversation safe spaces and tools that we could learn from and adopt into our ongoing programmatic work. The World Young Women Christian Association, with its headquarters a few minutes' walk from the WCC offices, was a convenient resource.²⁷ At the same time, some churches invited us to

²⁶ In light of this awareness and ongoing demand from adolescents and young people, both girls/boys and women/men who prefer to work together demanded a sample of CBS. See Chitando and Njoroge, eds., *Contextual Bible Study Manual on Young People: "Let the Children Come to Me."*

²⁷ <file:///C:/Users/nn/AppData/Local/Temp/YWCA-Safe-Spaces-for-Women-and-Girls-Full-Guide-EN.pdf> retrieved on 30/10/2021

work with church-owned schools, to engage the students, teachers, chaplains, church leaders, parents and administrators to address teenage pregnancies, sexual violence and how to accompany learners living with HIV.²⁸ CBS methodology and intergenerational conversations in safe spaces have helped us to learn to “listen with love” (Igo OSB 2005) and compassion with an audience that is true to African demographics and the wide variety of Christian denominations and theologies, let alone the interfaith dynamics in the continent. Consequently, our efforts continue to produce literature and resources, sometimes with unlikely UN agencies (UNESCO 2020).²⁹

The Struggle Continues

Wandia did everything within her power and wit to shield her dignity, selfhood, and humanity, yet most of us are learning about her actions one century later. In this essay, I have attempted to demonstrate that girls and women in faith communities, albeit here limited to Christian communities, are not silent and have refused to be silenced by conspirators who subscribe to a covenant of death. After all, through different platforms, girls and women refuse to do the hard lifting of protecting and affirming their *Ubuntu* and life against forces of destruction and death alone. Each step on the way, girls and women have sought how to become an inclusive community of equals by dismantling the formidable cornerstones of patriarchy, which perpetuate violence against girls and women. We have no shortage of good practices and life-giving outcomes; nonetheless, most of this work remains unresearched and undocumented, sometimes giving the false impression that girls and women are passive participants. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians have attempted to fill this void, but much remains to be done especially in pastoral care and counselling which focuses on restoration of dignity and healing unattended wounds and trauma from rape and violence in the society at large. Even before the tragedy of COVID-19, there was a deep yearning for compassionate solidarity and life-affirming advocacy with children and young people in churches that continue to advocate corporal punishment at home and in schools, for instance. Simply put, the struggle continues.

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²⁸ We have done substantial work in Togo and Nigeria. Some of this work is reflected in Labeodan et al, 2019.

²⁹ UNESCO’s *Religious Leaders’ Toolkit on Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights* was fully funded by UNESCO but, as acknowledged, several staff of the World Council of Churches–EHAIA were involved in the conceptualization and delivery of this resource.

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