

**Vulnerability And Capability In Kenya: Towards An African Women's  
Public Theology**

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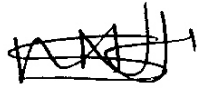
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**2008**

**Pietermaritzburg**

## DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis, unless specifically indicated in the text, is my own original work which has not been submitted in any other University.



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Sicily Mbura Muriithi

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Date

As the supervisor, I hereby approve this thesis for submission

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Prof. Steve De Gruchy

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Date

University of Kwazulu-Natal

2008

## ABSTRACT

This thesis concerns African women's experience of comprehensive vulnerability, and a proposal to develop an African Women's' Public Theology to enable the church in Africa to adequately respond to that vulnerability. The research involved a case study of 126 women in the Kenyan district of Meru South undertaken through interviews, focus groups and participant observation, and revealed that women experience vulnerability in eight key areas, namely, Domestic violence, Inheritance, HIV and AIDS, Education, Health, Female Genital Mutilation, Polygamy and a lack of control and access to property. The thesis argues that this constitutes a comprehensive experience of vulnerability that has five fundamental causes, namely, Patriarchal traditions and customs; Poverty; Policies and law; Religion and the church; and Internalisation.

The thesis then examines an appropriate response from Christians and the Church to this experience of comprehensive vulnerability. It notes that many of these concerns are voiced by African Women's' Theology, but that in order to adequately deal with the experiences and causes of women's vulnerability identified in the research there is a need to engage the field of public policy, constitution and law making to really make a difference. An engagement with the male theologians, Duncan Forrester, Jesse Mugambi and Charles Villa-Vicencio provides the impetus to develop a public theology, whilst at the same time the thesis offers a gender sensitive critique of these attempts.

Any public theology needs a social theory in order to engage the public sphere, and this thesis examines the work of the feminist philosopher and jurist, Martha Nussbaum in promoting the Human Capabilities Approach. We examine her formal proposal of ten fundamental human capabilities that should be supported by states and governments. Her work is affirmed for three important reasons, namely, it deals with the reality of women on the ground as revealed through the field research, it provides a public way of dealing with this vulnerability that is not based on one faith tradition, and yet thirdly, it is congruent with a Biblical faith that promotes Human Dignity, Freedom and Justice.

In drawing the research to a close the thesis proposes an African Women's Public Theology with the following seven characteristics. African Women's Public Theology (i) is a member of the family of African Women's Theologies, (ii) is grounded in the reality of the lives of African women, characterized by comprehensive vulnerability; (iii) claims the right for women to do theology in the public arena; (iv) works self-consciously in an interdisciplinary manner; (v) challenges the church to be more active in seeking social justice, with an emphasis on gender justice; (vi) focuses on women's capabilities – what they are actually able to be and to do; and (vii) challenges the hitherto male-dominated public theologies to take seriously the concerns, wisdom and passion of women seeking gender justice in Africa.

**DEDICATION**

To my mother Charity Maitha Njeru, who in her very vulnerable situation worked hard to ensure that her children lived a “better” life, by ensuring that at least all her daughters went up to high school and above.

**AND**

To my husband Francis Muriithi and our children Grace Wanja, Emmanuel Muthuri and Emunah Mumbi who had to suffer the pains of my academic advancement, owing to the fact that I had to do it while a wife and a mother because I could not get the opportunity to do it when I was still a young girl

**AND**

To all the girls of Africa, the African women of “today and tomorrow” in prayer that the comprehensive vulnerability your mothers inherited from your grandparents and earlier generations shall never be your inheritance.

**LET US BREAK THE CHORD OF VULNERABILITY AND THE DEPRIVED PAST!!!**

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**ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
COVAW	Coalition On Violence Against Women
DFID	Department for International Development
EATWOT	Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians
ETE	Ecumenical Theological Education
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FAWE	Forum for African Women Educationist
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
FIDA	Federation of Women Lawyers
FLEP	Family Life Education Programme
GAD	Gender and Development
GNP	Gross National Product
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HCA	Human Capabilities Approach
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HV	Health Visiting
IBR	International Bank for Reconstruction
IFM	International Monetary Fund
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
KECN	Kenya Enrolled Community Nursing
KEM	Kenya Enrolled Mid-wifely
LDC	Least Developed Countries
HCA	Human Capabilities Approach (of Martha Nussbaum)
NCKK	National Council of Churches of Kenya
NFLAW	Nairobi Forward Looking For the Advancement of Women
NGO's	Non-Governmental Organisations

PCEA	Presbyterian Church of East Africa
PCUSA	Presbyterian Church of USA
PFA	Platform For Action
SAPs	Structural Adjustment Programmes
SCM	Scotland Church Mission
TNDDP	Tharaka Nithi District Development Programme
UCIP	Urban Community Improvement Programme
UCT	University of Cape Town
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
WAD	Women and Development
WACIPD	Women and Children In Distress Programme
WCC	World Council of Churches
WB	World Bank
WED	Women and Environment and alternative to Development
WID	Women In Development
WOGECT	Woman's Guild Ecumenical Conference and Training Centre

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**GLOSSARY**

<i>Njuri ncheke</i>	Top most or select Council of elders among the Meru people
<i>Mugwe</i>	Intermediary
<i>Baba</i>	Father
<i>Maito</i>	Mother
<i>Harambee</i>	Terminology commonly used in Kenya to encourage communal work meaning – basically meaning pulling together but used variously
<i>Kiama</i>	Council
<i>Biama</i>	Councils
<i>Agambi</i>	Spokesmen
<i>Mugambi</i>	Spokesman
<i>Mutumia uria ngatha</i>	Virtuous woman
<i>Matatu</i>	Common transport. Usually means mini buses in Kenya
<i>Ampatwa na kamududu</i>	“Has been caught by a small worm”: Euphemism for describing someone infected with HIV and AIDS
<i>Mukenye</i>	Name for an uncircumcised girl in Meru
<i>Kiama kia ngo</i>	Council of Shield – Was used by early Kikuyu Christian to refer to the Woman’s Guild
<i>Mwiriga</i>	Clan
<i>Miiriga</i>	Clans
<i>Rika</i>	Age-set
<i>Mwiruwa</i>	Co-Wife
<i>Muthonuwa</i>	Bashful or Reserved – Usually between a man and the parents of his wife
<i>Mwari wa maito</i>	My sister
<i>Ntata</i>	Barren
<i>Nthuke</i>	Age group
<i>Ntuiko</i>	Cutting or breaking of existing pattern of authority - Meru
<i>Itwika</i>	Cutting or breaking of existing pattern of authority - Kikuyu
<i>Kimiru</i>	Language spoken by Meru people
<i>Cess</i>	Church financial contribution. Probably a corruption of the English “assessment”

*Presbyterial*

In the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, the term Presbyterial with an L is used for groups that function at presbytery level.

## CHAPTER ONE

### 1.0 Introduction

Women in Kenya are vulnerable. The challenge is to strengthen their capabilities. This is a development and politico-legal task, one to which the Church in Kenya can and should contribute. In doing this, the Church must draw on the insights of African Women's Theology, but must venture beyond this into an African Woman's *Public* Theology. This thesis will explore these claims.

It needs to be noted right at the start of this work that in the final months of completing this thesis, Kenya underwent a terrible civil conflict over disputed election results (December 2007 to April 2008). By the time this happened the thesis was almost complete and it was impossible to integrate these new developments into the research. However, it is clear that following this terrible episode there is *more* rather than less need for the kind of work proposed in this thesis. The status and livelihoods of women remain a central ethical, social and political challenge for theologians, church leaders and all people of faith.

Here in this first chapter we lay out the basic research questions and approach, the motivation, and the outline of the thesis.

### 1.1 Framing The Problem: The Social, Political And Economic Situation Of Women, And Their Inherent Vulnerability In Kenya

The study of women's lives and gender justice is an area that has attracted a great deal of attention and has been dealt with by many from various perspectives. This current work endeavours to formulate a framework that would enable the church and the governments to join hands in formulating policies that will help eradicate women's intrinsic vulnerability. While being born female is an unquestionable biological fact, experiencing childhood as a girl and growing up as a woman are social experiences particular to a given social environment.

The culture of difference that capitalizes on maleness or femaleness places a woman where the community decides to place her, as determined on gender lines. Therefore, the reality of being a woman in Africa must be understood through a critical analysis of her particular social, cultural, religious and economic context. This piece of work endeavours to formulate a framework that would enable the churches and governments to join hands in formulating policies that will help eradicate women's comprehensive vulnerability. In this section we outline the contours of the debate to which the thesis contributes.

### 1.1.1 African Women Theologians' Perspective

The centrality of African culture and religion in the life of women, extensively articulated by African Women Theologians (Oduyoye 1995, 1997, 2001; Phiri 1997; Kanyoro 2002), provides adequate evidence that women's experiences are determined by their place and status in society and the church. Among the publications emanating from the initial gathering of African Women Theologians is Oduyoye and Kanyoro (1992 (eds), *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, [Maryknoll NY: Orbis] which carries a cross section of issues relating to African culture and the church which influence women's lives. The overall impression of the publication is that African culture has dominant male ideals, which undermine female ideals. To avoid a constant repetition of this identified problematic situation, this initial group of African women theologians<sup>1</sup> chose to confront the situation as expressed in the following words:

...our purpose is to seek, find, examine and expose the historical and cultural aspects that are at the roots of their belief systems that continue to dehumanise women. We are also attempting to bring to the attention of the church in Africa the truth about the love of God, who considers all women and men sinners needful of the grace that comes through Jesus Christ. We are only starting our long journey of faith. We will need to think about methodologies and strategies that will help us achieve our purpose (Kanyoro and Oduyoye 1992:4).

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<sup>1</sup> M.R.A. Kanyoro (2002), "Beads and Strands: Threading more Beads in the Story of the Circle" in I.A. Phiri, D.B. Govinden, and S. Nadar (2002), *Her-Stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, (pp.15-38) gives the background of the Circle of African Women Theologians, how the vision was born and nurtured, and raises the future challenges posed by the Circle. From this article the initial group of women who took the challenge of confronting oppression against women by African culture and other social structures is outlined. M.A Oduyoye (2001), *Introducing African Women's Theology*. London: Sheffield, also gives a detailed account of the journey traveled by African women theologians in confronting dehumanization of women and struggle for their wholeness and dignity

African Women Theologians' contribution and enthusiasm in confronting the aspects that oppress and dehumanise women find its greatest expression in the Circle of African Women Theologians. The Circle traces its roots back to 1980 with the participation of individual academic African women theologians in a conference organised by the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). Their vision was strengthened by the inauguration of the Biennial Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture in 1989 where the themes of African patriarchal culture and religion were discussed.

At an evaluation of the progress in the Pan African Conference in Nairobi in 1996, the social, cultural, political and economic issues that impact negatively on women were identified (Oduyoye 1997:1-6). The Third Pan African Conference in Addis-Ababa Ethiopia, in 2002 addressed in a meaningful way the issues arising from the HIV and AIDS pandemic, and this continued in the Pan African Conference that was held in Yaoundé Cameroon in 2007 which pursued issues of women and health further. These conferences and a growing library of other publications by African Women Theologians are testimony to the fact that women's comprehensive vulnerability, which is caused by their social, cultural, religious, political and economic situation, is a reality that needs to be addressed not only by government and other civil society role players, but also specifically by the Churches of Africa.

The challenging questions are: how are they to be addressed? What strategies have been laid down? Are they appropriate and adequate? Are the strategies used the optimal ones to achieve the objective? Reading through this background with the lenses of theology and development<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>. Theology and Development is a very new discipline, with only a few institutions in Africa seeking to integrate theological reflection and praxis with development theory and practice. In his Guest editorial for *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, Steve De Gruchy the Director of the Programme of Theology and Development in the School of Religion and Theology traces its history and observes that the theme is both "old and new" because while it can be traced from the 1960s, it went underground in the 1970s until recently that it has started picking up again (De Gruchy 2001:1-4) as will be exemplified in the following academic publications: S. De Gruchy, (2001) "Guest Editorial", in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 110 (July), 1-4. This was a special dedicated to Theology and Development. I will present the information for only three issues but the complete volume comprises of eight issues all concerned with Theology and Development; B. Haddad, (2001) "Theologising Development: A gendered analysis of poverty, survival and faith", in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 110 (July),5-19; P. Germond, (2001) "Theology, development and power: Religious power and development practice", in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 110 (July), 21-31; C. Holder-Rich, (2001) "Development as freedom or Freedom as development?: A Christian dialogue with Amartya Sen's Development

as a student and an interested party, the undeniable challenge to address women's vulnerability manifested in the lack of basic social, political and economic necessities is confirmed. To respond to the challenge however, is to first acknowledge the comprehensive vulnerability that leads to experiences of injustices as manifested in oppression and discrimination, lack of adequate health facilities, lack of shelter, water, food, and education. This realisation raises the need to examine the situation of women in the changing perspectives of development and their place and status in the church and society.

As an African woman theologian, I bear the weight of the commitment and vision of the African women theologians to seek for possible ways of ensuring wholeness and human dignity for women. In addition, as an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), I hold dear its threefold mission commitment that seeks to ensure that its members receive physical, mental and spiritual nourishment by ensuring that they conveniently access health facilities, education and the word of God. This commitment is clearly stipulated in article three of the practice and procedure manual of the PCEA thus:

- This church expresses the faith of the Reformed tradition. Central to this tradition is the affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love. Related to this central affirmation of God's sovereignty are other great themes of the reformation such as:
- The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation; covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the word of God; a faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and improper use of the gifts of God's creation
- The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, and the need to call the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the word of God; and the motto *Ecclesia reformanda, semper reformanda* "the church reformed, always being reformed (PCEA Constitution Manual 1998:4)

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as Freedom", in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 110 (July), 89-96. Other eye-catching articles from *Missonalia* are as follows: I. Swart, (2003) "Church Mission and development: Revisiting the pragmatic debate", in *Missonalia* Vol. 31: 3 (November), 405-426; B. Haddad, "Gender, Development, and faith: The Church women's struggle to survive" in *Missonalia* Vol. 31: 3 (November), 427-450; S. De Gruchy, "Theological education and social development: Politics, preferences and praxis in curriculum design" in *Missonalia* Vol. 31: 3 (November), 451-466

This calling is for and about the people (women and men) of God. Yet due to the comprehensive vulnerability of women, caused by deliberate social constructions for selfish gain, women are denied this opportunity to respond to God's calling. That realisation and acknowledgement challenges me to stand firmly for their cause. Taking up the challenge at this point is to undertake this project that endeavours to formulate an enabling framework for the church and the government to work together for the cause of women in the church and society. As will become clear in the final chapters of this thesis, this challenge has led me to propose the emergence of an African Women's *Public* Theology. This emerges from my engagement with issues of women, gender and development, and recognition of how crucial it is for African women theologians to address the public sphere.

### **1.1.2 Women, Gender And Development**

Conscious of the fact that issues of gender are taken with a level of bias, I here articulate my understanding in this particular study. This study emphasizes the social construction of male and female gender roles and how such a construction impacts on men and women in church and society. Out of this, the study intends to highlight the status and place of women in church and society. Furthermore, the study endeavours to formulate a framework that could enable the church and the government to work together towards policies that ensure gender equality, equity and freedom. It is also hoped that such a framework will realize a form of transformation that will focus on social development of the whole society and the whole of humanity (women and men).

Earlier development literature in relation to women and development points to a set of different perspectives including: Women in Development (WID), Women And Development (WAD), Women and Environment and alternatives to Development (WED) and Gender And Development (GAD) (Visvanathan, Nisonof, and Wirgersma, 1997; Claridge, Frank and Mott 1999)<sup>3</sup>. A review of the literature shows that development has had a huge impact on women, which has largely been negative. Many authors have made links between gender, empowerment, development and women. They have tried to look for strategies for the

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<sup>3</sup> These perspectives will be discussed fully in chapter three.



successful development realisation of women's full potential. Women, however, remain the most vulnerable group in society. This vulnerability is manifested in the empirical experiences typified by the feminisation of poverty, inequality, discrimination, exploitation and oppression (Olufemi, 2000; Csete, Takirambudde, Jefferson and Saunders 2003; Epstein and Takirambudde 2002).

Typical of the WID approach is Ester Boserup. She provided evidence of Third World women's marginalization and our lack of access to technology and resources (Boserup 1970, 1986). She presented evidence of differences in work conditions between the sexes in countries that are in the process of economic development. Boserup's work became the impetus behind the enormous volume of work on women within development. Since the 1970s when the first work of Boserup was published, significant ideologies and theories have emerged.

Globally, and in most settings, women have fewer opportunities than men to gain education, to be involved in policy and decision-making or to become economically self-sufficient. This has resulted in poverty and illiteracy. It is argued that poverty and illiteracy among women results from discrimination in inheritance and land ownership, employment and development policies, resource allocation and the traditional division of labour (Getui and Theuri 2001). The negative impact of development on women has resulted in a search for alternatives, especially in Third World Countries (Dankelman and Davidson 1994; Sen and Grown 1987) and the approaches to women within development have changed towards empowerment within a perspective (Gender And Development)(GAD) perspective. Consistent with the above concern, the literature indicates that the number of women in the major decision making, and bilateral and multilateral development agencies is small compared to that of men (Claridge *et al* 1999:9).

This thesis will move a step further to investigate how policy and law making would be the most adequate alternative for ensuring justice for all in the society as a strategy of promoting humanisation. The expansion of the quality of life articulated in Nussbaum and Clover (1995) encourages critical thought about the central, fundamental concepts used in development

economics and other disciplines and suggests major criticisms of contemporary religio-cultural and socio-economic approaches. In the light of this, this study investigates the contextual social, cultural, political, religious and economic aspects that continue to sustain vulnerability in women and how the same can be eliminated. It is anticipated that this will result in the actualization of gender justice, equality and freedom.

Responding to such concerns from a Kenyan perspective, Nyabera (2002) summarised twelve critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform For Action (PFA). The major objective of this work was a representation of the goals for women's empowerment. It was designed to facilitate the conference on "Nairobi Forward Looking For the Advancement of Women (NFLAW) and removing all the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and adequate share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making" (Nyabera 2002:9). The PFA restated conventions and declarations made in relation to women and girls and sought to uphold the complete realization of all human rights and the fundamental freedoms of all women throughout their lives.

However Nyabera went on to observe that after Beijing a number of all encompassing global issues had taken place that have had a huge implication for women's lives. These include the end of the cold war which resulted in localized armed conflicts; globalization that led to the feminization of poverty among other effects; the strength of civil society which has encouraged the role of advocacy to ensure the protection of women; women's entry into the labour market; the HIV and AIDS pandemic and the growth of a young population calling for a focus on the rights of girl children.

Among the twelve areas of concern in the PFA she implies that little has changed as far as women's experiences are concerned while one cannot deny the fact that after Beijing an impact in a positive direction has taken place in the Kenyan community (Nyabera 2002:10). The argument, therefore, is that for the full emancipation of women in Kenya something more significant and long-lasting in terms of law and policy must be done. To understand this, we need to have a good overview of women's experiences in Kenya.

### 1.1.3 Women's Experiences In Kenya: Society and Church

Kenyan women, like other women in Third World countries and especially in Africa, continue to suffer the consequences of comprehensive vulnerability, despite the persistent effort to emancipate them. Research provides evidence that “women constitute over fifty percent of Kenya’s population but the majority of them are illiterate and poor” (Mucui-Kattambo, Kabeberi-Macharia, Kameri-Mbote, 1995:1; FIDA-Kenya 2001:25); their experiences are characterized by inequalities between women and men, discrimination, sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence, low levels of education and cultural oppression.

The poor representation of women in politics and in decision-making and policy-making bodies is key in keeping women in the predicament of vulnerability. While present legislation in Kenya was drawn up for and said to cater for all, much must yet be done for those intentions to be realised, especially in the area of legal issues affecting women (Kameri-Mbote, 2000; Gathumbi 2002). The challenging questions centers on why this is so, and what women theologians and church leaders are doing about it. Civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have arranged forums for women such as the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), the Forum for African Women Educators (FAWE) and the Coalition On Violence Against Women (COVAW). Others have made immeasurable efforts to emancipate women. Yet the patriarchal social system remains extremely influential in shaping the life and polity of the Kenyan community and shaping and determining the status and place of women in the church and society (Kameri-Mbote 2000; FIDA-Kenya 2001; COVAW 2002).

The same can be seen in the religious sector, with a few notable exceptions. The traditional teaching of missionary initiated churches in relation to the roles of women was subjugating. It propagated the notion that women’s important role was in the domestic and not in the public domain (Njoroge 2000:58-102; Okemwa 2003; James 2003)<sup>4</sup>. A hundred years after the

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<sup>4</sup> The references herein illustrate how missionary initiated church oriented women to a type of Christian standard that exposes them to subjugation and subordination. P. Okemwa (2003) “Impact of Adventist schooling on the status of women in Kenya”. In G. Wamue and M.M. Theuri (2003) (eds), *Quest for integrity in Africa*. Nairobi: Acton; R. M. James (2003) “Women’s participation in church-based organization” in G. Wamue and M.M. Theuri (2003) (eds.) *Quest for integrity in Africa*. Nairobi: Acton; J. N. Njoroge (2000) *Kiama Kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of resistance and transformation*. Ghana: LTSS.

missionary teaching of what women are supposed to be and to do, little has changed especially in the mainline denominations. Missionary teaching used suggestive biblical passages to domesticate women's minds. It has been clearly noted by Oduyoye (1995) and Phiri (1997) that the Christian teaching of the missionaries times, which was patriarchal, collaborated with patriarchal African culture to oppress women. This aspect will be discussed further in chapter three. The African church, which is highly patriarchal, has continued to use the same strategy to ensure control of women in the church. Even after this has been pointed out by women and some men who are concerned about the human dignity of all (women and men), the same trend has continued to be propagated in the church of today (James 1996; 2003:111-115) as illustrated in the words of James:

Those women who became Christians were taught how to make tea, gardening, cleaning and nursing the children of the whites as *ayahs*. This domesticating education was expanded in the church as cleaning the church building, making tea, arranging flowers and other care services. Until now, most women see their role in the church as such (James 2003:110-111; see also Kobia 2003:115-129).

Surprisingly, in most of the mainline denominations, like the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, where women's role in social development is immeasurable (for example, they own one of the most spectacular guest house in country, the Woman's Guild Ecumenical Conference and Training Centre (WOGECT) in Mombasa, and support other outstanding projects like schools and clinics), this has done nothing much to change men's attitude to women. This highlights a pathetic situation because it is rightly said that Christians account for over 75% of the Kenyan population, and women account for over 50% of the population and are the majority in the church. Therefore as the church and society are called to action, women must respond in their various capacities to oppose the decisions made for and about them that cause vulnerability, by being assertive to what they believe is life enhancing. This will then transform women's place and status in social development.

#### **1.1.4. The Church in Kenya responding to the challenge.**

Many who have articulated the role of the church in Kenya have perceived the church in ways that I acknowledge thus: the church as an enabler, a defensive wall against authoritarianism

(bulwark) serving the community, a teaching community, and an exemplary community.<sup>5</sup> In this situation the church bears the challenge to witness to the society in which she exists, to formulate appropriate ways and forms of communicating the Gospel, to articulate how God's people experience internal and external forces that determine their humanity. As central to the church mission of being a witnessing community, the church must be ready to be tested by the Gospel she proclaims (Kobia 1989; 2003). The church has to respond to God's calling and do God's work, making clear who God is, illustrating how God is involved in our daily struggles.

One very important aspect is that church and church leaders clearly understand the mandate of the church in realising the dignity and integrity of humanity. Gichia (1989) challenges Christian leaders and the church to take seriously their prophetic role as the conscience of society quoting the challenge posed by the first president of Kenya thus:

One of the services you give to others is to help keep them going in the right direction. We have many distractions and can wander off the path. We do need to be constantly put back on it again. Then too, most of us are not theologians, and in the complexities of modern life, we may not even know we are going astray, that we are making the wrong decision. That is why we need the church in our midst to tell us when we are making a mistake. The church is the conscience of society and today society needs conscience. Do not be afraid to speak. If we go wrong and you keep quiet, one day you may have to answer for our mistake (Jomo Kenyatta in Gichia 1989:100).

Slowly, the church has made an effort to engage with this challenge. Key here has been the ecumenical organization, the National Council of Churches in Kenya (NCCCK) which is an umbrella body under which the Protestant churches come together in unity and which renders services to the community in word and deed. The history of the NCCCK goes back to 1918 when several missionary societies formed the Alliance of Missions as a forum for Christian

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<sup>5</sup> S. Kobia, (1989) "NCCCK as enabler for church mission" in J.N. K. Mugambi, *Christian Mission And Transformation: A Kenyan Perspective*. Nairobi: NCCCK, 9-25; G. Githiga, 2001. *The Church As The Bulwark Against Authoritarianism: Development Of Church- State Relations In Kenya, With Particular Reference To The Year After Political Independence 1963-1992*. New Delhi: Regnum; J. Njenga (1989) "The church as a serving community" in J. N. K. Mugambi, (1989) *Christian Mission And Transformation: A Kenyan Perspective*. Nairobi: NCCCK 26-32; Z. Nthamburi, 1989. "The integrity of the church: the church as an exemplary community" in J.N.K. Mugambi, (1989) *Christian Mission And Transformation: A Kenyan Perspective*. Nairobi: NCCCK 74-78; W.D.Waruta, 1989. "The church as a teaching community: Special reference to the church in Africa" in Mugambi J N K, 1989. *Christian Mission And Transformation: A Kenyan Perspective*. Nairobi: NCCCK 79-93; G.P. Ngumi, 1998. "A critical analysis of the role of the church and the state in civic education and social – political development in Kenya between 1985-1995" Unpublished PhD Thesis submitted to the school of theology at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg

cooperation in service and witness to the Church (Kobia 1989:9, 2003:115-129). Over the years the NCKK has shown devotion in leading interventions geared towards recuperating the welfare of Kenyans broadly, and that of marginalized groups specifically. The initial activities of the NCKK that focused on women date back to the 1950s when the council of social workers identified destitute women and tried to offer them survival skills. In 1960 the council established the Family Life Education Programme (FLEP) where family life matters related to women were identified and attended to. In the 1970s the Urban Community Improvement Programme (UCIP) was started which focused on the issues of maternal health and child survival, and in the 1980s the Women And Children In Distress (WACID) project was started.

A women's desk was established in 1986, which became a women's programme in 1993. The main aim of the NCKK was to facilitate and enable women to have equal participation in church and society. The following were their guidelines:

- To extend women's awareness of their potential through participating in training.
- To promote, support and train churchwomen groups in a holistic approach towards development.
- To communicate the present situation of women, including their accomplishments, their struggles, their hopes and their concerns to the churches and to the general public.
- To create common links and networking between and among women and women groups for the sharing of ideas and experiences.
- To advocate on behalf of women to the church, government and the general public (Makau and Musyoni 2002:12).

Worth noting is the fact that during the World Council of Churches (WCC) decade of Churches in solidarity with women, 1988-1998, the NCKK embraced the aims and the goals which included provision of a time for churches to examine their structure, practices and teachings with a commitment to full participation of women (Musyimi 2002:8; Makau and Musyoni (2002:12). As a result of pressure, a number of denominations have women in active leadership positions.

At this point in time when Kenyans are revising the constitution, the church's insight and conviction guided by Christian ethics and moral discourse are crucial. Githiga (2001) articulates Kenya's political history giving illustrations with incidents where the church acted

as the defense wall for its members and the society as a whole against the state's authoritarianism. Worth noting is that, much as Kenya is a secular state and religious pluralism is a fact, the role of the church in shaping policy, constitution and law is crucial. The church and her role in the society must not be underestimated. For instance, articulating the role of the NCCCK as an enabling agent of the church in Kenya, Samuel Kobia, a Kenyan who is also the former General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, states:

With such a facility, we intend to challenge the member churches to renew their biblical concern for society, seeking to balance their development efforts by paying sufficient attention to both faith and practice and being prepared to participate in debates and activities related to the changes needed in the economic, political, social and cultural structures of the nation (Kobia 1989:20-21; see also Kobia 2003).

In his *The Courage To Hope* (2003) Samuel Kobia emphasizes the need for the church to take seriously her involvement and the ethical responsibility in the process. In general, the churches in Kenya have had a great impact by establishing schools, hospitals, and training institutions, not to mention a whole range of other empowering projects. The question however, is the extent to which the NCCCK and the member churches have had an impact on the lives of women and girls who are the most vulnerable of the marginalized groups in Kenya. On this issue Kobia (2003), states that the effort of the ecumenical institutions is questionable and calls on such institutions to join women in the struggle for the liberation of female human beings. This is echoed by Philomena Mwara with specific reference to Kenya, in a quote that helps frame the context in which this is written:

...Kenyan women, like most women in the world, continue to struggle for political, social economic and spiritual empowerment. Attempts to have their concerns addressed have found some support in the church and society but generally they have been dismissed as the yearnings of elite, Western - oriented women who want to dominate the society...women from diverse cultural contexts are seeking to define their own destiny, actualize their human potential and contribute to the life of the church and nation (Mwaura 1998:28).

It is clear then that the major question for theology concerning women and girl children in Kenya today is how the church can ensure justice, equality and freedom. Evidently the church

can do this in various ways: (i) through protest and challenge, or the prophetic ministry; (ii) through charity and service or *diakonia*; (iii) through its internal witness, or being the light and the salt of the earth; (iv) through individuals in leadership in governments or NGOs or (v) through influences on policy, constitution and law making.

While the church can engage society in the different ways outlined above, this study is particularly concerned with the fifth, namely *policy, constitution and law making*. Such a process begins with identifying the causes of the comprehensive vulnerability, investigating and analyzing the resultant experiences, exploring the available resources and stakeholders for dealing with it, and the use of well defined and justified analytical tools. The challenge of arriving at and proposing a theoretical framework that the church and the government can use in their engagement to achieve the objective appropriately is undeniable. How possible is it though, for the church, civil society and the government to sit together and draw up national policies, a constitution and laws that would enable women to define their own destiny and actualize their human potential as they fully contribute to social development? This is a crucial research question for my work.

In answering this question, I will be arguing for a focus on human capability development. In my opinion this can lead to a constitution, law and appropriate policies, which ensures justice for all the citizens<sup>6</sup>. Such an approach draws me into the field of public theology.

### **1.1.5 Public Theology, and Social Development**

The discipline of Public Theology is about the link between theology and the public sphere of politics, economics, law making and specifically in this case, social development. In this sense the heart of the discipline concerns the engagement between the two areas, namely, *theology* and *social development*. The key contribution of this thesis will lie in the contextual theological appraisal of specific aspects of human capability development and how this can offer the church, the government and the society a framework through which they can engage in their pursuit for gender justice and quality of life for all, especially for women and girls

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<sup>6</sup> Human Capability Development Approach is discussed fully in chapter five.



who are the most vulnerable of the marginalized groups. It is argued that development theories that emphasise only economic development and aggregate progress tend to ignore specific output and benefits for marginalised groups. Thus interest in the aggregate gross national product, which is focused on financial capital ignores other key development aspects like social, cultural and human development (Kobia 2003:115-129). It is strongly argued here that development that does not take into consideration the whole human being and the wholeness of community is wanting. Therefore development must take seriously issues that relate to integrity, dignity and wholeness, which in this case will be realised through the capability development of each and every person.

In line with this perspective, Nyambura Njoroge in her *Kiama kia ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic* (2000) shows how women's agency through protest action managed to ensure and continues to be a powerful force in ensuring, justice for women and that of girls in society. But it is also clear that social, economic and political structures and institutions do not fully back women to ensure the desired result, namely, holistic development where humanity realises abundant life. As Nyambura argues, women have tried to be their sisters' 'keeper'. It is also evident that the attempts of the church, the government and other organisations, in their individual capacity to devise interventions for women's emancipation, have not completely succeeded, although they have made some remarkable changes.

The focus of the thesis is therefore on how the church can impact on society by entering the public sphere and engaging with the government's policy makers, and its constitution and law to ensure that all are justly taken care of, regardless of gender. To do this, the thesis will pursue (1) a realistic and joint framework for ensuring justice, gender equality and equity, and (2) a theological basis for the church's participation in improving the life of girls and women in Kenya through the elimination of women's vulnerability, ensuring that integrity, dignity and justice for women, along with the wholeness of the community are cherished. It is proposed that the church should contribute to policy and legislation process by giving insights and affirming their convictions guided by Christian ethics and moral discourse.

In entering the public sphere, theology needs to draw on an adequate social theory to analyse and understand the world. This is also crucial in providing a language and vision for engaging role players in the public sphere who are not themselves driven by a commitment to the gospel, or Christian convictions. For reasons that will be advanced in the thesis, the work of Martha Nussbaum, a feminist philosopher and jurist provides us with this theory. We will argue that her Human Capability Approach offers the church and the government the possibility of working together successfully towards ensuring quality life for women and girl children.

Nussbaum's approach focuses on what people are actually able to be and to do (*see the full articulation of the Capabilities Approach in chapter five*). Her approach is grounded on two principles as follows: (1) The principle of each person's capability and (2) the principle of each person as an end. In her approach, Nussbaum focuses on the equality of resources and the capability to take action while insisting on the need for one to make informed choices. It is therefore, in this study held that the capabilities approach can be used in evaluating women's vulnerability.

#### **1.1.6. Conclusion: Toward an African Women's Public Theology**

This section has introduced the major concerns of the thesis, namely how the churches of Kenya can engage the public sphere to defend and enhance the capabilities of women in Kenya. In undertaking this task, the work draws heavily on the insights and victories of African Women's Theology, but it is clear that we are pushing into new territory in search of an African Women's *Public* Theology. The factors pushing for this theology will emerge as the argument of the thesis unfolds, and the nature and characteristics of this theology will be identified in the final chapter.

### **1.2 Motivation**

Having laid out the theoretical framework of the thesis, it is important to disclose the motivation which drives the work, for there is a congruence between the two. The rationale

for this thesis is my deep desire for the empowerment of women, which I believe, can be achieved by co-operation between two institutions – church and state. Firstly, as an African woman minister and a theologian, I have developed a great interest in the issues of women in church and society in general and their marginal participation in social development in particular, and how the two are influenced by women’s comprehensive vulnerability born out of the dominant patriarchal social structures. Though not the major objective, the question of how these patriarchal structures can be transformed will run through the study because it is also strongly held in this study that patriarchy impacts on almost all of what goes in Kenyan society. For the purpose of making the rationale clear, elucidation of my identity is important.

I grew up in a rural African traditional home where I went through all the cultural preparation of being a girl child among the Mbeere people of Kenya. Growing up in a family of ten children, four boys and six girls, I became aware of the difference in attention given to the boy-children and girl-children. This differentiation was never an issue because we were socialised to perceive it as ‘normal’ because our community naturally placed more value on boy children than on girl children<sup>7</sup>.

During our primary school days, the education of a boy child was valued more highly than that of a girl child. Despite attending school, as the boys did, we girls grew to know that it was a requirement that we help our mother with her domestic chores. Therefore on going to school, we each carried a jar so as to bring water from the river on our way back from school. On arriving home we had to help with collecting firewood, and cooking. While I was busy with domestic duties, my elder brother was allowed to concentrate on his homework. I did not complain because it was the routine for all the girl children and justifiable because by evening our mother used to be very tired. Our father worked far away in the city and only came home during his annual leave or for a weekend.

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<sup>7</sup> The Mbeere tribe into which I was born is patriarchal in nature. The *Mwiriga* (clan) which is a composite social group made up of several biologically related people is the social unit that members believe they descended. The *mwiriga* is traced through a patrilineal ancestor. This makes it necessary for every family to have a boy child and that a boy child must be treated with high regard because the future of the clan and subsequently the tribe depended on them, while a girl child is born to be married out in another clan or tribe. This also applies to the Chuka, Mwimbi, Tharaka and a Muthambi people of Meru South district. See J. A. Fadiman, (1982). *An Oral History of Tribal Warfare: The Meru of Mt. Kenya*. Ohio: Ohio University press; J. Middleton, (1979). *The Central tribes of the North Eastern Bantu*. New York: AMS, see also: <<http://www.kenyaweb.com>>.

When we completed our primary education, and passed our primary examination, another area of differentiation became evident. It was my parents' unchallengeable commitment to ensure that all their children attended high school and tertiary institutions to ensure that we could find employment. The year I passed my primary examination, my two elder sisters were in college and my brother in high school. It was financially difficult for my parents. The only option left for them was to negotiate with a nearby very poor school to take me in place of the school for which I had qualified. The value of this arrangement was that I could walk to and from school when money was scarce and when I was chased from school to go home for school fees, which happened several times during my four years of secondary school. My four years of education at this school were continuously interrupted, but by the grace of God and hard work I qualified for Advanced level, which was least expected. After this, I joined a theological institute where gender differentiation was even more conspicuous.

Theological education in Kenya as in many other countries was (and still is) perceived as a male occupation. Research shows that the ratios of men to women in theological education in Kenya cannot be compared (James 1996:70-73, 2003:111-119). James goes on to observe that apart from the lower education levels of women in Kenya and their lack of adequate qualification, the selection panels that are male oriented and discriminate against women. However, in response to God's calling to the ministry, I joined St. Paul's United Theological College after completing my advanced level at high school. The process of selection and interviewing was biased. For instance, I finished the interviewing process and qualified for joining the college but I was kept out for a year. Other students who were interviewed with me joined the college in September 1989 but I only joined them in September 1990 which in my observation was all about discrimination.

Differentiation between men and women in the theological college I attended was more pronounced than what I had experienced at home because theological education was perceived as a male occupation. Unlike the men's, the women students' lifestyle was closely monitored and scrutinised. One of the many nasty incidents was when our denominational (Presbyterian) representative confronted me because some other students had informed him that I was dating

an Anglican man. The argument was that the church was not ready to train women and then lose them to other denominations. This was consistent with the traditional cultures that saw women as property and meant that families were not ready to invest in them because they would marry into another family. The men colleagues had no boundaries; they dated and married whomever they chose. I strongly resisted this, although I later chose to marry a Presbyterian.

I thought my choice would be met with approval by the church, but it was not. My husband was not an elder or ordained minister. It was demanded that my husband be ordained as a church elder. The problem was not that he was a layman but that they feared I would disclose to him confidential church information. He had to be ordained so that he could be one among the elders of the church. My husband and I were opposed to the idea, which caused another battle because women are expected to take the option offered to them without question. If they dare to question, they are labeled 'bad' and the incident is used as a precedent to bar other women from selection for theological training (James 2003:119).

While in the midst of that battle, I attended the Pan African Conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians that was held in Nairobi in 1996. Their theme was 'transforming power in the household of God' (Oduyoye 1997). The meeting was opened with a skit depicting the struggles of mothers and girl children in the Kenyan rural homes (Wamue 1996:28-33). This skit forced me to go down memory lane and kept me alert for the whole week, keen to grasp and digest all that was presented and discussed; despite having to contend with the needs of my six-month old baby that I had gone with to the conference. The one-week conference rang a very loud wake up bell and for some time I sat back to reflect seriously on what gender bias does to women. It was a week of revelation as to what silence and passivity on social, cultural, religious, political and economic issues had done to keep women in the grasp of oppression. Throughout my previous education I had never been equipped with tools which could enable me to analyse the church and society in which I had lived. I was ignorant of how I was being exploited. After that conference experience, I understood that I needed to further my studies if I was going to make any impact on my own life and that of my sisters/fellow women. Two years later I had the opportunity to enroll in the

then School of Theology at the University of Natal. The long awaited opportunity had come. I am still on the go convinced that at the right time I will reach my goal. This thesis is an important mile stone on the journey.

The driving force at the time was the challenge to identify an area that would enable me to research issues of empowerment of women in their roles in the church and society. This led me to carry out my earlier research, first in a BTh (Honours) project (Muriithi 1999). My interest this time was the role of grassroots rural women in the church. Later, in a M.A programme, (Muriithi 2000), I delved into the issue of women in church leadership. My earlier research revealed that there was more to be researched and studied on the status and place of women in the church and society, making it necessary for me to engage in the current study.

In the preliminary stages, the study of Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Clover *women, culture and development: a study of human capabilities* (1995) alerted me to the fact that while women are the majority of the world's population, they receive only a small proportion of its opportunities and benefits. Nussbaum in her article, (1995) "Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings" challenged me to consider individual capability development and the extent to which capability development influenced the human functioning of girls and women in Africa and specifically in Kenya.

Critical analysis of my background as a girl and young woman and studies around this area led me into a deep awareness of women's comprehensive vulnerability, and the subjugation of their values and aspiration by patriarchal social structures, which dictate their role. Their individual competence can only be revealed or realised when they have access to opportunities, which will only be provided when their full humanity is recognised. This is key to what women are and who they can be or do. Accordingly, while development involves a wide range of issues, I am of the opinion that human capability development is key to empowerment and consequently to the elimination of women's comprehensive vulnerability, which I argue, is the cause of gross injustices experienced by women. This capability

development needs to be firmly established in law and policy if it is going to be strong enough to withstand the forces that reproduce women's comprehensive vulnerability.

### **1.3 Methodology**

A thesis of this nature must necessarily involve a combination of methodological approaches using a wide range of analytical tools and concepts from various fields such as work in gender and development, feminist studies, African women's theology, theology and development and social analysis. I explicitly work within the feminist research paradigm and employ feminist research methods and social analysis.

Central to feminist research is the principle that feminism is a perspective rather than a methodology, which enables the use of many innovative methods of inquiry and reaches across disciplinary boundaries (Sarantakos 1998, Reinharz 1992). My study does this in general and its particular contribution to feminism scholarship and its focus is theology and development. According to Reinharz and Sarantakos feminist research "is described as being contextual, inclusive, experiential, involved, socially relevant multi-methodological, complex but not necessarily replicable, open to the environment and inclusive of emotions and events as experienced" (Sarantakos 1998:63). Sarantakos outlines the characteristics of feminist research as follows:

- It puts gender at the center of inquiry: making women visible and representing women's perspective as a major part of feminist critical research.
- It places emphasis on women's experiences, which are considered as a significant indicator of reality and offer more validity than does other methods; in wider context feminist research seems to involve the development of women's roles and by reconstructing it in terms of women's rather than men's concerns; or by writing the history of women's realms.
- It discloses distortions related to such experiences.
- It sees gender as the nucleus of women's perceptions and lives, shaping of consciousness, skills institutions and distribution of power and privilege.
- It is preoccupied with social constructions of 'knowing and being known'.
- It is politically value laden and critical, and as such it is not methodic, but clearly dialectical. This implies that it is an imaginative and creative process, which engages oppressive social structures.
- It is not solely about women but primarily for women, taking up an emancipation stance; it entails an anti-positivistic orientation.

- It is supposed to use multiple methodologies and paradigms (Sarantakos 1998:63).

My study revolves around the contention that women in Kenya experience comprehensive vulnerability, and I take an advocacy stance in calling upon the church and government forums concerned with policy making, constitution and law making to engage in making policies that are women friendly and that would result in ensuring equal opportunities for all in the country. To accomplish this different methodologies and analytical tools are applied.

Firstly, participatory research methodology is consciously employed. Quoting Huizer, Philpott (1993) acknowledges the proposed requirements of participatory research where the researcher takes the role of an activist-researcher. Huizer's requirements placed upon the activist-researcher are articulated as follows:

- 1) Required is an awareness of one's own limitation, a sense of insecurity and one's relative ignorance (compared to the local people involved)...
- 2) Accepting one's relative ignorance, one tries to learn from the people concerned through empathy and friendship what their problems and needs and feelings are...
- 3) After acquiring the knowledge and understanding of the local problems further dialogue with the local people, particularly through discussions in small groups, searching together for possible solutions is taken (Huizer in Philpott 1993:19).

To Philpott (1993) an activist researcher is one who facilitates the research by being actively involved in the research process, identifies major themes present in the discussions and resultant action. Participatory research is one in which the community participates in the analysis of their own reality in order to promote a social transformation for the benefit of the participants who are oppressed (Philpott 1993:21-22). In this way participatory research applies because as stated by Hammond,

Participatory research is an educational tool to help oppressed people gain awareness of their situation through collective investigation and collective analysis and to plan to change these situations through collective action. The researcher in this process is an equal participant in the group, who assists others to reflect critically and to work together more productively than might otherwise have been possible (Hammond in Philpott 1993:22).

Philpott (1993) outlines the characteristics of participatory research, some of which apply in this current study as follows:



- The ultimate goal is fundamental structural transformation
- Its focus is on work with the oppressed groups
- A central role is strengthening the awareness in people of their own abilities and resources, and supporting the mobilization and organizing of the oppressed
- Those with specialized knowledge or training often come from outside the community, but they are committed participants and learners in the process that leads to involvement rather than detachment.
- There is greater use of qualitative rather than quantitative methods of research
- The 'researcher' and 'researched' work as equal partners. The question of power is an important aspect, moving away from a top-down to horizontal power relations
- Accountability is to both the 'scientific' community and the 'grassroots' community

As discussed above the research takes a participatory paradigm where various methods including observation, participation, interviewing, questionnaires, focus group discussions and informal discussions are used. These methodologies used have strengths and weaknesses; therefore they cannot be applied uncritically without creating loopholes. For that reason I shall briefly discuss them and also mention the place of the researcher as presented, which would also raise questions about objectivity. Aware of such problematic situations, I used them as advantage points. For instance, the fact that I was born in this area and have worked as church minister raises a situation of power relation where the researcher would have power over the researched. I used this situation carefully first by identifying with the women as one of them (*a woman*) and secondly as their daughter/sister. This helped me develop friendship and closeness instead of distance with them.

In-depth interviews by use of an unstructured questionnaire were used.<sup>8</sup> The questionnaire included personal information such as name, age range, marital status, education attainment, occupation, and the division from which the individual comes. I was the sole interviewer and facilitator during the group discussions. All those interviewed gave their consent. Furthermore, I used a notebook, a camera and a tape recorder. In all the instances, I informed the interviewees that there was use of the above mentioned apparatus and they had freedom to allow the researcher to use them or not to. In most cases the interviewees did not have problems with the use of the apparatus. Some declined from giving their personal details but opted for casual discussions that were highly encouraged.

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<sup>8</sup> See the sample questionnaire in the appendix.1

Focus group discussions were a significant tool because they involved persons especially selected because of their particular interest, expertise or position in their communities. (i.e. stratified purposive sampling was used). This was in an attempt to collect information on as many issues as possible that influenced the experiences of women as well as brainstorming solutions that would ultimately facilitate the basis for possible policy construction. Focus group discussions mainly aim at analysing the group, to gain knowledge in a short time or variations of opinions and to establish a mechanism of opinion formation (Sarantakos 1998, Blanche and Durrheim 1999). Awareness of some of the shortcomings of group discussion such as the possibility of digression; the possibility of members feeling intimidated and being unable to discuss freely, and the fact that some members can become domineering, I chose to be the sole facilitator and always observed the required discipline. In this situation, I would guide the group to the major issue to be discussed taking the role of a facilitator. Both the group and I then learn from each other's experience. In this kind of research, participants feel valued, which guarantees ownership in cases where recommendations are to be implemented, which this research intends to achieve eventually.

In the focus group discussion, I brought together groups of women through key informants who arranged with them a convenient time and place for themselves. I took the role of a facilitator and presented and introduced the issues to be discussed by the group. I allowed the people to discuss and articulate their views and opinions freely. The groups were encouraged to put forward what they thought were major issues for them in relation to the issues raised. Finally they brainstormed on what they thought were the appropriate solutions and the action they thought should be taken.

To conduct this research, literary material, a pilot survey of the area of research and oral interviews were used. Attendance and participation in the Pan African Conferences of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians held in Nairobi, Kenya in August 25-30, 1996 under the theme of *Transforming power: Women in the household of God* (Oduyoye 1997) and the one held in Addis-Ababa, Ethiopia in August 2-9, 2002 under the theme of *"Sexuality, Stigmatisation And HIV and AIDS"* (Phiri, I.A Govinden, D.B & Nadar, S 2002)

also provided useful resource material. Out of the presentations and publications of the Circle conferences and my involvement in the Kenyatta, Limuru, NEGST and Pietermaritzburg chapters of the circle informed my conceptualisation of women's comprehensive vulnerability in Africa and in particular Kenya where my research is based.

During the preparation for my research I visited my area of research (Meru South district in Kenya) in December 2001 to January 2002. During this time I managed to procure important documents relating to area of research including the maps used for the purpose of geographical information on the district. This visit was of particular importance because I was able to prepare for the fieldwork that took place in January-March 2003. The acquired knowledge is informed and enriched by my background of being one among these people and the fact that I have served in the area before my engagement in the study.

Oral interviews were conducted among the women in Meru South district by use of data collection methodologies and techniques discussed above.

Literature survey included reading books from different disciplines including history, politics, law, development, gender studies, agriculture, theology and religion.

#### **1.4 Structure Of The Study**

Having laid out the theoretical background, motivation and research approach in this thesis in this first chapter, I am now in a position to provide a short overview of the rest of the thesis.

*Chapter two* presents the socio-cultural and socio-economic status of Ameru<sup>9</sup> women. The chapter contains the fieldwork findings and analysis. It provides a reflection of how vulnerable women are. It reveals that one cannot understand Ameru women fully without a prior understanding of their place and status in traditional society. It is argued that an understanding of the background will enable the assessment of the causes of vulnerability. It

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<sup>9</sup> Ameru stands for the Meru peoples while Meru stands for the tribe or the community itself. This can be compared with the usage of Agikuyu-peoples or the Gikuyu, the tribe or the community. The two terms will be frequently used interchangeably

also argues that the place and status of a Meru woman can best be examined by looking at the structures of Meru traditional society including its socio-economic and political institutions. The articulation of the roles of boys and girls, and men and women, brings, further understanding about the Ameru and gender relations, which enables us to grasp, the criterion for the forward move to develop criteria for gender justice and freedom.

The overview provides indicators on what influences and shapes a woman's life in the church and society in Meru South district today. It also forms the background to the understanding of women's voices as they express their vulnerability and the extensive experiences of injustices in Meru South district, which are used for analysing women's experiences in Kenya generally. The stories are written as women narrated them during the research with a few changes to protect the anonymity of the women<sup>10</sup>. In this chapter, a photographic essay is presented. This section of the chapter gives us a whole section of photographs of women in different activities that characterize their daily activities and a brief comment which are very revealing. This is an unusual aspect of an academic thesis, but is a valuable way for foregrounding the real life experiences of African women.

*Chapter three* explores the conceptualisation of women's vulnerability. It examines the appropriate concepts and their interrelationships in engendering social justice. In doing this, a contextual theory is developed for analysis, which takes seriously socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political aspects that influence social justice and freedom.

The conceptual framework illustrates the interrelationship between causes of vulnerability and the experiences of injustices. The framework also illustrates how the church and secular structures and institutions concerned with policies and policymaking can work together in addressing both the causes and the experiences that negatively impact on women. The framework illustrates how such an engagement would ensure women's capability development as a process of achieving women's empowerment in the church and the civil society. Such empowerment, as it is argued in this study, would result in justice gender equity

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<sup>10</sup> Interviews were carried out in vernacular and the interviewer/ researcher translated them into English.

and freedom, which would improve women's quality of life and their human dignity and integrity.

*Chapter four* articulates how the church can potentially shape public policy, constitution and law making. It examines the church's theological responsibility and role in ensuring justice, equity, equality and freedom for all people in society. It examines the ways in which the church's contribution, insight and conviction can find their way into the forums concerned with shaping public policy, the constitution and law making. It also explores the possibilities of the church's engagement with the government and society in improving the life of women through law and the constitution.

In carrying out this task, an analysis of three public theologians (Duncan Forrester, Jesse Mugambi and Charles Villa-Vicencio) in dialogue with African Women's Theology is done. The three Public theologians provide a model of doing public theology while African Women's Theology is considered as the springboard from which African Women's Public Theology emerges. While the three theological perspectives under consideration have different emphases, the intention of the current study is to identify the possibility of transformative potential that leads to achieving or ensuring quality life for all through policy, constitution and law making and realization of theological paradigm capable of dealing with women's vulnerability.

The main aim of the chapter therefore is to explore the possible role of theology in public policy, in the constitution and law making, and the establishment of a theological paradigm that is capable of eradicating women's vulnerability.

Engaging in public theology, and dealing with the public sphere requires an adequate public social theory. In undertaking this, *chapter five* is dedicated to Martha Nussbaum's Human Capabilities Approach. In doing this an overview of Nussbaum, C M. (2000) *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* is carried out. The review shows how Nussbaum articulates the issue of women's vulnerability in relation to the factors that

contribute to it. It outlines how Nussbaum engages global feminism and third world women's experiences. The chapter argues for the theological significance of her proposal.

*Chapter six* presents the identified theological paradigm for adequate theologising in the particular direction proposed by the study namely *African Women's Public Theology*. This trend does not suggest a drift from African Women's Theology but a development that strengthens the discipline. While the major source of analysis for theologising for African Women are African culture and the Bible, the African Women's Public Theology consciously engages and interacts with social, cultural, religious, economic and political environment and influences human life and community in a more holistic manner. It therefore it ensures wholeness of community, which seeks to realise social justice for all. The chapter suggests seven key elements that characterize African Women's Theology.

*Chapter seven* forms the summary, recommendations and conclusion of the whole thesis.

## CHAPTER TWO

### WOMEN'S VOICES ON EXPERIENCES OF VULNERABILITY AND INJUSTICE

#### 2.0 Introduction

This chapter is devoted to the voices of women of Meru South District as they express their vulnerability and their extensive experiences of injustice. While I have gathered the stories into a range of coherent themes, the experiences will be written as the women narrated them to me during the field research. The experiences of gender inequality, discrimination and oppression against women and girls that the chapter demonstrates makes it necessary for one to pursue ways and means of achieving gender justice in order to realize justice, equity and freedom for all.

The articulations in this chapter are explicit that in the midst of comprehensive vulnerability, women have their own creative ways to survive. The chapter shows that majority of them form community or faith based groups so that they can work their way out as a group. Others turn to small scale businesses for their livelihood. Women have therefore have tried to make life in the same oppressive structures which this thesis is trying to find ways of transformation.

To locate these stories in their context, however, we need first to take a brief look at the historical, geographical and cultural background of Meru South District.

#### 2.1 Background Of Meru South District

In this section, the chapter deals with description of Meru South District. Firstly, the position, size and climate of the district are presented. Topography, climate and drainage, agro-ecological zones and recourses are also presented. This bit of information presents to us a clear picture of whom we are talking about, the environment and the resources available.

Secondly, the section presents to us the social political organization of the district in review including the presentation of the family, the clan and the age set, social economic setting, gender roles and the changing environment. This clearly presents to us how women and men grow and how they are socialized. This background informs us about the place and status of women and men in this particular society.

### 2.1.1 Position, Size And People

Kenya is a beautiful country. As a symbol of national unity, Kenyans have embraced the spirit of togetherness and the motivation to such unity is built on the concept of *Harambee*<sup>11</sup>. Different communities expressed the catchphrase “*Harambee*” differently as a motivation to work together before independence for national development. The founding president of Kenya, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, correlated the hard work that workers faced with the task a head and encouraged Kenyans to uplift that spirit in this new direction (Githiga 2001:44-45, 132-133). In the spirit of *Harambee*, Kenyans have achieved considerable development in projects like schools, hospitals, and education of individual persons who would have otherwise not have made it due to lack or shortage of financial capital<sup>12</sup>. This concept is widely understood as a mutual assistance through joining efforts and the community with a commitment to social responsibility and community self-reliance.<sup>13</sup>

Kenya has very beautiful physical features, including the Great Rift Valley, its chains of salt-water lakes like Lake Turkana, Lake Bogoria, and Lake Nakuru, and it shares Lake Victoria, which is the largest inland fresh-water lake in the world. Kenya is famous for her wildlife and numerous varieties of birds and beautiful landscape shaped by volcanic activity. Among the

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<sup>11</sup> The concept of *Harambee* became popular during period the founding president of Kenya Mzee Jomo Kenyatta. This concept shapes the country’s social, political and economic development of Kenya (Arap Moi 1986:19; G.Githiga (2001). *The church as the bulwark against authoritarianism: Development of church-state relations in Kenya, with particular reference to the years after political independence 1963-1992*. Oxford: Regnum; Kenyaweb.com (2001). Unlock your potential: Kenyan history.

<sup>12</sup> The current researcher has a personal witness of how ‘*harambee*’ works. She recalls: I am a witness to this kind of community effort because when I was in form three, it was difficult for my parent to raise the fees for three children and for me to get fees that year. The community had to pull together their resources and I was able to go back to school.

<sup>13</sup> This was written before the recent civil conflict and violence following the election in December 2008, which has clearly shaken a naïve belief in *Harambee*. Nevertheless it remains a solid cultural foundation from which efforts at reconciliation and justice will draw in the future.



East African countries, Kenya has by and large enjoyed peace and stability while surrounded by countries that have suffered political instability, such as Somalia, Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Rwanda. On the same footing Kenya has taken a major role in facilitating peace in the region, for instance in the case of Somalia and Sudan. Patricia Kameri-Mbote, a professor of law, founder of International Environmental Law Research Centre (IELRC) and the current Director for Africa is one example of what Kenya is offering the region (Kameri-Mbote 2004, 2005). Recent events have shaken this Kenyan experience, but nevertheless the violence and conflict did not slide into prolonged violence or war as in surrounding countries.

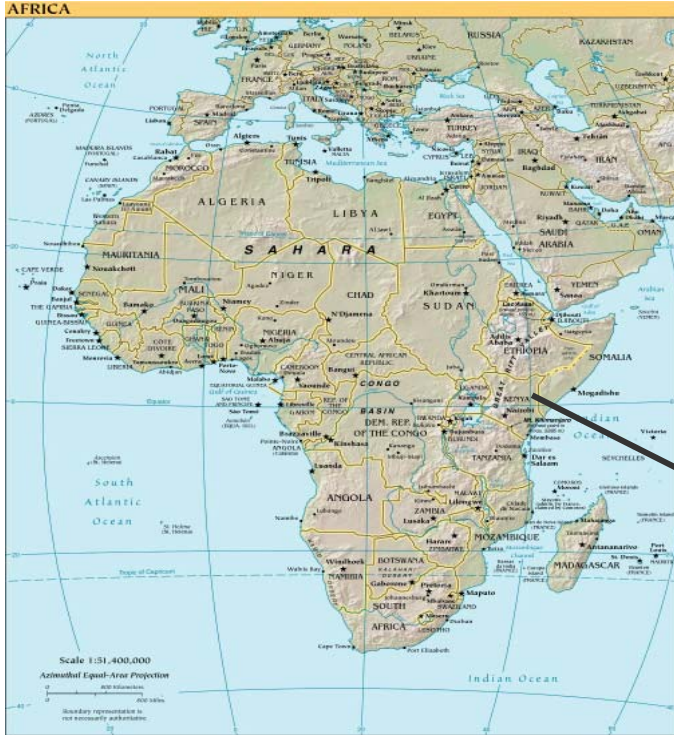
Kenya is divided into eight provinces and numerous districts, which are further subdivided into divisions and locations for administration purposes. These administrative divisions are ethnically oriented. One of the people groups in Kenya are the Meru.

The Meru people are a section of the Bantus of Kenya. The Bantus of Kenya include the Kikuyu, Embu, Kamba, Kisii, Luhgia, Mbeere, Meru, Mijikenda, Pokomo, Taita, Taveta and Tharaka. Socially, the Kenyan Bantu communities are predominantly patriarchal. From the colonial times until the multi-party era of the 1990s, the Meru district included all the Ameru sub-tribes, namely, Igembe, Tigania, Imenti, Miutini, Igoji, Tharaka, Mwimbi, Muthambi, and Chuka (Fadimann 1982:2; Middleton 1979:11, 40). Recently the original Meru district of the Eastern province has been sub-divided into four districts namely Meru North District, Meru Central District, Meru South District, and Tharaka District (TNDDP 1996:7). The current Meru South District is sub-divided into five divisions namely Igambang'ombe, Magumoni, Chuka, Muthambi, and Mwimbi (see Map 3:2 below), and this research has focused on these five divisions of Meru South District.

Meru South district is one of the seventy-one (71) districts in Kenya and one of the fourteen (14) districts of Eastern province. Meru South District is a section of the old Meru district situated on southeastern slopes of Mt Kenya. It is situated between Latitudes  $00^{\circ} 03' 47''$  North and  $00^{\circ} 27' 28''$  South and between Longitudes  $37^{\circ} 18' 24''$  East and  $28^{\circ} 19' 12''$  West. This district covers an area of 734 Km<sup>2</sup>.

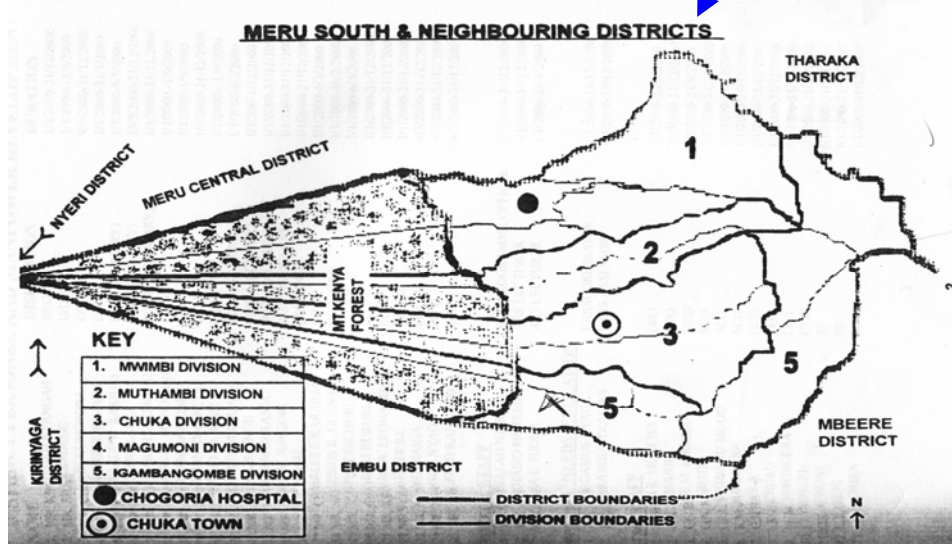
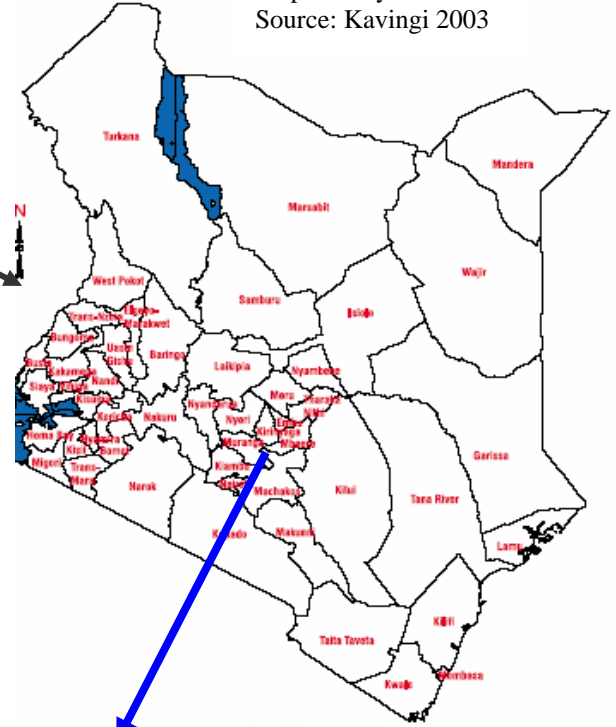
The district planning projection 1997-2001 projected that in 2001 the area covered by Meru South District would be having a population of 259,779. The report indicates that during the planning period, females outnumbered males in age bracket 15-80+ and it was projected that this trend would continue. Males outnumbered females in the age bracket 0-14 which was attributed to the high mortality rate among the girl children (TNNDDP 1996) (see Age/Sex Projections in Appendix 4)

*(1) Map of Africa showing location of Kenya; (2) Map of Kenya showing Meru District; (3) Map of Meru district, location of research.*



Map1: Africa  
Source: Kenyalogy 2005

Map2: Kenya  
Source: Kavingi 2003



Map 3: Research area (Meru south District)

### **2.1.2 Topography Climate And Drainage**

The altitude of Meru South District ranges from 5,200 meters at the peak of Mt Kenya to 300 meters in the dry lowlands. The temperatures range between 14°C - 27°C, and temperatures of 37°C have been recorded in the lowland area. The temperatures are cool, moderate and hot in the highlands, medium and lowland areas respectively. The district receives an annual rainfall ranging between 2000mm in the highlands to 700mm in the lower areas. It experiences wet and dry seasons. From March to May are short rains and October to December is the long rains. In between the two wet seasons there is a dry spell during the months of June to September (TNDDP 1996).

The topography of the district was shaped by the historical volcanic activity of Mt Kenya. As a result numerous rivers cross the district, including Mutonga, Mara Nithi, Tungu, Ruguti, Thuci, all of which drain into the Tana River, which in turn drains into the Indian Ocean. The district has a high agricultural potential because it is well drained. Four of the five divisions (Mwimbi, Muthambi, Chuka and Magumoni) lie in the highlands and medium areas where the soils are characterised by deep red loam soils, are well drained and fertile. The soils in Igambang'ombe division, which is in the lowlands, range from moderately deep, dark reddish brown to dark yellowish brown. It is the only division with low fertility, although it is still considered an arable area (TNDDP 1996: 5, 14-16).

### **2.1.3 Agro-Ecological Zones And Resources**

Given this environment, the economy of the district revolves around small- scale farming in the high potential areas and pastoralism in the lowlands. Ecologically, the district is representative of the variety of Kenya's high, medium and low potential farming areas. Traditional crops are millet, sorghum, cowpeas, pigeon peas, yams, cassava, green grams, sweet potatoes, and bananas. Beans and maize are now commonly grown food crops which have replaced the traditionally common crops including sorghum millet and finger millet. Since the introduction of cash crops, tea and coffee are grown in the high potential areas, and tobacco and cotton in the lowlands (Jaetzoed and Schmidt 1982; 1983;TNDDP 1996). While

the district has a high agricultural potential and it is only two and half-hours from Nairobi, it is remarkably poorly connected by road networks. It was only in the 1980s that the first and only tarmac road was constructed, connecting it to other areas such as Meru and Embu towns. This means that the marketing of agricultural products, which is the main economic activity of the majority rural population, is difficult (TNDDP 1996).

The district has other resources such as water, forest, commercial minerals, and tourists' attractions. As we shall see in greater detail below, the traditional social institutions of the Meru people impact on how men and women benefit from the available natural resources in the district today. For instance, the concepts of land tenure and property ownership inhibit women from benefiting, which continue to be key in agricultural activities and informal sectors (TNDDP 14-19, 31-39).

#### **2.1.4 The Ameru Social Political Organisation**

The Ameru socio-political organization reveals a strong link of communal relations governed by family, clan and age set affiliations. These were and continue to be patrilineal (Fadiman 1982:1-5). The Ameru social cultural set up is determined by strong patriarchal social construction where gender roles are well defined (see Traditional Ameru division of labour by gender in Table 9). These traditional social constructions are still dominant although much is influenced by modernization. This social organisation influences what one is able to do and achieve in normal circumstances. While some aspects such as the division of labour have changed since women have found their way into employed jobs, what is described below is still the dominant structure of Ameru society.

##### **(a) *The Family***

The family is the smallest socio-political unit. Traditionally this unit includes the husband, his wife/wives, and children living in the same homestead. Among the Ameru, the nuclear family is not complete outside of the extended family, which includes parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters and close relatives. Each family has social, economic, political, religious and

administrative functions as a unit. The father is the head of the family. He owns everything in the family and his authority is autonomous (Middleton, 1979). The father rules over his wife/wives and children but in the extended family set up, while the sons have authority in their individual homes, they consult with their father when difficult issues arise. He then, together with his sons, can decide if the matter is serious enough to be taken to the clan for further decision-making.

On the death of the father, his authority is passed on to the eldest son and in case of the polygamous families, the eldest son of the first wife (Kenyatta 1938, Middleton 1979, Fadiman 1982). In cases where there are no sons, the authority is passed to the brother, cousin or the clansman who was nearest male next of kin to the deceased. Women have practically no administrative authority, therefore the one entrusted with the property of the deceased is supposed to take charge of everything. Little has changed in the contemporary Meru societies of Meru South District.

**(b) *The Clan And Age Set***

A clan is composed of several family units and has to have the same clan name, which is believed to indicate a common ancestry. Each clan is governed by a council (*Kiama or biama*) of elders (Kenyatta 1938; Middleton 1979:40-41) which includes all the initiated men. There are different types of councils. The overall council among the Ameru is *njuri ncheke*. The membership of *njuri ncheke* is limited to a few outstanding and influential people who were recognized by their clans as spokesmen (*agambi*). The functions of the council are generally the preservation of law and order and judicial matters. The institution of *njuri ncheke* has remained very strong among the Ameru to today and the council's authority is still in force. For example it is said:

Among other things *njuri ncheke* was the custodian of Meru customs and the disciplinary body. Today, when customs represent the detritus of traditional culture for many of the younger generation, and as their anti-social behaviour increases, attempts to revitalise *njuri ncheke* are being made in some areas of Meru, with the elders assisting the police (Weblink services 1998).

Age-sets are based on the groupings during circumcision. An age-set that is referred to, as *nthuke* is a group of people banded together over a period of ten to fifteen years. They are grouped into age grades namely, the aged, the old men, and the ruling set. While the age-set and age-grade among men have connotations of leadership, authority and protection of the society, there are age-sets for wives, but they only deal with issues of female offenders against the law, the initiation of girls and religious ceremonies related to sacrifice in times of drought and pestilence (Middleton 1979:39-42).

*(c) Social Economic Setting*

The socio-political organization of the Ameru, which is entirely male, bore and continues to bear heavily on the socio-economic organization of women. Their socio-political organization has defined gender roles, which determines the place and status of women in the society. Ameru peoples are mainly farmers. They grow a wide range of crops and rear animals. Women are responsible for food production and storage. When they have stored enough to last the family until the next season, they can market the remainder with the consent of the husbands (Middleton 1979; Fadiman 1982).

*(d) Gender Roles*

The Ameru peoples have very clear boundaries between the public and domestic domains. As a result there are very clear distinctions between definitions of male and female roles. Boys and girls are therefore socialised differently from a very young age to take up their adult duties. For example, during the naming ceremony, young boys give a baby boy a bow and arrows, while a girl is given a gourd and a bundle of firewood. As they grow up, boys accompany their fathers as they go hunting and herding (recently, while hunting happens in some parts of the district, boys tend to join their fathers in viewing the TV, sport and other leisure activities); while girls do domestic chores with their mothers which include cooking, fetching firewood, fetching water, and helping with the siblings. By the time boys and girls are ready for initiation; they are required to have mastered their routines. They, therefore, assume the gender-defined roles immediately after their initiation.

The boy is socialised to the public sphere, and so perceives himself as a warrior, and a protector of the home and the community. The girl is socialised into the domestic domain and taught to take seriously aspects related to submissiveness, serving and caring, which are considered as acceptable mothering characteristics.

*(e) Changing Environment*

The women of Meru South live out their lives in the context of this natural, economic and cultural environment. However, this is not an environment that is supportive and enabling, but is one that creates a great deal of hardship and suffering for girls and women. While these cultural structures remain very strong (as it will be illustrated) it would be wrong to assume that they are not changing on the face of global, political and economic forces. Africa in general is caught up in global changes, which have been experienced in different spheres of African life. These political, cultural, social, religious and economic changes have impacted on women's lives significantly yet we shall see that the culturally determined status and place of women in the church and society affect women's lives irrespective of their socio-economic and political positions.

In the rest of the chapter I will turn to the women themselves who describe and reflect upon their lives and experiences of vulnerability and then in the next chapter we locate these experiences in a wider analytical framework.



## 2.2 Research Process and Data Analysis

The research was conducted among the women in the Meru South District of Eastern Province, Kenya. The predominant sub-ethnic communities in Meru South District are Mwimbi, Muthambi, Chuka, Tharaka and Mbeere<sup>14</sup>. It should be noted that the experiences expressed here sometimes go beyond the boundaries of the district to embrace the general trend of women's experiences in Kenya. This section of the chapter will describe the fieldwork process including the research design and methodology, the general impression of the study, and the problems encountered in the process.

Methods used in data collection were in-depth interviews, observation through participating in their functions, focus group discussions, documentary analysis<sup>15</sup> and informal interviews that took place as we traveled together, or with women in the market place and those who did not want to give formal interviews but had casual discussions. Twenty (20) of the women who were formally interviewed wanted their full names used in the thesis.

Over a hundred women participated in either formal or informal interviews or the focus group discussions. Of the recorded and transcribed interviews, twenty interviews are intensively used in the analysis as illustrations of women's experiences (see appendix 7 for these selected interviews. See also the photographic essay at the end of this chapter). The interviews and discussion reveal that the experiences of injustice and hardship are mostly as a result of poverty, deprivation, and social cultural structures in the society.

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<sup>14</sup> Igambang'ombe division comprises of a mixer of Tharaka, Chuka and Mbeere ethnic communities while the other divisions are predominantly occupied by single a ethnic community.

<sup>15</sup> Among others the following documents were very informative, Annual Report 2000. Ministry of Education, Science and Technology – Meru South District, Chuka; Tharaka Nithi District Development plan 1997 – 2001. Nairobi Government Printers; Government of Kenya, (1995). The National Implementation Plan: Kenya Family Planning Programme 1995-2000; Government of Kenya (1997). Economic survey Government Printers, Nairobi; Government of Kenya (1995). The National Implementation Plan: Kenya Family Planning Programme 1995-2000; Government of Kenya (1997). Economic survey Government Printers, Nairobi; NCKK 2002. The report of the National Christian Women conference: Limuru Conference & Training Center March 18th – 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2002;. Annual report 2001-2002 for Coalition On Violence Against Women – Kenya. COVAW (2000)

The research was conducted between 5th February and 3rd March 2003 in Meru South District where the five divisions<sup>16</sup> namely Mwimbi, Muthambi, Chuka, Magumoni and Igambang'ombe were visited. I focused on women in the district and subdivided them into categories – homesteaders (i.e women whose livelihoods are spent in the home and its immediate lands), businesswomen, teachers, NGO staff, women politicians, women church ministers and other professionals, for the purpose of ensuring proper management of data collection and analysis. Their age differences ranged from 16-80 years

### **2.2.1 Sampling Method And Sample Size**

A stratified purposive sampling method was applied in the selection of the individual respondents. Five divisions of Meru South District were visited (Mwimbi, Muthambi, Chuka, Magumoni and Igambang'ombe). At least two locations were visited in each division as follows: Mwimbi (Chogoria, Murugi, Maara and Kiera); Muthambi (Ihiriga and Karimba); Chuka (Kiang'ondu, Ndagani and Mariani); Magumoni (Mwonge, Thuita and Mukuuni); Igambang'ombe (Itugururu and Kamwimbi). The study aimed at interviewing 24 women in each division from the different categories outlined above. Therefore from each category only three women were supposed to be interviewed from each division. Although it was intended that there would be focus group discussions in all the five divisions, it was not possible to do so in two (Muthambi and Magumoni) of the five divisions. Because of the irregularities in the group discussions and the informal interviews that took place, the estimated number of women in a division went up in some divisions while in others it was not possible to reach the targeted number of twenty four (24) women.

In cases where focus group discussions were held, contact persons were used to organize the groups and decide on a convenient venue. Those events or occasions that I informally observed were in most cases not pre-arranged, although in a few of them I had informed the contact persons in the area. Where the members were not informed in advance, I started with an explanation of the intended mission and sought permission and consent from the people. The in-depth interviews were randomly sampled in the areas that were purposively sampled.

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<sup>16</sup> See maps provided on page 31, chapter two to locate the area of research in the country, and the divisions

During this period of research, the following open-ended questions were used:

1. How would you characterize “women’s life” in Kenya?
2. Why is it like this?
3. Which of the following issues is most pressing on women and why?
  - Education
  - Land /inheritance
  - Public participation
  - Domestic violence (incest, rape, battering or verbal abuse)
  - Domestic life (child care, early marriage, teenage pregnancies, chores, firewood and water)
  - Agriculture
  - Female Genital Mutilation
  - Religion and church
  - Employment
  - Health (reproduction health, malaria, general hygiene, HIV and AIDS)
4. What can be done about it?
  - By the government
  - By women and women organizations
  - By the church
5. Do you think the church should influence public policy and laws to help women and why?

While women responded to questions 1, 2 and 3 with a lot of ease, numbers 4 and 5 were problematic. As a result of minimal attention in terms of creating awareness in the rural areas, women had problems in articulating their relationship with the agents mentioned in number 4 in relation to their concerns. They quickly said what the three agents mentioned in number 4 *have* done rather than what they *should do* to help them out of their predicaments. Therefore articulating whether or not the church should influence public policy and law was a difficult exercise. It was clear that women, especially in the rural areas, are passive recipients and that

newcomers or outsiders (*researchers and different service providers*) have always determined their needs.

### **2.2.2 Analysis Of The Sample Size<sup>17</sup>**

Table 1 on the next page summarizes the scope of the interviews in the five different divisions. It indicates that more than the anticipated 24 women were interviewed in two (2) divisions (36 and 28), and less than 24 in three (3) (23, 21 and 18) divisions. Overall 126 women out of the anticipated 120 were interviewed, and this is assumed to be a helpful illustrative cross section of women in Meru South and by extension much of rural Kenya.

Table 2, which is on the following page points to the same one hundred and twenty six (126) women, but now analysed in terms of their categories. The research design anticipated that the majority of women would be “homesteaders” and then sought a good cross section from other professions such as businesswomen, NGO staff, teachers, ministers of religion, politicians and other professions. While 71 (56%) of homesteaders were interviewed, the spread of other professions is assumed to be a helpful illustrative cross-section of women in Meru South and by extension much of rural Kenya. While only three were politicians this reflects their relative presence in the district. It should be noted that the term “homesteaders” refers to women who work in their own houses, and in the fields of the home, generally the needs of the immediate household.

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<sup>17</sup> The sample size was determined by the inclination to qualitative research option as a matter of necessity (refer to methodology section 1:3 pp 20-24)

**Table 1: Number of respondents in relation to the number of women expected in every division.**

Divisions	Number of women expected	Number of women interviewed <sup>18</sup>	%	Comment from the researcher
Mwimbi	24	hs25/p2/t3/opp2/b3/ngo1/wm1 (36)	150	In Mwimbi division I managed to hold three focus group discussions and visited a group of women and men that are involved in micro-finance institution for small-scale business people. The focus group discussions involved homesteaders, high school teachers, and some women staff in the ministry of agriculture.
Muthambi	24	hs9/p/t3/op3/b3/wm1/ngo2 (21)	87.5	In this division I had transport and accommodation problems but I had an advantage because Mwimbi and Muthambi share in many ways. For instance two of the women high school teachers involved in focus group discussions in Mwimbi came from Muthambi division.
Chuka	24	hs17/p1/t3/opp3/u/b3/mw/ngo1 (28)	116.6	In Chuka I had one focus group with women involved in the church leadership but who also have other jobs. In this case they were there for church business but some are teachers, nurses etc.
Magumoni	24	Hs7/wm1/t3/p/op3/b3ngo1(18)	75	Due to time pressure, transport and accommodation problems it was difficult to do much in Magumoni division. There was no focus group discussion based on this division but some of the women who participated in the focus group discussion held at Chuka came from Magumoni and Igambang'ombe divisions.
Igambang'ombe	24	hs12/p/op3/b3/wm/ngo2/t3/ (23)	95.8	Among the five divisions only in Igambang'ombe was I able to interact with women who are well engaged with the activities of an NGO dealing with issues related to women and girl children.

<sup>18</sup> The full forms of the abbreviations in the table are as follows: hs -homesteaders, b-businesswomen, t-teachers, ngo-NGO staff, p- women politicians, wm-women church ministers and op-other professionals.

**Table 2: The categories and the number of women interviewed**

Category	Interviewed	Comment from the researcher
Homesteaders	Over 50 (71)	Most of the district is rural and most homesteaders are involved in agricultural activities. They are key providers for their families due to one reason or another. At the same time, due to cultural traditions, most of them do not own property and especially the land they work in making it difficult to claim ownership of the production of their own labour. Worth noting also is the fact that the majority of them are either illiterate or semi-illiterate and face various domestic constraints.
NGO Staff	8	While the district report recorded a big number of NGOs, that are supposed to be operational, it was quite difficult getting in touch with the NGO staff. However, in Igambang'ombe division I had an opportunity to engage with those working with "Save Children Canada". Their main objective is creating awareness and conscientising the community about the rights of girl children. They are very firm in discouraging harmful traditional cultural practices like Female Genital Mutilation. They observed that traditional customs and beliefs are a big challenge to development and gender equality and equity
Women ministers	9	Out of nine interviewees only three women ministers happened to have worked in Meru South District. All the others worked outside the district. However I (the researcher) have the advantage of having been born and worked in the district as a church minister in different capacities.
Women teachers	Over 10 (15)	In all the divisions there were many teachers who were willing to be interviewed. Apart from sharing their personal experiences, they gave impressions on how culture impacts on child upbringing, impressing that girl child are most vulnerable.
Women politicians	3	Two of the three women politicians interviewed were councillors from Mwimbi division. One elected and one nominated. The other one was from Chuka.
Other professions	Over 10 (15)	In this section I interviewed a number of women from outside the district and their views were quite relevant for the district in point. For instance, I interviewed a magistrate and senior pharmacist, but put together the district was quite rich in areas like nursing, agriculture and teaching. However, medical doctors identified were unavailable for interviews.
Business women	Over 10 (15)	Businesswomen interviewed fall under the category of small-scale businesses. Their major struggle is how to get credit facilities, storage and securities for their businesses.

### 2.3 An Appraisal Of The Research Process

It is important to note that while I was born across the boundary (Ishiera of Mbeere district); I grew up in Kiaritha village of Igambang'ombe division. After my theological training, I worked as intern (or what is commonly referred to as theological student) for one and a half years with Chuka Presbytery, which covers the Igambang'ombe, Magumoni and Chuka

divisions. After ordination, I worked with Chogoria Presbytery, which covers Mwimbi, and Muthambi divisions. I am also married to a man from Mwimbi division. This gives me enough reason to assert that I am one of them, and I have worked with and for them. However, owing to the fact that I am a church minister, questions of an unequal power relationship between me and the women was not ruled out. As mentioned in the first chapter, I was very conscious of this throughout the research process and tried hard to use that aspect positively in ensuring mutual relationship with interviewees.

In the process of interviews, observations and focus group discussions, encounters of the experiences of women especially in the rural setting were horrific. Women's experiences revealed the reality of suffering and injustice that women go through in most cases silently because "a good woman or wife" is the one who keeps her domestic life a deep secret from the others. For many of them if one dared to share their personal experiences they risked tough punishment from their husbands and the clan.

The research process revealed that women experience a great deal of dehumanisation and a wide range of gross injustices manifested in domestic violence, discrimination against girl children in education and an emphasis on traditional cultural beliefs and practices that are harmful to girls and women, like Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), polygamy, wife inheritance, child labour and child marriage.

### **2.3.1 Problems Encountered**

While time and finances were the very initial challenges encountered and continued even after the field work, during the time of field work two major problems were encountered- inaccessibility and misconceptions. Accessibility did not only involve transport but also road networks, timing and accommodation.

On the other hand due to the perception that researchers and missionaries come with donations and that they do charity work, as a researcher, I had to encounter and deal with misconception. The two problems are addressed below.

**(a) Inaccessibility**

The fact that the area of research is a rural area meant that transport and the transport networks were major challenges. Some areas were difficult to access due to the lack of a vehicle or due to the poor road network requiring me to either walk or organize private transport. In some places public transport was available only at given times, which raised the issues of timing and time constraints. This then placed pressure on the limited finances during the fieldwork.

**(b) Misconceptions**

The reality of poverty among the rural women results in a misconception that discussions related to their realities will result in offering physical handouts like food, clothes or money. Irrespective of being a daughter of the community, the current project raised issues of poverty leading to a misinterpretation that like other church welfare projects, I was going to give physical handouts. The fact that I was a parish minister who had gone out of the country, resulted in the thinking that she was bringing something from “out there”, a misconception based on the Mission Churches’ involvement in social welfare related to dependence on the mother churches in the West.

Given the absence of physical handouts, many of the women wanted to know how the research would be useful to them. It was impossible to make a promise to them in terms of immediate benefit, however the intended result was to realize empowering possibilities for women, and it was felt that the interactions and discussions were fruitful. The respondents were able to engage on issues related to how women themselves could use the available resources to address their comprehensive vulnerability.

As way of response, I suggested possibilities of women coming together in response to their particular situations. During focus group discussion it became clear that among other things, women needed to group themselves according to their felt needs. In these groupings, it was agreed that women could major on self help activities, sharing their own experiences as a way of encouragement to one another and possibility approaching organizations and institutions



that could be of help to them in various ways, but emphasized the fact that they should first and foremost identify locally available resources in their disposal.

### 2.3.2 Overview Of Research Findings

The research indicated that the following concerns are the major ways in which women experience injustice and hardships. The table 3 below gives the numbers of respondents from each category against the total number of women interviewed, who were one hundred and twenty six (126). The table gives an impression of how many women and from which category feels that that a given issue is priority aspect in eradicating women's vulnerability.

- Education and literacy
- Property ownership
- Violence against women
- Women's health and HIV and AIDS
- Female Genital Mutilation
- Marital issues (Widowhood, polygamy, leviratic union and single parenthood)
- Dearth of basic amenities

**Table 3: Interviewed women from each category and priority issues**

ISSUES \ Women Categories	HS	P	WM	T	OP	B	NGO	TOTAL
<b>Education and literacy</b>	61	3	9	10	8	7	8	106
<b>Property ownership</b>	46	3	7	13	7	10	8	94
<b>Violence against women</b>	35	3	9	10	10	6	8	81
<b>Women health and HIV and AIDS</b>	27	3	9	12	9	5	8	73
<b>Female genital mutilation</b>	38	3	9	12	10	6	8	86
<b>Marital issues</b>	45	3	9	9	8	7	8	89
<b>Dearth of basic amenities</b>	58	3	9	10	9	8	8	105

#### Key

HS Homesteaders  
 P Women Politicians  
 WM Women Church Ministers  
 T Teachers

NGO- None- Governmental Organisation  
 B- Business Women  
 OP- Other Professions

## **2.4 Experiences Of Vulnerability And Injustice**

Having observed the general overview of how women rate different issues of concern, in the next section we focus on each of these concerns in turn to gain a deeper appreciation of the vulnerability facing women in Meru South.

### **2.4.1 Access To Education And Literacy**

In the interviews and group discussions, among the 126 women interviewed, one hundred and six (106), which is 84.1% of the women, said that girls' education is a priority. The majority of interviewees said that girls' education is still given secondary consideration to boys because it is believed that boys have to grow up to be the providers of their families while girls have to get married to other clans. As result girls' education is not taken seriously, and therefore can easily be compromised in many rural homesteads/families.

Among the high school teachers, there was a consensus that much is yet to be done to overcome the tendencies that discriminate against girl children in education. Six of eight held to the conviction that this is as a result of structures and institutions that exclude women from decision-making and socialisation that relegate women to a second class status in the society.

They expressed the view that those who hold on to such beliefs, argue that it is not worth investing so much in a girl child because she will eventually go and marry a man who will be the provider. There were observations that this understanding is facing a strong challenge from the families who have educated girls and who are helpful to their families even when they are married; but the traditional socialisation bears on the majority in the society strongly therefore the discrimination against girl children endures. The following women highlight the currents situation of girls' education in their area.

Josephine Wanyaga Mbae feels that she was deprived of the opportunity to perform well because of the lesser value placed on the education of girls and the fact that girls must help their mothers in domestic chores. She however appreciates the effort her parents made because

there are other girls who were completely deprived of the opportunity of going to school. She recounts:

I very well remember while my sister that I follow and myself would stay home due to school fees for a long time yet my parents were very careful to ensure that my brothers never stayed at home due to fees. And even when we were at home for holidays or after school my brothers were reminded and pressurized to study but my sister and I had to help our mother in the household chores and only studied when we had finished the duties assigned to us ... I however appreciate what my parent gave us because many girls in the area never got any education at all and many others only went up to primary school. I now realize that their actions were influenced by our culture that did not put any value on girls' education those days although I don't think much has changed yet (Wanyaga 23.02.2003)

Grace Mukwanjeru Karani who is a teacher agrees that girls' education is affected by multiple factors including cultural beliefs and practices. She also raises the issue of poverty as a major contributing factor. Her observation implies that the government schools in the rural areas are also not well equipped. She says:

In most of schools that I have taught, boys perform better than girls. The contributing factors to poor performance among girls include:  
 -Girls are engaged in domestic chores after school to help their mothers while boys are encouraged to take seriously their schoolwork.  
 -Particularly in this current school, the community is committed to girls' circumcision. Immediately they go through the initiation their performance drops because after initiation they are more pre-occupied with their status. It is a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood and they are taught how to get prepared for marriage. At this point, many girls also drop out of school to get married and due to teenage pregnancies.

...Poverty, cultural practices and stereotypes about women are key factors that affect women or girls' education in this area. Many children who start primary education drop out in the course of time before reaching standard eight. Many of those who do their standard eight examinations do not manage to go to secondary schools because their parents cannot afford...many girls also end up in domestic work employment to support the family  
 (Grace Mukwanjeru Karani 11.02.2003).

Winfred Mukami Nyaga is a worker with an NGO, (Save Child Canada). She is also the location programme officer. In their endeavour to create awareness, the major obstacle is the cultural socialisation and stereotypes that disadvantage girl children. She made the following observation:

One very destructive aspect in the location is the fact that parents still hold to the traditional belief that boy children are more important than girl children and therefore, it is more important to educate boy children. In most families, after the initiation, girls are encouraged to get married. In other families girls step out of school for their brothers especially at high school levels where the families cannot cope with high school expenses. If this trend continues, low or lack of education will continue pulling women down and living in suffering (Winfred Mukami Nyaga 17.02.2003).

Jones Kaari Mutegi dropped out of school because her parents could not afford to educate her, and she realised that she could help her family by securing a job as a domestic worker. Her story also illustrates how women struggle single handed to provide for their families. Her story goes beyond education to illustrate the fact that child labour is still practiced. She says:

All the days that I went to school, I felt that it was really difficult because most of the time we went to school without food or even having not eaten in the morning. After my uniform got worn out, there was no money to replace it and I had to go to school with a torn uniform. My mother struggled all by herself to look for food and buy clothes for the four of us but my father only used to come home drunk and on many occasions beat her up. The situation disturbed me and I thought I could help her out. I knew of other girls of my age who had left school and gone to look for jobs and they were helping their parents. I therefore suggested for my mother that I would go to look for a job and help them with the rest of my brother and sisters although I was not the eldest in the family. My parents welcomed the idea and I left the school in standard four. I was thirteen when I left school. My other two sisters and one brother have studied up to standard eight. My parents cannot afford to take them to secondary school and they are also contented that they are able to read and write (Jones Kaari Mutegi 06-02-2003)

Very evident in the experiences shared above is that boy children are treated better than girl children generally, but specifically in education. Boys are also given opportunities to excel in their academic endeavour and in most cases at the expense of their sisters. Some girls end up in forced and early marriages so that their brothers may be educated with the money paid as dowry, and others are forced into child labour to earn for the family. Kaari's experience shared above explicitly tells us it was not her preferred choice to leave school. Neither did the mother have other choices for her. Like Kaari, Josephine Wanyaga Mbae attributes her current struggles to her disadvantaged position as far as education was concerned, as she grew up. She recounts how she grew up in the family and how her parents perceived and treated their boy and girl children. She observes that her parent's perception was strongly informed by the

social cultural construction of male and female children. Because of the perception that men provide for the family and women take care of the husband's property, boy children continue to be privileged at the expense of girl children.

#### **2.4.2 Property Ownership**

In the interviews and group discussions carried out during the fieldwork, out of the 126 women interviewed, ninety four (94) women, which is 74.6%, said property ownership is a priority. It was ranked second following education because the majority thought education among women and girls is the key to empowerment, overcoming poverty and addressing the causes of the experiences of vulnerability. The following shared experiences by women interviewed illustrate a limited or lack of economic power for women, which make them easy prey to oppression, exploitation, marginalisation, and discrimination resulting in gross injustices they experiences just because they are women. The following women share their experiences.

Joyce Karuta Mate is a leader in the church and society. Her motivation to vie for a civic seat in her area was the struggles she experienced as a woman and she had a strong conviction that what her fellow women and herself went through over the years would only be addressed adequately if women were represented in public life by women who understand what women experience, because they are women. She observes:

Due to the agricultural potential of our land, women should be in a position to improve their economic situation because they form the majority of the labour force in agricultural production. Their major problem is that most are totally dependent on their husbands and have no control not only of the economic life, but also their own lives. Women are able to identify their problems but have no power to solve them and the machineries that should be used are not readily available especially for rural women. As an individual, and a leader of women in the church and society, I feel very frustrated due to powerlessness that affects women in my area. There is complete lack of control and ownership of property by women yet they are the producers. Another major drawback is their bodily health. Even when they are themselves unhealthy, they have to take care of the other members of the family. This tends to affect their productivity (Joyce Karuta Mate 11.12.2003).

Agnes Ruguru is an elderly woman who for years sacrificed herself for her family but in her old age she realises she does not own anything. Her children are grown up men and women. Despite the fact that she had to work very hard to secure the family property and education of the children since the husband was an alcoholic (drinking local brew), now her sons have rights to property ownership and she has to rely on them for accommodation let alone her survival. She laments:

After much work on agricultural production and bearing and rearing children a woman does not own valuables like land or livestock. She only owns gourds, pots, and baskets and other fragile items. A woman has no right to the land she tills and the livestock she tends, further more a woman's life is wholly controlled by a man and has no say about her children at a given stage (Agnes Ruguru M'Mugambi 11.02.2003).

Jennifer K. Murigu is a teacher and one of the participants in a focus group discussion that comprised of the high school teachers. After a heated discussion on what goes on at home, at the work place and at school, she had the following observation to make:

While low levels or a lack of education puts women down, those of us who are "educated" are still oppressed by the institutional structures that are so patriarchal. It is more dehumanising when a woman is employed, contributes to the economy of the family and yet her contribution is not given due regard. Even in families where men and women are both in paid employment, men have the upper hand in decision-making, more so men are the owners of property in our society. It is not fair that the property that men and women work for together, at the end of the day, it belongs to the man alone and that the same woman must seek permission to use as she takes care of the family needs. Accordingly at the places of work, women must work more to prove themselves. When promotions are being done, for men, it is obvious as long as they qualify but for women, on top of our qualification, one has to work extra hard to prove herself. It is worse if one is a woman in a boy's school. My other major concern is that even if there are policies that ensure equal treatment of women and men I am not sure they rightfully function to help women enjoy the promised equality. I think whatever people call gender equality and equity is far from being achieved in the real meaning of the word (Jennifer K Murigu 12.02.2003).

Lack or limited access to and control of property in the society by women are identified as core to persistent poverty among women. For the majority of them poverty remains the main reason for women's dehumanisation because it emerged as the main factor that makes women remain in abusive relationships and the main reason behind gross exploitation. For them most

women have no choices for their lives because they do not determine or decide for themselves what they need in life or even to shape their destiny due to inherent restrictions.

### **2.4.3 Violence Against Women**

Domestic violence falls third on the list of issues that characterise experiences of injustices for women in Kenya. Out of hundred and twenty six (126) women, eighty one (81) which is 64.3% said that domestic violence is crucial to women's experiences of injustices and assertively said that this is practiced in their own homes in one way or another. A further twenty seven (27) women, which is 21.4%, said that domestic violence is common in their locality but it did not affect them directly. They said that they have at least witnessed such in their neighbourhood.

Domestic violence was identified as: wife beating; economic abuse; child labour; sexual abuse which included rape, incest and sexual harassment; verbal abuse and psychological torture. Among the women who took part in the group discussion from the Makena women's group of Mwimbi division, ten (10) women out of fifteen (15), which is 66.6%, said they personally experienced violence in their homes especially in the form of beating, verbal abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation. They also said that they are left to take care of their families on their own with minimal resources. After hard labour their husbands have the upper hand in the decision-making over their produce, which they considered as violence. The following stories from women illustrate women's experiences of violence.

In my first marriage I was a housewife where I suffered intensive domestic violence. Currently I work in a factory on a temporary basis because I have no skilled training. Although I am happy in my current marriage, the memories of my two boys in my former marriage whom I fear do not get the basics for life haunt me so much.

Before I got married in my first marriage, I worked in a Chemist; the lady who employed was a 'born again Christian'. I worked very hard for her in the city until she sent to go and open another chemist in smaller towns. While working at the Chemist I met my first husband who was a nurse by profession. I conceived before we got married and I thought it was going to be really bad. Incidentally on learning that I was pregnant my parents were very kind and insisted that I shouldn't get married because of pregnancy if I was not

convinced that it was the right thing to do. My boyfriend agreed that we should get married. On learning that I had intention of getting married, my employer withdrew me from the job.

I loved him and he insisted that we should be together before the baby was born and then we would formalize our marriage later. He also promised that when the child is big enough I would go to the college (*for him I was only supposed to go to a teachers' college*). Around that time the government teachers' college stopped taking more recruits until further notice. Four years down the line I had not gone to any college and I got the second born baby.

At this time we moved from the town he was working to the rural home village and he operated from home to work. Since I did not have employment I worked in the garden and was doing quite well. I bought many goats and chickens when I sold my agricultural produce to get money. We did not buy food because I produced a lot. But sometimes there would be poor production due to poor rains. On the other hand, due to poor transport network, marketing of our produce would be impossible. At such times, we needed money to buy some things from the market. Out of this joint effort, we put our semi-permanent house up together and I personally put all my energies in this because we were getting settled and this was my great desire. We finished building and putting in the furniture.

He then opened a private practice where he attended to the patients after hours or on his free time. He also sold medicine. Although I had worked in a chemist for more than two years before we got married he employed another woman to work in his private practice. Within no time I realized she was not only an employee but also a close friend whom he had love affair with. He was now spending most of his time at the clinic and only came home when he chose to. I thought it was not safe for me and confronted him; this was the beginning of the end of our marriage.

In addition to this, since I come from a different tribe although from the same district, his (my mother-in-law) mother had always advocated that her son should get another wife because I was a foreigner. The mother's wish started to get fulfilled. There were regular quarrels and threats from then on. He regularly reminded me that I was not trained and if I dared leave him I would die of poverty. But already I was not getting any support from him; I had to struggle for food and clothing for my children and I.

The situation deteriorated until I had to go back to my natal home in 1999. Fortunately, my parents welcomed me back and did everything in their ability to help my children and I. My mother regretted that I had no trained course/skill and that they now had very little to do to make a difference in my life. They talked to my elder sister who agreed to take my two children and my



brother got me a casual job in the company where he worked. I got an opportunity of working in their factory as a casual where I am still working.

Three months down the line when he (my former husband) learnt that I was working and not suffering as he predicted (*he said just go, I will only come for you after suffering enough...*) when I was going to my parents, he came and apologized and requested that I forgive him and that he would never do that again. Due to my commitment to my marriage I decided to forgive him. My parents, my sister and my brother opposed the idea. He came with his parents and clan representatives and we talked over the differences and he promised again that he was sorry and he would never repeat the abuse again. Little did I know that these were all lies. He only wanted to get the children back and dismiss me. The men that came for the negotiations knew it was a trick and ordered his mother not say a word because she would not be crafty enough. When all was done and we were on the way to his home, his mother broke into a big laughter and started challenging them “*Why did you have to cheat, you could have taken your children and leave the woman instead of putting her into a big torture like this...*” I knew this was more than what I expected. Partly, this happened because, in this tribe (Tharaka) it is believed that children belong to men, women are only supposed to bear and bring them up.

On arriving home, he started giving death threats. He gave me one thousand Kenya shillings and told me to go back to my parents or wherever. Not knowing what to do, I went back to my place of work traumatized. I later went to my brother who is a trained probation officer thinking that he would help me to take the matter legally but he said he was not ready for that because it required a lot of energy and money. I thought of approaching FIDA Kenya but my parents said no to it because they thought that even if I win the case this man might use witchcraft and spoil all my life.

It was during this time of great torment that I met my current husband. I was in great isolation because my brother and sister who had come to help initially distanced themselves and my parents are really old (*my father is in his eighties and my mother in sixties*). I shared my life journey and he also did it and we both thought we could live together. It is however difficult because we cannot easily legalize our marriage due to the many requirements (Josephine Wanyaga Mbae 23.02.2003).

Jones Kaari Mutegi grew up in a family where her father regularly beat up her mother. Together with her sibling she grew up in torment because when fights started they also suffered because their mother would run away for her life. As children they went without food at such times or stayed home alone because their father would still go to drink. This happened over and over again. She laments:

As I grew up, I have lived to witness my mother being beaten by my father. The one thing that I disliked about it is that, in most cases my father would be absent the whole day, come home drunk, and on arriving in the house; he would pick up a quarrel from nothing that would result in him beating her seriously. In a number of occasions she went back to her parents and then came. This has always been my mother's life. I hate imagining that I will get married because I do not want to live a life like the one I have witnessed with my mother (Jones Kaari Mutegi 06.02.2003).

This unnamed interviewee asked for confidentiality because at the time of the interview she was going through major marital problems. She however requested that her experience be shared in case it will be helpful for other women or young girls. She laments the helplessness of women and girls in decision making that result in such kinds of violence. She narrates her experience as follows:

I got married immediately after college. My parents were very excited and had very high expectations about me and I also had high expectations about my marriage life. Since my parents were very keen on my movements, the man I married was the only man that I related with closely. Dowry negotiations were done and since my husband came from a well to do family, the dowry was not a big issue. My trouble began long before marriage because everything was done for me and decisions were made for me, I did not participate in the organization; I only waited to be a bride and a wife. Everything was between my husband to be, his family and my family. On the wedding day, there was a big rain and my parents were not given their expected treatment. They demanded that I must go back to my natal home the following day so that my husband may pay a penalty and I did exactly that. This is not what I preferred but I had to obey my parents, my husband paid the penalty of a big cow and this marked the beginning of troubles between my husband and I. I attribute my marital struggles to my absence in decision making for life issues that concern me directly. For instance, I did not know what expectations were set for me during dowry negotiations, neither am I aware of the expectation that were set for me.

Asked what steps she was taking to solve her marital problems, she said she did not know whom or where to turn to because the church and the society usually blame women for such problems and already some of her friends are telling her that she has to play everything calm. She adds:

...Even if I went to the church leadership they will tell me that I am the one who is not playing the role of a wife properly. As for the legal proceedings, I cannot attempt because I do not have the strength to do that and I am not sure I

am ready for divorce anyway. My family gave me a bed<sup>19</sup> and on my wedding day my advisors said I have to be a good wife and take care of my husband (*Mutumia uria ngatha atumagiria maundu- literall - a virtuous wife remains silent on things*).

Although my husband has been in major church leadership for a long time, I have suffered in ways that I cannot narrate here. But to be honest with you, I feel bad because I have no say in anything in my marriage or home. I am a teacher but I cannot decide on my salary, I hear people discuss about sex, in my case, even the children we have, they were just born. In fact he always rapes me because if he realise that I am interested in sex, he avoids me but when he realises I am not interested he forces me. He has girl friends but when I tried to confront him about it, it resulted into a big fight and my immediate neighbours blamed it on me. I am not ready to come out of my marriage for the sake of my children and also the society will blame it on me all the more. I am so scared because I know I am so vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. He doesn't care about it. I strongly fear for our children (*Unnamed interviewee who requested to be anonymous 18.02.2003*).

Rose Mwikali must remain in her abusive relationship because her parents would not allow her back to her natal family because it is perceived to be a disgrace to the family. She has to make her marriage work to avoid being a disgrace to the family and the fact that her brothers see her as a threat to the land inheritance. She says:

I go through very rough times but I have to remain in my marital home because my parents cannot allow me to go back to my natal home because it is disgrace for the family and the land there belongs to my brothers (*Rose Mwikali Njeru 17.02.2003*).

Violence against women is manifested in wife beating, sexual abuse, discrimination, exploitation, oppression and exclusion from decision making. In many cases women are aware of the solutions they can go for but their status and place in the society and especially the home are major barriers. Violence against women is encouraged by women's legal, social, cultural and economic vulnerability. Furthermore, violence against women, especially, when it includes sexual abuse, has become a major avenue towards sexually transmitted infections,

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<sup>19</sup> The bed given to the bride on the wedding day symbolically means that the bride takes away her bed from the natal family and that one cannot go back there. It also symbolically means that it is the woman's prerogative to perform extra ordinarily well in matters of sex in marriage. Therefore if it is known that the man gets involved in extra marital relations, it is quickly concluded that the wife has failed to perform her sexual duties.

which include HIV and AIDS. While both women and men are vulnerable, research has it that women are more (Phiri, Haddad and Masenya 2003; Dube and Kanyoro 2004).<sup>20</sup>

#### **2.4.4 Women, Health And HIV and AIDS**

Women's health in the rural areas and among women in general is closely related to their life style. Poor health statuses among women are either because of overworking, stress or negligence, as they keep busy with other social and family concerns. Accessibility of health facilities and affordability of medication and treatment are other major challenges for rural women. The following interviewees had this to say:

Gladys Mukwaiti Marangu is a 46 year old woman from Mwimbi division. She is married and a mother of five children. She is a nurse in the local sub-district hospital (Magutuni). In her career she has trained as a Kenya Enrolled Community Nurse (KECN, Kenya Enrolled Mid-wifely (KEM) and Health Visiting (HV 11)). She is also a deacon in the church leadership and a member of the local women's group. Her husband is a teacher and a church elder in their church. As a teacher, the husband is a head teacher and he is also the chairman of the local congregation. Being a wife of a prominent man in the community, a career woman, a leader in the community and in the church Gladys notes that she is an extremely tired woman. After attending to all these leadership positions, and career, Gladys also checks on the work of their domestic help and the farm attendant, especially the livestock and poultry section. She also checks on their small tuck-shop before the sales lady closes her work. On ensuring that all is well she then engages in knitting. If she is completely unavailable her husband takes charge.

Asked to comment on the experiences of women, Gladys makes several comments on different issues as follows:

Culturally a woman is usually overworked and yet disabled because of the following reasons:

- She works a lot yet she does not own the property she works for.
- When it comes to marriage, women must belong to the clan of the husband.

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<sup>20</sup> The two publications cited here contain twenty two articles in form of chapters that bear women's testimonies and suggested resources for faith communities in overcoming HIV and AIDS.

- The issue of children born outside marriage is even more sensitive because a man is allowed by culture to bring the children born out of marriage without consulting the wife yet women are not allowed to bring the children born out marriage or even help them once married to other men other than the fathers of their other children.
- Economically women do not own property yet they are key participants in agricultural activities, and all household undertakings. Giving my personal example, apart from being a nurse I participate in our agricultural production, I do knitting after work which adds to our paid salary and also makes sure that I supervise our tuck-shop, livestock and poultry section before I think of taking a rest and then close my day by doing a bit of knitting.

Health-wise, she says as community health nurse and with her experience of working in the local area, women and health is a complex issue. She makes the following observations:

- Apart from taking care of their personal health, women are supposed to take care of the health of others in the family especially children and the aged. Women are majority in the hospital because they are either sick or they bring other family members.
- Generally women are overworked due to the hard work they do in the agricultural production, looking for fuel (wood) and water and for some, they have to walk long distances and they carry their different types of loads on their backs.
- During health visitations, I also found out that in addition to hard labour, women's eating habit is problematic because they either do not eat enough or they have no healthy and nutritious food. In times when food is not adequate, women feed others and are left without food. There are also food taboos although many women are trying to fight that out.
- I am also concerned that although it is said that HIV and AIDS issues have been taught, many women have not yet got to grips with them. And in rare cases where they have the understanding of the dangers attached to it, they are not in control of their bodies. In our culture issues of sex and sexuality are taboos. They are not freely discussed and especially women are not supposed to question the decision of the husband. It is currently happening in few families.
- Issues of great importance in relation to women's quality of life are education, health, agriculture, water and fuel (wood).

Joyce Rigiri Mati is 38 years old from Mwimbi Division and a mother of four children, three girls and one boy. She is a nurse by profession. She has worked as a nurse for fifteen years and she is specialized as a Kenya Enrolled Nurse (KEN), and Kenya Enrolled Midwifery (KEM). After working for government for some time and in the mission hospitals she now runs her own private clinic. As a Christian and a professional she is challenged by the health of women in the rural area. She says:

Just now I was attending a very fragile case. I call it fragile because that child was brought here by her old grand mother, her real mother does not stay here, the grand mother can hardly afford the medicine that would be the best for the child. I have now given some medicine to make her wait for the hospital and I have referred her to the government hospital but am afraid our government hospitals have become so bad that even when there is medicine patients hardly get them. Am so sorry for her because apart from affording the fare I do not think she will get matatus (*the common mini-buses*) now.

Rigiri says that most people in this area die because of poverty.

In the first place some do not have enough food to eat. And most of them that suffer are women. Women die of the diseases that could otherwise have been cured but they go to hospital when they are very sick and when they are diagnosed they do not have money to purchase the medicine. Very few women are keen to go for normal check ups. Therefore many die of some diseases like cancer of the uterus that can be prevented. Others just buy un-prescribed medicine so the disease just eats them up. Due to overworking, women do not prioritise their own health. They take care for their husbands, children and the rest of the extended family members.

I am of the opinion that that strategies for poverty alleviation would be key to reducing health problems among women because the majority of women who come here have high blood pressure problems but when I ask them to reduce the workload they say it is not possible. They work hard and walk long distances and at homes there is all the fights and quarrels. For instance in this area, traditional brew is highly taken and afterwards major fights follow. To cut down suffering among women, the following issues need to be given attention:

- Health
- Education
- Agriculture
- Transport in the form of road network
- Abolition of beer brewing and drugs because that is where many men spend their time and money.

Edith Gata Kamundi is sixty eight (68) from Mwimbi division. A mother of six children, she is now a retired nurse specialized as Kenya Enrolled Midwifery (KEM) and Family Planning (FP). Of her six children the two girls studied up to form four and three out of four boys studied up to university level. She attributes the differential education attainment of her boy and girl children to the environment they grew up in. There was little encouragement on the part of girls' education, which was a common trend in the area.

- As a nurse I have had the opportunity to understand women's health and their experiences. Women's major complaints among others include:
  - ❖ Joint problems due to overworking.
  - ❖ Headaches which in my assessment are related to stress due to overworking and family problems which range from violence to struggles for daily basic needs.

I am now working as a private practitioner and therefore my clients must pay for the treatment. Financial problems are acute in the area, which affects both my client and the development of my clinic. As much as I try my best to help, those who need help are more than I can handle. Some people die not because of age or natural death but because medical care is either beyond what they can afford or there is none at all.

The other aspect is that mostly women are the ones who bring the other members of the family to the clinic and this was also the case when I worked with the PCEA Chogoria Hospital. When women are sick they come by themselves and sometimes when they are in critical situations fellow women villagers bring them.

Family planning in this area is well accepted which has helped to cut down family sizes from families of ten to families of four in many households. But the only methods that are put in place are those used by women like pills and injections. They say that men do not want to use condoms let alone accepting vasectomy.

I must say that one of the problems is apart from the fact that they do not own property and are less educated; they also do not own their bodies. I may not go into the details of all that I think is the cause of the problems but I wish to list them down the following:

- Women's problems are accelerated by the fact that women do not own property and land.
- Adequate health care for all is a priority because medication has become so expensive for the ordinary people to afford and especially the rural poor women.
- Boys and girls should be given equal opportunities in education.
- Eradication of violence against women should be prioritized.
- Agriculture should be given priority attention because it is the major resource of livelihood for the majority in the area.
- The government should ensure accessibility and basic infrastructure like transport and road network, water and fuel (wood)

While Kenya is one of the most hit countries of the Sub-Saharan countries as far as HIV and AIDS is concerned, and many NGO activities are said to be doing a lot of work on HIV and AIDS (MAP 1998), seventy three (73), which is 57.9% of 126 women interviewed, agreed that the stigma attached to the disease continues to silence the people about its spread. To avoid talking about it openly, people have devised names and phrases like "she has become

very slim”, “she has the disease”, or “*amepatwa na kamududu*” (*which means, she has been caught by the worm*). In most cases people linked the sickness to other causes like TB and witchcraft. Implicitly there was a consensus that there has been high death rates reported in the area, much more frequently than used to be some ten or more years ago, and they seemed to agree that the HIV and AIDS pandemic was one of the causes.

Those who have participated in awareness campaigns and conscientisation in the area argued that there were some positive impacts of their interventions but the cultural beliefs and practices overwhelmingly countered their effort. Such beliefs like one does not die unless he/she is bewitched; that HIV and AIDS is a result of sexual immorality; and that people will have a negative attitude to the family on knowing that the dead had HIV and AIDS have resulted in the great stigma surrounding the disease.

In this area none of my interviewees shared a personal encounter with the reality of HIV and AIDS. I however remember some cases among many that happened when I worked in Kiera Parish of Chogoria Presbytery in 1996-1998. Here I reflect on my own participant observation:

In most cases as a matter of social concern, members of the family of the deceased refused to admit that the deceased died of AIDS related diseases or would give other causes of death.

As a religious factor or matter of faith people who died of HIV and AIDS related diseases were treated with contempt. For instance, in one instance, an evangelist refused the casket to be brought where he was preaching from because he was convinced the deceased had died of AIDS. In his preaching he emphasized that he was only preaching because of those who were remaining because the deceased had already been judged of her immorality.

The other case was where the preacher knowing that the deceased was an AIDS victim did not publicly say that the deceased died of AIDS but in the preaching impressed the fact that AIDS is a disease like any other. Due to the approach given many people wanted to discuss more about it with the preacher.

Another case was about a lady who had left school prematurely because of pre-marital pregnancy and went to look for a job in town. After many years, she came home sick and unable to help herself. She stayed with her young daughter



helping where she could. At home she was given very little assistance. She could not get adequate and nutritious food. The family members did not also take her to hospital so; she died at home in a very miserable situation. The church members went to pray with her and the family but did not discuss or raise the economic situation that was going to face her surviving child. As far as the family would take the matter, the child left behind is a girl; culturally she had no right to claim property in the family, because she is a girl and more especially because she is the daughter of unmarried woman (*The researcher*).

These interviews and reflections on the issues of women's health and HIV and AIDS are quite revealing on issues of women, culture and social status. Apart from having no access to property, women have no control of their own bodies. Culture also requires women to serve others before she can serve herself. This has made women neglect their personal health and welfare in general. While the issues of HIV and AIDS are surrounded by so many cultural traditions it is true that there are other terrible cultural practices such as FGM. In the next section we will reflect on FGM.

#### **2.4.5 Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)**

Among the interviewed women and the group discussions, the whole issue of FGM was treated with a lot of reservation<sup>21</sup>. They admitted that there were people practicing it but they were not very willing to share their experiences. Those who did so requested that their stories and names be treated with a lot of confidentiality. They requested this because practice of FGM in is punishable in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, and they therefore feared that if they shared it with me as a PCEA minister, they would be punished. Therefore the following shared experiences are going to be unnamed.

I am a mother of four daughters. My first daughter got circumcised against my wish because as a firm Presbyterian a deacon and a woman's guild leader I had vowed never to do it. When it happened, I reported the incident to the chief but it was my mother (her grandmother) who did it, the chief insisted that it was not in order to imprison such an old lady. I have been very keen with the rest of my daughters and they are now of age to be tricked. I always encourage them to attend church seminars and they now realise the negative side about it (*Mother of a circumcised girl*).

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<sup>21</sup> My being a Presbyterian Church minister made my respondents to be very cautious on the issue of FGM because if one is a Presbyterian (full member of the church) and allow her daughter to be circumcised are excommunicated and put under discipline for at least six months. Those who confided with me requested not to be quoted or disclosed in any way which is taken seriously.

We are six girls in my family. We have all undergone circumcision. I got circumcised when I was in standard seven. I was sixteen years when it happened, I tried to refuse because I had friends whose parents used to tell us it was not good but I did not have choices. According to my mother, those girls who never got circumcised were very loose sexually and she wanted her daughters to be sexually disciplined because she wanted them to further education and only get married when they are working. She was also not a Christian therefore it was a cultural obligation to have her girls circumcised in preparation for marriage when they finish school. Just as she wished, we all managed to go through our education and we are all working and married. It was such a painful experience and I also remember how much I had to bleed and did not have any medical attention. For medication, an egg was prepared with other herbs and poured on the wound and I was secluded in the house. I did not go to the hospital but by the grace of God I did not have any malfunctioning because I am now a mother of three. Even my other sisters have families but I always wonder what difference it makes in sex life for those who have undergone it and those who did not. I do not remember receiving special education as is always said was the case in the traditional culture. Personally I will not let my daughters go through it specifically because of the pain I had to bear (*A woman who laments that it had to happen against her wish*).

In some families it is done secretly but in others it is an open practice. While female circumcision has been strongly opposed by the Christian church and Gender Activists Support project, the practice is rampant among the Meru and other Kenyan tribes. The daily newspaper recently reported the following:

A twenty- year old woman in Meru North District circumcised herself in a bid to appease her in-laws and reconcile with her separated husband. Ms Monica Kaari, an estranged mother of one, mutilated her genitalia with a razor blade on Tuesday saying she was fed up with her being referred to as *mukenye* by her husband's close relatives. In kimeru, the phrase *mukenye* is a derogatory reference to a woman who has not undergone the traditional ritual, and implies that she is useless, almost to a point of being avoided like a leper. On the fateful day, a daring Kaari locked herself up in her parent's house at Kiolo Kia Kithambi village in Akirang' Ondu Location of Laare Division and carried out the operation on herself.

Recording her ordeal to journalists at Maua police station Kaari said she carried out the operation to satisfy her in-laws who had vowed not to entertain a *mukenye (uncircumcised woman)* in the family. As if that was not dangerous enough, Kaari treated the wound with a mixture of Dettol and an herbal disinfectant to prevent infection and did not seek any medical treatment.

Ms Kaari, who was accompanied by her nineteen (19-month- old son Kirimi --- ---- and who walked with difficulty, said her husband was prevailed up with his parents to kick her out of the matrimony home in the year 2002 while she was pregnant.

She said her own mother was not circumcised and her parents did not see any reason to make her undergo the rite. She said her father, who found her bleeding profusely in the house informed the area chief, Patrick Nthuku, who informed the police. Local acting Officer Commanding Police Division (OCPD) Joshua said female genital mutilation is rampant in the area and called the area residents to safeguard young women against contracting dangerous diseases like the HIV and AIDS.

He said another 19-year-old woman was forced to undergo circumcision in the area ten days ago by two circumcisers who are still at large<sup>22</sup>.

Grace Mukwnjeru Karani, a teacher at Kanini primary school, has taught for 28 years in five different schools in the district. In the schools she has taught the enrolment ranged between 160-1000 pupils, all of them had boys and girls (*commonly referred to as mixed schools*). She made the following observation:

In most of these schools that I have taught, boys perform better than girls. The contributing factors to poor performance among girls are:

- Girls are engaged in domestic chores after school to help their mothers while boys are encouraged to take their schoolwork seriously.
- Particularly in this current school, the community is committed to girls' circumcision. Immediately they go through the initiation their performance drops because on initiation they are more pre-occupied with their status. Being mature women not young girls any more. The concept of it being a passage from childhood to adulthood impacts so much on their behaviour and the fact that they are taught how to get prepared for marriage impacts on their performance. At this point, many girls also drop out of school to get married due to teenage pregnancies (Grace Mukwnjeru Karani 11.02.2003).

Female Genital Mutilation remains quite hidden because of the secrecy with which it is practiced. It is also assumed that women who do it choose or prefer to do it. Those who do it as a cultural practice feel justified in the current situation. Some Christian churches, NGOs engaged in human rights activism and other opposing parties consider it dehumanising therefore it has become problematic in a pluralistic society. In such communities those who do

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.kentimes.com/nwsstory/news2.html>

it are stigmatised and others who do not do it are also stigmatised. The judgment of whether it is wrong or right is so fluid. For most respondents, it was clear that the candidates do not take part in the decision of whether to do it or not. In most cases they are minors and in other cases the victim must adhere to the cultural requirements. In communities that have strong protestant Christians especially the Presbyterian Church, FGM is stigmatised and strongly discouraged. There are also some areas where some NGOs have put much effort against as part of their campaigns on women's and girls' right and empowerment (*see photograph no.2.12 showing the community members creating awareness about the dangers of FGM and the need to uphold rights of girl child in the photographic essay section*).

#### **2.4.6 Marital issues (Widowhood, Polygamy, Leviratic<sup>23</sup> Union And Single Parenthood)**

As with other African societies, the interviews carried out and literary survey among the Ameru revealed that family life was not a choice. It was a communal requirement that everyone had to fulfill or one was considered an outcast. This has become crucial in the contemporary society because there is mushrooming single parenthood resulting from various causes. Single parenthood is however seen differently by different people. For women, single parenthood is mostly caused by the death of the spouses, divorce or accidental pregnancies outside marriage and recently some women even choose single parenthood.

In the traditional Meru society, remarriage and leviratic unions were the remedy to the situation. The challenging bit in the contemporary society is that widowers are readily encouraged to remarry but the widows are encouraged to remain faithful to family and remain unmarried because upon getting married again the woman becomes the property of the new clan and she is not permitted to take her children to another clan. While widows and widowers may be perceived to be the same, the conceptualization of marriage makes it difficult for a woman once widowed. Here are different views and experiences:

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<sup>23</sup> Leviratic union refers to a situation where once one is widowed, she is supposed to marry a brother to the deceased or his kin but the children are said to belong to the deceased husband.

Prisca Thigaa M' Miriti is 79 years old from Mwimbi and widowed twice. She does not complain about her leviratic union because her argument is that, her culture requires it that way; but her story has evidence that women get exploited and oppressed in leviratic institution. She says:

When my husband died we had two children together. We had lived for a very short time and I was very young. This was not an end on my side but I only needed to heed to the cultural requirements. I only needed to undergo a cleansing ritual to free me from the spirit of death. The elders of my (marital) clan looked for a man who could perform the ritual; I got accepted back from seclusion by the community and then got united with my husband's brother. I lived with him until 1996 when he also died. We had three children together. I am therefore a mother of five children. According to our culture these five children belong to my former husband.

However, since my husband's brother had another wife, my children and I have gone through very difficult moments because there is no time we seemed to belong. The most painful of it all is when the sharing of property came and my children were considered secondary or as the other. Despite the fact that my former husband had lots of land and livestock my children struggled. They had to struggle for themselves because all that belonged to my former husband had been taken away let alone my experiences as a remarried widow.

Charity Maitha Njeru is 67 years old from Igambang'ombe. Charity is a second wife and a mother of seven children. According to Charity Maitha polygamy was a way of life when she was young. She however recounts what it involved and how women were affected by its requirements. With time, she argues, polygamy has taken a different perspective. During her time, there was agreement between wives but now competition and fights characterize polygamous relationships. Maitha shares her experience thus:

I started going to the church recently. In fact my children who are now all in their own families motivated me. I have lived most of my life in accordance to Mbeere culture. Among other things my husband is polygamous although my co-wife died. I am the second wife. I did not force myself into his home. It was arranged between his first wife and his mother that I should get married to him. This was acceptable and we lived in respect for each other. She died quite early, leaving behind three very young children. I took care of those children until each of them got married. Including my seven biological children, I am a mother of ten children.

Issues that I know are difficult to handle as a woman in my culture are issues of death. Out of experience I know that once one loses a child to death, one has to be excluded to ensure that one does not spread the spirit of death. A cleansing

ritual is done by a medicine man so that one can be reunited with the society and the husband. This also happens when one loses a husband or a wife. But the issues of seclusion and cleansing ritual are not taken so seriously for men but women.

I lost my first two children to death. During this time I had to be secluded until I went through the cleansing ritual. During that period I was not supposed to mix with other people, no one was allowed to bring me food and I was not allowed to cook. I remember I almost died until one Christian woman dared visit and bring me food. She encouraged me to walk out and look for food. After that kind of situation, one was also supposed to change the naming system. Instead of naming someone, one was supposed to name the child that survives after an animal or anything else. My supposedly firstborn child is called Mbaka (literally a cat).

Charity Maitha expresses that a widowed woman in Mbeere ethnic community had so many taboos. For example, one was not supposed to mix with the people until the cleansing ritual was performed by a medicine man. Until this ritual was performed, the wife was not supposed to share same house let alone the bed. The ritual included sexual intercourse with the identified man (the one doing the cleansing ritual) as a way of chasing away the spirit of death.

#### **2.4.7 Dearth Of Basic Amenities -Firewood, Water, Roads Network And Health Facilities**

In the majority of the rural areas, water is fetched from the river; the common source of fuel energy is firewood; there are no road networks and health facilities are scarce. In the midst of this women are the ones responsible for household chores where all these facilities are crucial. Women must ensure that all these facilities are available for use. In addition to the already existing problem, industrialization or 'development' in general has impacted on the lives of women significantly. For instance, land demarcation has interfered with short routes to the rivers and has also interfered with women's freedom to search for firewood freely. Women shared the following experiences in relation to such basic necessities See the illustrative photographic essay at end of chapter two.

Rose Mwikali Njeru is 40 years old from Igambang'ombe and a mother of four children. Mwikali and her husband wholly depend on what they produce from their small farm. For financial capital they have to look for casual jobs from the village. Sometimes the husband gets some work like felling trees and producing timber planks in the forest but much of his money is not accounted for. Their first child is now in standard seven and they are not sure they will manage to take her to secondary school; yet the husband does not allow his wife to use contraceptives which means they are likely to have more children, which she fears:

I left school in standard seven, looked for a job and worked as a house girl for some time. My husband had also left school in standard seven. When we were getting married my husband assured me that things would be all right because he had a big and fertile land. This was not a major issue because even our parents depended on tilling the land. Now that I am experiencing it practically, it is really difficult. My bigger children go to school, I leave the third one in the neighbourhood, and I have to carry this last one wherever I go. I have to look for some job because we need money, fetch water, and fetch firewood and when I go home I have to do the cooking.

My husband also goes looking for jobs but much of his money goes to beer drinking yet I am not supposed to enquire how much he made and how he spent it. In my case he has to know where I was working, how much I made and how I spent the money. I go through very rough times but I have to remain in my marital home because my parents cannot allow me to go back to my natal home because it is disgrace for the family and the land there belongs to my brothers (Rose Mwikali Njeru 17.02.2003).

Mwikali like many other women in the rural areas has to be creative on how and where to get basics for their livelihoods or survival. The following stories illustrate women's creativity and the role of faith in the midst of dire poverty and oppression.

Jennet Mbaka Ireri is 60 years old from Igambang'ombe and a mother of nine children. She is also a grand mother and yet she still has some children in the primary school. Up to around five years ago her husband lived a very irresponsible life where he spent most his time and money in local brew. She is also a church elder in the local congregation and has been a woman leader in the church in different capacities. Jennet recounts her challenges as church leader:

My commitment to serve God is born of what God has done in my life for many years. Even when life is really tough I have always believed there is a way because He is able. For all my marriage life until 1999 my husband spent most of his money in beer drinking and yet I needed my children to lead a life different from mine. Although the church never helped in terms of material support, the spiritual nourishment that I got regularly enabled me to move and face the following day. God has always blessed the work of my hand and now apart from those in school my children are able to enjoy a better life

Currently five of Jennet's children are earning well for themselves. Two of them run informal businesses and two work for the government ministries. She attributes their success to God and believes even the others will do well. She also thanks God that her husband eventually stopped drinking local brew and that, to her, was a great miracle. He now goes to the church and has acknowledged that he wasted a lot of energy, money and time serving the devil. For Jennet he stopped at the time of God and for a purpose.

Once in a while her husband brought some money home. Therefore, to feed and educate her children, Jennet engaged herself in various activities. The four main activities she engages in for survival are:

(1) Agricultural production. In their farm she could only grow food crops (*millet, sorghum, maize, green grams, cow peace, finger millet and pigeon peas among others*) due to climatic conditions and the fact the government did not emphasize dry land cash crops like cotton that she once tried, and marketing was a major problem. Since there is no controlled marketing for small-scale businesses/ peasant farmers' produce, the financial income from her production is quite limited. Her children (boys and girls) help her in agricultural activities.

(2) She is engaged in pottery work. She makes pots of various designs and takes them to the market. To make the pots she has to go for water from the river, look for firewood and grass to burn and dry them. She has to walk long distances hunting for specific clay soil that makes pottery. To carry those pots to the market that is three kilometres from home she uses her own back. Her girl children help in this project when they are not in school. During harvesting times Jennet and her colleagues (*who engage in the same project*) carry their pots and exchange them for food in the nearby higher agricultural potential areas. They have to walk



from home to home looking for possible buyers and it is not obvious that by the end of the day they will be bought.

(3) Jennet also buys and sells cereal in the local market. Her business is usually very weak because of a lack of storage facility. Due to the lack of enough space in her homestead and also transport problems she has to rent a place at the back of the shops in the market. The rented places are not very secure and she therefore keeps on losing her property, while not being insured (see photograph number 2.5).

(4) She is also a member of women's group in the area. In these women's group, they agreed to help each other buy kitchen items like cooking pots, plates, cups, and spoons. During the peak periods, they help each other with weeding and harvesting. They also help and visit each other during times of hardships like grief, and raising funds for their children's school fees. Initially they used to contribute money and keep it so that they could loan each other but this became problematic due to lack of adequate skills in record keeping, administration and problems of insecurity. Their initial arrangement was based on mutual trust and not legal policies. They are faced with incidents of some members who cannot be trusted and there are no mechanisms of recovering their property.

Child labour characterised with exploitation and oppression is common in Kenya. In this particular study it is illustrated by Jones Kaari's experiences. Looking at it from face value one would say she chose to take the job; but the underlying circumstances exemplify clearly that Kaari did not have other choices to choose from.

Jones Kaari Mutegi is sixteen years old from Chuka and works as a house girl in Thika town. The current home is her third place of work. In the first home, she was paid Ksh.700.00 per month, in the next one she was paid Ksh.750.00 and in the current home she is paid Ksh.800.00 (*about \$8*) per month. In the first two homes she did not stay for long because she was over-worked and the employers were too cruel to her. She also did not appreciate the wages. In the current job she earns at least Ksh.100.00 more than in the first home. In the current home the employer is not cruel and does not mistreat her as she experienced in the

former places of work. In the previous places of work she woke up at 5.00 am and slept at 11.00 pm and during the day she had a lot of work. This happened because she had to wake up early to prepare everyone's breakfast and prepare children to go to school in the morning. In the evening she had to make sure that when everyone had gone to sleep she tidied up the house and set the kitchen for the following day (In other words she worked approximately 18 hours per day for less than \$8 per month).

In the current home she wakes up at 6.00 am and sleeps between 8.00-9.00 pm. Although the lady in the home works she helps a lot and she at least appreciates her work and she is not cruel to her. The lady in this home finds time to talk to her unlike in her previous two jobs where they only mistreated her and disregarded her hard work.

When she gets her salary at the end of the month she has to share it with her mother. However, it is difficult to do this because the transport cost for a return journey to her home from Thika is Ksh.500.00 leaving her with only Ksh.300.00. Therefore she rarely goes home, and she send the money with others. The only thing she does with this money for herself is to buy clothes. She cannot also buy very nice clothes as she would wish to because the money is little and yet she has to help her mother. Asked to comment on the experiences of women, she says:

...On the other hand women in general get very tired because they are the ones who do the domestic chores like washing clothes, bathing the children, fetching water, fetch firewood, doing the agricultural activities like planting weeding, and harvesting. By observing the village activities, women do all these duties while most men like my father do a lot of idling and engage in alcoholism and later come home and fight their wives and children.

Mary Kajira Mbaabu is 28 years old from Mwimbi and a mother of two girls. She left schooling at standard eight when her father passed away. She however trained in dressmaking and knitting. Before she got married she had a small-scale knitting business that ceased when she got married. As a homesteader, she does small-scale farming for food production, which she sometimes sells for cash. She also keeps chickens, which are used for egg production and chicken meat. Her husband was employed in one of the local coffee factories but was retrenched in 2001. She is currently involved in a small-scale business (she sells cereals) and still continues with her small farm and household chores and she is also a member of one of

the local women's group. In that women's group, they contribute money for each other and help each other with garden work during the peak periods. Mary's business is the major source of income in the family. Mary has to organize how and where to leave children when going to the market. But she is not seen as the family's breadwinner.

When the husband used to work, Mary's work was seen as a subsidy on his earning. Mary worked very hard and they could sell the agricultural products she got out of their small farm. They have two small farms, one is 7km away and the other one is 3kms away. She has to make sure she fetches water from the river before she goes to the farm. There is no regular transport to these two destinations and even when there is transport availability Mary cannot afford the fare to her farm, and she has to walk. During planting time, she carries her seeds, fertilizer (when available), and other garden implements on her back to the farm. Sometimes she gets assistance from friends whom they synergies with. She still has to carry food for them on her back. On coming from the farm she has to tend to her children and husband. When coming from the farm she has to carry firewood that she uses as fuel.

Currently, now that her husband has been retrenched, she has started a more elaborate small scale business. She buys and sells cereals (maize, beans, sorghum and millet etc depending on what is available). She goes to the market two days a week (Tuesday at Keria and on Saturday at Magutuni are the official market days). The remaining three days in the week she divides for her house and farm work.

Mary's husband drinks beer, which Mary thinks is a drawback in her family. When the husband was still working, he used to drink a lot and come home late. Other times especially on payday he would start fighting and life was very tough. It would have been worse if Mary asked anything to do with money. In contrast whatever Mary did with the little money she raised from selling some of the farm products like bananas that women can sell without much struggle, she had to account for it. On the basis of her own experiences, she says that the life a woman lives is full of suffering and hard work. It is difficult being the unappreciated breadwinner, while domestic chores like fetching firewood and water are solely a woman's job despite how tired one is.

Among the 126 women interviewed, 100% of the women said they used firewood in their homes besides other sources fuel for some. Some 30 homes, that is 23.8%, used alternative fuel that included kerosene, gas and electricity. Only fourteen (14) of the thirty homes, that is, 11%, used electricity and most of women lived in the institution's (schools and hospital) houses. Therefore only 5 homes that is 3.96% had electricity that belonged to the households. This confirms earlier research such as that of Boserup (1970, 1986 and 1990) because she argues that women in developing countries are very confined to domestic chores and that they use very crude implements. While this is so, research has it that women are core to rural sustainable livelihood (see DFID 1999; 1998; IFAD 2000; Chambers 1993; Ellis 2000 and Ahmed and Lipton 1997) yet they have limited capability and access to resources.

Alongside the individual interviews, the research also involved five focus group discussions. In this section, take note on how the focus group discussion confirmed the issues raised in the interviews.

## **2.5 Focus group Discussions**

Of the five focus group discussions, three were held in Mwimbi Division one in Chuka and one in Igambang'ombe Divisions. One of those held in Mwimbi Division involved "homesteaders" who are unemployed, most of them living under intense poverty but who are engaged in various activities around the homestead to earn a living.

The second group involved women extension workers from the Ministry of Agriculture in Mwimbi Division. These women are actively involved in extension work in the district but currently based in Mwimbi division.

The third group involved women high school teachers from in Mwimbi Division drawn from three different schools (Chogoria boys High School, Chogoria Girls High School and Thigaa secondary). These teachers have a wide range of experiences because they have taught in

other schools before. While some were born in Mwimbi others were not but have worked there for a long time.

The fourth group came from a PCEA Woman's Guild from Chuka Presbytery. It was held at Chuka town. This group included women from different divisions because it was a presbytery level meeting. Chuka Presbytery includes the following divisions: Chuka, Magumoni and Igambang'ombe divisions. Woman's Guild is basically comprised of women church leaders from the whole of the Presbytery. It also comprised of different categories of women (teachers, nurses, social workers, homesteaders etc) of women.

The fifth group comprised of some members of an NGO called Save Child Canada. This group is basically an activist group on issues related to girl child in the area. They create awareness about the significance of children's human rights like education, protection against early marriages, FGM, child labour and any other type of injustice against them. In the next section we will look at each of these focus group discussions as they were carried out during the field work.

### **2.5.1 Makena Women Group - Mwimbi Division -10.02.2003**

Makena Women's group is comprised of forty-five (45) women. Only fifteen members managed to turn up for focus group discussion as reflected on the table below. Although they are faced with a lot of problems they have engaged in the following projects: - pig keeping, poultry keeping, running a grain store, helping in gardening and contributing money to assist (loan) one another. Among others, the problems of leadership and security have been major struggles in their endeavours.

Joyce Karuta Mate who is also the chairlady of the group convened the group. She is the elected councilor in the area. She has been a chairlady of the Woman's Guild for many years, which she stepped down from to vie for civic leadership. She has a special commitment to community development. She notes with concern that although all the members of the

community are in need of some vital facilities like road network and health facilities, women are hard hit because the majority of women in the rural community are so limited by resources and skills. One of the major limitations is low levels or lack of education because not many families are taking the education of girls seriously. She is of the opinion that without adequate formal education, one is vulnerable to all other problems.

The members that turned for the focus group discussion are tabulated below. The following issues were raised in this focus group, as being the key elements of women's experience:

- Low or lack of formal education
- Poor health or lack of health attention
- Hard labour in agricultural production, with little or no benefits - especially in cash crop production
- Domestic violence
- Lack of water in the vicinity
- Inheritance and property ownership
- Lack of credit facilities
- Difficulties around security for their properties
- Exclusion of women from decision-making forums
- Traditional widowhood cultures and practices that are not women friendly like FGM, early marriages, property ownership

**Table 4: Names of the participants of Makena Women's Group**

	Name of participants	Age (Yrs)	Responsibility	Comments from the participants
1	Priscila Gaturu Kithinji	71	Member	I feel very tired of our projects because we have continued to lose to the thieves all the time.
2	Sabina Ndeguru Mwihandi	55	Member	When property in our group is not secure we cannot promise to stay well because for example my husband does not help yet he wants to know how we are progressing. He threatens to stop my membership
3	Joyce K. Mate	52	Chairlady	It was out of the concern of the struggles that I go through as a woman that made me think of contacting my fellow women so that we could assist one another in thought, working together and improving our homes.
4	Alieta Kainyu Mati	52	Secretary	Joyce is better than us because she attends women's meetings at Chuka and other places. She has really helped us because by working together we have improved our homes in many ways.
5	Virginia Ntagana Ndeke	50	Member	All I want is to revive our original working spirit and identify a secure place.
6	Alison Kanyua	50	Committee	I believe God has reason for all that happens to

	Mutegi		Member	his people. God is on our side (Alison is also an evangelist in the area with the PCEA).
7	Rosemary Karuru M'kanga	50	Member	When we first started this place was so secure. It is recently that we have started experiencing thefts.
8	Phyllis Igonji Nkanata	45	Treasurer	Although I am the treasurer I do not know how to keep very good records but together with other officials, we help each other to keep the record of payments. I have a lot of problems trying to keep up with the banking requirements.
9	Agnes Irima Mputhia	41	Member	It is through the group that I managed to buy my kitchen items (cooking pots, plates, spoons etc).
10	Mary Wanja Nkonge	38	Member	People talk about loans but I think they are supposed to be done by employed people.
11	Silica Mukwamugo Miriti	35	Member	The moment we allowed other people to advise us, some took advantage of us. We have since then lost a lot of property.
12	Silivenia Maringa Nkonge	30	Member	Some envious people and even some of the husbands of our group members, discourage our efforts. Some men say that if you allow women to have lot of money they become proud and disobedient.
13	Lucy Karauki Kinegeni	26	Member	Other men say, the moment women get money, they become disobedient to their husbands and do not attend to domestic duties well.
14	Jacinta Karimi M'ribu	25	Member	I just want to learn from the older members since I joined the group the other day.
15	Pamela Kjuju M'rimi	23	Member	Now that I am new in the group, my prayer is that it gets revived because when we meet we are able to build one another materially, spiritually and morally.

### 2.5.2 High School Teachers – Mwimbi Division 12.02.2003

Eunice Warigia Githinji was the contact person who made it possible to gather together seven high school teachers. These teachers teach in the following schools: Thigaa Secondary School, Chogoria Boys' high school and Chogoria Girls' High School. There were more women teachers in these schools who were willing to attend the discussion but their husbands did not approve of their wives attending a women's group meeting and to them this activity was classified as such.

The meeting was held in the house of one of the lady teachers whose husband was in support of this kind of undertaking and encouraged the ladies who were present to take advantage of such forums for their personal growth and development. The teachers chose to meet in this

house because they thought that it would be a safe place for them as they share their experiences. They also had to meet after hours because they were coming from different schools. The following issues were raised in this focus group discussion and members suggested that they were key elements of women's experience:

- Government policies, acts of parliament and laws are not known to women therefore women continue to suffer injustices and dehumanization. They suggested that women need to be educated on and about them.
- Discrimination against women when it comes to the work place - especially on the issues of promotion of teachers and especially those who came from purely boys high schools. This is more severe if the head teacher is a man.
- Although the government and the NGOS are putting much emphasis on the education of girl children, cultural norms and beliefs remain major barriers to the education of girl children.
- Female circumcision affects girls adversely because once girls go through the initiation, they become unruly in school and a big number of them either get married they complete their studies or become victims of pre-marital pregnancies.
- Domestic violence. In most cases quarrels and fighting arise because men feel that women have no reason to enquire about their spending yet they expect that women should account for each and every coin they spend. Most of them argue that culture does not allow women to own property or keep on following up their husbands' spending. For those of us in paid employment, it is unfair but that creates tensions in the family resulting in violence.

During the brainstorming session, the members identified some issues and concerns and made the following suggestions. The church and the government should put specific machinery in place to ensure that there is:

- Unbiased participation and decision making
- Sharing responsibility in the family between husband and wife
- Responsible living
- Availability of health facilities bodily health, nutritional health, reproduction health and care taking.
- Transparency
- Accountability

On the same note one of the women requested that her observation and concern be noted and recorded as follows:

I Jennifer K Murigu, wish to make the following observation:

While low or lack of education puts women down, those of us who are "educated" are still oppressed by the institutional structures that are so patriarchal. It is more dehumanising when a woman is employed, contributes to



the economy of the family and yet her contribution is not given due regard. Even in families where men and women are both in paid employment, men have the upper hand in decision-making; more so men are the owners of property in our society. At the places of work, women must work more to prove themselves. My other major concern is that even if there are policies that ensure equal treatment of women and men I am not sure they are rightfully functional to help women enjoy the promise equality.

Names of the high school women teachers who participated in the focus group discussion are provided and tabulated below.

**Table 5: Names Of Participants Of High School Teachers**

	Name of participants	Age (Yrs)	Responsibility	Comments from the participants
1	Regina Kimathi	37	English	It is a real challenge for women who are in professional careers because at the end of the day they have to attend to their domestic chores while husbands wait to be served.
2	Euphemia K. Thairu	29	Commerce	My experience as one working away from home, and married in a different tribe is that women in most Kenyan tribes struggle with the same issues of life.
3	Cathrine K Mukua	33	Business Ed.	Life is a challenge especially when a woman is married in a different tribe.
4	Janeffer K Murigu	28	Kiswahili	I agree that I am a high school teacher and church minister's wife, but experience has taught me that being a woman places one in a corner that denies one authority of what she has even worked for. Education is important, yes, but social construction determined by patriarchy is terrible.
6	Mercy K. Muthuri	32	Geography	I look forward to a moment when the government will be able to address women's vulnerability adequately especially on the issues of property ownership and inheritance.
7	Jane Kathurima	39	History	The Meru tradition that denies women custody of children denies women and children certainty and hope. If the man decides to divorce, children and mother are assured separation whether the man is responsible or not.
9	Mukwanjagi	32	Homescience	There is a misunderstanding that home science is for girls. Very few boys venture into this field.
10	Eunice Warigia Gthinji		Mathematics	I take my career very seriously but also find satisfaction in social gathering and church leadership. I also motivate girls and parents to know that boys and girls alike can do well in mathematics.
11	Joyceline Kawira	27	Chemistry	Many people wonder that I teach Chemistry. It is commonly believed that chemistry is a men's subject. I am happy to be a role model to the young girls.

### **2.5.3 Ministry Of Agriculture Extension Officers -Mwibmbi Division – 12.02.2003**

This group involved women working as extension officers in the Ministry of Agriculture and who are actively involved in extension work in Meru South District based in Mwimbi division headquarters - Kieganguru.

Agnes Ndundu Mwenda who is also the Division Horticultural Crops Officer was the contact person who managed to bring the other three extension workers together. Agnes is currently carrying out research on the effects of bad health on agriculture in the district. During the brainstorming session and discussion of the selected issues the group came to a consensus that among other things women experience difficulties and hardships and raised issues of concern in the following order:

- Land ownership
- Land inheritance/ property ownership
- Discriminatory culture that excludes women
- Cultural assumptions that prescribe duties of a woman in a family set up.
- Domestic violence
- Marketing
- Transport
- Credit facilities not available for women
- Poor health (Women, health, and hard labour)
- Water
- Land and widowhood
- Low education status for women and the difficulty in advancement due to:
- Negative attitudes towards education for girl children.

The names of the women who participated in this Focus Group Discussion provided and tabulated in a table below.

**Table 6: Names of the Participants of Ministry Of Agriculture Extension Officers**

Numbers	Name of participants	Age (Yrs)	Responsibility	Comments from the participants
1	Dorothy I Mugambi	45	Extension services Maara Location	It is sensitive to make comments because they are usually not taken kindly. However, as an extension officer for a long time now, I must say farmers do not take women as seriously as they do men.
2	Agnes N Mwenda	41	Horticultural Crops Officer in charge Mwimbi Division	The issues of decision-making, ownership of land, inheritance, property ownership and the traditional perception that women do not own property are most dehumanising and have retained women in poverty and gross injustice.
3	Anne W Muriuki	41	Extension services Ganga Location	Transport is a major challenge for extension workers. Yet farmers expect so much from us in terms punctuality and output.
4	Annisia W Kibaara	37	Extension services Chogoria Municipality	Framers expect us to provide them with basic farm implements but the government does not supply. We end up in a big dilemma

#### **2.5.4 Igambang'ombe Women Activists Group In Girl Children's Rights Working Under (Save Child Canada) – 17.02.2003**

This focus group involved some of the women who are actively involved with activities of *Save the Child Canada*. This is an NGO, which is active in Igambang'ombe Division advocating for the rights of girl children. This NGO puts an emphasis on the fight against Female Genital Mutilation, against early marriages and advocacy for children's right to education and more emphatically, that of girl child.

Winfred Mukami Nyaga and Jane Wanjagi Kiringa are workers with Save Child Canada. Mukami is the Location's Program Officer in Kamwimbi location of Igambang'ombe Division. With the assistance of the two women (Wanjagi and Mukami), it was possible to bring eight women together. The NGO organises training for the trainers (TOT) and occasional workshops. The trainers penetrate the community who work very close with the local leaders like the chiefs, assistant chiefs, educationists and the church leaders in their areas of operation.

Winfred Mukami Nyaga, who is also the location programmer, makes the following remarks:

One very destructive aspect in the location is the fact parents still hold on the traditional belief that boy children are more important than girl children and therefore believe that it is more important to educate boy children. In most families, after the initiation girls are encouraged to get married. In other families girls step out of school for their brothers especially at high school levels. If this trend continues, low or lack of education will continue pulling women down and living in suffering.

Implicitly Mukami observes that traditional socialization continues to hold women captives, in that they have no authority not only in decision making but also about issues that concern them directly and even their own lives and bodies. To her, this situation has continued being a major obstacle to realizing quality life. Even when there are opportunities, women must wait to get permission from male members of the society. They are also keen to search whether whatever they wish to undertake is socially acceptable.

During the brainstorming session and discussion of the selected issues, members identified the issues and concerns listed below as the ones that contribute to women vulnerability.

- Education of girl children is taken as secondary to that of boy children in many families
- On decision making: -girls have take to take responsibilities made for them by others for instance, early marriages and Female Genital Mutilations (FGM),
- Traditional practices, beliefs and customs that are harmful to women eg FGM, forced and early marriages
- Sexual exploitation and abuse
- Child labour
- S.T.I. and HIV and AIDS
- Lack of water within manageable distances
- Difficulties in hunting for fuel wood
- Transport
- Women and Health

This group went a step further to suggest what they thought the government and the church should do to transform their lives. They suggested that the government and the church could do the following:

- The government needs to continue community training which seems to be making some difference in the community as far as social construction and traditional beliefs are concerned.
- Tough measures should be taken against those caught in whatever kind of abuse.
- Government to enforce policies that are women-friendly and ensure that they are put in practice through local authorities.
- The church should join hands with the government to educate the masses on human rights and creating awareness about the negative traditional beliefs, norms and practices.

The names of the participants in this Focus Group Discussion are provided and tabulated in the table below

**Table 7: Names Of The Participants Of Igambang’ombe Women Activists Group**

Numbers	Name of participants	Age (Yrs)	Responsibility	Comments from the participants
1	Priscica Utuku Njeru	79	Member	I am happy to see what women can do now. When I was young only men could do such things. These days there are women doctors, police women, women church minister and others.
2	Annet W Nyaga	47	Member	As a nursery school teacher and a church leader, I am glad that I can now see a future in our society. Save Child Canada is such a blessing.
3	Rehab Igoki Njue	46	Member	As I grew up, what we are calling children’s right did not exist. What our parents said was done without question and was the final authority. Am glad my children will have a different and better life.
4	Dorcias Nguga Njue	41	Member	It is true that girls do a lot of work not only because they are willing to help their mothers with domestic chores but because they are also taught from young age that it is their obligation to do so..
5	Rose Mwikali Njeru	40	Member	Girls are always there for their mothers but boys are out there hunting or fishing
6	Agnes W Nyaga	30	Member	While parent’s tendency to protect girls is positive, it denies the girl child the opportunity to discover her potential independently. While my brother is free to do things, I am monitored and stopped from

				venturing.
7	Jane Wanjagi Kiringa	30	NGO worker	Working with (Save Child Canada) is such an opportunity for my child and I. I used to feel very bad about being a single mother but I am now empowered to know that I am capable of a better life and a future.
8	Winfred M Nyaga	24	NGO worker	Working with (Save Child Canada) has made me to know that young as I am, I can make a difference in the society and in the life of women.
9	Esther Mumbi Nyaga	13	Teenager	I enjoy following my aunt when they go to the women group meetings. I am also hoping to grow up to work with such organization because they plan good things for girls and women.

### **2.5.5 Chuka Presbyterial<sup>24</sup> Woman's Guild Meeting Held On At PCEA Chuka Town Church 16-02-2003**

Woman's Guild is one of the standing committees in the PCEA. The leadership of this group starts from the grassroots and goes up to the national level. At the Presbytery level, women from all the parishes of that given presbytery gather together to discuss issues that pertain women in the Presbytery and the Church in general. This leadership draws women from different professions and categories. In this case it also drew women from three different divisions including Chuka, Magumoni and Igambang'ombe Divisions.

During the brainstorming session and discussion that followed women put together the following observations:

- Woman's Guild is the strongest church group in the PCEA thus far in terms of financial ability and general support to the church. Most of our projects are non profit and those that profit making, make marginal profits. Our projects include institutions of learning, rental houses and now the newly opened Guest House and Conference Center at Makupa, Mombasa.
- Women are few in major decision forums of the church which are characterized by the three major courts of the church namely; Kirksession, Presbytery, and the General Assembly. I am concerned that we rarely get women moderators and clerks of the

<sup>24</sup> Note that in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, the term Presbyterial with an L is used for groups that function at presbytery level.

Presbytery not to mention that we really get women in the Head Office in the GA secretariat.

- The general assumption that women are supposed to clean the church and make tea for the church leadership, has distorted the understanding of women in leadership. The majority of women in church leadership is at the level of deacons who are not involved in the decision and policy making of the church.
- Immoral cultural practices are crucial for our church. These practices include: Female Genital Mutilation, early marriages, polygamy, and compromising girls' education. As a church woman's committee, we are trying our best to fight but also call on the wider church and the government to join hands to ensure that everything is under control.
- Absence of women in decision-making forums is conspicuously noticeable in the church and society.
- In terms of the church and social development, the Woman's Guild has projects from grassroots to central committee level that all women who are members are shareholders. Through this, we train women how to participate in social development and also to become self reliant.

The names of the participants in this Focus Group Discussion are provided below and their individual comments are also provided.

**Table 8: Names of Participants of Chuka Presbyterial Woman's Guild**

	Names	Age	Responsibility	Comments
1	Priscilla K Njagi	40	Chairperson	Women and children are at risk of immoral cultural practices like FGM. Girls' education is not taken seriously; child labour is still prevalent although we are trying our best to change the situation.
2	Ann W Ngai	46	Secretary	Our Presbyterial is unique because of the variety. Those members that come from lower zones have different experiences than those from the upper zones. There are more cases of school drop out in the lower zones than the upper. By upper zones I mean from Magumoni parish upwards. And by lower zone I specifically mean Igambang'ombe and some parts of Magumoni.
3	Hellen M Nyaga	47	Treasurer	I experience difficulties getting cess <sup>25</sup> from the parishes that are in the lower zones. Some of our congregations from Magumoni parish and Kamwimbi Outreach have difficulties completing their cess.
4	Rose U Crispus	57	Member	I look back to the 1980s when some of our women church ministers were young girls and we got so excited. 1989 we had more than ten girls doing interviews for church ministry. Five qualified for sisterhood and two for ordained ministry. Most of these girls were members of Woman's Guild when they were really young.
5	Agnes J Muturi	53	Member	It is very difficult sometimes when one is willing to help

<sup>25</sup> 'Cess' is a local Kenyan term, probably a corruption from the longer English word, "Assessment". It refers to the financial allocations provided by each church level to the next level.

				girls but there are no legal machineries to assist. For instance, in many cases people will refer one to what culture requires.
6	Ened E Njeru	54	Member	As I share with a number of women colleagues in the committee and at the place of work, women are very disadvantaged financially because even many of us who are employed have to explain how our money is spent. That is one of the reasons why some women do not have money to pay when we agree as woman's guild members to pay a given amount for our projects.
7	Betreece K Njoka	38	Member	In many areas where FGM is practiced, it is done in deep secret especially among PCEA Christians because once it is known to have been done for her/his girl/s one is ex-communicated from the church for at least six months.
	Names	Age	Responsibility	Comments
8	Mary M Isaack	42	Member	I must say that in Kenya many families should be charged for child labour in the name employing primary school leavers as "house girls". Rarely will one find domestic workers who are mature men and women.
9	Grace M Njoka	57	Member	The Woman's Guild and the church at large has really helped our communities to realize that all children should be treated equally although it is really difficult to realize the anticipated result.
10	Florence C Ileri	64	Eastern Region Organizer	For the more than twenty years that I have worked with the Woman's Guild, I have always struggled to ensure that women fellowship with each other and their faith commitment are emphasized.
11	Stella Njeru	50	Member	As an educator and a Christian I am an activist on the need to teach children about God when they are still small. I therefore ensure PPI is taken seriously.
12	Rose K Mutegi	44	Member	We organize seminars for different ages but I thank God because the Christian Education department is now taking seminars very seriously for all categories of members and taking care of the PCEA sponsored schools.
13	Beatrice Ndura	38	Member	We ensure that all the women across the church are members of the national project by way of paying given registration fees when they are entering the Guild..

### 2.5.6. Summary From The Five Focus Group Discussions

First and foremost, it is important to note that focus group discussion as a method of data collection involves persons specifically selected owing to their particular interest, expertise or position in their particular community. This purposive stratified sampling was done in an endeavour to collect information from key informants on a number of issues, as well as



brainstorming a variety of solutions and ultimately to facilitate group discussions, as a tool of data collection and possibly policy construction (Sarantakos 1998).

The different groups of people were able to come together, discuss the identified issues and brainstorm together the possible solutions. While the discussions were geared towards data collection, individual experiences shared in a group discussion were helpful to individual persons as they related their own experiences to each other's experiences.

The five different groups that held focus group discussions were people who either worked together or had related interests. For instance, the contact persons for the women teachers reported that six of the nine teachers who turned up did so because they really needed a space where they could share their personal experiences. These teachers also had major concern for the girl children at homes and in schools. The other common factor was that they had issues they felt were important for them as professional teachers. While they did not have solutions to most of the issues they raised, the members felt that the discussion was very empowering as each of them reflected on their individual experiences.

The group discussion held at Chuka was with churchwomen leaders, although they were all leaders, they were from different division, different economic backgrounds and different professions. But they were church leaders entrusted by their local churches and together have a commitment to preaching the Gospel in word and deeds. In a personal interview with the Regional Woman's Guild Organiser,<sup>26</sup> she said, "as women in the church leadership we are committed to realising development in the church and in our community. We have built church and church halls, schools, rental houses and encourage each other to be good examples in our own villages by working hard and keeping our homes neat".

Although they were carried out at different times and places, all five discussion groups identified the need for the church and the government to join hands in finding solutions for the

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<sup>26</sup> Eastern Region that she organizes covers and goes beyond the old Meru District to Isiolo and Marsabit. The Woman's Guild was among the first Christian groupings to fight for women's human dignity and wholeness by challenging female circumcision which the Government heeded and banned irrespective of its cultural deep roots. See Njoroge J.N. (2000). *Kiama Kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of Resistance and Transformation*. Accra: Legon Theological Studies.

gross injustices experienced by women. Three (women of Makena women's group in Mwimbi Division; Church women leaders in Chuka Division and the group of women from Igambang'ombe Division) out of the five groups identified education as core to quality life for women. The other two groups (extension officers in the Ministry of Agriculture in Mwimbi Division and the group of women high school teachers) identified the need to have policies that take women and their concerns seriously. The list of issues are long as listed below but after the discussions and brainstorming the groups were of the opinion that all other issues put together are important but the need for appropriate policies and laws that must enforce and ensure justice is granted to all especially the vulnerable in the society.

**(a) Summary of the concerns of women that cut across the five focus group discussions**

The focus group discussion under review in the previous section took place in different places and times. It is however important to note that a number of issues and concerns were alike and took the same dimensions. In the section below, are the ten key issues that were identified and prioritized in the five groups.

(1) Women are excluded from *decision-making*. For instance in issues of land ownership, only men are called when the father wants to pass on the land inheritance to his sons. The wives do not participate nor are they supposed to be briefed on the proceedings. This happens even to the ones whose husbands are not alive. And the share of land (if any is given to her) is allocated to the boy children.

(2) Issues of *property ownership*. While the government has it that a woman has a right to property ownership, on the ground there is much discrimination when it comes to such.

(3) *Traditional socialization* that continues to present women as ones that to belong to the fathers, brothers, and clan seem to be persistent and continue to deny women a sense of identity.

(4) Dehumanizing *cultural traditions* and practices like FGM, early marriages, polygamy various taboo and rituals were cited in all five groups which makes it a crucial aspect of concern.

(5) *Participation*. In this region women are major workers for agricultural production. When it is time for picking tea or coffee women are major labourers but interestingly, they are not the ones who go for the pay out, or who are involved in decision making on the spending of the outcome. Women turn up in big numbers for training but they are not there when the men vote for the cooperative leaderships.

(6) Government *policy makers and laws* should be able to take seriously the gross injustices experienced by women.

(7) Minimal number of women in the church's major *decision-making bodies* is seen as a major challenge to the church in her role in engaging the society in the process of engendering administration and social structures.

(8) Women's experience of vulnerability and gross injustices also *cut across the focus group* discussion which confirms the need to investigate into the issue of vulnerability critically.

(9) The issue of women's *health and HIV and AIDS* also emerged very strongly and a call to address it seriously was underscored.

(10) *Education* was identified in the five discussion groups as crucial factor that has held girl child and by extension women captives of immeasurable injustices and vulnerability.

## 2.6. Photographic Essay

In this section I offer a photographic essay that graphically depicts the lives and livelihood struggles of women in Meru South District. It illustrates issues that have been raised thus far. While the chapter is more about women raising their experiences of injustices resulting from their intrinsic vulnerability, some of the stories have aspects of victory and expressions of joy earned through hard work and painful struggle.

Having located my interview in the rural and semi-urban area required of me to be with these women where they are on daily basis. Interviews were conducted in the homes, cars, neighbourhood and workplaces; therefore, the photographic essay includes women in the very practical activities of their daily routine. While there are long stories attached to the women interviewed, the photographic essay includes selected highlights of the whole story.



**Photograph 2. 1: Dorcas Nguga Njue carrying water and firewood**

Dorcas Nguga Njue walks long distances to fetch water and firewood. While she works hard on her garden, the products are usually poor due to the lack of farm inputs like fertilizer and

manure that she cannot afford to buy. To get money, Dorcas has to work in other people's farms and such jobs are not usually readily available. Sometimes she spends a whole day searching and the payments are very poor; yet she manages to earn enough for her household needs and for school requirements like books and uniforms. This photograph is taken in her neighbour's garden as she is on her way home carrying water and firewood. This garden resembles hers and argues that even her neighbour finds it difficult managing her garden due to lack of fertilizer and manure.

Dorcas Nguga is married but it is very clear that only women do domestic chores. Where or what the husband is as she struggles is not captured here.



**Photograph 2. 2: Rosemary Mwikali Njeru carrying firewood and her baby**

Rosemary Mwikali Njeru laments that she has to carry her baby all the time even when she goes into dangerous places. She is not allowed to cut firewood from the trees in the farm so she has to go into the far off bushes to collect the fallen branches for firewood. She also walks long distances to fetch water yet she has to prepare food for her husband, children and her elderly parents-in-law. Mwikali is married, she has her own family commitments but she is



culturally obliged to be responsible for what goes on in the lives of other members of the family. While her husband goes out in search of daily bread, Mwikali has no right to question his minimal contribution to the household livelihood.



**Photograph 2. 3: Rahab Igoki Njue carrying firewood, water and her baby**

Rahab Igoki Njue is the main provider of their household although she is married. She has to go to the garden, and on going, she has to fetch water and firewood. She has to carry water and firewood on her back and the baby in front. On arriving home she gets down to serve her family members. She takes care of her elderly parents-in-law and some other two orphaned children in the extended family. To feed the big family, her bigger children including the two orphans, must assist in the domestic chores that include gardening after school and on weekends.



**Photograph 2. 4: Florence Mugai M'Bundi feeding her Fresian cow**

Florence Mugai M'Bundi is feeding her Fresian cow. This cow is zero grazed (*this means that she has to bring feeds and water for this cow in this shed. It is not supposed to graze out there*). From 1970 until 2001 Florence fetched water for her cows from the river and had to carry fodder on her back for long distances. Then in 2001 piped water was put in the compound. Although she has to collect firewood, she is better because the trees that were planted in the 1970s now provide firewood. She is allowed to cut firewood freely. She noted that while her husband supports her there are those things that are supposed to be done by women culturally like cooking, and ensuring that elderly members of the family are taken care of and ensuring that homestead is well kept and tidy.



**Photograph 2. 5: Jennet Mbaka Ileri with her pottery for sale**

Jennet Mbaka Ileri is a mother of nine. She is a prominent leader of the church, and a long time member of the Woman's Guild, a deaconess and now a church elder in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA). Although a staunch member of the church, and a leader, her husband, for the better part of his marriage life, was not there for the family because he spent most of his earning in alcohol. However, he recently got converted which has become the greatest miracle of Janet's life.

For her family's livelihood, Janet engages herself in a number of activities: peasant farming, where she grows millet, maize, green grams, pigeon peas, sorghum and others. The other activity is, small scale business including buying and selling cereals and making pottery and selling them. With her in the photograph are pots that are parked ready to be taken to the market. In the background is Janet's mud house. She packs them outside because the house is not sufficient for storage. Janet encounters challenges and difficulties on storage, transport, and lack of ready market.

She will have to carry them on her back to the market, which is more than three kilometers away. She has to make several trips. On the other hand, her bigger children help her carry



some on their way to school. That is why some of them are left loose to be picked up by the children. The pottery and cereal businesses are her major source of money.



**Photograph 2. 6: Keria open market**

Keria open market is one of the main markets that serve Meru South District. Women are the majority of those selling and buying because in this area, small scale business and household sustainability are mainly women-oriented. This market does not offer shelter for traders. They also spread their goods on the floor. It becomes especially challenging when it rains. Storage, transport and insecurity are major challenges for traders in these types of market who are predominantly women.



**Photograph 2. 7: Charity Maitha Njeru with her three cows**

Charity Maitha Njeru is with her three white cows in their sheds. She cannot provide adequate security for them because she is now growing old and is not able to cut trees as she did several years ago when she put up the current fence which is now completely worn out. She is sixty seven (67) years old and her husband is eighty one (81) old. She is a mother of seven children who are living in different places with their families. The children try to help financially but because of the poor background they are not able to do everything for them. Despite her old age she has to work hard to put a meal in the plate for her and aging husband. They also feel obliged to work because they want to entertain their children when they come to visit them. Including these animals, Charity and her husband have more than one acre garden which they tend to. Of course after their long day with animals and the garden Charity must prepare their food.



**Photograph 2. 8: Jacinta Gatakaa on the right in her farm**

Jacinta Gatakaa on the right is seven months pregnant. She does not have house help and besides taking care of her garden, she has a kiosk, she also does knitting, and tends to her husband and her older child who is now three years old. She also carries on with her domestic chores like cooking, washing utensils and making sure that her husband is prepared for his daily activities.

She is shown with her sister –in-law. She has been keen with her small scale irrigation. Among other products she is showing her the big banana tree. She says while her husband is very helpful there are a number of things he does not do because he is a man, like cooking, changing a wet baby, and fetching firewood. Thankfully for her, she has water in the compound.



**Photograph 2. 9: Makena Women Group**

These are some members of the Makena Women's Group who turned up for the group discussion. In the background is their improvised shed used for keeping pigs, and the chicken cage. They also used to have a grain store in the local market. As they are now, they have lost most of their investment. This cage is in the compound of their chairlady and thieves broke in and stole all the chickens. The pigs have proven so difficult to manage, and the grain store is also becoming very difficult to operate. Despite all the handicaps, record keeping of their endeavours was never a possibility as they did not have a qualified person to handle it. The group is brainstorming on their way forward despite the challenges and obstacles they have faced in the past.





**Photograph 2. 10: Chogoria K-Rep self-help Group for small-scale business people**

Eunice Warigia Githinji is a high school teacher. She is the secretary for the Chogoria section K-Rep. They are in their weekly meeting where they deal with loans and loan repayments. During these meetings they also discuss emerging community issues. K-Rep is a micro-finance institution for small-scale business people. They credit each other a maximum of Ksh.200, 000 to a minimum of Ksh.10,000. Members contribute towards the savings. What they pay serves as security to the loans, and the repayment duration ranges between 3-12 months at an interest rate of 16% per annum. Due to the problem of insecurity, they usually meet at the Division headquarters.



**Photograph 2. 11: Edith Gata Kamundi in her private village clinic**

Edith Gata Kamundi runs her private village clinic. She is a trained Community Health Nurse specialised in midwifery and family planning. She observes that most of the women who come for attention have common complaints. With her long time experience, she argues that most of the complaints are stress related. She is also able to gather from the majority of them that the stress situation is related to domestic struggles. Her major challenge working in this village clinic is how women struggle to pay for their medical services. She suffers huge debts because it is difficult for her to deny some of these women medical services even when she knows they may not pay for it.



**Photograph 2. 12: Igambang’ombe Focal Media and Activist Group**

This group of women and men specializes in advocacy on issues that ensure human dignity and integrity. For a long time this group has worked under the auspice of PCEA Chogoria hospital and the church to educate the communities on major issues relating to community health. They have made their presentation on family planning and use of contraceptives, and messages of advocacy against harmful cultural practices like Female Genital Mutilation; early marriages and child abuse, at local and national levels. They are referred to as folk media educators.



**Photograph 2. 13: Gladys Mukwaiti Marangu a trained Kenya Enrolled Community Nurse**

Gladys Mukwaiti Marangu is a trained Kenya Enrolled Community Nurse. She is also specialized in Kenya Enrolled Midwifery. She is a deacon and a Woman's Guild leader. Besides her career she does knitting at home which enables her to earn further income. After work Gladys supervises the work of the worker at home who tends to the animals, and the lady who sells at their kiosk. The husband is also a teacher and a church elder. Her position in the church and society enables to interact with a cross-section of people. She therefore makes the following comments. Firstly, she observes that it is so unfair for the majority of career women, because they work so hard and at the end of the day they do not own the property. Secondly, she observes that whether in African traditional or African Christian marriage women are very vulnerable because they only implement what men heads of the family have already decides.





**Photograph 2. 14: Leah Mwari Mpungu is a primary school teacher**

Leah Mwari Mpungu is a primary school teacher. Her husband is also a teacher. Besides their teaching career, they also keep livestock. They also have a shop and rental houses. On coming from work, the husband (Mr Mbungu) goes to the shop. Peninah is responsible for ensuring that water to be used by the livestock for the following day is there, she prepares dinner and makes sure that she sets everything for the following day because she is convinced her husband should not be served by a house girl. She holds strongly the common teaching of the church that a virtuous wife is one who wakes up early ensures that her family is fed and well taken care of. Peninah's attitude to work is reflection of many women's lifestyles. Though strong when they are young, their bodies get worn out and weak by old age.



**Photograph 2. 15: Agnes Wawira Nyaga and her poultry keeping project**

Agnes Wawira Nyaga is a young girl who has just finished her course in secretarial and office management. After staying at home for three years without employment, she has opted to rear chicken as a source of money for her basic needs. Her parents have other children in school and are not able to support her adequately. Her parents are not willing to allow her to go and search for jobs in the towns for they feel it is insecure for her because she is a girl. They have allowed the younger brother to go to the city but Agnes is still bound at home.



**Photograph 2. 16: Eunice M Muriungi in her dressmaking and knitting businesses**

Eunice M Muriungi is a mother of one and she is doing very well with her dressmaking and knitting businesses. She was born out of wedlock among the Meru people. Such children are either taken to whoever is their biological father or they are left with the grandparents if their mothers want to get married to other men. Eunice was left with her grandmother as her mother got married elsewhere. She was only able to study up to standard eight and then did a course in dressmaking and knitting. Eunice however got married and she is now a mother of one, She has purposed to fight this kind of situation by first and foremost trying in her small way to help her mother educate her siblings although they do not belong to the same father. She is well aware that boys and girls who find themselves in the condition are different. Boys are entitled to be given a piece of land by the biological father but for girls no one ensures them any type of entitlement, but the maternal uncles are the ones that receive bride wealth when she gets married.





**Photograph 2. 17: Chuka Presbyterian Woman’s Guild meeting**

Woman’s Guild in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa is one of the very strong Church women organizations in the country. They operate massive projects from the grassroots to national level. Here in the photograph is Chuka Presbyterian Woman’s Guild. Membership of this committee is drawn from various categories ranging from “homesteaders” to professionals.

As a standing committee of the church, when they make their deliberation in meetings, a parish minister (*Usually the presbytery moderator at this level*) must be there as their chaplain. My view of this situation is that these women are left with very minimal space to make independent deliberation. On the other hand until recently church ministers were all men therefore Woman’s Guild was not exclusively women since the men moderators of the church must be in their meetings. Their main commitment is fellowship among women with a special commitment to the cause of a girl child but the influence the church may have on it is a bit worrying.



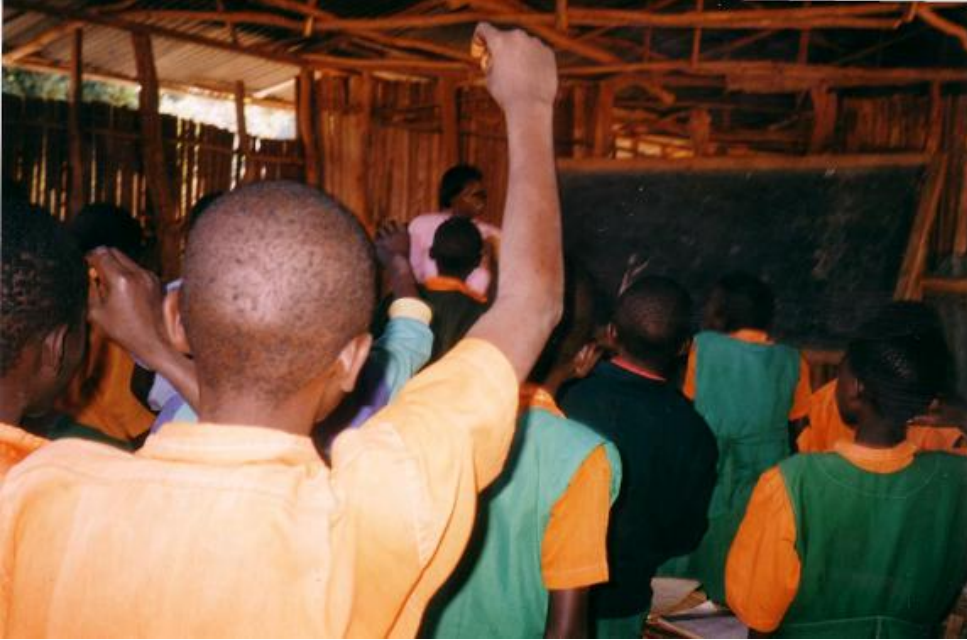
**Photograph 2. 18: Some Members of Save Child Canada group Igambang’ombe**

These are some of the members of (Save Child Canada) who managed to turn out for the focus group discussion from Igambang’ombe Division. These women are strong activist against Female Genital Mutilation. They are very active campaigners for children’s human rights in general. In their own small way, they are women of great influence. They belong to other community women’s groups and some hold leadership positions in the church. Among them is the researcher who joined them in the photograph.



**Photograph 2. 19: Florence Kaburo Mpungu an evangelist with PCEA**

Florence Kaburo Mpungu is an evangelist with the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. Her husband is a teacher. Florence takes seriously the development of the whole person. As she preaches the Gospel, she takes care of her family since her husband teaches far way from home. In the years 1993- 1994 Florence worked with the researcher in the then Ndagani, Chuka Presbytery. She was still an evangelist and I was overseeing her internship. Personal experience of the researcher about Florence is that she is a woman of positive influence especially to the young girls and the whole community.



**Photograph 2. 20: Pupils of Kanini Primary school**

In the photograph are pupils of Kanini Primary school in Mwimbi Division. The teacher in front who is dressed in pink dress is Mrs. Grace Mukwanjeru Karani. Grace has taught for twenty eight (28) years in different schools in the Meru South District. She observes that in the schools she has taught, boys always performed better than girls. Her findings are that girls are called to help their mothers in household chores while boys are encouraged to study. On the other hand, in areas where female circumcision is practiced, immediately girls go through the ritual, their performance goes down because their attention is diverted from studies to preparation for marriage. It is also at this time that many girls drop out from school due to early pregnancies.





**Photograph 2. 21: Garden fenced with locally available materials**

This nice garden with a wooden fence is an illustration of how women improvise with locally available materials. Most peasant farmers use wood for fencing because barbed wire is not affordable. This helps to stop cows and goats from eating or spoiling the crops in the garden.



**Photograph 2. 22: Women use donkeys for fetching water**



While in most places in Meru South District women carry water on their backs, in some instances donkeys are used as means of transport. In most of those places where donkeys are used, water is really far especially during the dry season. On the other hand, to purchase a donkey is a major project, which just a few people can afford. It is however, more economical to use a donkey because one donkey can carry four plastic containers of water with the capacity of 20 litres each. This means one is able to make one trip and get enough for a day or two. On the other hand, some people use it to fetch water for sale.



**Photograph 2. 23: Elderly people needing care**

While culturally, young people are supposed to take care of their elderly parents, there are cultural beliefs that make such elderly people refuse to go and stay with the young families. For instance, it is not possible for a parent to go and live in his or her daughter's home. It is culturally not acceptable. Therefore parents will cling to their marital homes irrespective of the difficulties. On the other hand children of the elderly parents can make it difficult and make it a requirement that their parents should remain in their compound because parental care is associated with some inheritance implications. These two old ladies, Agnes Ruguru and Wanja Mwinukie, live in their compounds and wait for their children or grandchildren to bring them provisions at their own time. This is a cultural practice or norm that is really life denying.



**Photograph 2. 24: Women Agricultural Extension Officers**

The four women working with Ministry of Agriculture in Mwimbi Division observe that it is very challenging for them because:

- It is generally very hard to get promotions with the ministry of Agriculture as women.
- At division level the mode of transport which is likely to be provided is either bicycles or motorbikes yet in rural setting, it is almost a taboo for women to ride them. It is really challenging for them to operated
- The distances to be covered are also extensive to offer quality without transport yet there is the tendency to feel that the officers are not efficient



**Photograph 2. 25: Women’s silent cries. Source: COVAW (K) 2002**

These pictures are adopted from COVAW (K) 2002. “Women’s silent cries: cases of violence against women in the printed media, a look at four Kenyan dailies from 1998-2001”

The clippings herein give the illustration that women and men alike become victims of violence but this study firmly contest that the whole situation of violence affects women more adversely than men. Research has it that, these are just a few of the cases that get into the public because of their magnitude but as we have seen in this chapter a wide range of women live in abusive relationships as a result of their comprehensive vulnerability caused by social, cultural, religious, political and economic factors that disadvantage women in the society

## 2.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have heard about the life experiences of women in Meru South District through the stories in the interviews, the focus group discussions, and the photographic essay. These are real expression of women's endeavours and everyday struggles. While women and men experience discrimination and oppression, the findings in this chapter confirm that women are extremely vulnerable. The stories cut across the issues that were raised and that were identified by the interviewees as experiences of injustices. The interviews presented here confirm that patriarchy, culture, socialisation, attitudes, religion, institutional structures and globalisation negatively impact on women.

Also identifiable in the interviews is the fact that women have resources capable of overcoming their inherent vulnerability but social institutions, structures, policies and the law are inappropriate to address their needs. We see that women have tried to form their own empowerment structures, such as community and churchwomen groups and associations. However, due to a strong patriarchal social influence and a lack of leadership ability, many tend to collapse before yielding the anticipated outcome. Women also engage in small-scale informal businesses like selling an assortment of foods in the open markets and tuck shops, and their vigorous engagement in the agricultural activities.

Faith is also identified as one of the driving forces that have enabled many women to survive experiences that are dehumanising. Women are able to forge their course through their faith that God is with them and that the difficult moment is temporary. They are also able to forgive and continue to exist with their oppressors who could be spouses, employers, guardians or fellow workers. This is similar to the role of faith identified by Haddad (2001, 2003) in her research among the church women groups in the South African context.

In this chapter we have an appreciation of women's voices that express the injustices experienced and vulnerability. We are able to hear, see, and conceptualise the extent and depth of women's susceptibility to abuse and injustice. We are also able to identify specific issues that women are raising in this community.

In the next chapter, we will venture into the analysis of those experiences, issues and concerns raised. At this point we will need to subject each of these issues and concern to feminist and gender tools of analysis in order to understand the weight of the experiences on the Meru South women and by extension women in Kenya. It is also expected that this will form criteria of identifying ways and means of dealing with women's vulnerability in Africa and by extension globally

## CHAPTER THREE

### ANALYSING WOMEN'S INHERENT VULNERABILITY IN MERU SOUTH

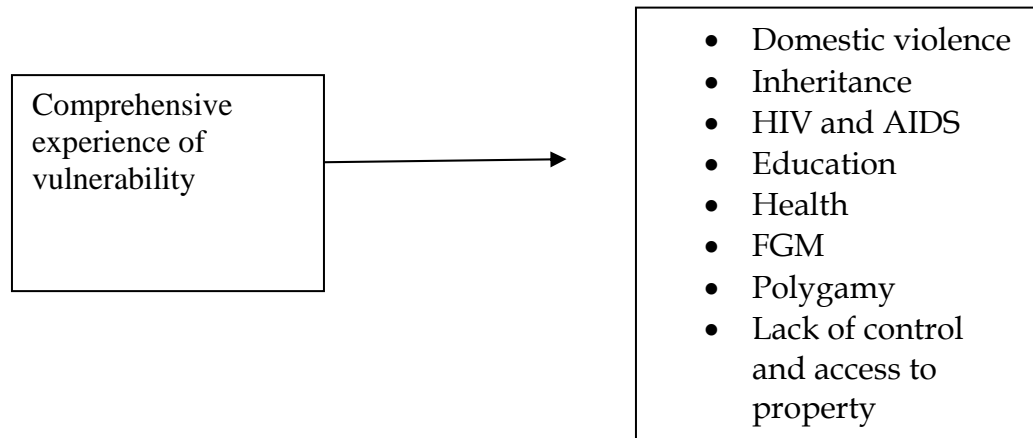
#### 3.0 Introduction

The previous chapter has provided clear evidence of the hardships and injustices faced by women of the Meru South, and by extension throughout rural Kenya. I have itemized these experiences as:

- Domestic violence
- Inheritance
- HIV and AIDS
- Education
- Health
- FGM
- Polygamy
- Lack of control and access to property

What should be clear however is that women do not experience these hardships and injustices as discrete items, but rather as a comprehensive experience of vulnerability such that progress in one area (for example gaining education or becoming a minister or business woman) does not overcome this fundamental and inherent vulnerability faced by women *because they are women*. As we work towards a framework that helps us articulate an appropriate theological response, I therefore propose the following first elements that suggest that the factors we have identified above are the result of women's comprehensive experience of vulnerability.





**Figure 3. 1: Women’s comprehensive experience of vulnerability**

### 3.1 Analysing The Position Of Women In Africa

In this chapter I seek to examine this comprehensive experience of vulnerability, and to enquire about the factors that contribute to it. Clearly, developing a theoretical framework that seeks to provide an analytical overview of women’s position in Africa must necessarily be able to handle a broad perspective. In the first place, an African woman’s situation is characterised by social, cultural, religious, political and economic determinants of women’s place and status in the society. Furthermore, the analysis must be conscious of the diversity in women as the subject of analysis. Bearing in mind that there are different categories of women and that their contexts also differ, the causes of their experiences need such a broad perspective.<sup>27</sup> Finally, I am conscious of the fact that there is no simple formula of dealing with the causes and effects, and that many of the experiences of injustices - such as lack of

<sup>27</sup> As we saw in chapter two, women are not homogeneous groups as there are those who are homesteaders, traders, and professionals, and even those who are professionals are not at the same level but it became clear that women’s lives are by high levels of suffering making extremely vulnerable irrespective of their statuses. The following two books give evidence of Kenyan situation. The two publications, G. Getui and M.M. Theuri (eds.) 2002. *Quest for abundant life in Africa*, Nairobi: Acton; and G. Wamue and M.M. Theuri (eds.) 2003. *Quest for integrity in Africa*, Nairobi: Acton, provides a multidisciplinary research on various aspects that challenge the church and society in Africa in their process of decision making, governance and partnership. Among the many issues I here present just three of them to illustrate experiences of women as follows , P. Mwaura,2002. “impact of globalization on women” in G. Getui and M.M. Theuri (eds.) 2002. *Quest for abundant life in Africa*, Nairobi: Acton, (pp.5-17); Ruth Muthei Jamaes, 2002. “impact of cost-sharing in health and education on women’s welfare” in G. Getui and M.M. Theuri (eds.) 2002 *Quest for abundant life in Africa*, Nairobi: Acton 18-32; L. W Kahindi, 2002 “cultural and religious factors affecting women’s health in Kenya”, in G. Getui and M.M. Theuri (eds.) 2002 *Quest for abundant life in Africa*, Nairobi: Acton 39-44.

access to education, which is key to capacity building - are themselves also causes of women's vulnerability.

To help us gain a broader analytical perspective on African women's experience, as illustrated in chapter two, I will examine the insights of four women scholars who have sought to understand the vulnerable predicament of women in Africa. These four are Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Molar Ogundipe-Leslie, Sue Ellen Charlton, and Patricia Kameri-Mbote. When I have gained insights from these scholars I will be in a position to offer proposals for analytical framework in dealing with women's vulnerability.

### **3.1.1 Mercy Amba Oduyoye: African Culture And Christianity Collaborating In The Oppression Of Women**

Mercy Amba Oduyoye is a renowned African feminist theologian<sup>28</sup>. She is from Ghana and married in Nigeria<sup>29</sup>. Oduyoye's background is matriarchal but she is married in a patriarchal society, an aspect that enriches her theologizing as she asserts:

My Akan background was gravely shaken when I discovered that among the patriarchal-patrilineal Yoruba of Western Nigeria, a wife is a member of the workforce in "her husband's house" but not one of the decision makers. Added to this were my experiences of what British -style patriarchy had done in what we have come to call the modern sector: church...with heightened consciousness of the centrality of my ego, formed in the womb of largely matri-centered environment, I cannot be thrown into an overly patriarchal pot without seeking a way of crawling out (Oduyoye 1995:8-11).

Oduyoye's passion for the dignity of women in both church and society is evident in her many publications<sup>30</sup>, and pioneering the formation of the Circle of Concerned African Women

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<sup>28</sup>M. A. Oduyoye (1982) "Feminism: A pre-condition for a Christian anthropology in Africa" *Theological journal* 11, 3 gives a definition of feminism and defends its cause as a tool of proclaiming women's dignity.

<sup>29</sup> In one of their most recent publication, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has honored Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye. See I.A.Phiri, and S. Nadar (eds), 2006. *African women, religion, and health: Essays in honor Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.

<sup>30</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye has a fleet of publications related to issues of women, religion and culture. Listed here are a few of the works authored and co-authored by her in this area. M.A Oduyoye, 1995. *Daughters of Anowa: African women and patriarchy*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis; M.A Oduyoye, 1990. *Who will role the stone away?*, The ecumenical decade of churches in solidarity with women. Geneva: WCC; M.A Oduyoye, 1986. *Hearing and knowing: Theological reflection on Christianity in Africa*. Maryknoll: Orbis; M A Oduyoye and M R A Kanyoro (eds), 1992. *The will to arise: Women tradition, and the Christian church*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis; 1997.



Theologians (Oduyoye 1992, 1997, 2001; Phiri and Nadar 2006). In her book, *Daughters of Anowa: African women and patriarchy* (1995) presented in what she calls three different cycles, she examines African women's experiences in the church and African culture. The first cycle deals with the theme of language, the second concentrates on how African culture defines the roles of women in the family and the third illustrates Oduyoye's vision and reflections of the status of women in Africa. She calls the church to account for the experiences of women because she firmly argues that in Africa, Christianity and African culture are partners in oppressing women. For instance on matters of motherhood she says:

The church joins in debates about the so-called population crises, and in these it takes various stances. But nothing is said to enrich the lives of those who have childlessness thrust upon them...On marriage and childbearing the Christian church is often unswerving as the Hebrew and African religions and cultures. The wedding ceremonies of traditional Africa do not explicitly articulate a "fruitfulness" requirement, but it is a basic assumption within the whole of the marriage transaction. The traditional Christian marriage ceremony, still often read to new couples, makes children a primary reason for getting married. The church continues to include Psalms 128 as part of wedding ritual: "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine...May you see your children's children" (vv. 3, 6). There is no empowering word and no ceremony to strengthen what may, for many reasons turn out to be a childless marriage. On this, the church is at best simply silent (Oduyoye 1999: 115-116).

Oduyoye is explicit that the major aspect in the culture that denies women their capability to be what they are able to be is *patriarchy* which is evident in the church and society and that it devalues them in the church and society equally. In her first cycle she scrutinizes the language that is used in storytelling, myths and proverbs (that is people's heritage) that shapes and forms the society. She observes that, "Culture, as manifested in folk talk, serves a regulatory and preservatory function for what is dear to people" (1995:20), and she shows how storytelling, myths, and tales are used to reinforce male domination in Akan society. She presents the implications of mythical images concerning the issues of male domination over women in the African society with particular reference to the Akan and Yoruba societies:

Folktales may be ingeniously constructed and entertaining; when effectively told, however, they do become an authoritative source for describing how life is and prescribing what ought to be. The listener is led to identify with the

characters, and to draw certain didactics and moralizing conclusions [*therefore*] myths inform social activities, shape men's and women's lives and attitudes, and give expression to people's fears (1995:20-21) (italics are added).

Socialization that denies women their full humanity forms her major critique of patriarchal culture. She specifically notes that proverbs related to marriage “illustrate the dominant status of the husband in the social institution of marriage” (1995:68). She therefore advocates for the need to break away from those proverbs that do not promote the dignity and integrity of women. She advocates for women to determine their own destiny. This is only possible if women are able to assertively affirm and articulate their vision in society. On the contrary, in societies like the one described by Oduyoye, gender inequality perpetuates unequal participation and involvement in the society which influences socialisation and attitudes which in the end impact on the way women and men are generally perceived and treated. This has worked well in undermining women in the public arena (Oduyoye 1995: 17-76)<sup>31</sup>.

In the second cycle she deals with how African culture prescribes and defines women's roles. She looks into culture, religion and marriage expounding some of the cultural aspects that undermine women. She observes that women's roles are defined and prescribed in the marriage and family and all spheres of socialisation in the community. She challenges socialisation that presents women only as child-bearers and homemakers. This has negative implications for women because it denies women their importance as human beings. They have to perform that role to be complete and in a way it has even more impact on single women, women who do not have children. This kind of socialisation has resulted in women often having to live in abusive relationships for the sake of self-image. Others have long sustained ridicule because they cannot bear children or are for one reason or the other single parents. These women are in the end excluded or marginalized in social development.

Oduyoye identifies the impact of cultural traditions and norms that are oppressive for women which she argues are guarded with a chain of taboos. For instance, there are taboos related to

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<sup>31</sup> In her poetry Mercy Amba Oduyoye expresses how a small phrase can be used in a damaging way. She presents how the phrase “Women are their own worst enemies” has been uncritically used to antagonize women and to cover up the reasons behind women's failure in situation where women would have emerged winners by virtue of being the majority, or where women have inflicted pain on other women. See E. Amoah and P. Martin (2001), *Heart, mind and tongue: a heritage of woven words*, Accra: SAM-WOODE LTD PP. 22-23,

blood during menstruation. A menstruating woman among the Akan traditional society is not allowed to participate in ritual performance. In some other societies a woman is not supposed to touch some items during that period, she is not supposed to eat some foods, or even share a bed with her husband. She further notes that it is a theme that dominates the book of Leviticus. Clearly this becomes a technical way of marginalizing women.

In addition to cultural norms that oppress women, she argues that there are other barriers to women's development like illiteracy, and the deepening gap between women and men in economic, social and political spheres. Such aspects raised by Oduyoye, are repeatedly highlighted whenever issues related to women are articulated and in most cases seen as obstacles to women's freedom or progress.

In the third cycle she challenges uncritical Christianity in Africa, which seems to be a prepared package that does not address the real issues of women both in the society and in the church. She assertively says:

My criticism of African churches is made to challenge them to work toward redeeming Christianity from its image as a force that coerces women into accepting roles that hamper the free and full expression of their humanity. As with class and race, on issues of gender discrimination, the church seems to align itself with forces that question the true humanity of "the other" seems to actually find ways of justifying the oppression or marginalization of "the other" (1995:173).

She however predicts a promising future in the church, which she argues can only be realized through a liberation theology that is inclusive of women and men. She argues that this should be viewed from the perspective of "men and women walking together on their journey home, with the church as the umbrella of faith, hope and love" (1995:185). This reflects the vision of a church that seeks to recognize the humanity of all regardless of gender and agrees with the definition of a culture that seeks to hold the community together working towards recognizing God's gifts to each and every person. To illustrate this aspect she uses the metaphor where each and every bead in beadwork is important and none must be lost. She acknowledges the fact that not all beads are used at the same time but goes on to say, those that are not used at that particular time should be preserved for the next helping (1995: 208-209). Therefore

women and men equally are significant in God and their gifts are God given and all are important to God for his own purpose. None of these gifts and talents should be lost.

Oduyoye calls on women to be part of the stakeholders in their own liberation by being able to participate. She consequently calls on women to assertively arise from their oppression and exploitation. But the big question is how this will be achieved. I will come back to this concern in chapter five. I now turn to the articulation of Ogundipe Leslie giving her perspective as she analyses the predicaments of women in social development.

### **3.1.2 Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie: Six Mountains On The Back Of African Women**

Ogundipe-Leslie is Distinguished Leverhulme Professor School of English and Postcolonial Studies, University of Leeds. She is a professor of English, Africana, Cultural and Gender Studies. She is widely involved in African issues of gender, politics and social transformation where she firmly questions the intrinsically male-oriented uncritical discourse and politics. In her significant book, *Re-creating ourselves: African women and critical transformation* (1994), she outlines a number of obstacles, which, in her opinion, are the causes of women's predicament in development. Using a metaphor that comes from Mao Tse-tung in China<sup>32</sup>, she identifies and calls them the "six mountains on the back of African woman". The six "mountains" discussed by Ogundipe-Leslie combine forces and weigh women down. She identifies them as follows,

- Foreign intrusion
- The heritage of tradition
- Backwardness
- Race and class
- Man
- Woman

Ogundipe-Leslie's publication under review comes after she had been "speaking both critically and creatively on the issues of gender, politics, and social transformation for at least

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<sup>32</sup> Mao Tse-tung spoke of four mountains on the backs of Chinese peasants. Ogundipe-Leslie uses the same concept and goes to propose the mountains on African women and articulating how they can be overcome Ogundipe (1994: 1)

three decades” (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: xii). Her articulation of the six mountains is therefore as a result of the outcome of both theoretical and practical knowledge in local and international engagement with experiences of women. She was particularly actively engaged in issues of women activism in Nigeria and national and international forums of decision and policy making on women related issues (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994:3-7) Her articulation of the six mountains on African woman’s backs as the obstacles to their development is a form of firm questioning of the development approaches that ignore the socio-cultural implications that impact negatively on women. I here discuss each of the six aspects outlined above as mountains on the back of African women.

First, Ogundipe-Leslie assesses how external influences make women vulnerable and calls them *foreign intrusion*. As a postcolonial scholar she examines how colonialism and neo-colonial activities affect women. She firstly notes how this impacted upon the traditional modes of production. She argues that women lost their important roles in the old production process. She says, within the new economic order, and capitalizing on the cultural attitudes towards women, commercial farming marginalizes women. She further observes that even within communities that recognized women’s leadership structures, these were completely swept away and replaced with male ones including hardened attitudes of male superiority introduced by colonial systems, underpinning patriarchy, and logically excluding women from public affairs (see also Oduyoye 1995, Phiri 1997, Charlton 1989, Kameri-Mbote 2004:1-3). Legal structures, religious and artistic cultures were all suppressed making women doubly oppressed. Her concern agrees with the stand held by Sue Ellen Charlton in regards to women’s status in decision and policy making. Ogundipe-Leslie argues that the impact of the concept of private/public spheres in relation to female and male gender pulls women to the periphery. Her scrutiny involves local, national and international policies. The same is raised by Kameri-Mbote when she assesses the status of women in relation to conflict and regional security.

Secondly, *the heritage from tradition* including organizations and approaches inherited from indigenous history contributes to women’s oppression. As also argued by Charlton and Kameri-Mbote, most communities are patriarchal and patriarchal ideals in such communities

tend to determine female ideals. She therefore correctly argues that ideologically and practically, historical and cultural traditions support the superiority of men to women in all areas, which influence current societal configurations impacting negatively on the roles of women.

Thirdly, a lack of technical approaches and practice and which result in what is understood to be a lack of knowledge is seen as crucial. For this, she uses the word *backwardness*. To her this is responsible for the poverty of women in that it renders them vulnerable. She presents this without much detail, which makes this category a bit weak. While in her introductory chapter (pg 1-18) she questions the simplistic use of the term “African woman” she uses the term “backwardness” in a way which for me allows African woman to be defined by “the other” and in this case men. Her use of the term backwardness is problematic because some of the aspects that characterise backwardness are ignorance and poverty, which are hardly a characteristic that can be blamed on women themselves.

Fourth, she identifies *race and class* as equally dangerous issues that make women vulnerable. She argues that these two aspects are important variables of imperialism because they impinge on economic affairs of state between the developing and developed countries impacting on policies that bear down negatively upon women.

Fifth, *man* himself is seen as a crucial obstacle because male domination over female subordination favours men, which finds its roots and backing from patriarchy that promotes male superiority as we have seen in the earlier discussion. When this happens women’s values are determined by male values. This therefore, suggests that, for women to combat their own disabilities they have to fight against the evils of patriarchy and male subordination.

Finally she also challenges women to search themselves. She is of the opinion that women become their own obstruction to development by holding on to stereotyped negative self-images. This brings about fear to attempt anything in fear of what others will make of her. She is of the opinion that it is women’s responsibility to fight this self-negative image and be assertive and affirm their self worth, dignity, and integrity. I see this powerfully captured in

the foreword of her book *Re-creating ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformation*, (1994)

What does empowerment mean to us women of Africa and her diaspora? It means social recognition and dignity just as, most of all, it means to speak, act, and live with joy and responsibility as it has always meant for our ever-so responsible foremothers wherever they were in history. Our work, writings and exhortations as women in various forms and media show that we want to end our silences and speak our truths as we know them. We wish to have power which positively promotes life in all its forms; power to remove from our path anything, person or structure which threatens to limit our potential for full human growth as the other half of life's gendered reality; power to collapse all screens which threaten to obscure our women's eyes from the beauties of the world

From the above discussion, for Ogun-dipe-Leslie it is evident that, women's vulnerability resulting from social, cultural, political, economic and religious factors is an obstacle to women's role and place in development. It is also evident that the underlying cause of women's vulnerability is firmly held in place by patriarchy, which shapes and maintains religio-cultural, socio-economic and political structures and institutions, which are experienced as six mountains on the backs of African women.

### **3.1.3 Sue Ellen Charlton: Women, Decision Making And Public Policy**

Sue Ellen M. Charlton is a professor of Political Science at Colorado State University. In her two publications *Women in the Third World Development*. (1984), and *Women, the State, and Development*. (1989 which she co-edited), she articulates among other things the predicaments of Third World women as a result of local, national and international policies that impact negatively upon them. Highlighting that decision and policy making is a key contributory factor to women's vulnerability she says.

The family's decision-making process is implicit in all its distribution of responsibilities and resources. The most powerful family member, the one who can orchestrate –if not dictate – decisions, is determined by prevailing cultural values, such as those attached to old age, sex, and the relative importance attached to men's and women's productive roles. In highly stratified and patriarchal societies, like those of North Africa, the Middle East, and most of South Asia, women are not expected to be self-supporting, have few opportunities to earn significant incomes

and cannot inherit land or other property. Even when women do earn, they are usually not able to translate their income into family power since they have to turn their earnings over to their husbands who control all family income...(Charlton 1984:48).

Arguing that women are not only vulnerable to decision making In the family she goes further to investigating the pre-colonial and neo-colonial periods as well as contemporary debates over theories of development. She identifies four important issues that surround the definitions of development that are important for women as follows:

*Firstly* is the role of ethical and moral choice in development; *Secondly*, the structure of the international system in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century; *thirdly*, the influence and in some instances, domination of western norms and institutions in development concepts and, policies; and *fourthly*, the political control of development (Charlton 1984:7-8) (italics are Added).

Charlton considers it necessary for every person committed to development and the empowerment of women, to question how many opportunities, if any, are given to each individual person to realize personal empowerment. This is a major concern because globally, and in most settings, women have fewer opportunities than men to gain education, to be involved in policy and decision-making or to become economically self-sufficient. This has resulted in poverty and illiteracy. She therefore argues women's experiences of hardship and gross injustices result from unfavourable local, national and international policies that impact negatively on women.

Charlton does not leave it at identifying that there is something wrong with policies, and she goes further than pointing a finger at patriarchal pressure to discovering that patriarchy is further strengthened by the societal structuring that is informed by the concept of public and private spheres. She defines the concept and articulates the implications of the same to the lives of women. She says,

The public realm is the realm of politics and community beyond the family (private). The exact meaning, scope, or range of public and private vary with societies and history, but the distinction is central in the Western political tradition...the household realm of women was defined as outside of, and excluded from, the realm of *polis*, culture, citizenship, or the larger community. The *polis* was the realm of politics and, as such, inaccessible to women (Charlton 1989:22).



This background is capable unconsciously or consciously of informing or even endorsing the local, national and international development policies. This has strong bearing on private – public dichotomy because she further observes that,

By the eighteenth century, women had been excluded not only from the public domain of the politics and citizenship (as were all who owned no property), but also from the new institutions designed by the centralized monarchs to protect external sovereignty and consolidate internal sovereignty and unity... (Charlton 1989:25).

Charlton clearly states that, even if other infrastructure like education, resources, shelter, water and health facilities are provided, they may not impact on the life of women positively until favourable policies are put in place. She has provided a good example of women who work and at the end of the day they are obliged to surrender their earnings to their husbands for control denying them the family power while they legally not allowed to the public arena (see the quote above). This was echoed in almost all our case studies in chapter two where it was expressed that all categories of women were vulnerable for one reason or the other. Charlton's work provides a useful foundation for understanding why Martha Nussbaum is used and focused on the question of *public* theology in this thesis.

### **3.1.4 Patricia Kameri-Mbote: Violence Against Women In Kenya**

Patricia Kameri-Mbote is a Professor of Law in the University of Nairobi, Kenya. She is also the founding Director of International Environmental Law Research Centre (IELRC) and Programme Director for Africa. Her publications include the areas of international law, environmental law, women's rights and property rights. Among various areas of her research interest is the issues of human rights and women's right. ([http://www.ielrc.org/about\\_kameri-mbote.php](http://www.ielrc.org/about_kameri-mbote.php)).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Patricia Kameri-Mbote's recent academic publications include among others, P. Kameri-Mbote 2004. "Gender, Conflict and Regional Security" in M. Mwagiru, (ed.), (2004). *African Regional Security in the Age of Globalisation* (Nairobi: Heinrich Boll Foundation) 82-91; P. Kameri-Mbote, (2000) "Custody and the Rights of Children" in K. Kibwana and L. Mute, (eds.), 2000. *Law and Quest for Gender Equality in Kenya* (Nairobi: Claripress) 161-181; P. Kameri-Mbote, (2002) "Gender Dimensions of Law, Colonisations and inheritance in East Africa: Kenyan Women Experiences" in *53/3 Verfassung und Recht in Ubersee* (This article was downloaded from the IELRC through the website provided in the text above); P. Kameri-Mbote, (2003). Gender

In her many academic publications Kameri-Mbote agrees that Kenyan women are vulnerable and that the Kenyan legal framework is wanting in terms of being in a position to adequately deal with the women's vulnerability (Kameri-Mbote 2003:4-12), which is wide ranging including violence, discrimination, abuse, property ownership, inheritance, and sexual abuse. In some of her earlier work Kameri-Mbote (2000) observes that while different approaches have been and continue to be employed in eradicating violence against women in Africa little has been realized in a positive direction. She argues that while NGOs and church organizations are at the forefront of this fight, legal inadequacy and misinterpretations continue to render women vulnerable in Kenya. In her book *Violence against women in Kenya: An analysis of law, policy and institutions* (2000) she points out some gaps in Kenyan law that allow for gender inequalities (see also Kameri-Mbote 2003:9-29). Explaining gender inequalities inherent in the laws of Kenya she cites as an examples and articulates the whole issue of "constitutional provisions on fundamental civil rights and discrimination" (Kameri-Mbote 2003:12-13) and analyses chapter five of the constitution highlighting its provisions and how these are not accorded to women.

While Kameri-Mbote (2000) identifies the aspects that lead to the inadequacy of the Kenyan legal framework that results in violence against women, she also agrees that women suffer issues arising from "tribalism, sexism, political corruption and authoritarianism rule in Kenya and throughout Africa" (Otieno 1998, Kameri-Mbote 2004). In her article on "Gender, Conflict and Regional Security" (2004) she observes the following:

Law to a great degree validates the exclusion of women from participation in the security apparatus and therefore denies them the chance to participate in the search for security at the national and international levels, Feminists' perception of law is that it is male and espouses male values. They argue that the defining characteristics of the legal persons are closely related to the world-view of the socially powerful. This assertion has been made in reference to both international and national law. At national level the best exemplification of the masculinity of laws is the tenor and application of gender neutral laws. Thus while legal provisions are couched in gender-neutral language, the enjoyment of equal rights and privileges in practice is an elusive concept.

Gender-neutral laws have, in many instances, resulted in de facto discrimination (Kameri-Mbote 2004:3).

For her, the existing law and policies allow for gender injustices and continue to have aspects that:

- Discriminate against women
- Are largely insensitive to women's needs
- Do not allow women to make decisions
- Do not give women room to contribute towards their development
- Deny women opportunities to leadership
- That obstruct laws and policies that favour women by weakening any structure that support their reinforcement
- Have economic policy that inhibits women's economic empowerment
- Limits women's equal access to education and access to assets

Kameri-Mbote identifies that the Kenyan constitution remains gendered and biased against women, citing that chapter five of the constitution is basically about the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual yet it is clear that the existing legal framework in relation to violence against women and their legal entitlements has a number of ambiguities that allow for women's legal vulnerability (Kameri-Mbote 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004 cf Gathumbi 2002). She notes that the Kenyan law of citizenship establishes the principle that spouses have equal rights in ownership of property (Mucui-Katambo, Kabeberi-Macharia and Kameri-Mbote 1995:14; Kameri-Mbote 2003:17-18). She further argues that some of these aspects are difficult because customary and religious laws have continued to have powers that impact negatively on women (Kameri-Mbote 2003:11-12). In Kenya where almost all communities are patriarchal, and it is rightly argued that 75% of the population is Christian, customary laws necessarily endorse men as custodians of property and religious bodies remain silent about it and implicitly endorse it by continuing to remain complacent to the patriarchal norms leaving women vulnerable<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> With the help of many nongovernmental organizations and United Nations(UN), Human Rights Watch have compiled and published very revealing documents on women and Human and democracy and women and property Rights violation in Kenya under the following titles: Epstein H and Takirambudde P (eds.) (2002) Kenyan unfinished democracy: Human rights agenda for the new government [http Document] URL; Csete J and

She notes that the constitution allows for the application of customary law in family matters like custody of children,<sup>35</sup> matrimonial property, inheritance and succession that denies women democratic and constitutional rights. The other factor, is the differential treatment in relation to citizenship where a man married to a foreigner confers automatic citizenship to the wife and children while a woman has to apply for naturalisation (Kameri-Mbote 2000:14, 2003:13 cf Gathumbi 2002:17). Kameri-Mbote's stand is further confirmed by current research by Human Rights Watch which has revealed that women continue to experience injustices because of the fundamental vulnerability resulting from patriarchal social construction and unresponsive government machineries (Epstein and Takirambudde (2002; Csete, and Takirambudde, (2003; Epstein and Csete 2003:16-43)

The crucial question is, how will such experiences be eliminated; can the government be made to apply the law in promoting women's right in Kenya? Kameri-Mbote argues that the interpretation of the legal rules has implications on the result. Therefore as long as the laws provide for gender neutrality the possibility of gender inequality or legal susceptibility in enforcing justice is the likely result (Kameri-Mbote 2000:1). This then tells me that Kameri-Mbote underscores the claim that Kenyan women suffer from comprehensive vulnerability and not just one identifiable aspect. I therefore need to situate these women in the bigger picture of African women. I now turn to the articulation of the framework for understanding the vulnerability of African women.

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Takirambudde P (eds.) 2003 Double standards: Women's property rights violations in Kenya [http Documents] URL.

<sup>35</sup> In chapter two, the story of Josephine Wanyaga Mbae indicates that she was denied the opportunity to see her children because among the Tharaka community children belong to the father, whether or not he takes good care of the children or not. She has no way of knowing how her children live. It is also worthy noting that Tharaka is one of the Meru sub-tribes and that it is a general part of the culture among the Meru people that children belong to men and not women. Likewise, property and especially land belongs to men and his clan

### **3.2 Towards A Comprehensive Framework For Understanding The Vulnerability Of African Woman**

In the previous section I have examined the analysis of four women scholars as they present the causes of the predicament in which African women find themselves. Each one has a particular emphasis but there are many issues and insights that are held in common. It is clear that African women are extremely vulnerable to hardships, injustices and violence, and this has been well documented by the case study on rural women in Meru South District in chapter two. What is also clear is that there is a set of very powerful factors, which combine to create what I have called the “comprehensive experience of vulnerability”. In the rest of the chapter and drawing from these four analyses I examine what we consider to be the five most important factors that negatively impact upon the lives and experience of rural women in Kenya, such as those in Meru South District, namely:

- Tradition and customs
- Poverty
- Policies and laws
- Religion and the church
- Internalisation

Issues identified in this section encompass other sub issues within them that are crucial in understanding women’s vulnerability in Africa such patriarchy and gender role encompassed under tradition and customs. I will also see how some manifestations of poverty like poor education, poor health, child labour and HIV and AIDS cause women’s vulnerability. I now turn to articulation of the each of the issues outlined above.

#### **3.2.1 Traditions And Customs**

The cultural framework in the form of tradition and customs of most African ethnic communities defines the roles of women and men. In the previous chapter it was noted that

there were defined social, political and economic roles for women and men among the Ameru people. In this section we will be looking at how such traditions and customs are related to women's vulnerability generally, and specifically in Kenya among the Ameru people.

*(a) Patriarchal Culture*

A critical analysis of African cultures provides evidence that African traditional cultural mores were meant to give dignity and integrity to all in the society. But it is evident that this is not the case for women. The contributions of the four women that we analyzed in the previous section clearly indicate that the cultural mores are taken advantage of by those in power in the society. One strong method used to ensure that women remain vulnerable and wanting is keeping them out of decision-making forums and to socialize the younger generation to understand their society in a way that devalues the female gender. A woman in the society is therefore defined in a way which is entrenched in the societal attitudes of which women and men are meant to be. It is correctly observed that:

African cultures present a woman as one who has to fulfill her destiny by being a mother. In becoming a mother this woman renounces her personality or personal identity, she is simply referred to as the wife of ...or the mother of...she belongs to her husband and she does not possess but rather she is possessed. She is the rural landless woman who works for the farmer and earns a meager salary, which she has to subsidize. She works sixteen to eighteen hours a day. She suffers in silence and weeps in secret. She is the candle and her children are the light she gives (Nasimiyu-Wasike 1997:176).

While many scholars have defined culture in different ways, Jesse Mugambi has defined it as the "cumulative manifestation of people's achievement over generations and in physical space" (Mugambi 1996:31). Therefore, taking seriously the fact that culture is dynamic, and that it can be reconstructed and transformed, the above definition confirms that the past informs the present. The patriarchal culture of the past continues to be powerful in the lives of women in Kenya today. It is also clear that women's place in society continues to be male dominated as it is well presented in chapter two and the recent research by the Human Rights Watch (Csete and Takirambudde 2003; Epstein and Takirambudde 2002). I can therefore assert that African ethnic communities are socially constructed by patriarchy and that among

such communities female ideals are determined by male ideals. Therefore male dominance and female submission are observed as a cultural obligation.

Indeed it is widely argued that patriarchal establishments of African culture reinforced by the colonial/neo-colonial and religious patriarchal social ideals<sup>36</sup> have continued to exploit, oppress and marginalize women in and at different levels:

Culture is the leading issue, which has pre-occupied the theology of African women. Culture has silenced many women in Africa and made us unable to experience the liberating promise of God. Favorable aspects of our cultures, which enhance the well being of women, have been suppressed. Those that diminish women continue to be practiced in various degrees of our societies, often making women objects of cultural preservations (Kanyoro 1996:5)

In recognizing that patriarchal structures that are oppressive to women exist, cultural reconstruction should be the first step towards eliminating the obstructions that hamper women from progressing and experiencing fulfillment in their performance. At the same time cultural reconstruction will not be possible unless patriarchy and its time honoured structures are challenged and completely reconstructed because:

Patriarchy is a destructive powerhouse, with systematic and normative inequalities as its hallmark. It also affects the rest of the creation order. Its roots are well entrenched in society as well as the church – which means we need well-equipped and committed women and men to bring patriarchy to its knees (Njoroge 1997:81).

As I shall illustrate, the traditions and customs of the Ameru people reinforce patriarchal gender relations in a number of powerful ways, and this is one of the key factors in creating their vulnerability. I now turn to an examination of the Ameru traditional culture and customs as a way of establishing an appreciation of the opinion held in this study.

***(b) The Ameru Traditional Culture And Customs***

As a cultural requirement, men and women had specified religious, political, economic and social functions. For example, if I look at the religious function, men offered sacrifices to

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<sup>36</sup> M.A.Oduyoye, 1995. *Daughters of Anowa: African women and patriarchy* and I.A.Phiri, 1997. *Women, Presbyterianism Patriarchy* identifies collaboration of African culture and Christianity in the oppression of women in Africa.

God, became seers and medicine men and, therefore, acted as mediators between God and people. For example each of the Ameru peoples had a designated ritual leader (*Mugwe*). He was supposed to be a senior retired elder. He was the only one who could bless major events, oversee the initiation of the generation-set, and administer important sanctions and ritual curses (Ambler 1988:102-104). Men took charge of the religious matters although women were involved in *minor* issues such as girls' initiation and ritual ceremonies during the times of drought and pestilence

Among the Ameru people, the elderly people passed their roles over to the younger generation by gender. Male dominance in religious matters is evidenced by the fact that women had age-sets apart from their husbands, but any age-set activities had to be under the supervision of the council of elders on which women had no representation (Middleton 1979, Fadiman 1982). As a result of male dominance and the lack of women's representation in religious matters, women "did not fit in the societies' definition of religious status" (Mwaniki 2002:2). Women's religious practice and orientation, therefore, was only possible through a male figure, thus denying women an intimate relationship with their creator.

The exclusion of women from the religious, social, cultural, political and economic matters of the community has implications for women's lived experiences. To understand a woman's life cycle, it is important that we examine the rites of passage that are significant in determining her place and status in the society. Rites of passage mark the life stages of people and some determine their social status within community, defining the responsibilities, property rights, and obligations of their members. For instance:

African rituals have an import that is at once psychological, spiritual, political and social...African religion gives a major role to rites of passage. An individual's life is monitored, marked, and celebrated from even before birth to death and thereafter and the events in the life of a community echo this same cycle (Oduyoye 1992:9-11).

As in many African communities, among the Ameru people, rites of passage are not a matter of choice. They are a requirement that give an individual a sense of identity and belonging. The questions the need to keep in mind, however, as we examine the rites under discussion are, whether the specific rite and its implication is beneficial to the individual participant? Does



this rite equip him or her to experience a quality life? How much choice does the individual have to take or discard it? These questions will help us to analyse the impact these rites have on the lives of women.

***(i). Birth And Naming***

Among the Ameru people differentiation in gender begins at birth and the naming of a child. Even before a child is born, it is understood that the first child will be named after the parent of the father –a boy after a paternal grandfather and a girl after her paternal grandmother. If, for example, the first one is a boy and the second one is a girl, then only the third child will be named after one of the maternal grandparents. And as reinforcement, it is important to note that among the Ameru children belong to men and not women. At birth it was easy to identify the sex of the newborn child because the number of ululations that were offered marked it. If the child was a boy there were four ululations and for the baby girl three of them (Thigaa, Mugai and Maitha, *Oral interviews on 10.2.2003, 13.2.2003 and 20.2.2003 respectively*). Those interviewed argued that while the number of the ululations has had a deeper meaning and purpose, over time this has been misinterpreted<sup>37</sup> to mean that a girl child is less valued than a boy child.

The naming of a child did not happen the same day the child was born. It was a later event, which was full of symbolism. The number of ululations was important because it was to announce the gender of the baby. On the other hand the order of naming (Paternal first and the maternal parents) was also interpreted to mean that those children who were named after their paternal grandparents were superior to those named after the maternal grandparents. Most African communities attach meanings and value to the name therefore that has implication on the place and status of the individual (Nasimiyu-Wasike 2006:43-50). Such notions propagate the male subjugation of the female spouse.

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<sup>37</sup> In a casual discussion with my husband's grandparents who were in the eighties, they confirmed that the ululations had deeper meaning more than just announcing that either a boy or a girl is born. They informed me that the fourth ululation for the boy child announced the expectation of the boy child, which never necessarily meant he is any better than a girl child. Since it was believed that a boy would always go out and come back with something for the community, it is during this fourth ululation that the destiny of the boy was announced as a way of informing about the challenges of being out there searching for the community (Paulo M'Riungu and Jerusha Ciamutua July 1998)

*(ii). Initiation*

Initiation for many African communities marks the transition from childhood to adulthood. Among the Ameru, and the surrounding communities such as the Agikuyu, Ambeere, Aembu and others, it was and is understood to mark this transition for centuries (Middleton 1979; Fadiman 1982; Mwaniki 2002). While for different communities it takes different dimension, among the Ameru and the surrounding communities it involves the circumcision of both girls and boys. While this rite of passage is perceived to have the same meaning for girls and boys' new status in the community, the two are prepared for different experiences.

Historically, before they underwent the rite, they were given practical and theoretical education. During this time boys were introduced to the Ameru traditions, religion, folklore, mode of behaviour, taboos and sex. Girls were prepared to face the responsibilities of womanhood. For example, it is expected that the girls need to learn to be submissive and generally be 'good' and obedient wives. It was believed that girls who were not circumcised were sexually uncontrollable; Circumcision was, therefore, a measure to contain women's sexual desire (this was clearly stated by one of the interviewee in chapter two). Those who are pro female circumcision argue that it is comparable to male circumcision; but available research (Okemwa 1996, Gachiri 2000 and Njoroge 2000) reveals that male circumcision has a different impact on the male initiate in comparison to what female circumcision does. For example, it has been correctly argued that the socialization of the sponsor (or the person who takes the initiate to the initiation place) of the initiate impedes the performance of women in other areas of life outside the roles and productivity because they only emphasise what the society has predetermined for them (initiates). Accordingly:

The rituals surrounding the physical operation have a negative effect on the development of women as members of society. Through the songs sung to them, dances and stories that are aimed at socializing the young girls into their roles as women in the society. This socialization curtails the performance of women in other sectors of life outside the roles prescribed to them by the society...Through the songs; the girls are prepared for the sexual activity which is going to be a characteristic feature of their future lives. This is based on the

fact that girls' status has changed from that of uncircumcised girls to that of young women; a status within which they have to prepare to leave their homes in marriage. It is impressed on the novices that they have attained the status of womanhood and they have to be sexually active...to imagine that girls of 6-10 years have become women and should be sexually active is too much for children, whose minds and bodies are still being formed (Okemwa 996:178-179).

On the other hand, physically the practice includes the removal of well functioning parts of the genitalia, which has resulted in human rights and other activist condemning it as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). The World Health Organisation (WHO) classified FGM into four types, (1) Excision, referring to removal of the prepuce and the tip of the clitoris; (2) Clitoridectomy, referring to the removal of the entire clitoris and the adjacent labia; (3) Infibulation consisting of the removal of the clitoris, the adjacent labia and then joining the scrapped sides of the vulva across the vagina securing them with thorns or sewing them together with catgut or thread. A small opening is left to allow intercourse on the wedding night and is closed again to secure fidelity to the husband, (4) Unclassified FGM includes, pricking, piercing or incising of the clitoris or labia, stretching of the clitoris, and cauterisation by burning the clitoris and surrounding tissue (Gachiri 2000). As a result the practice ends up as psychological and physical torture making it nothing less than "Female Genital Mutilation" (Hinga 1992; 1998; Muriithi 2006:37).

The social, cultural and political requirements of the Ameru culture in relation to initiation as a rite of passage, bestow men with authority, important responsibility and privileges in the home and society. Girls on the other hand are prepared for responsibilities related to their womanhood including, child bearing, being a wife and other domestic chores.

For both boys and girls, following initiation, marriage is the next stage in their life cycle. The challenge here is that boys are prepared to marry and dominate while girls are prepared to submit to the predetermined domination. A superficial observer may feel that women embrace their menial role without complaint while a critical analyst of the situation would rightly observe that women are forced to accept their situation because the consequences of not following the set down procedures are quite severe. This has meant women accepting

what they are in fact coerced to take or opt for. I will now discuss marriage and its effects on the life of women.

### *(iii) Marriage*

Among the Ameru as in many African communities, the significant purpose of marriage was not companionship and sexual enjoyment but procreation. Children from a marriage were primarily important because they ensured the continuity of the family. Children were also seen as a source of labour. It follows that the more children to a couple the better. Among the Ameru as in other patriarchal communities, family lineage was traced from patrilineal side therefore placing more importance on the boy child (Kenya 1938). Culturally “one of the outstanding features among the Ameru just as in the Gikuyu system of marriage is the desire of every member of the tribe to build up his own family group, and by this extend and prolong his father’s clan (*mbari*)”(Kenya 1938:162). Accordingly John Mbiti observes:

Marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. Otherwise, he who does not participate in it is a curse to the community, he is a rebel and a lawbreaker, and he is not only abnormal but also ‘under-man/woman’. Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person concerned has rejected the society and the society should reject him in return” (Mbiti in Bahemuka 1992:120).

This means that the women’s role in marriage in a patriarchal community was that of enabling the continuation of the family through child bearing and rearing (Oduyoye 1999:110). Further to this gender differentiation, while boy children were supposed to sustain the family lineage, girl children were destined to leave the family at marriage. They were therefore not entitled to property but were supposed to be a source of wealth through the bride wealth (*Oral interviews with Agnes Ruguru, Priscah Thigaa and Charity Maitha on 10.2.2003 20.2.2003 and 23.2.2003 respectively*). Such high expectation from marriage and the significance placed on procreation makes it necessary for us to examine other issues related to marriage such as dowry, polygamy, barrenness and widowhood.

**(iv) *Bride Price (Dowry) And Betrothal***

The issue of bride price in many African societies is understood as a way in which not only the couple is joined together but also the two families are. It is also perceived that the man's family is obliged to give and the girl's family to receive. For the Ameru peoples, among other celebrations of marriage, dowry, sharing and eating together was significant and was considered as a means of cementing the relationship between the two families and the clans at large. While some scholars have argued that dowry is not a payment but a way of cementing the relationship, so that the making of a payment of goods or service by the bridegroom to the bride's kin is an essential part of establishment of legality of marriage. On the other hand it is perceived as an appreciation on the man's side because the wife would be part of the man's family henceforth. It also follows that "on signing the matrimonial contract the marriage ceases to be merely a personal matter, for the contract binds not only the bride and the bridegroom but also the kinsfolk" (Kenyatta 1938:163). The dowry payment was supposed to be a long-term drawn-out process so the relationship went on even when the wife was deceased.

The practice and perception of dowry is problematic and oppressive to women because, in the first place, the woman is not part of the dowry negotiation process yet the whole process determines her life (this was expressed by one of the interviewees in chapter two). The significant purpose of the dowry is firstly to cement the relationship but also to bind the couple ensuring that they make the marriage work. It is however noted that upon marriage, the wife leaves her natal family and becomes identified closely with her husband's lineage group and her links with her kinsfolk are correspondingly diluted. For instance, "the wife addresses her parents-in-law as father (*baba*) and mother (*maito*); the husband refers to his parent-in-law (*muthoni*)" (literally being bashful or polite) (Middleton 1979:25-26). Further, to this, "the validity of marriage and the social position of women in the community is determined by the fulfillment of the communal duties regulated by the marriage custom" (Kenyatta 1938:164). In the first place, the social environment of women changed and they

had the obligation to adjust in the new clan. Apart from her wifely duties the wife had the obligation to participate in clan functions when called upon. Very little has changed if anything as is noted from my own experience:

While I was already a minister of the church at the time of my marriage in the mid-nineties (1994-5), the dowry negotiations were completed as usual, although with a few adjustments. Still today much is expected not only in my case, but also from all the women married into my husband's clan. For instance, when women are in paid employment and cannot attend to the duties assigned to other women such as cooking and serving men, as they deliberate and decide about the clan, the employed women or their husbands must pay the money to the clan as substitute for the physical work which is demanded by the clan from a married woman (*The researcher*).

This practice oppresses women and makes them vulnerable because they continue to be excluded from decision concerning matters which affect them directly. This causes women to be merely participants and not companions in marriage. Even after the death of their spouses, the clan is in a position to make demands of her. For example, this has made it difficult for young widows to remarry men of their own choice because they are clan property and the clan must protect their deceased son's property and children<sup>38</sup>.

They are passive recipients of directives from the husbands and the clan at large. Those husbands who deviate from these requirements are perceived as being dominated by their wives. As a result, many women have had to live in abusive marriage relationships in the name of making the marriage work. As for the man, he is there to make the decisions, and he also has the right to either remain in the marriage or to discontinue it by proving that his wife was not able to deliver. Josephine Wanyaga has this to say:

I thought of approaching FIDA Kenya but my parents said no to it because they thought that even if I win the case this man might use witchcraft and spoil all my life.

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<sup>38</sup> The case of Wambui Otieno marked Kenyan newspapers headlines in August 2004 when she announced her marriage to Mr Mbugua yet as a widow no one bothered to care for in the absence of Mr Otieno. Those who questioned the marriage cited issues of children and property but they never bothered to know Wambui's struggles as a widow while her children are now grown up and in their own endeavors in life. The same is now happening about Bishop Wanjiru of Kenya. She has brought up the children single handed but now that she has announced her marriage the husband of her traditional marriage has legal rights to bar from getting married yet when men decide to remarry they are in fact encouraged to go a head because they need someone to take of them and the children.

It was during this time of great torment that I met my current husband. I was in great isolation because my brother and sister who had come to help initially distanced themselves and my parents are really old (my father is in his eighties and my mother in sixties). I shared my life journey and he also did it and we both thought we could live together. It is however difficult because we cannot easily legalize our marriage due to the many requirements (Josephine Wanyaga Mbae 23.2.2003 – find her full story in chapter two).

With the excuse that wives do not deliver, husbands can marry second and even third wives. I will, therefore, turn to examine polygamy and assess its implications on women.

(v) *Polygamy*

Polygamy is the situation or condition of having more than one spouse (Nasimiyu-Wasike 2006:103). Among the Ameru, polygamy commonly refers to one man having many wives. Meru society recognizes polygamy, and marriage involves the extended family and the whole clan. In the past polygamy was preferred because large families were considered necessary for a man's prestige and for economic reasons such as providing a source of labour in agricultural production. Worth noting is that the first wife is the one who requested for a second wife (*Charity Maitha oral interview on 23.2.2003*). Charity Maitha (*she is a second wife*) says that she did not force herself into her husband's family neither was undertaken in ignorance by either her or the first wife. The venture was agreed upon amongst all the involved parties and originated from her co-wife and then the normal marriage arrangements proceeded.

For management purposes, the man had his private hut (*gaaru*) and built independent huts for the wives. For harmony, the husband was supposed to share his love and his concerns with his wives equally. This was a major challenge not easily met. This then became the source of contention and jealousy among the wives. Contention and jealousy implied by the term used to refer to the co-wives (*mwiruwa* –literally means my colleague in jealousy) (*Priscah Thigaa10.2.2003 and Charity Maitha23.2.2003 Oral interviews*) (see also Mwaniki 2002:30).

While polygamy is an accepted practice in most or all traditional African cultures, it denies those in the marriage union their equal rights. A situation in which men are allowed to marry

many wives but the woman is bound to only one marital partner remains problematic in the context where equity and justice in marriage is called for. It should be challenged because it is correctly argued that:

Both the churches and the government are unable to regulate this most intimate yet public of institutions. It is not whether the marriage is polygamous or monogamous that defines the status of women; rather it is the dependence and domination mentalities of the women and men sharing the marriage that need transformation (Oduyoye 1995:147).

Polygamy is oppressive in that it ignores the equal rights of the partners in the marriage. Unequal differentiation in the marriage relationship disadvantages women in realizing their potential or even having fulfilled marriage experience. On the other hand women have been blamed for the misfortunes that take place in such marriage relationships such as death, lack of children or any unexpected eventuality. Lack of children is one such dreadful eventuality, to which we now turn.

*(vi) Barrenness*

Owing to the significance placed upon procreation and children, barrenness is not taken lightly. I have seen in the previous section that those who were unable to participate in procreation were perceived to have rejected the community and so the community was obliged to reject them. Lack of children in a marriage was in most cases blamed on barrenness and not impotence. While a barren woman was treated with contempt or chased out of the marriage, the community would organize for a relative or age-mate of the impotent man to step in and bear children for him. Oduyoye recalls her experience as follows:

African culture has ways for surrogate fatherhood just as modern science has finally recognized the need. Men I have as colleagues and friends would say to me, jokingly of course, “If our brother is the problem we stand ready to help.” Generally, there is an embarrassed laugh when I say no, thank you, what I need is a sister to lend me a womb. This was well before surrogate motherhood made headlines in Western countries. These men were not licentious, promiscuous persons, ready to take advantage of desperate women. They too were socialized by a culture that requires them to hide “the brother’s shame.” They were responding to religious and cultural demand... (Oduyoye 1999: 114)



Just as expressed above, a barren woman among the Ameru or even the Agikuyu was a subject to much ridicule and assumed to be the culprit. She was referred to as '*nthata*' meaning a useless fruit that dries up and leaves no seed behind (Mwaniki 2002). On the other hand, impotence was supposed to be maintained as a secret and the clan would arrange how one of the members of the clan would secretly conceive with the wife of the impotent man.

A married woman was fully accepted after bearing children. She continued to be called *mwari wa* - literally 'daughter of' until she had a baby when she would be referred to as *maito* – literally, 'mother' or 'mother of her child' by those younger than herself (*Florence Mugai oral interview on 9.2.2003*). The father-in-law "may not enter his daughter-in-law's house before she has borne a child, and must give her a goat when he does enter" (Middleton 1979:26).

Childlessness therefore meant that a woman had not yet become a fully-fledged member of the marital family and that her identity and integrity were still wanting. This attitude towards barrenness creates the perception of a woman as a vessel of procreation and sexual object and not as an important part of the creation of God (Oduyoye 1999). This is dehumanizing because she is only considered human in the event that she can give birth and that the husband was still interested in her sexually. This therefore made single hood, old age, disability and widowhood a nightmare for women. I will therefore turn to discuss widowhood and divorce.

#### ***(vii) Widowhood and Divorce***

Once married, it was and is unthinkable for a wife to be without a husband. This is so because at first she belonged to her father and the ownership was passed over to the husband at marriage. Her identity is always in association with the male figure without which her personhood is at stake. Widowhood among the Ameru is dealt with in different ways. For instance there are widows who never remarried and it was the role of the clan to care for them. Alternatively the widow might re-marry a brother of the husband or another man of the same clan (known was 'leviratical union'). While that happened quite often in the past, in the modern society many men and clans take advantage of this practice to deprive the widow of her wealth and inheritance.

Leviratic union is “a temporary adjustment in a continuing marriage in which a brother-in-law substitutes for the deceased legal husband” (Kirwen in Ngaari 1997:8). In the traditional Meru society a leviratical union was an option especially for young widows. Children born out of this union belonged to the deceased man (*Priscah Thigaa oral interview on 10.2.2003*). Therefore leviratical marriages were common and were favored because the society was able to cater for the social, emotional and material needs of the woman, since she belonged to the clan after marriage. Although this practice is not common in contemporary society, it influences the place and the status of the widow. A widow is looked on as one who cannot stand by herself but needs protection and care from a male figure.

This perception is problematic in contemporary society because there are many women who are single parents, not necessarily because of being widowed or divorced, but by choice. These women are an important asset in society, but because of this socialization, they are either disempowered or they individually shy away. This perception is a tool that has been used in the church and society to keep unmarried women from leadership. They are seen as a menace to their male colleagues. It is commonly said that they will steal other women’s husbands. They cannot be trusted.

Having assessed the different aspects that determine the place and status of women in the society it is then important to articulate the inherent gender aspects in relationship to women’s place and status. In simple terms gender refers to the social construction of male and female human being in the society.

### **(c). Gender Roles Among The Ameru**

From the above articulation it is clear that the Ameru peoples had very clear boundaries between the public and domestic domains. As a result there were very clear distinctions between definitions of male and female roles. In the previous chapter we noted some of the initial gender socialisation for boys and girls. Table 9 below, demonstrates how the social structures of the Ameru peoples ordered their duties and responsibilities along gender lines.

This structural ordering determined the social and economic status of men and women. It also ensured that men and women were familiarised with the materials and duties that formed and shaped their personalities. This, therefore, determined the duties and responsibilities, which will be entrusted which in turn, determined their place and status in the society.

**Table 9: Traditional Ameru Division Of Labour By Gender**

Men	Women
Men are the owners of property and the rest of the family members, including wife/wives, children and all that is in the homestead.	Women and children belong to the men owners (husbands and fathers). Women were not necessarily permanent. Girls were supposed to get married so they were not permanent members of their natal family. Wife/wives were supposed to live up to the given standard or else be sent back to their natal families.
Guarding homestead at night and the community at large	All domestic chores including cooking, fetching water, fetching firewood, taking care of the husband, children and the aged.
Cutting and erecting timbers for building, fences and granaries	Cutting and carrying grass for thatching and plastering the house
Hard work like clearing fields and breaking virgin ground, making water-furrows, building bridges and roads and cutting and burning grain stocks	Sowing, weeding and pruning specified crops sorghum, millet, and green grams e.t.c. Women were not allowed to tend crops like yams and bananas.
Planting certain crops like bananas, yams, sweet potatoes, sugar-cane and tobacco and scaring birds, pruning bananas and cutting sugar-cane	Harvesting specified crops like sorghum, millet, and green grams e.t.c.
Making wooden, leather and iron equipment and tools.	Making pottery, weaving baskets, dressmaking and beadwork.
Hunting and collecting honey	Grinding grain such as maize, sorghum, millet pounding sugar-cane for beer
Dealing with warfare, legal and ritual duties	Overseeing the women social life, taking care of children and trading in grains

Source: Middleton, 1979:21-24; Fadiman 1982; cf Kenyatta 1938; Mwaniki 2002:21-22<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Gender roles among the Ameru peoples (Tigania, Igembe, Imenti, Miutini, Igoji, Mwimbi, Muthambi, Tharaka and Chuka) are closely related with those of other surrounding ethnic communities like Kikuyu, Embu, Mbeere and Akamba. Due to their interactions in inter ethnic warfare and trade they have influenced each other's cultural practices in many ways C. H. Ambler, 1988. *Kenyan communities in the age of Imperialism: The central region in the late nineteenth century*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press); T. Spear, 1981. *The Kenya's Past: An introduction to Historical Methods in Africa*. London: Longman.

Among the property which men owned was land, which was central to the economy because they were mainly agriculturalists and kept animals. It is, therefore, explicit that these social, cultural and political structures render the Ameru women economically vulnerable, because they neither own property nor have control of their own lives. The socialisation, responsibilities and the duties apportioned in the traditional Meru community, continues to exist in the modern Meru community entrenching women's continued vulnerability. For example in an interview with *Agnes Ruguru (Ruguru interview on 10.2.2003)* she explains how women do not have right to any property apart from items of little worth, such as baskets, pottery and beads. The table also shows that men took care of the perennial crops and women took care of the seasonal crops. It is also evident that even those responsibilities, which were given to women, required prior authority from the male owners of the property.

The table 9 indicates that men undertook hard physical tasks including hard labour and ensuring security for the family and community. In my opinion, the intended notion behind this is that women are weaker and need the protection from the male figures in the home and community. On the other hand, it indicates that women did the soft and easy tasks where safety and security were ensured.

A critical analysis of the table, reveals that the jobs men did were occasional, while the jobs women did were continuous and time and energy consuming. It is clear that while both men and women worked together in the garden, on arriving home it was the women only who continued to work, cooking and attending to all the household tasks. As we saw in chapter 2 this practice persists in the contemporary Meru community. This ordering of the society on gender lines perpetuates the stereotypical attitudes of what women's abilities and aspirations should be. The result of this type of ordering of the society has left the majority of women vulnerable and the greater majority of the vulnerable women live in abject poverty. In the next section therefore we discuss the second major factor, poverty that underlies the experience of comprehensive vulnerability for women in Meru South, and by implication Kenya and many other parts of Africa.

### 3.2.2 Poverty

Chapter two raises the challenges of who the poor are; to talk about the poor, articulate what makes them poor and analyse the causes and implications of their poverty. Poverty has been and is still defined and perceived variously. Duncan Forrester illustrates us to ways in which Liberation Theologians have focused on the poor:

But who are the poor? Clodovis Boff and Jorge Pixley suggest that the poor exist in collectivities, that they are the ‘losers’ in social conflict, and that they call for new social order. The poor belong in a class or classes –in Latin America the huge majority of the population; in Europe and North America a minority even if a large one, and therefore politically weak. Marxist analysis encouraged the liberation theologians to emphasize the necessity of understanding the poor as part of a class system of social stratification, which is itself inevitably locked into class conflict. As the losers in this conflict, the poor ‘have been reduced to poverty (impoverished) or held in poverty by a system of domination. We should not, however, idealize the poor, we should see them as they really are (Forrester 2001:158).

This quotation vividly presents the kind of mental picture similar to what was presented to us in the previous section and the whole chapter two because I have noted how gender injustice, discrimination and suffering is put in place by cultural, social, political religious and economic structures leaving women vulnerable. Further, articulating poverty from a Kenyan perspective, Mwaura asserts:

Poverty is very complex concept. Too often, it has been defined simplistically as the lack of monetary income. However, in subsistence economy or “economies of affection” based on kinship or lineage solidarity, income alone cannot be a valid measurement for poverty. It can be perceived as deprivation in terms of lacking access to resources or in terms of living in deteriorating or demolished environment. It can also mean the denial of opportunities and choices most basic to life and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self respect and the respect of others. Poverty can further be seen from a mental or cultural perspective as isolation, loss of direction, hopelessness, apathy and passive suffering (Mwaura 2002:7).

From a feminist perspective poverty has been defined as a “social construction, which comes from patriarchal societies” thus Gebera puts it:

It seems very important to recognize that the idea of accepting poverty is a social construct, which comes from patriarchal societies. This acceptance concerns not only economic issues but also gender issues when women are

poorer than men. Women are more powerless than men. This is considered as part of the “natural order” that a patriarchal understanding of human life has developed in a very special way. In this sense we can speak about “anthropological poverty”. This means in the deepest understanding of human beings, men are considered more important and richer than women. There is different historical, social and religious consequences connected to this understanding of human beings, all having negative effects in women’s lives. We call this anthropological poverty because it is present at the root of the understanding of human beings and is the support for economic and social poverties. This anthropological poverty becomes a kind of “metaphysical” reality that allows all kinds social and religious poverty to exist and even to be encouraged (Gebera 1996:219).

This perspective of understanding poverty corresponds to the situation presented to us in chapter two where in the analysis it is discovered that there are social, cultural, political economic and religious causes to such poverty and vulnerability. In recognition of the fact that “women’s poverty is linked to social economic decisions taken by elites in every country and by corporations all over the world” (Gebera 1996:219), analysis of how such institutions impacts on women’s live is crucial.

For instance, Africa as a continent is characterized by suffering ranging from a lack of basic necessities, oppression, violation of human rights, through to large international debts, political unrest and environmental degradation (Thomas-Spear and Rochleau 1995). Over the years this has deteriorated as it is observed thus:

A 1997 report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) shows that, 33 of the 48 Least Developed Countries (LDC) are in Africa; Africa has the highest debt ratio; The average growth rate of these countries fell from 5.4% in 1995 to 4.6 in 1996; the export primary commodity prices fell especially in tropical foods (e.g coffee, tea, cocoa) and minerals (e.g copper); and aid flows have declined and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows have remained low (Mwaura 2002:5).

While social, cultural and political factors are understood to be the cause of women’s poverty and vulnerability in Africa, implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) has played a large part in the recent past. For many it meant being retrenched from their jobs hence losing the source of income, it also meant cost sharing in areas of education and health facilities making these social goods unaffordable to many. As a result, the African development goals to eliminate the three ‘evils’ of poverty, disease and ignorance, which were

laid down since 1960s, have not been realized. These three 'evils' were perceived as the main obstacles to development in Africa in achieving 'good' life. The failure is manifested in the increased level of poverty and disease. In place of the anticipated development, today the African experience is characterized by a lack of basic necessities like, food, shelter, health facilities (diseases like TB, Malaria and HIV and AIDS which are either curable or preventable kill people in millions), and the massive destruction of natural resources (Dankelman and Davidson 1988; DFID 1998, 1999). This has a disproportionate effect upon women.

Globalization is another major factor contributing to poverty. The process of globalization has many definitions, but fundamentally these focus around the amalgamation of markets and technology, the increased mobility of resources and the rise of transnational corporations (Wood 2001:525). Globalization emphasizes liberalization of trade and markets, which should be based on equal partnership. As a process it tends to develop unified global ideological and cultural dimensions. However, it does not bring with it the anticipated equality as claimed. Consequently, Oduyoye has explained the situation in the words of Chinua Achebe, calling it "the partnership of the horse and the rider" (Oduyoye 1999:74; see also Kobia 2003:97-98) where the affluent have continued to be more affluent at the expense of the marginalized and the poor. Power relations that include the gender (im) balance are part of the package.

Domination of some cultures by others and the globally integrated entrepreneurship also characterizes globalisation. The questions about who is directing the process and the impact it has are crucial because it "benefits the rich and the powerful...and has disastrous consequences for the majority poor peoples and the nations through out the world" (Nasimiyu-Wasike 2002: ix). It is observed that since the introduction of structural adjustment in 1980s people from impoverished nations have been faced with overwhelming social problems that include the collapse of local industries, a decline in agricultural production, the deterioration of social infrastructure and a failure to provide basic services for their citizens (Nasimiyu-Wasike 2002:ix). At the bottom of those who suffer as a result of globalisation are women, the poor of the poor in all human societies world over. To gain a deeper understanding of the

impact of poverty and the economy in the lives of African women, there is need to gain an understanding of development.

***(a). The Impact Of Development On Women's Lives***

The concept of 'development' came into being in the 1950s and 1960s after the Second World War, emerging from the effort to reconstruct the infrastructures and economies of the nations that had been overwhelmed in the First and the Second World Wars including those in Europe, Africa, Asian and Latin America. The structures crucial to this process were and are the policies of the 1945 Bretton Woods Corporations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the International Bank of Reconstruction (IBR) and the World Bank (WB) (Mengesa 1989: 113-114; Mwaura 2002:5-6)<sup>40</sup>. However, these institutions which were controlled by the North to help reconstruct the North, are now still controlled by the North to 'develop' the South. The problematic situation has affected the objectives and consequently the implementation process. The affluent North has continued being richer at the expense of the poor South and the pressure to reassess the situation has failed, making development a moral concern. It has become a moral concern because contrary to the perspective anticipated by the above mentioned international organizations, authentic development must prioritize human development and a realization of all that bring with it wholeness of life to all.

The understanding of development as practiced in the context of globalization brought into existence the concept of the first and third worlds. The North comprised of the First World which is "developed" while the South is comprised of the Third World which is "developing". (Fitzgerald, McLennan, & Munstow, 1995). In line with development concerns and the problematic situations, implementation of the programmes designed and the relationships between the north and the south worsened.

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<sup>40</sup> Laurenti Mengesa illustrates how the Bretton Woods Corporation policies were controlled by the West and that those policies were not in favour of the Third World Countries. On the same note Philomena Mwaura highlights the impact of the implementation of those policies as they are manifested in the afterbirth of globalisation in Africa. L.C. Mangesa, 1989. "Theology of integral development in Africa in Church contribution to integral development" in J.T. Agbasiere and Zabajungu, (eds.) 1989. *Double spearhead numbers* 108-109 113-123. P.N. Mwaura, 2002. "The impact of globalisation on women in Kenya" in M.N. Getui, and M.M. Theuri, (eds) 2002. *Quest for abundant life in Africa*. Nairobi: Acton 5-17



Seen in broad terms ‘development’ has remained an obscure phenomenon, which experts and scholars from different disciplines have debated, ending up with ambiguity, or imprecise disagreements.<sup>41</sup> While many understand it as an ambiguous concept, Fourie (1981) correctly argues, that the context in which it is used determines its usage and meaning. However, in most cases this usage is restricted in relation to the poor. The poor nation needs to be developed by the rich nations. This notion was specifically based on economic growth, focused on the country’s GNP

In economic terms, ‘development’ has traditionally been thought of as the capacity of the national economy, whose initial economic condition has been more or less static for a long time, to generate and sustain an annual increase in its Gross National Product (GNP) (Todaro 1992:99).

The approach of weighing the GNP and GDP of a country ignores the social and cultural factors of development and other factors like environment, partnership and consultation in the development process. Understanding development in economic terms, it was thought that if underdeveloped countries could achieve a certain level of development, they could enter into equal partnership with the others in the world economy (Braidotti, Charkiewicz, Häusler & Wieringa 1994) but the gap between the rich and the poor nations has continued to widen.

The process based on economic growth, ignores aspects of development that cannot be quantified such as domestic chores that are usually done by women. The dominant models of development have significantly rendered women invisible by excluding them from decision making, leadership, and poor representation, policy making forums (Jahan 1995; DFID 1998, 1999; Francis 2000). The place and status of women in development, has resulted in women being the poor of the poor (Olufemi 2000) and it is evident that women are at the bottom of

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<sup>41</sup> The critics of development like Gilbert Rist reject ‘development’ because he sees those who believe in it as believing in the ‘myth’ of progress, growth and things getting better yet, where such believe exist, no development happens because poverty increases and dehumanisation is at it’s highest. See R. Gilbert (1999). *The history of development: from western origins to global faith*. Cape Town: UCT Press. 1-122. Also Gustavo Gutierrez (1974) traces the origin of the concept of development and comes to conclusion that ‘development’ was/is a new term for imperialism and that the so-called ‘developed’ nations use the term development to disguise their economic and political ends. See G. Gutierrez (1974). *A Theology of Liberation: History, politics and salvation*. Maryknoll NY:Orbis

Steve de Gruchy in his Guest Editorial for the June issue of *The Journal of Theology For Southern Africa* 110 acknowledges the fact that in response to the hopes and dreams of many in the Third World the WCC initiated a process in which theologians begun to dialogue with those involved in development. In endeavour to locate the theme of Theology and Development, he argues that, the theme is both new and old in theological terms. See De Gruchy S (2001) “Guest Editorial” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 110: (July) 1-4

the hierarchies as a result. This dimension also denies development human integrity and dignity and therefore the anticipated authentic satisfaction, which may be derived from an understanding of God's purpose in creation. In this case human productivity may not only be measured against monetary contribution or productivity but through other opportunities.

***(b) Development, Gender, And Women's Vulnerability***

While development issues which impacted on women and men had taken root in the 1950s, the first piece of work that was related to women was only published in 1970. Boserup (1970) an agricultural economist, provided evidence of third world women's marginalization and lack of access to technology and resources. She argued that, "in such countries, men are better educated and trained than women; illiteracy among women is more widespread than amongst men; and women work harder, with primitive equipment both in the household and in the labour market." She argued further that "a major difference between male and female productivity begins to develop when men become specialized producers of commercial agricultural goods or services, while all or most women continue to produce a variety of traditional products and services for family use" (Boserup 1986:213). This situation of women is still evident in the recent research confirming that even with massive research and exposure on the experiences of women little has happen towards a positive change (Thomaso, Slayter and Rochleau 1995; Olufem 2000; Getui and Theuri 2002). Boserup's work was the first to raise these concerns and became the impetus behind the enormous volume of work on women in development (WID). With time the discourse on women within development has taken different perspectives.

Women in Development (WID), is a 1970s approach that emphasised and highlighted the disadvantages that women suffered, and argued for the inclusion of women's issues and interest in development. Interventions of the approach emphasised programmes, projects and policies that were based on women's concerns and interest. This was challenged in the 1980s because it ignored the aspect of gender inequality (Boserup 1986; Charlton 1984).

In the mid 1980s there was a growing awareness of the shortcomings of the one sided approach to a gender examination of social development, focusing simply on women. As a result, the focus shifted to questions of gender relations including issues of division of labour, power and how resources are shared between women and men in the society. The issues of how policies and programmes, which promised to offer equal opportunities to everyone, impacted on women and men in the society were also important.

This trend resulted in the Gender and Development (GAD) approach, which goes beyond women to scrutinize the balance of power between men and women (Visvanathan et al 1997; Macdonald, Sprenger and Dubel 1997; Claridge, Frank and Mott 1999). It is important to note that the development of the new approach, GAD, did not invalidate the WID approach because there was still a need to continue making women visible and that GAD as an approach had its own shortcomings because it not deal with ambiguity that is impeded in gender neutrality. Gender neutrality has continued to raise concerns in issues that touch both male female genders (Kameri-Mbote 2003:1-8). To deal with such a misconception there has been a need to acknowledge the fact that the situation in the world is that gender relations is a chain of command with men at the top. It is also important to note that this command is founded in societal structures that are biased against women (Charlton 1989; Oduyoye 1995; Kameri-Mbote 2003). Consequently the problematic situation of gender analysis is that of identifying the differences and analysing how those differences impact on women and men. It is however agreeable that, the gender approach entails the taking up of strategies to rectify gender-based disparities (Visvanathan et al 1997; Macdonald, Sprenger and Dubel 1997; Claridge, Frank and Mott 1999), and working out the identifiable ambiguities.

In acknowledgement that development has had a negative impact on women, experts and scholars have made links between gender, empowerment, development and women. Consequently, they have tried to look for alternative strategies for the successful realisation of women's full potential. (Olufemi, 2000; Csete, Takirambudde, Jefferson and Saunders 2003; Epstein and Takirambudde 2002). This being the case therefore calls for a need to look into the issues of social-economic impacts on women particularly in Kenya.

***(c) Social-Economic Impacts On Women in Kenya***

Since the 1980s the Kenyan economy has suffered in different ways. For example, while there was remarkable growth after independence, 1972-1980 (Ngugi 1994:7) there has also been a remarkable decline since then, which was a result of different internal and external factors. Some of the factors that have affected the Kenyan economy are bad climatic conditions resulting in poor agricultural production, the oil crisis that effected market prices, a global economic recession and general economic mismanagement and corruption (Ngugi 1994:7). As a result, like other developing countries, the Kenyan government endeavoured to implement Structural Adjustment Programmes in order to reconstruct the economy. The implementation of SAPS impacted on the Kenyan economy variously. The government illustrated its efforts and commitment by setting their objectives that were based on economic and institutional reforms including, balance of payments and trade policy reform; fiscal and public sector policy reform; monetary and price policy reform; education policy reform; and population policy reform (Ngugi 1994:9-14).

This meant that those who made the decisions about what to do with the SAPS, had a powerful impact upon society. Poor representation of women in the decision making bodies translates into poor representations of the issues and concerns of women. As a result the implementation of SAPS in Kenya has negative implications on women, which contribute to their vulnerable status. Ngugi argues that although Kenya's legislation does not discriminate about participation in decision making on the basis of gender, women are under represented in the policy formulation process, and therefore have little impact on major decisions such as SAPS. He illustrated this by showing how women were represented at parliament level and local level (see table 11, Ngugi 1994:19). The current parliamentary representation illustrates the same kind of trend. The tables 11 and 12 illustrate the parliamentary representation as of July 2004, which reflects the parliament representation of 2002 (Parliament of the Republic of Kenya (PRK) 2006).<sup>42</sup>

**Table 10: - Summary of Kenya Parliament**

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<sup>42</sup> This has changed after the most recent election, but the gender balance stays more or less the same.

Category of Members	No
Elected Members	210
Nominated members	12
Ex-officio Members	2
<b>Total Members</b>	<b>224</b>

Source: Parliament of the Republic of Kenya (PRK) (2006)

**Table 11: - Kenya Parliament gender composition -2002**

Elected Members				Nominated members				Ex-officio Members			
Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
198	88.4	12	2.2	5	2.2	7	3.1	2	0.9	0	0.0

Source: Parliament of the Republic of Kenya (PRK) (2006)

**Table 12: Members of Parliament by gender, 1969 - 1992**

Year of Election	Elected Members				Nominated Members			
	Male		Female		Male		Female	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1969	154	99.35	1	0.65	11	91.67	1	8.33
1974	152	96.82	5	3.18	10	83.33	2	16.67
1979	155	98.1	3	1.9	11	91.67	1	8.83
1983	157	99.37	1	0.63	9	81.82	2	18.18
1988	186	98.94	2	1.06	10	90.91	1	9.09
1992	182	96.80	6	3.19	12	100.0	0	0.0

Source: Women's Bureau – compiled from supervisors of Elections, Attorney General's Chambers, Ngugi 1994:19

Structural Adjustment Programmes are in general terms the economic reform policies recommended and supported by donor communities to manage their debts. Developing countries embraced the set strategies in order to streamline the economic structural damage and discrepancies to ensure sustainable and stable economic growth. The main objective therefore was to promote the efficient use of resources and since in most of the countries where SAPS were embraced, women were not involved in decision-making to represent

women's issues and concerns, the implementation process has negative implications on them and has left them more vulnerable. Particularly, in Kenya, the negative effects of SAPS have impacted more on the marginalized groups, the poor, slum dwellers, rural population of whom majority are women (Ngugi 1994; Gitobu and Kamau 1994; Mwaura 2002; and James 2002).

For example, the impact of cost sharing when accessing health and education facilities has had a negative impact on women in Kenya and this should be understood as some of the results of the changing economic paradigm. A focus on the rural and poor urban women means that one is dealing with those categories of women that are economically poor or challenged; those who lack or have little education; those who are unemployed, and most probably those who own little or no property. Much of these problems are a result of Structural Adjustment Programmes, which are attributes of globalization. It is therefore significant to note that globalization has a historical process that involves the restructuring of the global, national, local household economies, social structures and livelihood strategies, which has in turn transformed international and local division of labor, changed productive relations, employment, the provision of social services and cultures affecting rural and urban Africa (James 2002:18). As a development concept globalization endeavors to create a single global market and governance for "the good" of humanity but this is highly contested for instance:

With regard to women's well being, globalization in Kenya has meant both the availability of opportunities for utilizing their potential, and an increase in their poverty particularly in the informal sector in agriculture and small business. This sector where women dominate is now threatened by high-level competition from transnational corporations. The New World Order is negatively affecting the lives of millions of people especially the poor, many who are women (Mwaura 2002:6-7).

Among other things it is identified that in Kenya, crop production has fallen, divorce and family breakdown are on the increase, illiteracy has heightened among women and poverty status has risen with women being most hit. Evidently, social economic dynamics in the traditional and contemporary society are unfavorable for the advancement of women. Clearly, this is influenced by the traditional social set up. Earlier in the study we noted that most Kenyan ethnic communities are patriarchal. It is also evident that most contemporary communities prefer male leadership, which excludes women from major leadership and

decision-making forums, which determines women representation in policy making that impact on their economic status. This therefore is a major draw back to such a realization as Mwaura suggest because among the role players as she suggest, the majority in the leadership are men and women's representation is poor. Having identified that policies are specifically a major aspect that makes women remain in the predicament of vulnerability, in the next section I articulate policies and law in relationship to women's vulnerability.

### **3.2.3 Policies And Law**

The traditional ethnic communities had their legal systems that enabled them to guide their social and political life as a community. In the modern Kenyan society, while there is the national constitution that is used, uniformly local customary laws are still in force. These are mostly felt on matters that touch issues of land, property ownership, marriage and death issues because the national constitution allows for application of the customary laws when dealing with family matters, in other words in the domestic sphere which affects women. This is an area where many women suffer because in most of these ethnic legal councils women lack representation. There have been cases of forced marriages, disinheriting widows and violation of women's property ownership of property. In most cases, and especially where there are inter-cultural marriages, women are disadvantaged. In such situations women are advised to go home and sort out the case at home or with the clan and it always ends up that customary legal processes favour men against women<sup>43</sup>. After all they are set by men and women are not represented. To establish this claim, we then turn to an examination of women's legal situation in Kenya. As we get into this section, it is significant to refer to our earlier articulation by Kameri-Mbote (3.1.4) where she argues that the Kenyan legal framework in relation to violence against women in Kenya allows for ambiguities that makes women vulnerable.

As in many other Third World Countries and for that matter other African countries, Kenyan women experience suffering and dehumanisation characterized by violence, discrimination and all types of oppression of which were described in chapter two and earlier in this chapter.

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<sup>43</sup> The case of Wambui Otieno is one of those remarkable cases. On the death of Otieno in 1986 it was so difficult for Wambui to bury her husband. The same Wambui Otieno had difficulties when she decided to remarry because the clan members felt that Wambui was their property and that if she got married to another clan they were going to lose their property (Otieno 1998; Persley and Clough 1999)

Experts and scholars have researched<sup>44</sup> and have endeavored to expose the experiences of women in their effort to advocate for women's liberation and creating awareness for the need for ensuring humanization of women.

As it was discussed earlier in page 25, chapter two the PFA restated conventions and declarations made in relation to women and girls and seeks to uphold the complete realization of all human rights and the fundamental freedoms of all women throughout their lives. It is however, observed that even after the Beijing conference women's lives are characterized by gross hardship and suffering.

Chapter two makes it clear that most of the Kenyan ethnic communities are patriarchal where women's ideals are determined by male ideals. In such a society it is argued and illustrated that women were not represented in legal courts and they had no legal and political authority. Exploring the existing legal framework in relation to violence against women, it is realized that irrespective of the Kenyan government being a signatory to various international conventions that deal with issues of violence against women, like CEDAW and ICCPR the conventions have not been used in a way that give protection of women's human rights (Gathumbi 2002; Kameri-Mbote 2002).

### **3.2.4 Women's Health and HIV and AIDS**

Women's vulnerability exposes them to many types of opportunistic diseases and infections. In chapter two, we encountered three women (*Edith Gata Kamunde 13/02/2003, Joyce Rigiri Mati 11/02/2003 and Gladys Mukwaiti Marangu 10/02/2003*) who shared their experiences that showed that women are vulnerable to diseases because of their nature as women. Firstly

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<sup>44</sup> The following publications and many more analyse and expose the experiences of Kenyan women and most of them are calling for women's human dignity and integrity. Structural adjustment programmes (SAPS) in Kenya: Implications on lives of women (Workshop report) K. Kanyinga K and S.Ibutu. (eds.), 1994 Nairobi: NCK; COVAW, 2001. *Gender and sexual violence in institutions of Learning: Calling for change of attitude*. Nairobi: COVAW. G. Wamue and M.N. Getui (eds.) 1996. *Violence Against women* Nairobi: Acton; Kameri-Mbote, P. 2000. *Violence against women in Kenya: An analysis of law, policy and institutions*. ILC Working Paper No.2000-1.

M.N. Getui and M.M. Theuri (eds.) 2002. *Quest for abundant life in Africa*. Nairobi: Acton.; L. Owiti, J. Mbugua and J. King'ori (eds.) 2002. *Our journey, our hope: The national Christian Conference*. Limuru Conference and Training Center March 18<sup>th</sup> –22<sup>nd</sup>, 2002. Nairobi: NCK



because they are more involved in their mothering activities, they forget personal health. Secondly, they are busy taking care and feeding the rest of the family members; they therefore forget to eat well. When they do not eat well, their immunity is weakened making them susceptible diseases and infections. Thirdly, it was also identified that women do not have control of their own bodies and especially when it comes to sexual lives, this leaves them at great risk of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and of course HIV and AIDS. Fourthly, some traditions still hold on the traditional taboos and belief on the witchcraft. Therefore, many do not take the reality of STIs and HIV and AIDS seriously. They are therefore predisposed and in case of infection, they do not take the necessary precautions making them really vulnerable. Fifthly, the whole question of stigma around STIs and HIV and AIDS has continued holding many families and for that matter majority of women captive in keeping it secret (Shisanya 2002:45-64, Otieno 2002:64-75).

As a result, Governments, NGOs, Church organizations and individuals have intervened in different ways. Amongst others, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has taken the issue of women's health and HIV and AIDS seriously. This is evidenced by their intervention in various ways. One major way was demystifying the stigma attached to HIV and AIDS which was climaxed by their theme for the Third Pan African Conference held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 2002. This conference was followed by publication of the papers presented in that conference (Dube and Kanyoro 2004, Phiri, Haddad and Masenya and 2003, Muriithi 2003).

Members of the Circle have pushed the issue of women's health and HIV and AIDS further because of the weight it bears on those who are concerned with women's vulnerability. This is further articulated in the book in honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye (Phiri and Nadar 2006) in which issues of women's health and religion are articulated. Members of the Circle have concerned themselves with the issues of women's health in a big way and committed to ensuring that they are able to provide sustainable resource to women's fundamental vulnerability.

### 3.2.5 Religion And The Church

The fourth factor that contributes to women's vulnerability in Kenya has to do with religion and especially the church. In a continent characterised by religious pluralism, the impact of religiosity on people and their social development cannot be ignored. Accordingly, a wide range of research on African Religion has it that African life is intrinsically religious. Africans are sometimes referred to as being notoriously religious. Their rituals and ceremonies are religious. When they break the ground for planting and even when they take the first crop from the garden it is religiously done (Theuri 2002:188). Furthermore religions like Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism, which were originally foreign in Africa, also have a wide impact on social development in Africa.

Religion impacts on development because religion affects how people work and integrate with others and their environment, which is determined by their relationship with their ultimate being. Religious activities and involvements include religious taboos, days of worship and difficulties that come with interfaith engagement. While people live together, faith convictions make them perceive things differently. For instance, the Seventh Day Adventists go to worship on Saturday, Muslims on Friday and Majority of Christians on Sunday. Apart from such functionalities, there are other complex issues that make them perceive life and social development differently. Women find themselves in the midst of this that makes their lives doubly complex.

In some African traditional societies women took part in religion. In some cases, such as in the rain shrines amongst the Chewa of Malawi, they were the ones who took care of the religious shrines as prophetesses (Phiri 1997:21-32). A Chewa woman was initially seen as the sacred vessel of life, and she was supposed to nourish and unite the family. However, the modern Chewa woman's life is subjugated by the powers of patriarchy which with time have been able to influence and overtake the traditional ordering of the Chewa community. Phiri (1997) and Oduyoye (1995) have argued that in the Chewa and the Akan communities which were originally matrilineal, women can no longer be said to be much different from the patriarchal societies because they have lost the religious authority to men. Their argument is

that the Christian patriarchal culture, which has had great impact on African peoples, played a great role in setting the standards of the roles and place of women in the society<sup>45</sup>.

A common characteristic of the early missionary churches was the kind of teaching that was given to and about women. Women were taught how to be good wives, mothers, and servants. They were taught how to take care of children, take care of flower gardens and how to arrange flowers in the houses and in the church. Women were taught things that were basically domestic oriented which up to this time influence the roles of women in the church and the society (James 1996)<sup>46</sup>. Accordingly, in many churches, biblical scriptures have been used to silence women and determine their place and status in the church denying them the opportunity to lead or teach (1 Timothy 2:8-15). Other scriptural verses are uncritically used as the authoritative word of God to determine how women are supposed to behave or approach church issues for example the roles of women in the church (1 Cor. 11:1-16, 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:8-15) and their role in the family (Eph. 5:18-33; 1 Peter 3:1-7).

Remarkably, while Proverbs 31:10-31 is a good example of women's capability in social development including domestic and complicated economic engagement like purchase of land, it has been used to emphasise the domestic roles of women. In many of the churches during a wedding, churchwomen emphasise to the bride how to treat the husband and what they are required to be and to do but nothing much is said to the bridegroom. There are a number of key Christian denominations in Kenya, including Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and Pentecostal. Each has its own particular stance on such matters, so we cannot provide a generalized overview. To gain a deeper understanding of this situation it is best to illustrate the situation with a case study drawn from the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA).

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<sup>45</sup> Philomena Mwaura identifies the fact that religious ethics of the church determines the way the church shapes and implement their development endeavours. See P.N. Mwaura, 2003 African instituted churches and socio-economic development in G. Wamue, and M.M. Theuri, 2003. *Quest for integrity in Africa*, Nairobi, Acton.

<sup>46</sup> In her recent research Ruth Muthei James argues that women's participation in the church-based organizations is influenced by culture and socialization, education, organizational structures and policies, women's multiple roles and obstacles at work. See R.M. James (2003) "Women's participation in Church-based organizations" in *Quest for integrity in Africa*, G. Wamue, and M.M. Theuri, 2003, Nairobi: Acton.

*(a) Illustration: The Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA)*

To illustrate the way in which the church relates to women and their concerns, I will look in some detail to one denomination, The Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA). This is my denomination. The PCEA is one of the mainline churches of missionary origin, which traces their origin to the work of the Church of Scotland Mission. In the 1930s there were two churches, the Church of Scotland Overseas Presbytery (CSOP) (European church) and the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA)(African church). The two churches (CSOP and PCEA) united in 1956 to form the current Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PPM 1998:3; Njoroge 2000:10). It is important to note that the first elders of the church were ordained in 1920 who were all men. The first women elders were only ordained in 1965 (Njoroge 2000:8). The first African men ministers of the church were ordained in 1926 and the first woman minister was ordained fifty six years later in 1982.

The Presbyterian Church of East Africa is the third largest denomination after the Roman Catholic and Anglican Church in Kenya. The PCEA draws her membership from rural and urban communities. One outstanding aspect about PCEA as a denomination is the aspect of self-reliance. This is concept that was instilled in the members since the early 1970s spearheaded by one of the major leaders of the church, the Very Rev Dr. John Gatu.<sup>47</sup> (Kobia 2003:131; Gatu 2006). As result most of the PCEA's development projects including their church buildings are done through Christian community driven "*Harambee*" and personal commitment from members to give for church service. The PCEA secretariat including the seven major departments<sup>48</sup> organize different development projects<sup>49</sup> including schools and

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<sup>47</sup> The Very Rev. Dr. John Gatu is known world wide for his call for a missionary moratorium. In 1974 while he was the secretary General of the PCEA, he made his famous statement "Missionaries go home" and founded Jitegemea –in Kiswahili -literally meaning 'self-reliant'. Refer to S.M. (Kobia, 2003. *The courage to hope: A challenge for churches in Africa*. Nairobi: Acton: 131; J.G Gatu, 2006. *Joyfully Christian, truly African*.Nairobi: Acton.

<sup>48</sup> Currently I head the department of Christian Education. As the Director Christian Education, I am in charge of the docket of all the church sponsored schools, which are more than 700 schools countrywide. The church is the sponsor of Thogoto Teachers College and is the proprietor of Presbyterian Teachers College – Rubate. The PCEA sponsors some of the best schools in the country such as Alliance high school for boys, and Alliance girls' high school, Nairobi school among others which are also top performers in academic performance. As a development interest it is also important to note that the PCEA is the proprietor of some of the best hospitals in the country including PCEA Kikuyu hospital, PCEA Tumutumu hospital and PCEA Chogoria hospital.

other institutions of higher learning, medical institutions such as hospitals and clinics, Christian based Guest houses and many other project from the grassroots to the international levels including Tanzania and Uganda.

The PCEA embraces the role of women in the church characterised by its acceptance of women's' ordination, women in leadership as church elders, deacons and other church group leaders. The impact of the PCEA Woman's Guild is felt in the church and society. The woman's Guild has initiated and runs major institutions, for instance the WOGET Guest house in Mombasa and other national and grassroots projects. While the PCEA is highly rated in embracing the place and role of women in the church, women make it with much struggle because of the influence of patriarchal overtones in the Christian church in general. We therefore need to explore the place and the role of women in the PCEA.

The role of the church in the advocacy for equality of all in the church and society is influenced by theology relating to women in the history of Christianity. Ruth James has articulated the historical analysis of the place of women in theology from the early church. In her analysis she identifies the fact that the leaders of the Reformation shared the theological notions of the early church fathers that rated women as second-class humans (James 2003:108-109). This attitude, it is clear, informed the Euro-American missionary approach to Africa which impacts on women and their role in religious activities (James 2003: 107-111, see also Oduyoye 1995:172-173). This dominant theology from this background required women to be modest and silent in the church and they were not allowed to take leadership roles (1 Tim. 2:9-15). A literal reading of this and other bible scriptures allows for the suppression of women in the church. As a result women have emerged as a vulnerable and marginalized group in the church.

To their credit, the PCEA was the first of the mainline churches in Kenya to accept and to practice the ordination of women. The first women elders were ordained 1965 and the first

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Generally PCEA as a denomination is well known for her social development innovativeness and commitment countrywide. Her development initiatives impact on people's lives in the rural and urban areas alike.

<sup>49</sup> Many other projects have come up between 1974 to date including the PCEA Teachers College Rubate; Presbyterian University of East Africa, WOGECT Guest house Mombasa, Presbyterian Guest House Nairobi, PCEA Milele Beach Hotel in Mombasa and many others,

woman minister was ordained in 1982. The PCEA also has a reputation of having recognised the important role of women in the church, which is demonstrated by their involvement in the church. Women are the majority in the church and they also play central roles in fundraising for the upkeep of the church and the church projects. The women's involvement in church activities is illustrated by especially the activities of the woman's guild as earlier discussed. The Woman's Guild has non profit and profit-making projects from the grassroots to national level, which is clearly indicated in the diagram, provided.

Women clergy are known to have advanced in their academic endeavours just as their male colleagues. They are also involved in the leadership as the male colleagues. There have been women moderators of the Kirk sessions, and the presbytery. There are also women seconded to the training colleges with the first woman to be ordained currently working with the WCC (Rev. Dr. Nyambura Njoroge); the second woman to be ordained working with the St Paul's Theological University (The Rev. Alphama K Kinyua<sup>50</sup>) and I am working in the General Assembly secretariat. While women were absent in the top leadership positions, the role of the Woman's Guild against the harmful traditional practice (Female Genital Mutilation) of 1920s is remarkable in the church development (Njoroge 2000). Currently, Woman's Guild impact in the church is felt through their effort in fundraising for church building and other projects.

However, and this is the point of the illustration, while the PCEA as a denomination has over the years demonstrated its recognition of women in the church, the question of gender disparity in all sectors of the church structures stands out as a major challenge. While the constitution of the church does not sanction gender discrimination, women in the PCEA are marginalized in leadership, and decision-making forums. For example, it is particularly difficult to understand why John Gatu in his book, *Joyfully Christian, Truly African* (2006) does not have a section on women ministry in the PCEA given that he championed the debate when he was the deputy secretary in 1960s.

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<sup>50</sup> The Rev. Alphama K Kinyua is the Dean of Students and the Presbyterian Church representative in St. Paul's Theological University which is an ecumenical institution.

Due to the patriarchal teaching brought by the missionaries and embraced by the church, the majority of women have internalised attitudes that they are second-class citizen and therefore they must be led by male leadership. For instance, at congregational level, the Woman's Guild must have the chairman of the congregation (usually a man) as the chaplain. At parish level, the parish minister must be there when they meet, likewise at the Presbytery and General Assembly where the moderators are the chaplains. These moderators are usually men<sup>51</sup>; this means that at the end of the day the moderator's view prevails. The place of women in such a prominent church with such background has remained representative with huge inequalities in all the sectors of the church life and functioning.

In a nutshell this section is implicitly saying that, while the church should be setting an example to the society in rescuing women from comprehensive vulnerability characterized by discrimination, exploitation, injustices, inequality and all forms of unfreedoms, the church is itself caught in the same web of discrimination and inequality.

### **3.2.6. Internalization through Socialisation**

The fifth and final element in women's vulnerability is the way in which women have internalized their inferior position in the church and society. Internalization can be understood as the end product of the process of socialization from childhood. The process of socialization can also be understood from different perspectives. All that surrounds an individual informs his or her internalised attitudes inform ones personality and identity. As earlier articulated in chapter two and earlier section of this chapter three, people's art, music, and ways of doing things inform their thought patterns, which in turn influences their identity. This kind of scenario is illustrated by Mercy Amba Oduyoye in (Oduyoye 1995:77-153). In this section she explains how an African woman is socialized by African patriarchal culture and how that internalization forms and shapes her personality. We now turn to an exploration of the concept of socialization to gain an in depth understanding of its impact on women's.

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<sup>51</sup> In the recent times there are some local chairpersons that are women, and also women parish ministers and women Presbytery Moderators. Another surprising thing is that, the title has not changed from chairman to chairperson. Whether men or women, they are addressed as "CHAIRMAN". To make it worse, there are some women who have refused to be addressed as CHAIR LADIES but to remain CHAIRMAN

*(a) Socialisation*

In agreement with the above articulation, viewing the concept of socialisation from a social perspective Pilcher and Wheleham say,

In sociology, the concept of socialization refers to a process whereby individuals learn the culture, (for example, language, formal and informal rules of behaviour and sets of knowledge) of the particular society they live in. The concept of socialization features in explanations of gender difference, where emphasis is given to the process of how individuals learn to become masculine or feminine in their identities, appearance, values and behaviour. The primary stage of socialization occurs during infancy and childhood, via interaction between adults (especially parents) and children. Socialization is though, a life-long process. As individuals grow up and older, they continually encounter new situations and experiences and so learn new aspects of femininity or masculinity through out their life (Pilcher and Wheleham 2004:160).

Just as it was expressed in chapter two through stories of women and photographic essay, Pilcher and Wheleham (2004) confirm that socialization impacts on the lives of women through social, cultural, political and economic structures. In chapter two it was discovered that culture has its ways of communicating where each individual stands as far as the above aspects are concerned. Clearly, earlier in this chapter, it was evidenced that in most African communities femininity is portrayed negatively, which has then impacted on the role and place of women negatively. For instance in many cultures, it is known that girl children do not belong to their families for ever because once they get married they will belong to the other family/clan. With that kind of internalization, the community is socialization to take it that boy children are more valued than girl children. Consequently, such factors as property distribution, opportunities for education, in many communities disadvantage girl child who is presumed to be a passerby in favour of the boy child who is presumably a permanent resident, provider and protector of the family and the clan. The aspects listed below illustrate how such socialization impacts on the girl children and women in the society,

- The boy child is more valuable than a girl child leading to a devaluation of women. Therefore women have always to prove their capability and struggle for status and place in the society.
- Women should remain silent (*Mutumia*) and keep secret the family matters. This perpetuates the violation of women in the society under forced silence



- Men are the owners of property and women must always belong, therefore women are always identified in association with (the father, husband, uncle, brother and son, male relative or the clan).
- Use of language, proverbs and symbols such as *kia muka kiricaga kia rara* (the word of a woman is taken seriously after what she said comes to pass) devalues the abilities of women resulting in subjugation of women by male dominance and especially in issues of decision making and policy.
- Due to their presumed semi-permanent status, it is mostly assumed that women do not deserve property whether in their natal or marital homes. In their natal homes parents provide and in their marital homes, husbands and sons provide for them.

Research confirms domestic violence as one form of gender-based violence that is usually directed to women and girls and that the aspect of socialisation helps this to happen without disclosure.<sup>52</sup> To be a virtuous woman one has to keep secret what happens in the family circles. The research confirms that “battery, sexual abuse of female children and workers, female genital mutilation, dowry related violence, marital rape, emotional, verbal, psychological, economic, and spiritual abuse” (Phiri 2000:85) happen even in Christian homes and are kept as family secret. Phiri in this particular research – amongst Black South African women - examined the following:

- The proportion of married Christian women who know someone who have experienced violence in a Christian home.
- The proportion of married Christian women who have experienced violence in their home.
- The survivors’ perception of the attitudes of people around them and in their communities.
- Survivors’ perception of themselves.
- Survivors’ knowledge about the support structures that exist and their suggestions on how they can be improved.
- The role of theological and spiritual teachings and beliefs on what it means to be a woman and to suffer abuse.

The outcome of the research was outrageous because 96% of the 25 interviewed women had knowledge or had experienced it themselves, 84% had experienced it themselves and out of the total number only 16% that said they did not experience any type of violence. Phiri says she could sense some level of wanting to keep their experiences secret for one reason or the other. This internalization of second class status through socialisation makes women vulnerable and little is happening to help the victims. This is a common feature in many

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<sup>52</sup> I.A. Phiri (2000) “Domestic violence against women in Christian homes: A Durban case study” in *Journal of constructive theology* Vol.6 (2) 85-110

African countries where socialisation, social and institutional structures consider women's plight as a secondary issue.

Socialization as an aspect that informs an individual personality and shapes her identity, is also responsible for the low number of women in places of leadership and decision making forums. From the field work in chapter two it was clear that at initiation, while boy children are prepared to take leadership and protection roles in the society, girls were introduced to mothering duties and domestic chores. The story of Jones Kaari Mutegi stands out as a conspicuous example because Kaari internalizes that since she is a girl she can leave school and go look for a job to help her mother bring her siblings up. She also express that, she would not want to get married because she would not want to suffer like her mother. Women are quickly reminded of their cultural requirements and for many their internalization of this leads them to decline from taking up responsibilities and even leadership.

Social structures are also set in a way that reflect women as weak and needing protection from the male figure, which has also resulted in women themselves not having confidence in the fellow women who are in position power and authority. Ogundipe-Leslie in the previous section argues that women themselves are obstacles to their social development, and this is one in which they are obstacles. This is a cause of vulnerability because in such a situation women do not support fellow women.

As presented in chapter two and earlier sections of this chapter women have a reason to internalize fear in terms of legal protection, in areas of marital crisis, property ownership, leadership and representation in decision making forums (refer to the section on Kameri-Mbote and Ogundipe-Leslie). Most of those issues are usually referred to the family or clan leadership. In a patriarchal societal set up, family or clan leadership or meetings favour men to the disadvantage of women counterparts. As a result, many women remain silent as it was the case shared by Wanyaga Mbae in chapter two. Most of the customary proceedings favour men and it is most likely that people are referred there. Most women therefore choose to remain vulnerable.

*(b) Resistance Strategies*

I would be wrong, however, if I simply ended at internalisation. It is important to note that not all women accept the situation as it is, and there are elements of resistance to patriarchy and vulnerability that was illustrated in chapter two. Resistance in this case is seen from the perspective of ways in which women are able to confront their status of vulnerability, including structures, institutions and available resources. Due to socialization, which leaves women suffering from low-self esteem and intimidation, the identification of ways and means of resistance is a challenge. In chapter two there a number of victory stories that show how some women were able overcome hardships. For some, they joined together especially in cases of material support and finances, others simply shared their experiences and encouraged one another and together found alternatives to their challenges and others chose to use the available resources and waited for nature to take its course. We therefore witness some ways in which women are able to confront vulnerability in the next section.

Through out chapter two and the bigger part of this chapter three, it is evident women's lives are predisposed to injustices. The condition of the majority of women hinders their possibility of accessing resources that would help them out in times of need. In most cases, as a last result women have worked with what is available. In chapter two, it was clear that a majority of women used locally available resources creatively and transformed their status. Jennet was engaged in pottery while Agnes reared chickens and made their livelihood. In the face of the modern economy where monetary resources are inevitably a requirement of life, women have devised their own ways of accumulating finances. As a result, they have established women's groups, self-help projects organised as income generating projects. Some have organised themselves and managed to network for guaranteeing one another to afford credit facilities, while others come together to help each other in their local levels to uphold each other's dignity and integrity (Kinetic 1994: 49-54; Thomas-Slayter and Richelieu 1995; Njoroge 2000; James 2003).

Community women's groups range from small groups that women organise themselves to help each other during peak periods in their garden. Others form what they call "merry go

round” where they contribute money for one another and buy household items like spoons and cups. Where women have become collaborative enough there are even large water projects, tree planting projects, and the like. Most of these projects are organised in such a way that women are able to meet some of their very intimate needs like fuel wood through tree planting, reducing long distances when fetching water for domestic use and acquiring money for buying their very basic things and upkeep of their families. The photographic essay in chapter 2 pointed to a number of these projects.

Women’s groups that are church based, range from fellowships that meet for spiritual well being to elaborate church income generating projects for women. Such organisations have enabled women to perceive themselves differently. In cases where women had taken the attitude that women cannot be leaders, these attitudes have been challenged and slowly women are starting to be more involved in leadership and decision making forums. For instance Njoroge (2000) discusses how the Woman’s Guild protested against female genital mutilation in 1920s under the auspices of the PCEA. Their impact was largely felt by 1929 when the government banned that traditional practice. Currently the Woman’s Guild of the PCEA is one of the churchwomen organisations that is very influential and runs non profitable and income generating projects for example, Shalom Girls’ Training Centre at Nairobi and Woman’s Guild Ecumenical Conference and Training Centre- Makupa Mombasa (PCEA WOGET Centre)<sup>53</sup> among others. Community and church based women groups and organisation range from village to national levels. They provide women with the safe space to share their experiences and help each other in different ways.

### **3.2.7. Conclusion**

I have just noted how women do not just ‘play the victim’ in the face of vulnerability. They do find ways of protesting against patriarchy and resisting the oppression they feel. Safe and cooperative spaces are created, and small attempts to secure livelihoods are evident. However, it should be clear from the research in chapter two, and the analysis in chapter three

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<sup>53</sup> See the following Woman’s Guild booklets - 1.PCEA Woman’s Guild Guide BOOK, undated, page 25  
2. Kiririkano 1922-1997 Miaka 75, undated, pages 1-2

that for all their own struggles against vulnerability, women are up against a series of very strong patriarchal and unjust structures. The five core causes identified in this chapter are as follows:

- Traditions and customs
- Poverty
- Policies and law
- Religion and the church
- Internalisation

I am now in a position to identify the third level of the framework. The framework notes that five factors are the key causes of comprehensive vulnerability in women in Kenya. This experience of comprehensive vulnerability in turn, has an impact on a whole set of women's lived experiences in the home, in education, in health and in the work place. This in turn then serves to reinforce the experience of vulnerability, even to the point of women internalising their vulnerability and coming to accept it as normal, or as that which God has ordained. Even where they seek to resist it, the victories are small and often temporary.

Such an analysis is helpful for Christians and the church in two important ways. First, it confronts the church with a fundamental ethical challenge characterised by severe human suffering. It places the cry of injustice, hardship and vulnerability squarely before those who claim to worship God and follow Jesus, and it demands an appropriate response from true worshippers. Second, this framework helps to articulate what that response needs to focus on, namely the "*experience of comprehensive vulnerability*".

While a sectoral response to each of the individual causes or experience is crucial, the fieldwork and analysis suggest that the vulnerability is so pervasive that progress in one area of life (eg. Church, education or health) does not necessarily mean that the comprehensive vulnerability will be overcome. The church needs a more constructive strategy and it is to this task that I now turn in the next two chapters.

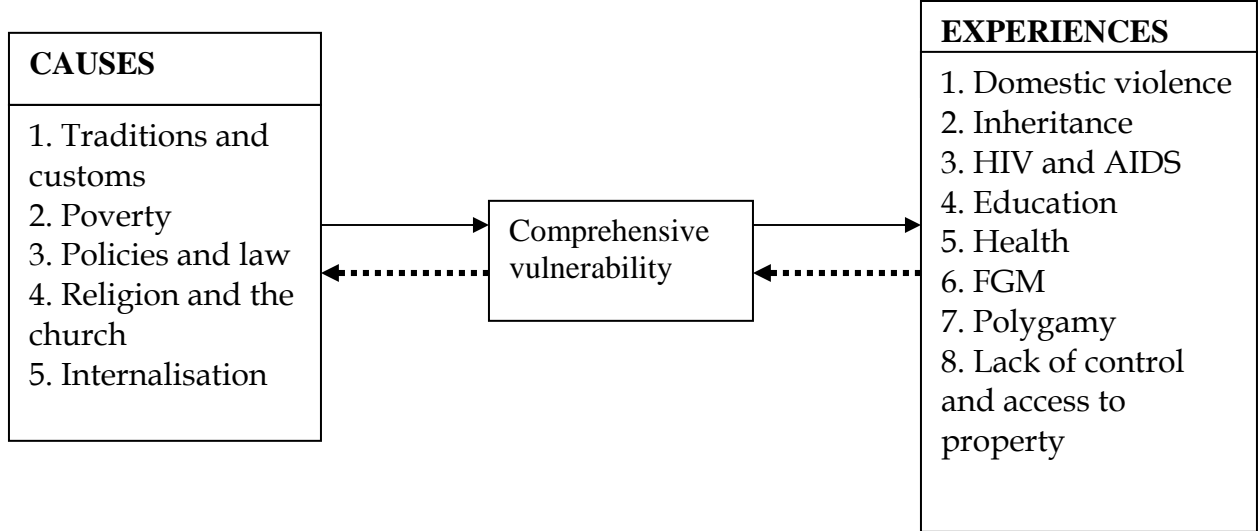


Figure 3. 2: Summary of relationship between the causes of vulnerability experiences of injustices

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THEOLOGY, PUBLIC POLICY AND GENDER VULNERABILITY

#### 4.0. Introduction.

I ended chapter three by noting that the description and analysis of women's experience of comprehensive vulnerability in Kenya presents an ethical challenge to Christians and the Church and a challenge as to why and how they might respond. This chapter takes up these concerns. First, it deals with the ethical challenge, by providing a theological response - in dialogue with key proponents of African Women's Theology - that calls upon the Church to provide justice, dignity and freedom for women in Africa. This answers the question: *why* should the church should respond to women's vulnerability? However, I argue that focusing predominantly on questions of culture, and concentrating mainly upon the life of the Church, means that African Women's Theology does not always provide a response for women who experience vulnerability in wider society from a range of other factors such as the law, poverty and policy.

To take the issue forward, and in starting to address the second concern raised by the framework, I argue that African Women's Theology (to which I am myself committed) must also become a *public theology*, taking up issues that women face in the public arena. This responds to the question: *How* should the church respond to women's vulnerability. In other words it must begin to deal with issues of public policy, constitution writing and law making if it is to help ordinary women overcome the comprehensive experience of vulnerability that they face in society. To help us understand what this might mean, I draw on the work of Duncan Forrester, Jesse Mugambi and Charles Villa-Vicencio three internationally recognized scholars who have offered ways of doing public theology. While Duncan Forrester provides an understanding and a framework for doing public theology, Jesse Mugambi and Charles Villa-Vicencio provide two case studies of public theology in Africa.

Finally, to anticipate our argument and to prepare for chapter five, I will argue that the weakness of the work of Forrester, Mugambi and Villa-Vicencio is the assumption that once good constitutions, laws and policies are in place, or once society, the church and individuals have committed themselves to reconstruction, then justice will be experienced. It is likely that these theologians are reflecting a male experience, one that is not attuned to the comprehensive vulnerability that women experience in the public arena.

So here I must return again to the concerns of African Women's Theology, and the work I have done in the previous chapters to argue that a legitimate African Women's Public Theology must focus not on the rights that women may or may not have, but on what women are "actually able to do and to be", what has become known as their *human capabilities* and this will bring me directly to chapter five and the work of the feminist philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, who has provided a coherent articulation of the capabilities approach for development theory, in dialogue with third world women. This chapter will therefore be articulating *why* and *how* the church should respond to women's comprehensive vulnerability in Africa.

#### **4.1 The Ethical Challenge: African Women's Comprehensive Vulnerability As A Theological Concern**

As I have noted in the introduction to this chapter, I will first point to the ethical challenge of women's experience of vulnerability by providing a theological response that calls upon the Church to provide dignity, justice and freedom for women in Africa in dialogue with key proponents of African Women's Theology.

From a theological point of view it is important to ask: what does God feel and think about the situation of women's vulnerability in Africa? The answer to this question should provide the direction for the church in responding to the experience of women in Africa. It is clear to me, as it is to many who have reflected upon the situation, that God cannot be happy with the situation as described in chapters two and three. This experience of comprehensive vulnerability surely reaches up to God, as did the cry of the Israelites thousands of years ago:



The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them. (Exodus 2:23-25).

In this section I will argue that in the light of the experiences illustrated and analyzed in chapters two and three, issues of women's dignity, justice and freedom are crucial to women's fullness of life. However, patriarchal social structures have created women's vulnerability, which is systematically held in place at the expense of women's dignity, justice and freedom. The church must take up the challenge of ensuring that those aspects that make women vulnerable are adequately addressed and that the government takes appropriate action.

In exploring what God's perspective on women's vulnerability might be, I will reflect on three particular aspects that emphasize humanization in the face of the experience of dehumanized women: (1) The importance of women's *dignity* in a patriarchal constructed society in relation to the understanding of the fullness of life and women's humanity as a creation of God. (2) The importance of women experiencing *freedom* as women in society, in relation to God's intention that all should experience life in abundant freedom from all forms of bondage. (3) The importance of women's *equal and just entitlement* with men to the benefits of society in relation to God's purpose of creation and providence for all humanity.

#### **4.1.1 God, Dignity And Women**

Firstly as noted in chapters two and three, there are biological, social and cultural determinants of who women are that lead to their devaluation in society. Biologically, girls and boys are different. Therefore at one level the difference between femininity and masculinity is accepted as a fact where girls are seen to be physically weaker than boys. Socially, as illustrated in chapters two and three, the birth of a girl child leads to mixed feelings, because in the Meru culture, and in most African cultures, girl children are generally less valued in comparison to boy children. There are numerous examples of where girls have lost education to give opportunity to their brothers. In such cases young girls have faced child labour and/or early marriages exposing them to undue injustice and abuse of their human dignity.

As a grown-up woman, she is supposed take care of all members of the family attending to the domestic chores. She is supposed to get married and bear children for the family and the clan. Women therefore are perceived as a means of sustaining the patriarchal family tree through procreation and nurturing. Women who do not marry or are childless are treated with suspicion. In some communities they are ridiculed and stigmatized. Operating under such circumstances, women are taken to be a means for the ends of others in the society, such as their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons. How then are theologians supposed to understand women's dignity? Are men and women equally human? If they are, how is this the case? This draws theologians to reflect upon the Christian foundation for understanding humanity.

The first creation account in Genesis chapter one (Gen. 1:26-27) shows that God created both men and women in His image and likeness, and entrusted both of them with stewardship of the rest of the creation. In a similar way, the life and ministry of Jesus illustrates a strong emphasis on the human dignity of women in the way women are actively involved in Jesus' life and ministry. For instance, Mary, mother of Jesus in humility and faith embraces God's grace in faith and obedience:

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."...The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the son of the most high, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of His ancestor David...therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called the son of God...Then Mary said, "here I am, the servant of the Lord...(Luke 1:26-45)

God deliberately and purposely uses a woman in his redemptive mission. In obedience she accepts to take up God's calling. In the same faithful obedience, throughout Jesus' earthly ministry Mary remained a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ and her journey is crowned in her following Jesus up to the cross while all the disciples had deserted him. Mary is among the four women who reported the Good News of the risen Christ to the disciples. Many other stories of Jesus' relationships with women in the Gospels make clear God's perspective on

women. For instance, the story of the woman with the alabaster jar, and the significance of the anointing of Jesus and the affirming remark that Jesus gave about her to those who were raising questions:

As he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment ... “why was the ointment wasted ...” But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me ...what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (Mark 14:3-9),

A similar story concerns the Samaritan woman who engages Jesus in a conversation, and the Gospel of John presents her as a theologian in her own right. She discerned that Jesus was the Messiah, a thing that the disciples had not yet discovered. Jesus commissioned her to take the Gospel to her own people:

The Samaritan woman said to him, How is it that you a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria? (Jews do not share things with in common with Samaritans.)...”I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ)...Many Samaritans from that city believed him because of the woman’s testimony... (Jn 4:7-42).

This recognition of the dignity of women is summed up in Paul’s classic statement about the exclusivity of salvation in Galatians:

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26-29)

This biblical emphasis on the dignity of women has been noted by the Kenyan theologian, Nyambura Njoroge in her argument that:

In light of this reality, I have found it increasingly critical to urge my African sisters to reclaim our heritage and dignity, without which no human being can have the courage and power to confront the powers and principalities that press on us from all sides. Nor can we have the opportunity to reclaim our God-given gifts, theological voices and to envision a life of wholeness and fullness as Jesus intended it. To use the words of Letty Russel and Shannon Clarkson, let me assert that “our heritage is our power” in our efforts to make a difference in Christian theology in the twenty-first century. Therefore as Christian women we need to empower ourselves in order to reject the inferiority complex instilled in us through sexism, patriarchy, imperialism and racism. To this end, we need to reclaim the legacy of our forebears who rejected dehumanizing

authorities. Unless we take seriously our God-given dignity, gifts and heritage, African women have little to share with others who want to join in the process of constructing liberating and transforming theologies and spiritualities, which will bear fruits for the work of a new humanity and creation (Njoroge 2002:41).

Patriarchal culture, as analyzed above, has interfered with the purpose of God in creation by making women vulnerable and this denies them the possibility of experiencing human dignity, which is their God given entitlement. As expressed in the passages above, men and women are equal before God by virtue of bearing His image and responding to calling in faith and obedience; but patriarchal social constructions portray women as less human and work to make them invisible. It is for this reason that African Women's Theology challenges religio-cultural structures and institutions that dehumanize women and calls upon women to be assertive and affirm their human dignity in culture, society and church. It is for this reason that it is proposed that African Women's Public Theology will endeavor to provide a humanizing framework for women to regain their human dignity in the public arena.

#### **4.1.2 God, Freedom And Women**

Chapters two and three illustrate that many women in Kenya and in Africa live a life of misery, full of fear and oppression. They have no control over their lives owing to the bondage that is created by patriarchal structures and institutions. Such structures and institutions have a way in which they determine women's life leaving them vulnerable, owing to the powerful social, cultural, political and economic determinants of women's lifestyle. The majority of women do not have access to the basic human valuables of life like education, health care, shelter, food, legal protection and thus their lives are always endangered. As a result women experience abject poverty, exploitation, discrimination and injustice that deny them the possibility of experiencing freedom.

The church should be concerned about those whose lives are characterized by oppression. God calls us to be our brothers/sisters' keeper (Gen. 4:1-10). Just as he called Moses to go and rescue His people, (Exodus 3: 7-12) theologians should consider the affliction of women as a theological concern. The theme of freedom is at the heart of the Biblical message. It comes

time and again in the biblical text. Thus prophet Jeremiah challenges the people of Israel to remember their own freedom from Egypt, by offering freedom to others:

The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah from the LORD: Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I myself made a covenant with your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, saying, "Every seventh year each of you must set free any Hebrews who have been sold to you and have served you six years; you must set them free from your service." But your ancestors did not listen to me or incline their ears to me. You yourselves recently repented and did what was right in my sight by proclaiming liberty to one another, and you made a covenant before me in the house that is called by my name; but then you turned around and profaned my name when each of you took back your male and female slaves, whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them again into subjection to be your slaves. Therefore, thus says the LORD: You have not obeyed me by granting a release to your neighbors and friends; I am going to grant a release to you, says the LORD--a release to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine. I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth (Jeremiah 34:12-17).

Jesus identifies himself with the Messiah who will bring freedom to the captives, when he quotes from Isaiah in the announcement of his ministry in his sermon at Nazareth:

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:16-19)

The Apostle Paul sees the theme of freedom as a crucial part of the work of redemption. At two important points in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans he turns to this:

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Romans 8:19-21)

This theme of freedom is especially important for Liberation Theology. It has recovered the theme of freedom, emancipation and liberation as the central motif of the Christian message.

The ‘father’ of Liberation Theology, Gustavo Gutierrez states:

“For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal.5:1), St. Paul tells us. He refers here to liberation from sin insofar as it represents a selfish turning in upon oneself. To sin is to refuse to love one another’s neighbours, and therefore, the Lord himself. Sin –a breach of friendship with God and others –is according to the bible the ultimate cause of poverty, injustices, and the oppression in which men live. In describing sin as the ultimate cause we do not in any way negate structural reasons and objective determinants leading to these situations. It does however, emphasize the fact that things do not happen by chance and that behind an unjust structure, there is a personal or collective will responsible – a willingness to reject God and neighbor. It suggests, likewise, that a social transformation, no matter how radical it may be, does not automatically achieve the suppression of all evils. But St. Paul asserts not only that Christ liberated us; he also tells us that he did it in order that we might be free” (Gutierrez 1973:35-36)

Feminist theology has also picked up on this theme, as the South African Denise Ackermann states:

My doing of theology originated in my need to reflect systematically and in an informed manner on my experience of domination and oppression as a woman. Behind it of course lies my conviction that present patterns in church and society reflected in the saying “man’s world – women’s place”, as well as the stereotyping of women in which biology determines our destiny are an affront to my humanity. So, it is not surprising, that I believe in the need for liberation, which for me spells liberation out the love of God that can liberate us all to be free. I do not see liberation as some sort of personal soul message but as multi-dimensional; embracing politics, society, culture and our religious life. I see it as imperative for all of humanity as both men and women need to be freed from oppressive roles and structures. Freed from what? I need to be freed from the limitations of my own individuality, which has been cast over years in a script full of stereotypes. That means being freed from those areas, which for years have been “I can’t” areas. Freed from the banalities imposed on me so that I can grow to wholeness and full humanity (Ackermann 1989:76)

African Women’s Theology has called full attention to this concern identifying and responding from a Christian perspective to each of these dehumanizing aspects in the lives of women. Musimbi Kanyoro states:

Women in Africa are custodians of cultural practices. For generations, African women have guarded cultural prescriptions strictly governed by the fear of

breaking taboos. Many aspects that diminish women continue to be practiced to various degrees, often making women subjects of cultural preservation. Harmful traditional practices are passed on as *cultural values* and therefore not to be discussed, challenged or changed. In the guise of culture, harmful practices and tradition are perpetuated. Practices such as female genital mutilation; early betrothals and marriages, and the stigmatization of single women, barren women who sustain these practices. Issues of this nature illustrate the reality of women's powerlessness and vulnerability in the face of cultural prescriptions. It is for this reason that the African women theologians in the last decade gave priority to engaging in theological debate on culture (Kanyoro 2000:4-5).

African Women's Public Theology should therefore be concerned about comprehensive action on and around women's comprehensive vulnerability, and the struggle for their freedom from all that makes them vulnerable. Such action should aim at the total restoration and realization of abundant life in freedom for all humanity, especially for girl children and women. This therefore is a pointer to African Women Theologians as agents of transformation and social change, ensuring that women's vulnerable state characterized by powerlessness and injustices is transformed fullness of life.

#### **4.1.3. God, Justice And Women**

Women's vulnerability is a result of comprehensive injustices characterized by prejudices, biasness, discrimination, abuse, violence and inequality. This type of experience in the lives of women cuts across age, ethnicity, faith affiliation, structures and institutions. Women suffer injustice in the home, institutions of learning, in the church, in the work place and even in the public sphere as they interact with their male counterparts. NGOs, governments, churches and individuals have for a long time called for a just social order. Yet women continue to suffer injustice.

Theologians must ask why is there no remedy to the situation, when we serve a God who desires a just social order? The Old Testament is full of passionate cries from the prophets for justice:

You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of

those who are in the right. Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you. (Deuteronomy 16:19-20)

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. (Psalm 146:5-9)

Hear the word of the LORD, O King of Judah sitting on the throne of David--you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates. Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place. (Jeremiah 22:2-3)

Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5:14-15)

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

Jesus stands in the same tradition as these Old Testament prophets. The social circumstances had changed considerably from the period of the Monarchy in Israel, and under Roman rule he could not address the political rulers in terms of the Exodus tradition and the Sinai covenant. Nevertheless, he is angry that the religious leaders have forgotten the importance of justice in their expression of their understanding of the faith of Israel:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! (Matthew 23:23-24)

It is clear then that the theme of justice is very significant in the bible, and should be a central part of the church's mission and ministry. A leading protestant theologian and a professor of systematic theology Miguez Bonino argues that:



The true question is not “what degree of justice (liberation of the poor) is compatible with the maintenance of the existing order?” but what kind of order, which is compatible with the exercise of justice (the right of the poor)? Here alone do we find an adequate point of departure for the theological determination of priorities. The fixed point is “justice, the right of the poor” This is the theological premise from which we cannot depart (Bonino 1983:86).

It is true that the church preaches about justice and calls for social justice. Yet, while the church embarks on tasks that should result in a just social order, it would seem that injustice in the lives of women gets worse. This presents itself as a major challenge for the church, and is an important aspect of African Women’s Public Theology, for it inquires about the possibility of the church addressing the government around questions of constitution, law and public policy – the structures that can create justice for women in society. As part of being church and a church that articulate and implement theological obligation, African Women’s theology uses theological tools that are gender sensitive and raises the concern that women’s issues and concerns need to be given priority.

#### **4.2. African Women’s Theology**

In understanding theology as an endeavour to understand God, the universe and humanity, African Women’s Theology can be seen as an effort to challenge the African Church to value the contribution of women and their perceptions and understanding of their interaction with the universe and God. Thus Oduyoye argues that:

The primary context of women’s theology, therefore, is that of an effort to make a contribution so that theology in Africa will be a word of both women and men, lay and ordained, teachers and preachers, poets and sculptors...Women’s theology is crafted in the midst of the ongoing life in Africa, overshadowed by economic exploitation, political instability and militarism (Oduyoye 2001:23).

In the theological articulation of African Women’s Theology, the bible and African culture are the major sources of analysis. As a starting point, African women theologians argue that not everything in the bible and in African culture is liberating. I therefore reject anything in the bible and African culture that does not promote life and support all that does promote life. They analyze their own culture from within, and engage in intercultural dialogue and work

towards cultural transformation (Oduyoye 2001:13). Witnesses to this<sup>54</sup> are the establishment of the Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture launched by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians in Accra, Ghana 1989, with a stream of publications since its conception. Among these<sup>55</sup> are Oduyoye (2001) *Introducing African Women's Theology*, and Phiri and Nadar (2006) *African women, religion and health: Essays in honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye* which serves as an introduction to what African Women's Theology is about and provide its development and the journey traveled thus far. This work arises from over two decades of nurturing AWT concerted effort to discover and cultivate African women doing theology all over Africa.

These publications make it clear that African Women's Theology is one voice among many voices committed to the worldwide family of feminist theologies. As a branch of liberation theology, Mercy Amba Oduyoye argues that, "feminism has become the shorthand for the proclamation that women's experience should become an integral part of what goes into the definition of 'being human'... feminism then is part of the whole movement geared to liberating human community from entrenched attitudes and structures that cannot operate unless dichotomies and hierarchies are maintained" (Oduyoye 1982:193-194).

African Women's Theology therefore, reflects and articulates the collective struggle of women for dignity, freedom, justice and the recognition for humanity but contributing its own exceptional methodology. Their main commitment is to communicate African women's own

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<sup>54</sup> M.R.A. Kanyoro,(2002). "Beads and strands: threading more beads in the story of the circle" in I.A. Phiri, D B Govinden, and S. Nadar, (eds.), (2002). *Her –stories: hidden histories of women of faith in Africa*, traces the history of the circle and articulates very well how out of concern for women's human dignity and justice a handful of women have, since 1989 networked to bring together hundreds of women to forge forward for their cause. African women's contribution to theology through publications, conferences and meetings has worked to create awareness and has provided a different way of understanding and interpreting contextual situations that are liberative.

<sup>55</sup> M.A. Oduyoye, (1990). *Who will roll the stone away: The ecumenical decade of the churches in solidarity with women*. Geneva: WCC

I A Phiri, (1997). *Women Presbyterianism and patriarchy: Religious experience of Chewa women in Central Malawi*. Malawi: CLAIM

J.N. Njoroge, (2000) *Kiama kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of resistance and transformation*. Ghana: LTSS

I.A. Phiri, and S. Nadar, (eds.), (2005) *On being church: African women's voices and visions*. Geneva: WCC

I.A. Phiri, D.B. Govinden, and S. Nadar, (2002). *Her–Stories: hidden stories of women of faith in Africa*.

Pietermaritzburg: Cluster. M.A. Oduyoye, and M.R.A. Kanyoro, (eds.), (1992). *The will to arise: Women tradition, and the Christian Church*. Maryknoll, N Y: Orbis

understandings and experiences, which goes beyond theory to advocacy and the transformation of practical situation (see Oduyoye 2001:15-19). It is further stated:

Our hope is that in the process of dialogue we shall come to know one another better and thus not only affirm the need for justice and human dignity for all women and all people but also, more importantly, be leading agents in creating such justice...we need to seek to deepen our commitment to the future of our people especially the girls and women living in the context of so much that is painful and death causing...African Theology without the story of faith of the women is handicapped. The distinct gift that we bring to Theology of Africa is to repair the imbalance...we have actually found out that we have no option but to challenge the culture of patriarchy so dominant on our continent. It affects the way we treat one another as women and the way we handle ordinary and specific situations including the God-talk (Kanyoro 2002:34-36).

It is clear that the Christian faith has much to offer in terms of an ethical perspective on women's vulnerability. I have examined the theological resources of human dignity, freedom and justice. In the process we have noted some of the concerns of African Women Theologians. These theologians have sought to challenge the church in Africa to respond to women's experience mainly through engaging with the church and African patriarchal culture. AWT is one of the key proponents of women's freedom, and equality in Africa. In a recognizable way AWT engages in the fight against injustices and advocates for women's dignity, integrity and freedom. African Women's Theologies take seriously issues of social justice in the society; however as I shall later argue, in the light of the experience of comprehensive vulnerability, this is not enough: there is need to deal with the situation in the wider society as well. Thus the contention in this thesis is that there should be a deliberate engagement with the public sphere and that a structural theological framework be devised for that purpose.

To gain a perspective on current work in African Women's Theology (AWT), and their proposed solutions and the limitations of these solutions I shall turn to three representatives namely, Mercy Oduyoye, Isabel Phiri, Nyambura Njoroge. I do this conscious of the fact that over the past decades, African Women's Theology has developed and their initial framework has widened (Kanyoro 2006:19-42). (I will come back to this in chapter six).

#### 4.2.1. Patriarchal Culture And Women's Dignity

As we have already illustrated chapters two and three, the Meru people in Kenya like most African communities are patriarchal in nature. In the patriarchal social set up, a man is the head of the family. The wife/wives, children, workers and the property belong to him. This aspect of ownership therefore determines the place and status of women in the society. The valuation of women is determined by the social-cultural determinants of the given ethnic community. Women's dignity is therefore subject to such standards. It is from this background that African Women Theology deals with the valuation of women in the society.

Mercy Oduyoye's articulations are characterized by her firm call to the church to respond to the plight of women resulting from religio-cultural oppression. She is of the conviction that the church's positive response would restore women's dignity in the church and society. She is concerned about patriarchal structures and institutions of the church and society and their impact on women's life. A patriarchal social set up, according to her, upholds men's authority and women's submission and subordination to that authority that denies women their God given human dignity. Her passion to expose this aspect finds a good deal of examination in her *Daughters of Anowa: African women and patriarchy* (1995) among other publications<sup>56</sup> and an article where she has written about her own experience as a childless woman and the experiences she went through because of cultural expectations that a woman must have children. Regardless of her education and her firm Christian back ground, the cultural stigma that weighs heavy on African women was real until she found rest in the word of God as she read and discerned it herself.(Oduyoye 1999). I have already examined some of Oduyoye's work from this book in chapter three of this thesis. The section illustrates how she argues on patriarchal cultures oppress women. By dividing her book into three major sections which she calls cycles, she identifies various causes of women's vulnerability. She identifies patriarchal social cultural structures and institutions that oppress women including cultural traditions,

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<sup>56</sup> M.A.Oduyoye (1990), *Who will roll the stone away: Ecumenical decade of the churches in solidarity with women*. Geneva: WCC; M.A.Oduyoye, (1986) *Hearing and knowing: theological reflection on Christianity*, M.A.Oduyoye, (1999) "Reducing welfare and sacrificing women and children" in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, M.A.Oduyoye (1997), *Transforming power: African women in the household of God: Proceedings of the Pan African Conference of the Circle of 1996*. Accra: Sam-Woode Ltd, M.A.Oduyoye (2001) *Introducing African women's theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis.

family institutions, socialization, language and the exclusion of women from decision-making. She argues that these cultural traditions and practices are engraved in people's language; proverbs, songs, folktales, religion, rituals and adds that generally people's way of life determine their quality of life. This has a profound impact upon women's vulnerability.

Oduyoye's examination and call on the church and theology to address the plight of women is crucial. However, much of her work assumes that all women are Christians. She therefore fails to acknowledge the fact that the church may only be able to change things for their specific members. This then starts to set the agenda for an African Women's Public Theology. African Women's Public Theology must go beyond the confines of the church and religion to include all categories of women and also call the church to go beyond the pulpit. African Women's Public Theology calls on the church to move outside the walls of the church and to engage social, political and economic issues. It calls on the church to address the government and to identify women's plight as a policy issue. In doing this the church must also not call upon the government and simply wait for the government to act, but has to be involved in the process of policy making. African Women's Public Theology should call upon the church to push the government to ensure that women are able to experience their human dignity whether they chose to be Christians or not, because they are both a creation of God and a citizen of the country

#### **4.2.2. Women In The Church And Freedom**

Decades of Africans women's struggle for inclusion in church structures and institutions does not only demonstrate the need to serve but is also a cry for freedom. African women theologians have widely researched around this area and exposed the experiences of women in their endeavour to seek for inclusion. A survey of the literature on women and the church in Africa<sup>57</sup> bears witness to women's experience of discrimination, oppression, exploitation and the call for transformation of institutions and structures that perpetuate the same.

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<sup>57</sup> The following literature provides African women's call on the church women's plight. M.A. Oduyoye (1990) *Who will roll the stone away: The ecumenical decade of the churches in solidarity with women*. Geneva: WCC  
I.A. Phiri (1997) *Women Presbyterianism and patriarchy: Religious experience of Chewa women in Central Malawi*. Malawi: CLAIM

In their theology, African women theologians criticize oppressive structures and practices and advocate the enhancement of what is inclusive and liberative not only for women but for the whole community. Their theology is generated by experience or praxis characterized by a struggle to make religion relevant to the challenges of contemporary Africa. African women theologians are making conscious efforts to develop a liberative response to the social change that challenges life in Africa from different perspectives.

Isabel Phiri (1997) argues that Christianity took women's traditional religious freedom away. She examines how the Chewa women of Malawi were in charge of the religious shrines in the traditional society and how they are now excluded from the current church structures. She challenges patriarchy, which she argues is responsible for women's place in the church and society. While this earlier work of Phiri exposes women's experience in the church and society, she has also endeavoured to create space for women to freely express themselves. Her recent works include the experience of women in Christian homes. She has also co-edited prominent works like *Her stories* (2002), and *On being church* (2005) where women share their lived experiences in the church. She provides women with a unique space to express how the church has denied them freedom, and at the same time makes a call to the church to transform their institutions and structures. In this way her work focuses deeply on women in the church.

Given the experience of comprehensive vulnerability that I noted in the previous chapters of this thesis, however, here I want to push for a greater understanding of freedom by proposing a framework that goes beyond proposals for the church, and to focus on practical engagement in the public arena that should result in social, cultural, religious, political and economic transformation that ensures the fullness of life for all in the church and society. Therefore

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J.N. Njoroge (2000) *Kiama kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of resistance and transformation*. Ghana: LTSS

Phiri, I A and Nadar, S (eds.) (2005) *On being church: African women's voices and visions*. Geneva: WCC  
I.A. Phiri, Govinden, DB, and Nadar, S (2002). *Her-Stories: hidden stories of women of faith in Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster

M.A. Oduyoye, and M.R.A. Kanyoro, (eds.) (1992). *The will to arise: Women tradition, and the Christian Church*. Maryknoll, N Y: Orbis

African Women's Public Theology will be looking to the freedom of women in the church and also in the society. It will be looking at the possibility of women requiring the church to not only include women in the church structures, but to also create an environment that responds to women's wider experience of comprehensive vulnerability in society.

#### **4.2.3. Women's Role in Resistance Against Injustice**

The kind of injustices that women suffer in both the church and society must be greeted with concerted effort. With determination and with dedication, therefore, African women theologians engage with religion and culture as a way of asserting their own voices, dignity and wholeness and the voices of the marginalized and disempowered women of Africa in both the church and society. They strongly hold that any authentic theology must address people's daily-lived experiences. For them, women's lived experiences in the church and society is crucial. African women theologians have called upon the church to respond to women's concerns and also required churchwomen to be active participant of their own liberation process.

For example Nyambura Njoroge presents a case of women's agency showing how women in the Presbyterian Church in Kenya have struggled for transformation. Njoroge in *Kiama kia ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethics of resistance and transformation* (2000) articulates women's involvement with the church structures that led to the banning of female genital mutilation (FGM), and acceptance of the ordination of women in 1960s (although this only took place in 1980s)<sup>58</sup>. Njoroge (2000) demonstrates not only how women's agency brought freedom in the lives of the dehumanized and marginalized women but also how women were able to fight for their dignity and wholeness in the face of intense vulnerability. She gives examples of women who had to walk around with machetes to protect their girls against FGM

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<sup>58</sup> Nyambura Njoroge spends the whole of chapter one explaining the crises of female genital mutilation in 1920s and how Agikuyu Christians women protested and protected their daughters (Njoroge 2000:20-36). She further explains how the kiama kia ngo evolved into Woman's Guild of the PCEA (36-42 and finally she articulates how Woman's guild has been the agent of women's empowerment, evangelization through community prayers and intervention in the lives of needy people. Very important point to note in her appreciation of Woman's Guild work is how the Woman's Guild fought for ordination of women and they have continued to support the church.

which was and is a valued rite of passage among the traditional Agikuyu community<sup>59</sup>. Agikuyu Christian women with the help of the Scottish missionaries firmly rejected female circumcision. The big challenge was that while the missionaries addressed it as one of the African ‘primitive’ cultural practices, Africans used it as a strong cultural practice to bring them together against the colonizer.

By the mid-1920s all the elements for a potential clash were in place. But exactly what precipitated the crisis is extremely difficult to disentangle. The Scottish position held that the KCA launched a deliberate anti-mission campaign with circumcision as its rallying cry, while the nationalist point of view saw intemperate mission action as responsible for the crisis. While we may never know precisely who fired the first shot, clearly it was in Nyeri at the CSM station of Tumutumu that the issue first became political and led African Christians to an open, if reluctant, break with the church (Robert W. Strayer in Njoroge, 2000:20)

While the missionaries together with the Agikuyu Christians were pushing for legislation against the FGM, when it was politicized, the colonial government stopped the progress. It is clear that the government was not ready to take up the issue of FGM because of its entrenched impact in the cultures of the practicing communities. The government therefore preferred soliciting political peace against women’s human dignity and well-being. This perspective on FGM among the practicing communities in Kenya has remained unresolved and the government does not provide a clear-cut position. As a result African women theologians continue to join other activist groups to oppose FGM (Shisanya 1996; Njoroge 2000; Muriithi 2006). The Woman’s Guild of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) has continued the legacy with the help of the church constitution. Unfortunately, it only works for those who belong to the PCEA while other girls in the same community fall victims of the gross practice.

African women theologians too draw from the lived experiences of women and make suggestions for what can be done by the church to make a difference in the lives of women, but they have not provided a framework of engagement in the wider society yet. I suggest that any justification to engage in a task of addressing issues of women necessarily requires a

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<sup>59</sup> Gachiri gives an outline of where in Kenya the female genital mutilation is practiced and gives an elaborate account of how the Agikuyu community carried out the female circumcision here termed female genital mutilation.



critical dialogue with the issues of concern raised by and for all African women. This is where the work of a non-Christian and jurist like Martha Nussbaum becomes important.

#### **4.2.4. Women's engagement in social activism**

As should be clear, African Women Theologians have for more than two decades now been working with the liberation paradigm as the major proponent in creating an awareness of women's status and place in the church and society. Over time African Women Theologians have been in the forefront in advocating for women's freedom and justice. This commitment finds its full expression in their involvement in the HIV and AIDS pandemic which was officially launched in the Pan African Conference of the Circle of African Women Theologians in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 2002 under the theme: *Sex: Stigma and HIV/AIDS: African women challenging religion, culture and social practices* (Kanyoro 2003:xi). Since 2002, African Women Theologians under the auspice of the Circle have taken up this theme of justice as well which is well expressed in one of the recent publication edited by Muse Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro (2004) *Grant Me Justice: HIV and AIDS And Gender Readings Of The Bible*. Musimbi Kanyoro and Musa Dube have the following to say about the concerns of the above mentioned publication:

This book is a resource especially written by women of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians with the Bible as its basis. Justice is the central theme of the book. Some of the following are key concepts that are captured through the analysis of the text of the Bible. Women are not victims and their vulnerability does not stem from inherent physical or psychological weaknesses (Luke 18:18, Mathew 15:21-28). These and other texts of the Bible teach us that we must build on women's resilience, persistence and ability to reject injustice. Throughout the whole book, the texts of the Bible continually show that resisting injustice is God's option and it must become our option in the fight in the face of HIV and AIDS (Kanyoro 2004:viii-ix).

The reading of this volume seek, therefore, to contribute, in whatever small ways, towards HIV and AIDS prevention, provision of quality care, eradicating the stigma, mitigating its impact and confronting social injustice, which drives the epidemic...(Dube 2004:6-7).

A theological justification for the church to engage with the society in improving the life of women requires an articulation of the role of women and a theological understanding of the issues such as their status and place in the church and society as Kanyoro further argues:

The witness of the church in Africa will not be credible unless the church takes into consideration the traumatic situation of the millions of women and the perilous conditions of the outcast of our societies. What meaning can faith have in churches that seek to be liberated without sharing people's battles with the forces of oppression assaulting their dignity? (Kanyoro 2002:80).

While Kanyoro is calling for the African church to take into consideration the traumatic situation of millions of women, it is important to note that in many ways African Women's Theology has yet to develop a clear Public Theology – one that is itself able to deal with the traumatic situation, or what we have called the comprehensive experience of vulnerability of women in Africa in the secular or pluralist society.

African Women's Theology is still in search of a language and a framework for this kind of engagement (Oduyoye 2001b). This is because as much as African women theologians are raising a cross section of social, cultural, religious, political and economic issues, their position seems to be focused on the church and culture, and what theology could contribute in these two areas to make a difference in the lives of women. There has been little sustained work on the engagement with the public sphere, a sphere traditionally understood as the male sphere of life. This is the point of departure suggested by our proposed African Women's Public Theology.

African Women's Public Theology will be characterized by the inclusion of a wider scope, which will include the public sphere, or the sphere of government, public policy and law making in addressing what I have called the experience of comprehensive vulnerability. The proposed framework calls for African Women's Theology to widen the sources of analysis from culture and the bible to include other social structures and institutions like the judiciary, legislation and economic related bodies. In doing this, the framework seeks to use a language that is inclusive of those in the church and the secular world in understanding that the comprehensive experience of vulnerability relates to all women irrespective of their categories. In chapters two and three, this need is expressed because in chapter two, it was

clear that women of all categories are vulnerable and that these aspects combine so that an eradication of one does not set women free. In chapter 3, it was clear that, while women in theology and other sectors (Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Isabel Apawo Phiri and Jane Nyambura Njoroge are theologians, Patricia Kameri-Mbote is a lawyer, Sue Ellen Charlton is political scientist, and Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie is linguist) have endeavoured to address this situation from different perspectives. One point is clear at the end; there is a need for an approach and a framework that would bring all these efforts together. This will be revisited later in the chapter and dealt with fully in chapter five.

#### **4.2.5. An Appraisal Of African Women’s Perspective Of The Ethical Challenge**

In summary, then, the following four appreciative critiques on AWT make it necessary for an articulation that provides an approach on how to carry out a public theology:

First, AWT has not recognized how it has itself shied away from the public sphere, and in a way is caught up in the traditional gendered perspective that this is a ‘male’ sphere. Women can talk about home, culture and church because they are present there – but are they are not expected to move into the public sphere. Most of the published works of AWT are characterized by a focus on culture, women’s experiences and the church. So part of challenging patriarchy through developing an African Women’s Public Theology is precisely to challenge the assumption that women and women’s theology should not deal with politics, economics and law, and to provide ourselves as African Women theologians with the language and framework to support this.

Second, AWT has not consciously identified the issue that women outside of the church experience vulnerability, and that AWT has not just a pastoral and *ministerial* function to care for those inside the church, but a *missiological* function to share the gospel in the world, amongst all women. This means engaging with the wider structures that dehumanize, and this means recognizing that theology has to move from outside of the comfortable confines of church-language into a secular and pluralist world where it has to dialogue with people of all faiths and of no faith. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians seeks to work in

a multi-faith context, although it is predominantly Christian. This is a strength that needs to shape the work of the Circle to work with women's vulnerability in the world rather than just in the church.

Third, to engage with the wider structures in a secular society requires interdisciplinary work – and engagement with scholars of economics, law, politics, public policy, and sociology. AWT has focused on biblical hermeneutics, cultural hermeneutics and drawn heavily on women's experience. Now AWT needs to draw on what women have been doing outside of the church in these other fields. We need to find dialogue partners, and learn from them, and find the language to engage with secular society. There needs to be a conscious dialogue with women in public fields like politics, economics, law, development, public policy and education, and a willingness to engage with public and secular theory – so that a language can be created to address the wider society. In this thesis, I am proposing that the work of Martha Nussbaum provides one useful dialogue partner that can help to shape our work of African Women's Public Theology.

Fourth, and finally, I argue that AWT has to recognize that if these points made above are valid, then this means African women must develop a *public* theology, and to do this, it is necessary to engage with and learn from others who have worked in the field of public theology. The reality is that at this point in time, most of those who have engaged in public theology are male theologians. Thus we must engage in two things at the same time. We must foster a solid dialogue, and we must nevertheless, still draw from our different experience – as women in Africa - to shape this theology. Thus, even as we call for an African Women's Public Theology, we must never lose sight of the fact that it remains a branch of African Women's Theology.

These four points of critique suggest that the time is right to develop an African Women's Public Theology, and it is to this task that the rest of the thesis gives its attention.

### 4.3. Constructing Public Theology: Duncan Forrester

In the previous section, African Women's Theology is acknowledged as the most appropriate tool through which women's comprehensive vulnerability is presented to the church. Yet, for four important reasons, there is a need to develop an African Women's *Public* Theology, and to do this, it is suggested that there is a need to search for a model of dialogue with those who have already engaged in public theology. I consider issues involved in constructing a public theology, by turning to three theologians who have taken on this task. I am aware that all three of these scholars are men, though two of them have focused on the African continent. I shall return to this concern at the end.

#### 4.3.1 Duncan Forrester: His Perspective On Theology And Public Policy.

After many decades<sup>60</sup> of articulating and practising public theology, a publication by scholars from all over world titled, *Public theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*" (2004) was published in honour of Duncan B Forrester. From this and other sources, Forrester's journey and commitment to public theology is evident (Storrar and Morton 2004:1-7).

Duncan Bailie Forrester has served as a minister with the Church of Scotland, and he is now professor emeritus of Christian Ethics and practical theology in the University of Edinburgh. He chaired the department of Christian Ethics and Practical Theology for twenty-two years, and the programme on Theology and Public Issues for two years at the University of Edinburgh. Prior to this he was a professor of politics in Madras Christian College in India; and chaplain and lecturer in politics and religious studies at Sussex University. He was the founder of the Centre for Theology and Public issues 1984-2000, as a result of which he became the recipient of the Templeton Prize (UK). (Storrar and Morton 2004:1-3). The work

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<sup>60</sup> In their introduction to *Public theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> century* Storrar and Morton (2004) "Introduction" in *Public theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. London: T&T Clark have given Forrester's background dating from 1950s when he started his university education. They explain the way he excelled academically and his engagement with social issues that are tackled from an interdisciplinary perspective. The book the two scholars are introducing is a crown to Forrester's involvement in public theology because it is a contribution of prominent scholars from all over the world.

of this Centre points to the focus of Forrester's work and commitment. Some of the themes that have been considered are:

- Welfare state or welfare society
- Ethics and economics of the distribution of income and wealth
- Education and community
- Finances and ethics
- Northern Ireland challenge to theology
- The renewal of social vision
- Justice, guilt and forgiveness in the penal system
- The market and health care
- AIDS, sex and the Scottish churches
- Security, solidarity and peace making
- Scottish devolution and national identity
- Work, worth and community, responding to the crisis of work
- The sorrows of young men, exploring their increased risk of suicide (Storrar and Morton 2004:3-4)

The activities of the Centre are the real manifestation of witnessing to the wider society and an illustration of how he deals with issues that touch humanity whether they choose to be Christians or not - which is the heart of public theology. It is also a manifestation of ecclesial commitment to reach out to all humanity. While the issues handled by the Centre are many, his work in the centre should be understood as threefold as follows:

- To discern and formulate the crucial issues deserving treatment
- To design and refine the method of their treatment
- To distil from this essentially interdisciplinary enterprise the uniquely theological insights (Storrar & Morton .2004:4).

In a colloquium held in his honour, scholars from all over world appreciated his efforts and raised concerns about the future of public theology.<sup>61</sup> The colloquium raised questions related to the future of public theology. To them the issues and the approach to be used were crucial. Among the crucial to be taken seriously, were a focus on pluralism, globalisation, post modernity and the enormous growth of technological competence (Storrar & Morton 2004:5).

#### 4.3.2 Key issues in Public Theology

Forrester argues that Public Theology is about acknowledging the fact that theology is not the preserve of the private domain/sphere and that it is not exclusively an individual occupation.<sup>62</sup> Forrester discusses his view about the different spheres and he does this in context of the post-enlightenment where distinctions of the private and public domains were crucial. Forrester discusses three distinct spheres in social life and rejects individualistic and private theologies that understand Christian faith as a private preference without public relevance. The former emphasized subjectivity, the spiritual realm, and a personal relationship with God resulting in a pulling out from the public engagement of theology (Forrester 1989:10).

For him the private and domestic sphere is the area where there is an exercise of accepted morality. He goes further to note that during the Enlightenment, this was the sphere where individual morality was expected, and Christianity was only supposed to be concerned with this sphere. Forrester points out that, this did not go unquestioned because the critics of this position argued that Christianity would soon lack a prophetic edge. Without this prophetic edge, Christianity would justify the values of the society or would never question society when things went wrong (Forrester 1989:7).

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<sup>61</sup> The colloquium took place from 31 August to September 2001 in Edinburgh and was attended by twenty-four scholars, other submitted papers and the opening session had an attendance of around eighty people. The contribution of the colloquium resulted in the publication now known as the “public theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> century which is a landmark in public theology.

<sup>62</sup> Forrester’s work is around theology’s contribution in the churches, academy and the wider society which is characterised by the following, D.B Forrester (1988), *Theology and politics*, New York: Basil Blackwell; D.B Forrester, 1989. *Believes, values and policies: conviction politics in a secular age*. Oxford: Clarendon; D.B Forrester, 1997. *Christian justice and public policy*. Cambridge: University press. His work in public theology is crowned by the publication of W.F. Storrar, and A.R. Morton, 2004. *Public theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. London: T&T Clark. In this particular publication, his involvement in the wider society and his conviction for theology’s role in the public arena are well articulated.

This confinement of religion to the private realm should be a major concern for public theologians. When Christianity is assigned to the private realm it lacks the potentiality for prophetic importance because it tends to engage in an easy-going validation of the values of the society, influencing personal morality and accepted values (Forrester 1989:7). Forrester acknowledges the fact that the private sphere is there and is important. Yet for him, religion does not only belong there, but has a wider contribution to make in the public discourse.

Theological positions today should be determined to work out the most competent and constructive ways of contributing to the solution of problems that arise in this central area of social life, where great matters which intensely affect human thriving are the main concern (Forrester 1989:9, see also Mugambi 1999 and Germond 1996). For Forrester, “theology in principle is concerned with the wholeness of life as a consequence of belief in the universal lordship of Jesus Christ” (Forrester 1989:12). He holds that theology can operate with integrity in the public realm especially through the distinctive contribution of liberation theologians in the public debate. In this situation, critical handling of the bible and a commitment to interpret and explore the possibility of ambiguities is absolutely necessary.

After the domestic sphere, the second sphere includes the ceremonial, ritual, symbolic side of the life of the nation. The emphasis here is upon the assertion of national identity and the legitimation of the power configuration of the society and their procedures, helping to make clear why it should be considered important and/or be taken seriously” (Forrester 1989:8-9). This lays great responsibility upon Christian theology in that it has to fulfil its function as civil religion while holding on to Christian truth. How to develop and support all that is good while concurrently addressing a prophetic word to the nation is the main challenge (Forrester 1989:8-9).

The third sphere focuses on politics and economics. In today’s society, the so called “free market” claims greater control than ethical and religious control, and as a result those with economic power have undue influence on the policies of the nation. This sphere is therefore dominated by material interest and the ‘acceptable’ norms of the market. This sphere claims to be independent and sovereign. Those who are in control of wealth and policies take the



theological position to task. “Theology, in the context of plurality of the contemporary society must necessarily adopt an interdisciplinary stance because its insights and contribution should be analysed and understood in the bigger picture of the society. Choosing to be completely independent and free from external analysis is tantamount to denying the secular the opportunity to internalise the theological insights and contribution. Due to the autonomy and acclaimed power of the market and market forces, the question of how to penetrate this sphere is a crucial task for public theology”. (Forrester 1989:11) Forrester also notes that the power of the market raises questions about human flourishing and human integrity that can only be adequately articulated upon vigorous interdisciplinary engagement

In upholding human integrity and wholeness, Forrester holds that public theology should address all issues of social concern for everyone. Seeing theology as a personalised and exclusive theology which has no significance in the public domain renders theology unable to question the order of things, thus allowing for compromise and upholding the status quo. Theology is then muted of its prophetic voice. Christianity’s stand in all issues of social life must be loud and clear and should be guided by Christian virtues. In Forrester’s opinion public theology should, (i) Steer a course that relies on the tradition as a compass to travel into unknown waters; (ii) The church should be the tower from which this theology operates from as an inclusive community of faith; and (iii) The scripture should be read through the eyes of excluded (Storrar and Morton 2004:20-21)

Public theology therefore seeks to be uniquely Christian and to address issues that concern the wider society. It should be concerned with human concerns whether the people affected are Christians or not because part of Christian mission is to reach out to those others. Further on this issue, Forrester argues that public theologians should be those who will keep alive the vision of the ending of worldwide human despair and speak in public deliberations in ways that are prophetic, passionate and yet obtainable. He also calls the public theologian to: Work hard and humbly in the quarry of the rich resources of the Bible; to follow the Christian tradition; and to produce the fragments of insights, challenges and the truth that may help to pave way in the coming of God’s reign (Forrester 2004: 437).

Forrester affirms that public theology is concerned with the public affairs of society in the “light of hope in Christ for the Kingdom of God” (Storrar and Morton 2004:20-21, Forrester 2004: 431-438). While it is not easy to pick out one issue out of Forrester’s overriding contribution, his work has the evidence that he struggles for the poor victims of social injustice and those who are excluded in the community. Among other concerns, economic and welfare policy are crucial.

Forrester argues that due to the changing role of theology, it is important that theology finds its basis or location from where it operates. For him it should be located in a community that fellowships and shares their concerns. For that to happen, theology and the church must work hand in hand where theology informs the church of the needs and the directions to take. “Theology must cease to be just an academic activity. Therefore public theology must be a church theology that has values and goals in her ecclesiastical mission taking the gospel to the rest of the nation” (Forrester 1989:13-15; see also Forrester 2004:432). The other questions that are to be considered could be, why should theology be necessary in the public arena? How should theology engage in and with the public issues?

***(a) Theology In The Public Arena***

Theology after the Reformation and enlightenment is a highly disputed aspect in the public arena because it lost the earlier authority which everyone was supposed to acknowledge (Forrester 1988:25-56). Thus one key concern for Forrester is to find out whether secular pluralism can provide theories, insights and resources required for the construction and carrying out of public policy in modern egalitarianism. He endeavours to explore if secular theories provide a sufficient basis for public policy and whether it is possible to accomplish public policy with involving religious and metaphysical insight, without at the same time making the public policy weak.

He holds that religion plays a critical role in the development of public policy and that where religion is barred public policy is deprived of sources of determination, expectation and vision. He is, however, of the opinion that it is important that theology engages in critical questions of

what the church is able to offer, the challenges and the opportunities to be confronted over time. Below are some of the questions he raises:

What service might theology render in the public realm today?

What service is it capable of rendering?

What are the constraints, the opportunities and the responsibilities laid upon theology today (Forrester 1989:1, see also Forrester 1997:31-37).

The questions that Forrester raises bring to attention the challenges faced by Christian theology, especially at the dawn of secularisation. Christian theology faces criticism due to its past history, which is marked by imperialism, anarchy and links with such social and political structures such as colonialism and apartheid (Mugambi 1995, 1999; Villa-Vicencio 1992). Forrester argues that although theology has some weaknesses that are evident, “theology can still offer insight, conviction, questions and qualifications which may be true and necessary complements, modifications and enlargements of conventional accounts of justice” (Forrester 1997:3). He further argues that it is the Christian theological dimensions in most western political thinking, which have influenced political themes and interpretation of structures, processes action of political decisions in most parts of the world which were founded on Christian values (Forrester 1997:3).

### ***(b) Values And Visions***

Theology, according to Forrester has the task of

engaging with the underlying assumptions of society and culture about the nature of human beings, about human flourishing, about human destiny and human fellowship, about relations of the social order and the transcendent order, and about the way a community allocates worth and chooses its goals (Forrester 1989:36-37, see also Forrester 2004: 431-438).

Vision and values are seen as part of theology’s role to sustain and refresh Christian values in society. There is a possibility that “values may emerge from various and sharply differing sources, and the same values may be held by people of contrasting fundamental convictions, justified and explained in various contradictory ways” (Forrester 1989:38). For instance, there are people who see theology’s task as supporting relational and natural principles, which are already widely diffused in our way of life and are necessary if society is to stick together and

be strong. Others see Christian faith, and Christian values and visions in particular, at its best when in conflict with the conventional values of our society.

The argument here is that more is required of theology in relation to values that inform public policy than just to affirm and interpret the main values of the day. This requirement makes the church's participative concern and engagement crucial. But the more challenging question that is raised is, for whom and to whom is the church doing so? Further to this, why should the church speak any way? In response to the question raised, in the next section I examine why the church should be involved.

*(c) Why The Church Should Be Involved*

Forrester (1989:50-64) articulates the whole complex issue of why the church should speak into the public sphere, and discusses the questions of whom it should speak for and to whom it should speak. While the church is always doing things and speaking on issues that pertain to society, is the society aware of this and are the issues the church addressing in the whole community relates to or does it leave some out? Here I have in mind the disabled, marginalized and vulnerable groups in our society. For Forrester it is a common thing for people to look to the church to speak out in times of crises. This, in his opinion, happens partly because the church is entitled to a voice in public affairs and therefore is a significant part of the political society. For some, the church is the right institution to do so because it has the right to be heard and has the responsibility to speak out on issues of social concern. In issues that concern the nature and destiny of human beings, theologians are highly needed.

Forrester argues that the church should carry its pastoral role into the society (Forrester 1989: 46-50). As a pastoral obligation therefore, in regard to issues of government public policy, the church should speak out when it is appropriate and as directed from the scripture. It should speak to announce the Kingdom, to proclaim the gospel, to affirm the justice of God and to speak for vulnerable citizens; her speaking, is not to defend its own institutional interest. Challenging as it may be, as the church proclaims liberty for itself, it will claim liberty for all.

While the church speaks for all, it should give preference to the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable because generally their voice does not find way to speak to the society.

On the issues of whom the church speaks to, Forrester argues, “when churches or theologians speak they rarely seem to ask whether anyone is listening” (Forrester 1989:61). Church statements are certainly intended to affect feelings, influence the way people take part in an election and to make decisions. He firmly holds that only when church statements are unmistakably and credibly argued will they make a distinctive contribution to the discussion. It is only when they are correctly targeted and tracked through are they likely to be persuasive enough to be heard and in turn to affect the way things are done. “In any setting the ability to minister to the nation depends on the seriousness with which it seeks to exemplify in its own life the message it proclaims.” (1989:64). If church statements are appropriately targeted and followed, they would have the intended impact, to realise justice in public policy.

Forrester is also concerned about the Christian voice in public policy where there may be moral emptiness. For him it may be difficult to make an impact because there is a need for common guiding principles, which are as a result misrepresented. He also notes that there are diverse moral dynamics even among Christians although their claim is based on their belief in God; and that they claim to know where to look for justice and find out what justice is and how to come to deeper understanding of it. For Christians, he argues, “to know the God of justice as of love and coming to know God and God’s justice involves a distinctive form of access through repentance, change of mind, and through the effort to come to God and neighbour and to do justice”(Forrester 1997: 54-55).

Christians do not necessarily claim to have a principle of justice that is equal with other principles of justice but they believe that because “they are oriented in mind and action towards the God of justice they should have insights, questions and challenges to contribute to the on-going discussion about justice in our society today”. (Forrester 1997: 55). There is a need to find ways of seeking justice and of responding actively to concrete situations of injustice as it is experienced by the vulnerable in the society. In the discourse, it is imperative that the intellectuals give preference to the needy, poor and the victims of injustices although

doing this does not exhaust Christian responsibility. If the church is called to be a tool of God's justice, it has to express this in concrete actions, which reflect and exemplify the justice of God that is the Christian gift to public policy and the basis for Christian witness in the public realm (1997:58).

#### **4.3.3. Forrester's contribution to this thesis.**

Forrester's contribution to the current study is enormous and profound because apart from giving hints on how theology can contribute to public policy, his work has clearly illustrated what public theology is about. He has also given insight on what a public theologian is supposed to do. Basically Forrester becomes the basis of our chapters five and six. In chapter five we will be looking at the framework that should help the church engage with the government in the formulation of public policy that should transform the lives of the vulnerable in the society. Forrester is very useful because we will be discussing about vulnerable women. Then in chapter six I will articulate in greater detail an African Women's Public Theology. As Forrester argues that public theology should be concerned with the "excluded", I will articulate how African Women's Public Theology will be important in responding to women's vulnerability in the Kenyan community and in Africa in general. Public theology is concerned with changing or affecting human life. It is about making human life better

We are now going to turn to two theologians who have intentionally engaged in public theology in Africa, namely, Jesse Mugambi of Kenya, and Charles Villa-Vicencio of South Africa. They provide good examples of a theological paradigm that focuses on the aspect of reconstructing human society to effect transformation in the lives of vulnerable people ensuring that the government puts in place policies that consider equality, justice and freedom for all. Because of the limitation of the study, the two scholars' work will only serve as case studies of public theology in Africa, which will serve as a model in development of the African Women's Public Theology.

#### 4.4. Jesse Mugambi: Theology Of Reconstruction in Africa

Jesse Mugambi is a renowned African theologian who has published widely and specifically in theology and Christian religion<sup>63</sup>. His publications are the evidence of the passion to have a transformed Africa. While Mugambi, has worked in the national and international ecclesial and ecumenical sectors, he prides in working for and in Kenya, and this makes him a natural dialogue partner for our work. His commitment is illustrated by his immense work and contribution in building up the publishing house, *Acton Publishers*, which has contributed much to African Christianity. His first publication in 1974 was his undergraduate work, which he had done in the year 1973. From this time Mugambi has published in various areas with his climax in 1990s when he came up strongly in the area of liberation and reconstruction theology. One of his boldest suggestions is that theologians must shift their attention from liberation to reconstruction. Like Villa-Vicencio (as we shall see below), Mugambi prophesies that the old is gone and the new has come. For him therefore, the exodus motif must change, and there is a need to start embarking on a return-from-exile motive.

Mugambi's theological articulations relate to the role of Christian theology in the social transformation of the whole of the African continent. He draws partly from the changes that have taken place on the African continent during the decolonisation era and partly from the 'New World Order' that resulted in 1980s and 1990s with the collapse of the Berlin Wall in Europe and the collapse of apartheid in South Africa (Mugambi 1995:18, 50, 205-209, see also Villa-Vicencio 1992:41-42). He therefore suggests that Africans should feel obliged to respond in their own way to the Gospel, cultures and social situation. Just as it has happened in Europe and North American countries, Africans do not need protection from the foreigners but rather encouragement and support as they appropriate the Gospel in their own cultures. For Mugambi, creativity, innovation and inventiveness should be encouraged to promote the positive and constructive values of the African cultural and religious heritage. He observes that the Western missionaries stressed aspects of discontinuity between the African cultures

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<sup>63</sup> J.N.K. Mugambi, (1996). *Religion And Social Construction Of Reality*. Nairobi: Nairobi University press, J.N.K. Mugambi, (1989). *The African heritage and contemporary Christianity*. Nairobi: Longman, J.N.K. Mugambi, (1989). *African Christian theology: An introduction*. Nairobi: Heinemann, and others,

and traditional religion. They condemned African religious practices without a proper evaluation.

For Mugambi, in the new era, African Christianity and African theology should have a reconstructive function, comparable to Protestant theology during the European Reformation. Drawing from the historical background of the theology of liberation in Latin America, North America and Africa, Mugambi comes to the post-Cold War era and the time of new democracies on the African continent. For him, the 1990s are a decade of national, constitutional, and economic revitalisation for many African countries, becoming a starting point for Africa's Renaissance and Reformation. He also predicts that the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be a century of reconstruction in the whole of Africa, and that reconstruction should take a multi-disciplinary perspective, which he suggests, is the most useful concept for reflection in Africa now and in the future (Mugambi 1995:5).

In his major book of Public Theology, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War* (1995), Mugambi understands reconstruction at three major levels. First, it is *Personal*, in that individual reconstruction is the starting point. The intentions and motives of the individual must be changed, to reflect the direction of the appropriate social change. Second, there is a need for *Cultural Reconstruction*. Such cultural components include politics, economics, ethics, aesthetics and religion. Each of these must go through a kind of reconstruction for appropriate social change to happen. Third, he argues for *Ecclesial Reconstruction*. This includes reconstruction in the areas of management structure, financial policies, pastoral care, human resources development, research, family education, service and witness.

The theme of reconstruction is very attractive because it includes not only social but also personal, cultural and ecclesial transformation. Mugambi holds strongly that theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be most effective if the social and physical reality of the continent and its people are accurately understood and re-interpreted. For him, the emerging theologies of reconstruction will be the most appropriate because such a theology should help to make the Christian message effective. The Christian message should be based on a clear understanding



of the essence of the Gospel as well as the cultural and philosophical worldview of the recipients. Since any kind of theology is bound to the culture, Christians from any part of the world have the right to raise questions that are most relevant in their own situations, seeking answers under the guidance of the Gospel. He also suggests that the fundamental themes of Christian theology should be treated in relation to African culture, history and situation.

Mugambi argues that in the past, the dominant themes in African theology were liberation inculturation and adaptation. These themes should be reviewed to include themes like reconstruction, restoration, renewal and survival. Mugambi proposes a future theology that should:

be reconstructive, rather than destructive; inclusive rather than exclusive; proactive rather than reactive; complementary rather than competitive; integrative rather than disintegrative, programme-driven rather than project-driven; people-centered rather than institution-centered; deed-oriented rather than word-oriented; participatory rather than autocratic; regenerative rather than degenerative; future sensitive; rather than past-sensitive; co-operative rather than confrontational; consultative rather than impositional (Mugambi 1995:xv).

Having grasped who Mugambi is and what his commitments in theology are, I turn now to examine some specific issues of concern.

#### **4.4.1. Individual Reconstruction And Transformation**

Mugambi argues that constructive changes must start with the motives and intentions of the individual who must constantly reconstruct in readiness for future tasks and challenges. Therefore, the starting point of social reconstruction is the individual. In this case, core to social transformation is the openness of the individual members of the community, especially its leaders.

Individual reconstruction is related to education and moral values especially among young people. According to Mugambi, education is the preparation of a person for responsible and mature participation in the life of his/her community. Schooling is one of the methods of achieving this goal but not the only one. Education as preparation involves at least six

aspects: physical growth, character formation, self-understanding, development of skills, management of time, and understanding of cultural heritage (Mugambi 1995:15).

Mugambi pays special attention to the pastoral transformation of young people. He emphasizes a chaplaincy plan with an ecumenical orientation, placing the heavy task of individual reconstruction on the shoulders of schools and churches in Africa (Mugambi 1995:26-29). He argues it is the special task of schools and churches to take over the responsibility of inculcating basic beliefs and norms in the young generation. This also requires a good theological and religious preparation of personnel for service in ecclesial institutions. A good theological education for ministry in a pluralistic society should become a responsible evangelization. It is therefore a great challenge taking into account that the majority of church workers have not been prepared for religious pluralistic ministry.

#### **4.4.2. Socio-Political And Cultural Reconstruction and Transformation**

Culture, in Mugambi's definition, includes politics, economics, ethics, aesthetics and religion. In each of these components, Mugambi argues that reconstruction is necessary from time to time to ensure that the social structures are adjusted to fit the needs of the people. In his articulation of cultural reconstruction he focuses specifically on the economy, culture and religion.

He analyses the economic situation in Africa in relation to demographic, economic and settlement pattern changes. For him industrialisation is a process, shifting the mode of production from manual to mechanised methods impacting on the life and value systems of the African people. It transforms people from peasants into farmers and weavers into industrialized operators. He proposes a plan for African in the new world order which he argues should create self-reliant programmes for food production, preservation and storage, for education on international economies, and for the stabilisation of local and international marketing infrastructures by Africans themselves. As it is, the current mode of production and consumption in Africa increases dependence rather than interdependence. This should be a

major concern because it deprives the individuals their human dignity and integrity. He asserts:

The well being of a nation's people must be in some way connected with the ability of the people to control their immediate and long-term destiny within history...A socially healthy nation should consume what it produces and exports any surplus...Thus the goal should be self-sufficiency... (Mugambi 1995:158)

Cultural reconstruction takes into consideration people's way of life. Thus it includes ethics. Ethics is concerned with the reconstruction of value systems. Therefore when priorities change, the value system also has to be adjusted to remind the society of forgotten priorities or to re-organise the hierarchy of values. He notices that both external and internal pressures have eroded traditional African ethics. In his view external pressures included the Christian missionary enterprise, which accompanied the secular forces of colonial and neo-colonial expansion. The internal pressures include changes in social structure, which inevitably befall a society as a consequence of new historical circumstances (Mugambi 1995:73). He acknowledges the Christian missionary enterprise has had the greatest impact in the disintegration of African cultural and religious heritage. Christianity in Africa is associated with cosmopolitanism, resulting in eroding much of the African ethics, something that is evident in the competition among various denominations and the endeavours for doing things differently. This for Mugambi means even theology must be done differently. For him this different way of doing theology includes using relevant biblical themes in addressing religious, cultural, political environmental and economic concerns in the continent. I therefore turn to Mugambi's proposed theme in the process of reconstruction.

***(a) The Biblical Theme***

Mugambi is convinced that after on the demise of colonization and the abolition of apartheid the common Exodus motif used by liberation theology has become "inapplicable and irrelevant" (Mugambi, 1995:165). It is his conviction that the bible is abounding with illustrations of social reconstruction:

Theologically, we need to appreciate that entry into the land of Canaan from Egypt is only the beginning of a long process of human fulfillment. The

Exodus is only a prelude to that process. Moses did not enter the promised land, but he provided the bridge for the people to cross the Red Sea, the wilderness and the River Jordan. He established the foundation upon which the new nation was to be built, but later generations would have to build that new society. The book of Deuteronomy, written perhaps more than six centuries later, recaptures that significant role of Moses, but highlights the necessity of later generation to revise the plans to match new circumstances and resources (Mugambi, 1995:166)

Mugambi further explains his theme of reconstruction in Deuteronomy 1:19-21 saying: It is important to note that the book of Deuteronomy was written in the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C., long after the settlement in Canaan. The book represents the effort, under the long reign of King Josiah, to formulate a theology of reconstruction based on Mosaic law and highlighting those aspects of society which required further explanation. Thus Deuteronomy is based on the exodus, but offers an updated version of Mosaic law. How can this text be applied in a relevant manner so as to discern a new ideological emphasis to propel African churches into the future? (Mugambi, 1995:65)

Likewise Mugambi identifies another text in New Testament, Mathew 5-7 where he argues that while the critics of Jesus said that he was destroying Judaism and its institutions, Jesus replied that his mission was not destructive but reconstructive. Mugambi is of the opinion that Mathew 5-7 should be considered as the most basic of all reconstructive texts in the synoptic Gospels (Mugambi, 1995:13). He however, pointed to the challenge of discerning a relevant biblical motif for reconstruction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where he suggested a number of them for instance; exilic motif (Jeremiah), restorative (Isaiah 61:4), reconstructive (Haggai and Nehemiah) (Mugambi 1995:39) and others. After looking into a number of options Mugambi settles on Ezra-Nehemiah as a model for reconstruction theology where he states:

After the Babylonian exile, a new nation was reconstructed under the direction of Ezra and Nehemiah. The role of Nehemiah as the director of the reconstruction project is lucidly explained in the book bearing his name. Nehemiah becomes the central text of the new theological paradigm in African Christian Theology, as a logical development from the Exodus motif (Mugambi 1995:13)

For Mugambi, (as with Forrester) public theology must draw from the mines of the scripture to provide a well grounded theology, and so he recognises that a biblical theme is crucial when dealing with the social, cultural, political, economic concerns.

*(b) Ecclesial Reconstruction And Transformation*

Religious reconstruction is important in that it provides a world-view capable of uniting individuals as corporate members of the community that should be consciously directed. If left to chance, the community risks losing its integrity and identity. Therefore religious reconstruction is vital in the nations that are undergoing rapid social changes (see Forrester 1988, 1989 and 1997). The role of religion and theology must be well articulated to provide guidance and direction to the society.

In relation to the reconstruction of religion, Mugambi defines his perception of the role of the church in its missionary undertaking across cultures. He stresses the fact that Jesus challenges us to follow his example in order to become men and women of all cultures without abandoning or denouncing our own. Cultural suicide, whether imposed or voluntary, can in no way promote Christian missionary activity. He argues that in contemporary Africa, the need to defend one's own culture is as important as it was during the European Renaissance. During the renaissance Europe was threatened with the loss of its culture during attacks by Moslems who entered the continent from North Africa through the Iberian Peninsula (1995:106). He predicts that African Christianity will survive if it paves the way for an African Renaissance and Reformation, but it will vanish if it fritters away this opportunity. However, the major challenges here are: are the people oriented to see the opportunity and are the communities capable of taking the opportunity and utilizing it?

The church is a body within which people's worldview is portrayed and celebrated. Ecclesial reconstruction includes management structures, financial policies, pastoral care, research, family education, service and witness. Mugambi in his proposal for ecclesial reconstruction shows that the potential for renewal, reform and schism is always present in all religions and denominations and are an integral part of the evolution of churches in specific cultural contexts (Mugambi 1995:109-124). He acknowledges hope for ecclesial reconstruction in certain characteristics of African religiosity including:

- African spirituality. African spirituality is synonymous with African religiosity because in the African context, religion is in the centre of life. Thus ecclesial

reconstruction necessarily means the study of the total appropriation of the Christian faith.

- The Bible. This is the central book in Christianity. Mugambi's strong evangelical back ground affirms the authority of the scripture
- Lay participation. Lay leaders, regardless of gender, sustain the daily life of congregations. Therefore ecclesial reconstruction is needed in our era of secularisation. If religion is to be relevant to Africa it must make qualitative changes in the lives of rural and urban people. Intensification of religious commitment that leads to positive social reconstruction and not passive piety is necessary for Africa.

Mugambi distinguishes priorities for African churches stating that more emphasis should be placed on scholarship and fellowships for Africans to train and improve their skills within Africa. They should also be facilitated by missionary enterprises that publish and disseminate knowledge within Africa. Therefore evangelisation in Africa should help Africans in the social reconstruction of their environment and the improvement of quality of life should become a priority. He argues that the church's essential task is evangelisation. Since the old frontiers on the missionary agenda of Christian churches till now have been geographical, cultural and ritual, the new frontiers should be theology, knowledge, technology, pastoral care, ecumenical unity, healing and management (1995:167-173).

In visioning the church of the future, demographically, politically and technologically, Mugambi argues that Africa is changing so rapidly that the church of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will not be relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; therefore she will need to be transformed into the church of the future. The church of the future will have to understand and appreciate the aspirations of the afflicted people of Africa. The gospel will help Africans regain their confidence and hope, thus the church will:

- Have to rehabilitate the refugees and displaced persons.
- Become an effective agent of reconciliation between culture and nature.
- Have to become an agent of reconciliation between peoples, creating a programme of conflict resolution within and between denominations and nations.
- Be organised in such a way that women will be able to play more active roles in ecclesiastical affairs as they are already the majority in the church and they also do most of the work.
- Be challenged to take the disabled as one their priorities in the process of evangelisation.
- Have to contribute for the improvement of food production, diversification, preservation and storage.

Mugambi makes a very important contribution towards the anticipated church and society that gives dignity and integrity to all people, which in Forrester's definition of a public theologian Mugambi qualifies.

#### **4.4.3. Mugambi's Approach In Doing Public Theology**

In his approach, Mugambi analyses the current situation pointing to the deficiencies or shortcomings and finally points out the ways in which the church and society can confront the issues for the good of humanity and the environment. In visualizing the new world order, he presents clear demarcations in the following order: The decolonization decade 1960-1970; the decade of bilateral Aid 1970-1980; the NGO decade 1980-1990; The partnership decade 1990-2000, and points out to the possibilities of the future (1995:210-225). Mugambi's presentation of what Africa should embark on takes up Forrester's call for public theology and theologians to venture into un known "waters" it also points to Villa-Vicencio's caution that while the old is gone, the new is not yet completely realized (1992:2).

Mugambi's approach is crucial for the current study because, it comes almost five decades since the issues of women's vulnerability became an issue in many disciplines in Africa yet the argument is that, women are even more vulnerable and there needs to be serious redress<sup>64</sup>. Mugambi enables us to identify the situation of women in the context of the church's ecclesial task to the society. This therefore calls for Women's Public Theology with a missiological task to the vulnerable and excluded.

It is however important to identify two important concerns about Mugambi's theological vision. Firstly, his call to cultural reconstruction ignores women's call to address cultural aspects that are oppressive to women. In his articulation and call for cultural reconstruction, he would have given it a better treatment if he advised on such crucial aspects such as

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<sup>64</sup> The history of women in development, social status of women, and feminism concern of women's plight is discussed in details in chapters two and three and it is also captured strongly the works of African women's Theology (AWT) in this chapter four.

polygamy, ritual rites, rites of passage, property and property ownership which are core to the plight of women in Africa.

Secondly, Mugambi, slightly touches on the issue of women involvement in the ecclesiastical affairs. Mugambi's suggestion that "this involvement will in turn boost self-confidence of women and help Africa to highlight hope rather than despair" raises crucial gender questions on his commitment to realization of church and society of the future that is interested in the dignity and integrity of all. Are women supposed to be involved or are they supposed to be in the center of reconstruction process?

Elelwani Farisani observes that Mugambi's approach does not identify or examine the ideological conflict between the returned exiles and the *am haaretz* and suppresses the voices of the *am haaretz*. He further observes that in dealing with Ezra-Nehemiah, Mugambi does not identify or analyze the relationship between the returned exiles and the *am haaretz*, and presents the reconstruction process as the work of the returned exiles and excludes the role of the *am haaretz* (Farisani 2002:112). As a result, Mugambi's presentation of reconstruction theology and his concern for the whole of Africa does not give attention to the marginalized who are present but invisible, and in our context this would mean the women. There is need to take note of his silence on the issue of gender and to recognize that this is problematic given what we have noted in chapters two and three.

Having dealt with Mugambi, we now move to our next case study of public theology in Africa, based on the work of Charles Villa-Vicencio.

#### **4.5. Charles Villa-Vicencio: Theology, Nation Building And Human Rights**

The change of the political situations in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and South Africa at the end of 1989 and start of 1990 created a new opportunity for both theology and the church. In the light of this, Charles Villa-Vicencio, a South African Methodist theologian with a particular interest in social ethics, and who was based at the University of Cape Town, declared that: "the old is dying even though the new is not yet born. And there is no clear



indication of the form the new society might take” (Villa-Vicencio 1992:2). As part of the ‘old’ giving way to the ‘new,’ Villa-Vicencio argues in his book, *A Theology of reconstruction: Nation – Building and Human Rights* (1992), that liberation theology has to be transformed into reconstruction theology in much the same way as Mugambi argued earlier (although his book on reconstruction theology was actually published later). For Villa-Vicencio therefore, “the prophetic task of the church has to include a thoughtful and creative option for political and social renewal” (Villa-Vicencio. 1992:1,8,11, 32-42). Villa-Vicencio, argues that the church’s theological responsibility is to assert human dignity and restoring justice.

The changing political situation in the world, including South Africa, called for a change in the mode of doing theology as well. It called for a transformation of the theology of liberation, which played an important role in resisting oppression and apartheid, into a theology of reconstruction. Various contextual theories that have emerged over the years from within the South African struggle have constituted an important part of resistance within the country. The struggle is now contributing to further theological debate and renewal of the process of political reconstruction as nation building unfolds (Villa-Vicencio 1992:5).

Thus in this book, Charles Villa-Vicencio explores the encounter between theology on the one hand and constitution writing, law- making and human rights locating his study in South Africa. He reminds lawyers and others to re-evaluate the basis of their own disciplinary endeavours in their attempt to solve South Africa’s constitutional and human rights problems. He suggests that there is a need to be more inclusive, and that technical legal solutions will by themselves not be enough, unless they can be related and supported by the deepest personal values by which people live. He discourages absolute political systems and principles that suggest that God can be entirely identified with a political preference or the use of divine absolute that reduce all political systems and principles to the same level (Villa-Vicencio 1992:7,76-116).

Considering the analysis of the social situation, he holds that ordinary questions asked by ordinary people are key and that it is important to discern and understand the meaning of the

signs of the times. He engages in uncovering the causes of suffering and exploitation in society and identifying the signs of new birth that reside within the community as a basis for both confronting the state and encouraging programmes of hope and renewal.

According to Villa-Vicencio, liberation theology was a theology of saying 'no'. It says no to apartheid, racism, sexism; and he holds the view that theology's role today must continue to say 'no' to all forms of exploitation and injustice. He also maintains that it must be concerned about the process of nation-building by saying 'yes' to important political, social-economic and cultural changes such as one person one vote, economic justice, ecological renewal, gender sensitivity and so on (Villa-Vicencio 1993:24). Villa-Vicencio is of the opinion that liberation theology has not adequately contributed to the process of nation building but acknowledges that it fuelled 'resistance and revolution' (1992:23). While he does not go into the details of liberation theology, he is concerned that liberation theology has never reached the level of saying 'yes' and saying 'no' correctly. He points out that liberation theology tends to say 'no' when in the process of being part of the resistance and saying 'yes' when in the process of providing a religious legitimisation of the status quo.

Given this background, Villa-Vicencio proposes reconstruction theology saying that the challenge of theology in South Africa must take a different dimension. He argues that theology is obliged to begin the different task of saying 'no' and 'yes' in a creative and thoughtful way, which should exemplify its critical solidarity with a democratically elected government of the people (1992:25). He says that the theology of reconstruction is a "positive and reconstructive theology, concerned with social and economic structures" (1992:274). It involves the task of breaking down all forms of prejudices and creating an all-inclusive society (1992:7-8). For him therefore, a theology of reconstruction is about facilitating and supporting actions that make and sustain human life. At this point, we explore Villa-Vicencio's formal proposals for a theology of reconstruction.

#### 4.5.1. Proposals By Villa-Vicencio

In his theology of reconstruction, Villa-Vicencio makes two proposals that are also crucial to his central theme, namely, nation building and law making. Firstly, according to him, in order to restore the human face of society in the apartheid era, a process of nation building must begin. He argues that nation-building theology has a special obligation to enable and empower the nation to realise the highest ideals, which should be included within a new society. Giving its theological support to the poor and dispossessed, it is to facilitate the emergence of a social force that empowers the poor and the marginalised people of the society (1992:43). Secondly, the theology of reconstruction proposes laws to provide a life-giving sense of order and purpose to the society. The basis and drive of a legal system that will support the democratic process thus becomes a focal point in his proposal, leading directly to a theological discussion of the issue of human rights (Villa-Vicencio 52-53, 117-152).

Villa-Vicencio holds that a theology of reconstruction must not avoid difficult and tricky areas such as the economy and the relation between theology, economics and justice or the social significance of religion and its political responsibility. In this way, he draws a methodological proposal for a theology of reconstruction as a corporate theology, a theology enriched by interdisciplinary and inter-faith dialogue in its social analysis and theological structures (Villa-Vicencio 30-46, 274-284). For him, just as we saw with Mugambi, the biblical metaphor most suitable for a theology of reconstruction becomes the post-exilic experience that helps to remember the failures of the past and face the challenges of the present.

Villa-Vicencio argues that it is dangerous to leave the role of nation building only to politicians just as it is dangerous to reduce theology to a specific political ideology that may result in a merger between the state and the church. He gives a good example of the Constantinian Empire when the Christian religion was transformed into a new political cult. He observes that in the past the church has been either essentially excluded from the political decision-making process or is an instrument of ideological self-legitimation. Hence, the history of the church is full of examples of theologically legitimated political triumphalism and economic gluttony, for example: the Hebrew monarchy, the Constantinian Empire,

Medieval Europe, the Colonization of America by Columbus, and Nazism (1992:20-21). He argues strongly that theology must move from a theology of legitimation to a theology of nation building where it has to contribute to the difficult program of nation building and political reconstruction. However, this raises key question as to whether the church is theologically capable of contributing anything essential to the establishment of good government, or whether this responsibility should rather be left to secular forces.

The call of the church to share theologically in the nation building process is one of the new theological responsibilities of the church. The task of the church in the emerging society is to promote the destruction of all forms of cultural oppression and exploitation, whether located in the church or society. There is no place for racism, sexism or classism in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The church therefore cannot rest content until all structural forms of the basic violation of human rights are eradicated from the statute books and society (1992: 23-32). The church has to accept that if theology has to be taken seriously within the political arena, and especially during the period of political reconstruction, it has to contribute to the process of transformation by producing concrete proposals to deal with complex political and economic problems.

For Villa-Vicencio a nation building theology is a contextual theology that addresses present needs of a particular society. It is also retroactive theology, seeking to correct the causes of previous suffering and conflict in society. In doing so, social analysis plays a fundamental role, especially in posing tough and uncomfortable questions about the economy, nation development programmes and social issues, which influence the lives of ordinary people at a material and spiritual level. Nation building theology has the ability to enable and empower the nation in implementing the highest ideals within a new society. He states that “for the church to fail to share in the creation of a new culture and society is to fail to address its liberating obligation to society, is to marginalize itself from the task of reconstruction” (1992: 45).

He is, however, aware that his proposal offers no final answer to the complex problems with which society is confronted. As such it is open-ended, driven by an eschatological vision that

demands more than a particular society offers at any given time. From his point of view, a theology of reconstruction is both contextually responsible and socially transcendent. It is contextually responsible in seeking to define the next logical step a society has to take at a certain moment. It is also socially transcendent in the sense of challenging society to reach forward to social goals, which form part of the social vision integrated in the biblical allegory of the reign of God (1992:274-283)

#### **4.5.2. Constitutionalism And Law Making**

While a theology of reconstruction is required for nation building, for Villa-Vicencio, law is necessary to instil a sense and order in the society. At the same time, he argues that to fail to understand the history of law in South Africa as an instrument of exploitation and oppression is to fail to understand the suspicion with which debate on the rule of law and proposals on Bill of Rights is greeted by the oppressed people (1992: 49).

The law making process can and must be an instrument of restoration and justice. These two elements; restoration and justice, make the encounter between theology and the law a vital component of the theology of reconstruction. A significant point to note is that, inherent in the theology of reconstruction, is a notion of law as the positive stimulant that reveals the presence of God in society, enabling and drawing a people to what they ought to be. Therefore, bearing in mind that theology has to do with the creation of a society that conforms to the sovereignty of God, nation-building theology is defined in relationship to the constitutional process.

Villa-Vicencio gives the historical background of constitutionalism in South Africa in the past that led to the apartheid system. He points out that it was essentially British colonialism and the discovery of gold that created the legal structures of oppression leading to apartheid and the legal structures of dispossession with which South Africa lived up until the mid 1990s. The history of legal dispossession in South Africa started with the abuse of parliamentary supremacy. It reached its highest point with the implementation of a new constitution in 1983 that gave limited political rights to 'coloureds' and Indians in parliament and excluded

Africans (1992:53-66). In Villa-Vicencio's opinion, considering the trend of events that led to the abuse of power by the British and the Boers, parliamentary supremacy needed to be limited or the black majority government would get into the same problem in the process of undoing what the white minority government had done.

For him, the church cannot ignore facing the challenges involved in the reconstruction and nation building. He therefore deals with basic principles of legal philosophy to support the choice for a values-based approach to law making and to explain the task of theology in this regard. He states that the discussion on human rights and law making leads to two notions of human dignity: individualistic and communal. These two notions of human dignity are related to two economic systems that continue to dominate global structure he argues: capitalistic and socialistic. The challenge facing the society is how to marry these two different but related visions of democracy into a higher and more complete reality. Democracy involves concrete expression of the highest human rights ideals, which affirm the personal and material dignity of people, the right to participation in society and the freedom of choice in every area of life.

The individualistic notion of human rights is the classical liberal understanding that reduces human dignity to individual free choice. The communal notion gives a social perception of humanity that insists that human dignity involves more than individual free choice. The two notions of human dignity reflect two different worldviews of the Enlightenment and the democratic socialist worldviews of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1992:83). This situation raises major questions on social justice because, while there is a single humanity, their worldviews are divided and therefore the whole question of human rights gets into questioning which and whose human rights count.

#### **4.5.3. Theology And Human Rights**

Human rights constitute the basic elements of respect and dignity, which are due to any person by virtue of being human. They are rights for all people whether they choose to live under the gospel or not. At the same time theology makes Christians aware of the nature of these rights, providing them with an incentive to live in accordance with their demands. Theological

studies on human rights offer an understanding of humanity in a broad sense, within which individual and communal values are balanced and fulfil each other.

The church in a pluralistic society is obliged to address human rights because without this basic commitment it is likely to find itself marginalized from the political quest for reconstruction. The church may have other tangible social contributions to make to the creation of a new age, but Villa-Vicencio tries to present a possible contribution from theology, the question arising being whether theology can contribute anything worthwhile to the process of transcending a historic contradiction between individuals and socio-economic rights.

The primary task of theology, he argues is not to legitimize the human rights debate or to engage in a dialogue with other disciplines that study the nature of humanity, but to explore the ways in which human dignity can inform the political order. To do so Christians have to turn to other traditional and doctrinal teaching on what it means to be human, and discern within the biblical story of creation and redemption a spiritual and theological mode for living in harmony with God, other people, and the whole of creation. For Villa-Vicencio, theology is not to rework the list of human rights that are already defined and defended by many world organisations, but to show that the human rights rooted in Christian tradition are worthy of theological support.

The secondary task of theology is to help locate the human rights struggle at the centre of a debate on what it means to be human and therefore at the centre of social and political investigation. In other words, it is in the struggle for human rights that theology has its best chance to be materially grounded in the political and social-economic struggle that comes more closely to the demands of the gospel. From what is understood as the task of theology, Villa-Vicencio draws some implications and expectations towards the theology of nation building in the field of supporting human rights. First, theology will have to proclaim a new vision of humanity. The new vision is based on the message of human nature, which provides an alternative to both Western notions of individualism and ideological Marxist perceptions of collectivism. It affirms the truths, which stand central to these traditions. For him, “the

message contained in the biblical vision of society is a message concerned individual worth and the dignity of all people, realised in community with others” (1992:165).

Second, the African vision of humanity locates the human rights debate in the biblical anthropology grounded in the Genesis myth. In this context, the African worldview emerges as a striking alternative to Western individualism. It is at the same time alternative to ideologies that reduce people’s consequences of social and economic forces.

Third, theological reflection will have to stress the universal character of humanity; that all people are included within the human family. The struggles for human rights at a universal level are extended beyond national boundaries as well as sexual and racial barriers. Finally, pastoral programmes designed to teach people to love one another, to respect the human dignity of all people, and requiring all people to participate in the shaping of society on a basis of equality and mutual respect will have to be a priority for the church in the period of reconstruction.

For Villa-Vicencio, pastoral concern requires the church to share in the struggle for a political economy, which ensures the basic requirements for the well being and functioning of people as free and responsible citizens. The church is required in a situation of injustice, unequal distribution and political oppression to proclaim the biblical message of liberation in the most concrete terms possible (1992:182-184). Given this, Villa-Vicencio’s work on reconstruction and nation building is a major building block to this work in a number of ways: First his call for an articulation of what it is for each and every one to realize his/her human dignity is crucial because it is herein strongly argued that by violating women’s human right, leads to gross injustices. He also gives insights on aspects that are important in process of nation building that at end realizes humanization. He goes further to affirm the crucial role that law plays in order to ensure that what is promised is also enforced.

Finally, by suggesting that the process of lawmaking should be theologically informed will ensure that a process that uses biblical insight, and convictions for human well being is put in place. It is therefore anticipated that the origin of human beings created in the image of God



will suffice especially for women human beings whom the society has presented as if they are less beings.

Having carefully explored into the contributions of the three scholars –Forrester, Mugambi and Villa-Vicencio, and appreciated their contribution to issues that are crucial for theology and social issues, I now turn to a critical evaluation of the three of them in our endeavour to locate African women’s public theology an area that will be further worked in chapters five and six.

#### **4.6 Toward An African Women’s Public Theology**

Earlier in this chapter, I noted how Forrester argues that public theology should be founded on the church as an all-encompassing community, the bible should be read through the eyes of the marginalised, and that theologians should be those who will promote the vision of the ending of global misery, through speaking in public debate in ways that are prophetic, passionate and yet reachable. For him the occupation of a public theologian is to work humbly and hard digging out from the resources of the bible to get insight, challenges, and truths that may pave the way in the coming of the reign of God. For him therefore, public theology is concerned with the affairs of society in the light of anticipation in Christ for the kingdom of God’s sovereignty. (Forrester 2004: 431-438, see also Storrar and Morton 2004:20-21). Forrester goes further to suggest that justice need to be enforced by practical action. This view is shared by John De Gruchy (2004) when he gives an illustration of what role the church played during the South African struggle against apartheid.

Similarly, I have already dealt with the issues and concerns raised by African women theologians in chapter three and in an earlier section of this chapter. African women theologians identify aspects of religion and culture that render women vulnerable and call the church to action. In this section I will be looking at the potential of African women’s theology being or translating into one of the public theologies.

#### 4.6.1 An Evaluation Of The Three Public Theologians

Mugambi's reflection on the reconstruction theme precedes Villa-Vicencio's although his work was published later. Mugambi introduces a new paradigm for African Christian theology in Africa and explores the role of theology in the social reconstruction of Africa. The two theologians acknowledge the dilemma that the old is already gone yet the new is far from being realized. While they each identify this dilemma from their own different reference points, they hold a common the concept in shifting from the former to the current paradigm. While Mugambi's work implicitly ignores the plight of women in Africa, Villa-Vicencio is keen to propose that reconstruction theology should be able to creatively say 'no' to all forms of oppression and exploitation and injustice including those that are gender based.

According to Villa-Vicencio, liberation theology has not contributed to the process of nation building adequately although it fuelled resistance and revolution. For him the liberation motif struggles to contribute to the difficult programmes of nation building and political reconstruction (Villa-Vicencio 1992:23). Although he does not give a detailed analysis of liberation theology he acknowledges that there are some aspects that are still going to apply in the theology of reconstruction. He, for instance, says that the prophetic 'No' to all forms of oppression and injustices must continue in the theology of reconstruction (1992:1).

Forrester is clear about the role theology plays in public policy. For him, public policy that lacks theological insights, is wanting because it does not put into consideration the ultimate. The promised kingdom of God is the ultimate goal for un-compromised social justice. These three veterans of theology in the public space have some issues and conviction that are the same and in some cases differ a bit. It is imperative to note that they are concerned about social justice and the realization of a society where human beings are able to experience their humanity as God created them to. They are for a theology that is practical. Next I explore in their shared vision towards public theology in the visioning of the African Women Public Theology.

### (a) Biblical Metaphors

Jesse Mugambi and Charles Villa-Vicencio both acknowledge the significant role the Exodus motif played in the era that liberation theology was a requirement for political independence. Their approach implicitly and explicitly calls for a biblical theme for the purpose of theological guidance in the new direction theology is taking. Mugambi uses Ezra-Nehemiah and the Sermon on the Mount as a basis for his biblical metaphor of reconstruction theology. As earlier argued, Mugambi's negligence to engage in a social analysis of the texts he uses faced criticisms. Mugambi quickly links the Israelites experience during the exodus with the African experience in their transition from colonialism and apartheid to political independence. Consequently he links how Africans can adopt the Ezra-Nehemiah model in the process of reconstruction uncritically because he presents it as if African's social statuses are homogeneous. For example when he articulates cultural reconstruction, he does not put into consideration the issues that African Women Theologians are putting into question.

Villa-Vicencio unlike Mugambi, considers the rich resources of the biblical literature in relation to reconstruction theology. He does not point to a given biblical text but "post-exilic metaphor is used as a tentative, symbol which draws from a liberative spirit of hope located alongside all else within the exilic period and the return of the exiles" (Villa-Vicencio 1992:27). Arguing that the biblical scholars have not adequately developed that post-exilic period resource, he asserts:

The dichotomy suggested by some scholars between doom, judgement and law in the pre-exilic period over against hope, salvation and grace in the post-exilic period is an oversimplification of the more complex biblical shift in the emphasis at the time of the return from exile (Villa-Vicencio, 1992:27).

Villa-Vicencio further explains his stand referring to the pre-exilic time in Israel arguing that prophets and poets looked back to the past times and old traditions because the old promise tended to give assurance to the future; but also acknowledges the fact that there are a range of resources in the biblical literature which supports post-exilic metaphor as a foundation for a visionary reconstruction and political stability. Thus he says:

Then come the exilic poets, no longer appealing to the continuing power of the old tradition, but enunciating new actions of God that are discontinuous with

the old traditions. The promise of the old tends to give way to the new. It is this shifting emphasis that is employed in what follows in the “metaphorical” use of the post-exilic theology as a theology of reconstruction and nation building...there are resources the biblical literature which give credence to the use of the post-exilic metaphor as a basis for a theology of prophetic reconstruction and political stability rather than revolution (Villa-Vicencio 1992:28-29)

In the new situation Mugambi and Villa-Vicencio argue that a shift must take place. The Exodus metaphor must be replaced by a post-exilic metaphor to be used as a symbol, which draws on liberation and hope for the new, better future. The theme of post-exilic experience combined with social reconstruction and the idea of home-coming and nation-building are well suited to serve as the hermeneutic key for the theology of reconstruction as a whole.

Taking an interdisciplinary stance, the two theologians venture into difficult areas like law, economy, human rights, individual and cultural reconstructions. They are of the opinion, democratic institutions will only survive if they are upheld by democratic values and ethics to which theology has much to contribute. The issue of values is also fundamental for the new approach to law making, re-establishing the link between value and law. The emphasis is correctly placed on the importance of developing a theological anthropology and the task of humanizing society.

In the words of Forrester, public theology must be read through the eyes of the excluded, a point that comes out clearly in the articulation of post-exilic discourse. Just as Mugambi is criticized for a lack of deep engagement with the text that results in him excluding the voices and participation of the *am haratz* (Farisani 2002), Forrester is of the opinion that public theology should be founded in the deep mines of the scripture and give special concern to the place and status of the excluded. Therefore the bible should not be just used but appropriated adequately. In line with the guidance of Forrester’s call on the centrality of the scripture in public theology is clearly articulated in our two case studies in Africa by Mugambi and Villa-Vicencio. Likewise, Feminist theology, a category of theology under which African Women Theologies fall, is founded on the call for a proper search of the scripture. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, a renowned feminist theologian puts it thus:

Therefore a feminist theology that conceives of itself as a critical theology of liberation must sustain a creative but often painful tension. In order to remain feminist and faithful to women's experiences, it must insist that Christian theology, biblical tradition, and the Christian churches are guilty of the sin of sexist-racist patriarchy, which perpetuates and legitimates the societal exploitation and violence against women. Patriarchal religion and theology perpetuate and legitimate rape, wife-battering, child abuse, sexual exploitation of women, second-citizenship, and many more injustices against women. At the same time a critical feminist theology of liberation must be able to show that Christian faith, tradition, and church are not inherently sexist and racist, if it wants to remain a Christian theology. In order to sustain this creative tension such a feminist theology has to move critically beyond androcentric texts traditional teachings of men, and patriarchal structures by centering on the historical struggle of self-identified women and women-identified men against sexist-racist-militarist patriarchy and for liberation in the power of the Spirit (Fiorenza 1996:9)

This requirement therefore, compares with the very initial quest for African Women Theologians to use the bible and African culture as their sources of analysis of their theologizing. African Women Theologians however reject biblical and cultural aspects that are oppressive and dehumanizing. For instance Teresa Okure asserts:

Interpreting scripture from women's perspective requires that their creative approaches be applied and recognized as a valid way of searching the scriptures even the historical-critical method has been over the year...A key problem surrounding the Bible and its interpretation is that of patriarchy. By this I mean that the Bible was written most likely only by men and, for the Hebrew Scriptures, most specifically for men ("my son," "your wife") in male dominated cultures... (Okure 1993:80).

Like those who had lived in exile, African women have been captives of patriarchal social cultural construction that have defined the ideals of the society. As a result women have lived and continue to live a miserable life of hardship and oppression.

### **(b) Women And Human Rights**

While Mugambi does not give the issues of human rights conspicuous attention, Villa – Vicencio argues that theology has a role in the promotion of and advocacy for human rights. As we saw above, he argues that the primary task of theology in the promotion of human rights is not "to reinvent the wheel, in reworking the list of human rights already defined and

defended by countless human rights agencies around the world” (1992:123) but to provide a Christian defence of these rights because there is harmony within the major Christian traditions that the rights identified in most human rights declarations are worthy of theological support. This support he argues, emphasises the need for support to be given to socio-economic as well as developmental ecological human rights and he then goes on to identify some of the rights that theology needs to support including rights to life, right to cultural identity, right to democracy, right to dissent, right to personal dignity and freedom of religion (1992:123).

For him, theology is obliged to engage in a “deepened theological reflection in order to work out the ‘specifically Christian contribution’ to the further development of the human rights issue” (1992:125) and goes on say that the church should work with other faiths in “establishing a popular cultural, spiritual theoretical basis which defines and promotes human rights” (1992:126). This therefore calls not only for inter-disciplinary but also inter-faith engagement. Villa-Vicencio’s position agrees with Forrester who says:

Public theology is not a free floating wisdom (or rather, foolishness!), in the public sphere. Nor is it simply the ideology of the empirical community called ‘church’; it is caught in the constant tension between the church and God’s reign. The church, meaning at this point primarily the congregation, is called to be a kind of utopian community, nurturing hope and giving shape to expectation, providing a working model of reconciliation, and transforming anger and despair. The church, meaning now both the congregation and the *oikumene*, is also a community of moral discourse, honest, hard-hitting and attentive. We ought to be able to speak of the church as a place of truth, perhaps as the place truth, a community whose lifestyle and action at least make people ask questions and become open to new possibilities (Forrester 2004:433).

The three theologians (Mugambi, Villa-Vicencio and Forrester) are in harmony that theology has an obligation to engage in human rights discourse. It is also true that human beings are entitled to fundamental human rights, yet cries about injustices are full in the society’s profiles. The major question here is, how can theology help those who are struggling for their rights? What authority does theology have to intervene, and what avenues are there for intervention. It was earlier highlighted in this study that theology done from a male perspective may not be adequate in dealing with the issues of women and specifically Africa

women. This raises the same problem: how will a male-gendered public theology handle this? In this kind of situation, engendering theology is crucial. Theology must be redefined to be African Women's Public Theology. The church must by use of sound theology and an interdisciplinary framework engage the government to ensure that all citizens are able to realise the promise of human rights impartially. This therefore calls for church and state engagement.

### **(c) The Church And The State**

Villa-Vicencio argues that nation building requires law-making, a good constitution, and human rights. Other components that are important in the process of nation building are the freedom of religion. He is of the opinion that the role of the church in the process of nation building is crucial. Pointing to the role of the church in this process, he says:

The freedom of religion, rather than mere tolerance, is an integral and indispensable part of this right and process. Religion has always been a significant part of social transformation in western society. Essentially, the right of people to affirm and proclaim their most fundamental beliefs, which lies at the heart of all religions, constitutes a vital contribution to society. It cannot be turned away from society without destroying the democratic process. The freedom of religion and conscience, as part of the democratic process, presupposes the existence of the secular state. Free from theocracy and atheism, the secular state, which is tolerant in accepting conflicting, differing individual views and social values, ultimately accepts that there is only one tribunal for dealing in the pluralistic modern society, and that is the political process. The separation of religion and state protects not only the state from sectarian interest and perceptions of the truth, it also protects religion from becoming captive to the dominant interest and values of the state. (Villa-Vicencio 1992: 264).

For Mugambi, separation between the church and state is profitable to both church and state. For him the church should help its members to live more abundantly as members of a society to which the church renders service. Too often, the church has tended to isolate itself from the community it should serve with the result that the community cuts itself off from that church. When the local church isolates itself from the local society, it renders itself irrelevant to the needs of that society. The challenge for the local church is to identify itself with the needs and aspirations of the local community without being swallowed up in the frustration from which

it attempts to lift its members (Mugambi 1995: 133-134). The state is greater than the church, in the sense that it includes citizens who may not be Christians. But the Church's advantage over the social institutions is that it has ideals, which are always above human achievement. The forces and lobbies of secular politics cannot carry the church away but the church also cannot avoid being influenced by secular politics (Mugambi 1995:135). Villa-Vicencio, Mugambi and Forrester are in agreement on the church-state relationship.

The church-state dichotomy is well articulated by the three public theologians making their stand clear that the two are distinct yet complimentary in their responsibilities. Implicitly their discourse understands the church-state relationship and responsibility in the words of Forrester as he states:

The theologian addresses the state and civil society from within the church, which is seen as a kind of alternative community, and a model that society might emulate and an earnest of God's purposes for all humankind. The theologian does not enter the discussion as free floating expert, a specialist in speculation about divine things, but as a mouth-piece for the household of faith, someone who represents a particular tradition and community of faith. This is not to deny that the theologian's attitude to the tradition may often be critical, and the relationship with the church an easy one. But the theologian must represent a catholic, worldwide fellowship which is the contemporary manifestation of the tradition and which shares the responsibility for the doing theology. Theology is a function of the whole church; the theologian does not have a monopoly of theologizing and should be attentive, but not submissive, to the thinking of the whole church. Theologians and church leaders today have to remember that their statements and interventions are being monitored by churches and Christians throughout the world (Forrester 1988:163-164, see also Villa-Vicencio 1992:30-39).

Forrester understands public theology as an ecclesial theology. It is according to him the pastoral responsibility of the church to reach out to the society through sound theological insights and conviction in all matters of social development and justice. The challenge here is, is public theology as it is articulated from a male perspective adequate when addressing women's issues and concerns? Feminist theologians as earlier articulated, indicate that male oriented public theology is wanting. As argued by Western and African feminist and presented in this work earlier, feminism is about the wholeness of human life placing emphasis on place and status of women. Its proponents advocate social justice and



humanization of all in the society. It is for this reason that it is here proposed that African Women's Theology engaging in public theology is the most appropriate alternative in addressing women's inherent vulnerability.

#### **(d) Social Transformation**

Mugambi argues that social reconstruction should start with the motives and intentions of the individual leading to individual transformation and consequently cultural transformation that embraces politics, economics, ethics and religion. Reconstruction in these different areas is necessary to ensure that social structures are well adjusted to the needs of the people. Included in individual and cultural transformation, the role of the church in the process of transformation is crucial, in order to meet the new social demands of the society to which its members belong.

The dimension taken by the theology of reconstruction has indicators that public discourse is inevitable, though it has its challenges. The challenge of religious plurality and the use of theology/ies need to be taken seriously because different theologies may raise different voices and concerns for and to the contemporary society. The whole question of the contribution of theology to the human rights debate, affirmative action, women's rights and commitment to the poor raises major challenge to social structures, systems and institutions that calls for the church to justify its claims and authority. It should however be noted that Mugambi's theological discourse does not put into consideration women's quest for church and theology to address cultural aspects that are oppressive to women. He also does not put clearly what in culture should be addressed. Are cultural aspects and practices so universal?

Forrester struggles with the questions of policy, policymaking and policy and practices. These crucial questions in the whole area of nation building and reconstruction are major aspects that determine the quality of life for people of a given society. Forrester's concern is that theology should be in a position to make constructive contributions into the public policy. In his quest for social justice, equity, and equality in the allocation of property, resources and opportunity are important aspects. Mugambi and Villa-Vicencio raise this same concern when, in their

advocacy for social reconstruction they insist that the church should get involved in all areas that appertain to constructive social transformation.

The paradigm shift in the theological approach of Villa-Vicencio and Mugambi presents a theological articulation that confronts issues that determine the quality human life. In my opinion, their openness to interdisciplinary engagement presents theology as a discipline with the opportunity to contribute to issues that for a long time have been avoided by theologians, including African Women Theologians, although often engaged in by lay members of the church. This opens the possibility of theology taking part in critical policies that shape the life of the society, for instance economic policies, health policies, legal policies, etc. This possibility allows the church to be in critical solidarity with the state presenting an opportunity for the church to get involved in the process of decision and policy making in the society.

The articulations of these two theologians, Villa-Vicencio and Mugambi link with Forrester's quest for the role of theology in public policy, as Forrester challenges theology about its capability to make a contribution to public policy. For him theology must attain high levels of credibility to be a competitive participant in public policy. Villa-Vicencio and Mugambi echo the same when they recommend creativity and innovativeness.

For Villa-Vicencio and Mugambi, in their theologies of reconstruction the concept of transformation and renewal are key. They differ in their key concerns, however. For instance Villa-Vicencio considers nation building and law making as core to his proposal while for Mugambi it is social construction of African continent putting much emphasis on evangelisation. They however address issues that are quite similar at some point. For instance they agree in the following four areas. (i) : The post-exilic metaphor. Both theologians acknowledge the post-exilic metaphor as the most suitable for their theologies. This metaphor helps to remember the failures of the past and helps face the challenges of the future. (ii) Both theologians acknowledge the special role of the church in the reconstruction process and the challenge for the church to remain separated from the state. They are convinced that this is the only way the church can have significant influence on nation building and social transformation in Africa. (iii) Both theologians identify the need to depart from liberation

theology without discarding it but using it as their strong foundation on which a theology of reconstruction is built. (iv) Finally, Villa-Vicencio and Mugambi advocate for the theology of reconstruction, which in Forrester's view should be understood as contextual public theology. He emphasizes policy and policy making, which should result in social transformation. Constructive social transformation that ensures quality life and respect for human dignity therefore becomes a common place for the three theologians.

The three theologians set the foundation upon which African Women's Public Theology should be nurtured. But the African Women's Public Theologians will have to confront the following six challenges: (i) The call to engender public theology, which is predominantly male oriented; (ii) To be equipped to deal with the interdisciplinary aspect from a wider and more inclusive perspective; (iii) to develop the ability to identify and deal with crucial public issues such as women and law, women and environment, women and property entitlement from a legal perspective; (iv) endeavouring to be engaged in decision and policy making process identifying and questioning women unfriendly policies; (v) to explore a unified biblical theme or metaphor; and (vi) to dispute the aspects that do not promote humanity and freedom for all, and to challenge not only religion and culture but also the social and political structures that do not place value on human life.

Research is one of the very effective ways of discovering what goes on in the society and also suggest ways of transformation where necessary. In chapter three I articulated how women scholarship that took place in the 1970s and 1980s impacted on the life of women. The articulations mentioned chapter three explained how research expoused the experiences of women and recommended changes that have this far transformed the perceptions and lifes women. Transformed perceptions and have impacted on the statuses of women including, their place in leadership, decision and policy making. It is also important to note that the impact is more when women realize the need to take part in different capacities and at different levels. As explained in Chapter two, women collectives or groups among other strategies help women to improve their lives. The role of women in their emancipation is further seen in the role played by different women discourses as discussed in chapters two and three. This therefore

gives African Women's Public Theology a challenge to tap from from the two rich wells (research and Women's participation for their own liberation).

#### 4.6.2. Conclusion

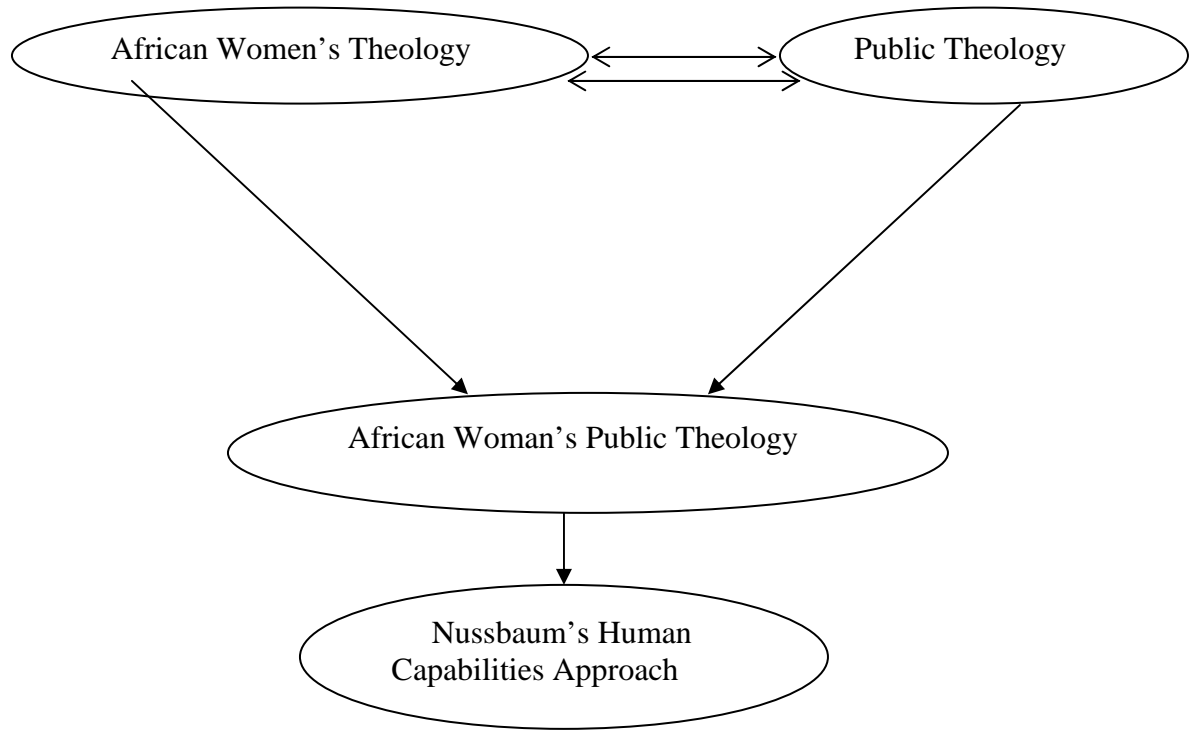
Mercy Amba Oduyoye's remarks lead us to ask questions about the vision of public theology offered by Forrester, Mugambi and Villa-Vicencio. Is their vision and programme strong enough to help women in Africa deal with the comprehensive experience of vulnerability? Will reconstruction and nation building help women in Africa if this happens upon the foundation of unjust gender relations? Is it enough to enshrine human rights in the constitution, laws and policies of a country, or is it possible that these remain rights "on paper", and do not begin to touch the everyday lives of women in the community. In Kenya, for example, it has been illustrated that while there are constitutional rights for women, these seldom translate into the lived experience of women in society.

For these reasons I need to return to the dialogue with African Women Theologians, who constantly hold on to exposing the experience of women and advocating for their justice. They also expose the role of patriarchy in the center. Although it is suggested that African Women Theologians need to learn from others about how to undertake public theology and seek to make a difference in the wider world of politics, economics, law and national policies, there is also need to continue to keep the lives of ordinary women in front of us. There is need for a *public theology*, but it must remain an *African women's* public theology in order to uniquely and significantly contribute to the concerns of women and specifically women of Africa. It needs to deal not just with one element causing vulnerability – namely law and policy – but it needs to deal with the whole comprehensive experience of vulnerability.

Thus in order to find the vision and language with which to speak to the public arena about this comprehensive experience of vulnerability, it is our concern to go beyond 'human rights' on paper, and to focus on what women are "actually able to do and to be", what has become known as their *human capabilities*. The most helpful exponent of this approach is the feminist philosopher from the United States, Martha Nussbaum, who has provided a coherent

articulation of the capabilities approach for development theory, in dialogue with third world women. For this reason, I now turn to gain a deeper understanding of her approach, and to identify its uses for Christians and the Church in the public arena in Kenya. I seek to work with and alongside women to overcome their comprehensive experience of vulnerability.

The quest to develop a language and vision that is adequate in dealing with task of the thesis suggested in this chapter presents the fourth level of the framework since I am now able to identify the dialogue partners in the development of the *African Women's Public Theology*. African Women's Public Theology is therefore expected to set the stage for an adequate analysis for the comprehensive experience of vulnerability and call upon the relevant actors in the intervention process to confront the women's experience of comprehensive vulnerability.



*Figure 4. 1: The theoretical framework for understanding dialogue partners in African Women's Public Theology*

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE HUMAN CAPABILITIES APPROACH

#### 5.0 Introduction

I ended chapter four by identifying the need for a theological paradigm that will be able to adequately deal with women's comprehensive vulnerability. While I noted that African Women's Theology advocates and proclaims the need for the church to uphold women's dignity and freedom, I suggested that it is still wanting in terms of engaging with the public sphere. African Women's Theology has focused a great deal on the marginalization of women in the church, in the use of the bible and in African culture. I argued that African women theologians' concern to address African culture and the church can overlook other causes of women's vulnerability that are crucial to their experiences. Given the experience of comprehensive vulnerability that I have identified and analysed in chapters two and three, I propose that we as African women theologians should find ways to engage theologically with government policy, law, constitution, economy and political structures in our analysis of the place and status of women. Therefore in the previous chapter I proposed an African Women *Public* Theology and suggested a theoretical framework to begin to do this. A key element of this was to work in an interdisciplinary way, and to draw on feminist thinking in the area of the law and policy. This concern is taken up in this chapter, through an examination of the Human Capabilities Approach of Martha Nussbaum.

In this chapter I argue that a legitimate African Women's Public Theology should not focus only on the human and civil rights that women may or may not have, but should focus on what women are actually able to be and do in all spheres of life. This is the position that is promoted by the Human Capabilities Approach, developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. Here I will be focusing specifically on the work of Nussbaum and particularly her seminal text *Women and human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (2000) which provides us with the kind of framework that the churches can use as a guide in their

engagement with governments and wider society to formulate policies that ensure justice, freedom and equality for all, and particularly for women.

In this chapter I will introduce Nussbaum, the philosophical foundations of her work, and her articulation of the Human Capabilities Approach, and then pay attention to her proposed list of basic human capabilities as a framework of operation in the proposed theological paradigm. I will show why and how her Human Capabilities Approach is appropriate for guiding the church, Government and society in dealing with women's comprehensive vulnerability. As I will argue and demonstrate in this chapter, although this approach does not in itself claim to be Christian or theologically grounded, it can be used by the church in addressing the government towards ensuring justice, freedom and equality for all, especially women and girl children.

## 5.1 Martha Craven Nussbaum

Martha Craven Nussbaum is a feminist political philosopher and jurist from the United States of America, currently the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics, at the University of Chicago. Nussbaum is not a theologian, although her work shows that she is acquainted and uses religion comfortably using religious ideas and symbols. It should also be noted that although she does not claim or write as a Christian, she grew up in a church (Nussbaum 2000:235) and she was later converted to Judaism (Nussbaum 2000:183). In her more than twenty five years of teaching, she has had appointments in other departments including classics, philosophy, comparative literature, religious studies, gender studies and political science<sup>65</sup>. Her involvements in these different areas are also explicit in her publications covering wide range of academic concern<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> In a talk she was invited to give at Delhi in India in order to link her interdisciplinary situation, Nussbaum explained her professional appointment and academic credentials, which reveal that she holds, M.A and a PhD in classical philosophy. See M.C.Nussbaum, (2000b). "Humanities, past and future" [html document] <http://www.aau.edu/aa/Nussbaum10.00.html> Down loaded on 5/24/2002.

<sup>66</sup> Presented here are some of Nussbaum's publication that are representative of her interdisciplinary academic engagement: M. Schofield, and M.C. Nussbaum, (1982) *Language and logos: Studies in ancient Greek philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; M.C. Nussbaum, (1997). *Cultivating humanity: a classical defense of reform in liberal education*. London: Harvard University Press; M.C. Nussbaum, (1986). *The fragility of goodness: luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; M.C. Nussbaum, (1990). *Loves knowledge: essays on philosophy and literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; M.C. Nussbaum, and A. Sen, (eds.) (1993). *The quality of life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; M.C. Nussbaum, and J. Clover, (eds.) (1995). *Women, culture and development: a study of human capabilities*.



Nussbaum's contribution as a political philosopher to issues of economic development has created a potent interdisciplinary academic interface between economics, law, feminism and politics<sup>67</sup> especially as she developed her Human Capabilities Approach. She is thus far the key partner and critic of Amartya Sen's position on Human Capabilities Approach and although she agrees with him in some areas; she also disagrees with him in some other crucial areas (Croker 1995: 154-155; Nussbaum 2000:11-15; Clark 2005:6; Berges 2007). I will revisit this concern later in the chapter. Nussbaum has also worked closely with Amartya Sen in economic development (Clark 2005; Berges 2007). Sen, a Bangladeshi Nobel prize winning economist who has had a significant influence upon the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), acknowledges that:

My collaboration with Martha Nussbaum during 1987-1989 was of great importance in investigating the concepts of capability and quality of life, used extensively in this book (Sen 1999: xiv-xv; cf. Nussbaum 2000:11).

Nussbaum's involvement in economic developments finds substantial expression in her involvement at the World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER) which made her aware of the need to engage in work that would address the reality of poor people's lives culminating in the publication of her *Women and human development: capabilities approach* (2000). She states:

In March 1997 I went to India to look at women's development projects, because I wanted to write a book that would be real and concrete rather than abstract, and ...(Nussbaum 2000:xvi)

Nussbaum provides a consistent articulation of the Human Capabilities Approach for development theory, in dialogue with third world women. Throughout her work, she displays

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Oxford: Oxford University Press; Nussbaum C M 2000 *Women and human development: the capabilities approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>67</sup> Wolf S 1995 Commentator in M.C. Nussbaum, and J. Clover, 1995. *Women, culture and development: A study of human capabilities*. Oxford: Clarendon; D. A. Croker, (1995) Functioning and capability: The foundations of Sen's and Nussbaum's development ethic in M.C. Nussbaum, and J. Clover, (1995) *Women, culture and development*. Oxford: Clarendon; Lutz C 1995 Commentator in M.C. Nussbaum, and J. Clover, (1995). *Women, culture and development*. Oxford: Clarendon; S. Berges, 2007. "Why the Capability Approach is justified" in *Journal of applied philosophy*, 24, 1, 2007, 16-25; D.A. Clark (ed.), (2005). "Capability Approach". The Elgar companion on development studies, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar (This paper was Initially written for Global Poverty Research Group, under the title: The capability approach: Its development, critiques and recent advances).

a passionate engagement with the problem of how to live with dignity in a world we do not control. She deals firmly with issue of ‘human vulnerability and human need’, concentrating her study on the world’s most vulnerable women in the developing countries. She says:

I had come to WIDER a relatively typical American moral political philosopher – meaning that I didn’t have much empirical information about the world outside America, and next to none about the developing world. I found myself operating on a daily basis with people from all regions of the world and my ignorance astonished me. The problems set before me –women’s hunger, illiteracy, vulnerability to violence – were to some extent new to me, at least in their urgency and their detail. Totally new to me were the cultures and nations the institute considered – and our project focused from the first on South Asia. Of the history and religions of that region I was woefully and culpably ignorant. I did persist in my conviction that philosophy had a lot to tell development economists about normative concepts involved in the very ideal of development. But I also saw that this conversation would be derailed from the beginning if I did not humbly learn and learn again (Nussbaum 2001:7).

It is out of this background that her book, *Women and human development: The capabilities approach* (2000), emanated. It is also for this reason that her work on the Capabilities Approach and specifically in this book is crucial for the current work because it understands that in Kenya and Africa at large women suffer comprehensive injustices leaving them absolutely vulnerable. While none of her published work has reference to Africa, her commitment to the perspectives of poor women in developing world’s contexts makes her a useful dialogue partner for those concerned about women and development in Africa.

While I draw heavily from this publication, her other works will also be used in our articulation of her Human Capabilities Approach and its relationship to this current work. As illustrated in chapter two and three, women suffer discrimination, exploitation, abuse, and are majority of those who live in abject poverty. For this reason, therefore, Nussbaum’s Human Capability Approach is the center of my appraisal in the formulation of my framework for eliminating women’s vulnerability. She develops the theory of human capabilities, which in this thesis I am arguing, is worthy of theological support because it is applicable and can be structured for use by the church, the government and the society in their engagement in policy making, constitution and law making towards ensuring gender justice, freedom and equality.

In other words she provides us with the multi-disciplinary language for African Women's Public Theology to address the secular public sphere.

## 5.2 Theoretical foundations

In her Human Capabilities Approach, Nussbaum is concerned with providing the "philosophical underpinning for an account of basic constitutional principles that should be respected by the governments of all nations, as a bare minimum of what respect for human dignity requires" (Nussbaum 2000:5). To achieve this aim, she advances an approach that focuses on human capabilities which is about "what people are able to do and be" (2000:5.). In doing this, she is committed to an approach that recognises "each and every person, treating each as an end...based on the principle of each person's capability" (2000:5.). She uses "the idea of a threshold level of each capability" and according to her all citizens should not live below this capability threshold<sup>68</sup>. Another use of her Capabilities Approach is that it creates liberty for an assessment of the quality of life but she goes beyond comparison level to "construction of a normative political proposal that is a partial theory of justice" (2000:6). It is partial in the sense that it is universal and open ended. It is open for adjustment in its application in particular locations or context.

Nussbaum's Capability Approach is universalist and she argues that it can be used for dealing with issues of women in the developing nations and takes note of the fact her universalism might be faced with hesitation by International feminists. As a result she offers an adequate defence of universal values and critically engages with International feminism and women in the third world as discussed below. She however cautions that:

This project is somewhat unusual in feminist political philosophy because of its focus in the developing countries. Such a focus, already common in feminist economic thought and feminist activism, is becoming more common in feminist philosophy, and rightly so. Feminist philosophy, I believe, should

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<sup>68</sup> In her 'Human Capabilities, & female human beings' in Nussbaum and Clover (1995), *Women, culture and development: A study of human capabilities*, 86-95, Nussbaum discusses the role of her conception of human capability in development policy. She establishes what it is to be human and how to live a humane living and how this kind of perception should inform government concern in dealing with the Citizens and the influence it has on the public planning. In her comments on Nussbaum in this work, Susan Wolf 'Martha C. Nussbaum: Human capabilities, female human beings', in M.C. Nussbaum, and J. Clover, (eds. 1995. *Women, culture and development: A Study of Human Capabilities*. Oxford: Clarendon, appreciates Nussbaum's approach "in bringing out specific implications it has for issues relating to development and gender (Wolf 1995:105-115).

focus on the more urgent needs and interest of women in the developing world whose concrete material and social contexts must be well understood, in dialogue with them, before adequate recommendations for improvement can be made. This international focus will not require feminist political philosophy to turn away from its traditional themes, such as employment discrimination, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and reform of rape law; these are all as central to women in developing countries as to Western women. But feminist philosophy will have to add new topics to its agenda if it is to approach the developing world in a productive way; among these topics are hunger and nutrition, the right to seek employment outside the home, child marriage, and child labour (Nussbaum 2000:7).

It is poignant that many women in the world are intrinsically vulnerable such that they suffer various forms of injustice such as lack of bodily protection and integrity, vital nutrition and health care, education and political voice (as we noted in chapter two and three). These injustices are experienced in the world by women because they are women. As a result, women have and continue to resist such inequality and call for people, structures and institutions to treat them with respect.

### **5.2.1 Human dignity, Aristotle and Marx**

Nussbaum's capabilities approach makes it clear that in terms of her understanding of human life she has a fundamental philosophical debt to Aristotle and Marx, and she engages with them time and again. In her articulation of the central human capabilities, she refers to Aristotle and Marx in her argument that in some crucial areas "human functioning is a necessary condition of justice for public political arrangement" (Nussbaum 2000:71). She is persuaded that their conception of human dignity is the bedrock of her philosophy. She notes:

The intuitive idea behind the approach is twofold: first, that certain functions are particularly central in human life, in the sense that their presence or absence is typically understood to be a mark of the presence or absence of human life, and second – this is what Marx found in Aristotle – that there is something that it is to do these functions in a truly human way, not merely animal way. We judge, frequently enough, that a life has been impoverished that it is not worthy of the dignity of human being, that it is a life in which one goes on living but more or less like an animal, unable to develop and exercise one's human powers (Nussbaum 2000:71-72).

Nussbaum embraces Aristotle's and Marx's concept of human dignity and this forms the foundation of her formulation of her list of capabilities. It is this background that makes her suspicious of standard development theory. She wants to know: do these development policies really enhance human dignity in terms of the actual lives that people, and specifically women, live? She asserts:

Otherwise promising approaches have frequently gone wrong by ignoring the problems women actually face. But the capabilities approach directs us to examine real lives in their material and social setting; there is thus reason for hope that it may overcome this difficulty...the core idea is that of the human being as a dignified free being who shapes his or her own life in a cooperation and reciprocity with others, rather than being passively shaped or pushed around (Nussbaum 2000:71-72)

Karl Marx also helps Nussbaum see the connections between reality and false consciousness, so that women can often be willing participants in their own oppression because they have internalised their situation and come to see it as normal. At the same time, she is aware that her debt to Marx might make some people reject her thinking because of its relationship to communism. However, she notes the connections that Marx shares with more 'liberal' notions of political freedom, and she notes the connections to Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant and John Stewart Mill. She says:

The idea that some preferences are deformed by ignorance, malice, injustices, and blind habit has deep roots in the tradition of political philosophy as well. Adam Smith's ideas about greed and anger, in Mills ideas about the sexes, in Kant's ideas about the many ways in which people get accustomed to treating one another as means rather than ends, in John Rawls's ideas about the ways in which unjust background conditions shape desire and choice...one of the things this liberal tradition has emphasized is that people's preference for basic liberties can itself be manipulated by tradition and intimidation; thus a position that refuses to criticize entrenched desire, while sounding democratic on its face, may actually serve democratic institutions less well than one that one that takes a strong normative stand about such matters, to some extent independently of people's existing desires (Nussbaum 2000:114-115).

In other words, she understands that society has a commitment to ensuring that its policies advance human life and human dignity. This is where the idea of treating every person as an 'end' comes from. While it is possible that this philosophical background informs her

commitment for upholding policies that advance human life and human dignity, my own hunch is that the basis for this lies also in her faith commitment (Christian and Jewish), although she never says so. Christianity and Judaism both uphold human worth and human dignity strongly because human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:27).

### **5.2.2. Universal values**

Given her focus on human life as an end in itself, Nussbaum argues for a universalistic ethic. In doing so, she is well aware of the critique that she has to face. She argues her case in response to what she considers to be the three most important challenges (the arguments from culture, from the good of diversity and from paternalism) to which we now turn.

The argument from culture is a strong challenge and she confronts it first. Any American who promotes universal values can be accused of promoting Westernization, confronting traditional customs and disregarding local traditional norms. She has the challenge to justify how her approach would not westernize the traditional norms. In her argument from the perspective of the culture, she points to the influential norms of “female modesty, deference, obedience, female submission, silence, and self-sacrifice that defines women’s lives for centuries” (Nussbaum 1999:229; 2000:41-42) which she challenges by questioning situations that deny women their human rights.

Nussbaum argues that feminists should not uncritically deduce that such norms are bad and not competent for making good and flourishing lives for women. She argues for the need to assess such norms and reminds us that culture has become the grounds of crucial debates and could have dominant and masked voices that can inform capability development and policy making. She for instance asserts that:

My proposal protects spaces within which women may make such choices, and in which parents may teach the value of their traditions to their children. But we should also note that the objector, once again, oversimplifies tradition, ignoring counter traditions of the female defiance and strength, ignoring women’s protest against harmful traditions, and in general forgetting to ask women themselves what they think of these norms, which are typically

purveyed, in tradition, through male texts and the authority of male religious and cultural leaders, against a background of women's almost total economic and political disempowerment (Nussbaum 2000:41-42)

Her claim for universal norms takes seriously the quality of life for all and especially the vulnerable women in the developing world. Her argument is that unless the protection of women is grounded in an ethic that stands outside of a given culture, there is no way that women can be protected from the negative aspects of that culture. Her universal ethics takes seriously a specific situation, putting into consideration the universal ethic of each person as an end.

The argument from the good of diversity calls for an acknowledgement of the richness of cultural diversity, Different languages of value and the danger attached to disregarding all of them in favour of one (an American one). These foregrounds Nussbaum's American background, which is likely to undermine the cultural diversity of those, she is with and for. It is held that each person's cultural heritage is rich and worthy of respect. She responds to this by demonstrating that her proposed framework takes into account such details but provides a more general criterion of assessment. She argues:

In the end, then, the objection doesn't undermine the search for universal values, it requires it: for what it invites us to ask is, whether the cultural values in question are among the ones worth preserving, or possibly part of what is killing the bird. And to ask this entails at least a very general universal framework of assessment, one that will tell us what is and is not beyond the pale, (at is and is not implicated in the killing the bird, I will be offering just such a very general framework, one that allows a great deal of latitude for diversity, but one that also sets up some general benchmarks that will tell us when we are better off letting practices die out (Nussbaum 2000: 50-51).

In other words, Nussbaum is saying that the decision to respect other cultures is itself a 'universalist' position. The point is not to interfere with cultural particularity but to set out a framework that has universal values that can inform and question particular cultural practices.

Third, in terms of the critique that she is being paternalistic she can be viewed as an outsider who comes to prescribe to others. Universal standards are feared to be ones that takes away

the respect and freedom of the people. She acknowledges the fact that paternalism coerces people and tells them what they should do. She clearly demonstrates that the capabilities approach is about respect for all and that each and every person is treated as an end. She argues that:

Thinking about paternalism gives us a strong reason to respect the variety of ways citizens actually choose to lead their lives in a pluralistic society and therefore to prefer a form of universalism that is compatible with freedom and choice of the most significant sort...The argument from paternalism indicates, that we should prefer a universal normative account that allows people plenty of liberty to pursue their own conceptions of value, within limits set by the protection of the equal worth of the liberties of others. It gives us no good reason to reject all universal accounts, and some strong reasons to construct one, including in our account not only the liberties themselves, but also forms of economic empowerment that are crucial to making the liberties truly available (Nussbaum 2000:51; 55).

Looking at the three arguments that Nussbaum's confronts when grounding her stand on universalism, we can rightly argue that dealing with issues of women in the developing world, such perspectives are crucial because different cultural traditional practices marginalize and oppress women. In other words women are treated as those who have to receive instructions from others without question. As a result therefore Nussbaum's universal value provides universal standards, that which can provide checks and balances to ensure quality of life for women.

There is another important reason why Nussbaum promotes a universalist ethic. She is concerned that women exhibit what she calls 'preference adaptation'; in other words women's choices and preferences become adapted to what is culturally and socially possible (She even speaks of preference *deformation*). In this way vulnerable women internalise the view men have of them, and so they come to 'prefer' things that undermine their own position. Nussbaum argues that unless there is a universalist position that stands outside of a given culture or a given group of women, there is always the possibility that women will 'choose' things that are against their objective interests because they feel that this is what is expected of them, or worse, that they will be punished for not doing otherwise. Thus whilst a universalist position can be accused of being paternalistic or disrespectful of individual cultures, this is important in the fight for women's capabilities against the conditions that dehumanise and



make them so vulnerable. Citing example of how women internalise other people's preference, she says,

Like many women, seems to have thought that abuse was painful and bad, but still part of women's lot in life, just something women have to put up with as part of being women dependent on men, and entailed by having left her own family to move into a husband's home. The idea that it was a violation of rights, of law, of justice, and that she herself has right that are being violated by her husband's conduct-these ideas she didn't have at the time, and many women all over the world don't have them now. My universalist approach seems to entail that there is something wrong with the preference (if that's what we should call it) to put up with abuse, that it just shouldn't have the same role in social policy as the preference to protect and defend one's bodily integrity. It also entails that there is something wrong with not seeing oneself in a certain way, as a bearer of rights and a citizen whose dignity and worth are equal to that of others (Nussbaum 2000:112-113).

Nussbaum's concern is depicted in the kind of life women expressed in chapter two of this thesis. Take for example the experience of Josephine Wanyaga Mbae and Jennet Mbaka Ireri. These two women were strongly convinced that they needed to remain married irrespective of their gross experience. Josephine believed that it was her obligation to make the marriage and also it did not matter as long as her children grew up in a family situation. Out of this she had to bear violation and abuse, while later she was even chased out of the marriage she worked so hard to remain in. Likewise, Jennet Mbaka had to work hard to provide for her family and take care of her alcoholic husband. She specifically did that because as an African married woman, once married, it was stigmatising to back to the natal family. She was a reputed church woman as a woman's guild member and leader, a deacon and now and later a church elder, she (ad to re-ain in the marriage and endeavour to transform her husband.

As it is evidenced in chapter two and three, this is a common trend. Women in most cases have to have adapted preferences for a number of reasons such as to sustain their marriage, to maintain their jobs, to be accepted in their societal structures and even the churches. As also indicated earlier, women in the theological institutions and church leadership must do things in a given way, and if they fail they are termed difficult or have to really struggle. Nussbaum's

universality provides a way out of this kind of culturally enforced preference adaptation.

### 5.2.3 Feminist commitments

A key element of Martha Nussbaum's work is that she is a feminist, committed to the life and dignity of women in a world in which this is too often denied. This is a key reason why she argues for a legal, political and philosophical position that treats every one as an 'end' in herself, rather than a means to someone else's end. Unless we hold to such a position, she argues, women are always sacrificed to wider family, cultural or religious aims. For instance: (i) She argues for the rights of women as citizens, and holds that a commitment to human dignity must involve a commitment to women's dignity; and (ii) she also recognises the need for the rights of poor women, and not just the struggles of rich first world women.

In the fourth chapter of *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (2000), she highlights the status of a woman at home. She ends by engaging with international feminism and challenging them to recognise the fact while there are cultural particularities, there are also values that are universal and that is what the capabilities approach argues for. At this point she argues that there those aspects that affect women because they lack in those universal values or are systematically discriminated. For instance she begins section five of chapter four by saying,

If it seems incontrovertible that the structure of the family is shaped by history, custom, and law, so much has not usually been granted regarding the feminine abilities of nurturance that define woman's role within family structures of widely differing types. In many different types of families, women overwhelmingly do the child rearing and housekeeping, and are expected to give care and support to men, often without return in kind. It is frequently alleged that this traditional function is itself "natural" in one or more of the senses mentioned earlier, and it is often inferred in consequences that there would be something wrong with any attempt to shake up traditional patterns of care giving. We must, therefore confront this issue to some extent separately from the issue of family structure; our stand on it will affect what we can and should say about the family (Nussbaum 2000:264).

In this sense I see Nussbaum in the same position as other feminists like Oduyoye, who define feminism as one in which women's issues and concerns are foregrounded. A position where a woman's visibility, voice, and action is counted crucial for anything that goes on in the society. Nussbaum uses the stories of vulnerable Indian women which reflects on their Past life and what life they lived after going through the process of empowerment and capacity building. For instance she says:

Again, consider the Women of SEWA in my second epigraph, who see a video of women doing daring new things and thereby gain confidence that they can do these things too. Note clearly it is Lila Datana's point that the experience of watching the video helps these women make adequate choices for the future—not only by giving them new information but by enhancing their sense of their own possibilities and worth (Nussbaum 2000:126).

To be able to enhance their own possibilities and worth she argues, one must first and foremost have bargaining power which is determined by identifying the following important options; importance of perceived contribution and the importance of a sense of one's own worth (Nussbaum 2000:287-290). Nussbaum shows a special commitment to women issues and concerns for their marginalized position that makes them vulnerable.

As I will note below, because she focuses on women's capability and functioning this helps her to see that it is not enough just to have rights; one must also have the social opportunity to express those rights. In this case, her approach puts most of the developing countries under the spotlight because while it is constitutional, for example, that everyone has a human right to education actually nothing happens when some families sacrifice girls' education in favour of boys' education. This in my opinion does not only put to task the government policies but also the role of charity and humanitarian organisation and the church that preaches the gospel of equality and freedom, dignity and integrity of all those who are created in the image of God. All of this makes her feel that something has to be put in place in political structures to protect and provide for the dignity of women. This makes one of her major argument for capabilities approach to which we now turn.

### 5.3. The Human Capabilities Approach

The Human Capabilities Approach is used for assessing or measuring the quality of human development. On recognizing the shortcomings of the previous approaches used in measuring the quality of life, the human capabilities approach spearheaded by Amartya Sen has strongly come on board as an appropriate alternative. While Amartya Sen has emerged strongly, even being a Nobel prizewinner, this approach has faced criticisms. Among those who have worked towards this approach is Martha Nussbaum who is also a major critic of Amartya Sen (I will offer a section on capabilities approach and Sen in the following section). The Human capabilities approach can be simply explained as an approach that emphasizes the recognition and appreciation of human dignity and integrity in real-life terms. It is about what one is “actually able to do and to be”. Nussbaum says:

The capabilities approach directs us to examine real lives in their material and social setting...taking a stand for political purposes on a working list of functions that would appear to be of central importance in human life, we ask: is the person capable of this, or not? We ask not only about the person’s satisfaction with what she does, but what she does and, what she is in a position to do...And we ask not just about the resources that are sitting around, but how those do or do not go to work (Nussbaum: 2000:71)

I will begin by recapping the origins of the capabilities approach and then articulate it from Martha Nussbaum’s perspective.

#### 5.3.1. Amartya Sen and the Origins of the Human Capabilities Approach

After decades of articulating the Capabilities Approach, Amartya Sen is acknowledged as the pioneer with his literature dating back to 1979 when he presented his Tanner Lecture on ‘Equality of What’ (Clark 2005:2; Nussbaum 2000:11; Sen 1999; Croker 1995:153-198). Amartya Sen is also the 1998 Nobel Prize winner in economic science based on his immense contribution especially in his dealing with the issues of economic problems relating to the poor and dispossessed in the world (see the forward of his book *Development as Freedom* (1999). In his work Sen views economic development from the perspective of human development. He takes seriously the social basis of individual well-being and freedom. David

Clark (2005) argues that Sen's Capabilities Approach has strong connections with Adam Smith's (1776) analysis of 'necessities' and 'living conditions' and Karl Marx's (1844) concern with "human freedom and emancipation", Clark further argues that while Sen had initially failed to acknowledge the connection of his thought with Aristotle's theory of "political economy and Marx" he later embraced it

His conceptual foundations of the Capabilities Approach are found in his critiques of long-established welfare economics and utility (Clark 2005:3; see also Sen 1984, 1995, 1999). Sen focuses on people as ends in themselves, and embraces human freedom and agency. He therefore emphasizes the role of practical reason, democracy and public action in pressing for goals, making choices and influencing policy. Sen also agrees that where there are different people, cultures and societies there is possibility of different values and desires (Clark 2005:5). Sen's main use of the conception of capability is:

Firstly to specify a space within which assessment of quality of life is most effectively made. Secondly, it is a partial, rather than a complete, theory of just distribution. Thirdly, he gives significance to the role of political liberty, and fourthly, he stresses that the capabilities should be understood to be valuable for each and every person, and that it is the capability of each that should be considered when asking how nations are doing (Nussbaum 2000:12; Croker 1995:158).

Martha Nussbaum is one of the renowned critics of Amartya Sen, the pioneer of the Capabilities Approach. While Nussbaum agrees with him in some areas, she also departs from Sen in the following ways:

Firstly, Sen has not produced explicit arguments against relativism that shows the descriptive inadequacy of many anti-universalist approaches, which Nussbaum defends persuasively. Secondly, Sen never attempted to ground the capabilities approach in the Marxian/Aristotelian idea of truly human functioning. Thirdly, Sen, unlike Nussbaum, never developed a list of central functional capabilities, and fourthly, Nussbaum provides detailed definitions of the three types of capabilities (basic, internal and combined) (Nussbaum 2000:13; Croker 1995:160-161 cf Nussbaum 2000, chapters 1 and 2).

Nussbaum and Sen agree on many things about capabilities but she departs from him in number of ways and works towards what is seen as an improvement of Capabilities Approach. While Sen just considers people's freedom and agency, Nussbaum goes further to argue that once human capability is achieved, people are supposed to be given the freedom of choice.

For Nussbaum, people should be made aware of their right, be empowered and the governments ensure constitutional, political and legal rights for all citizens. Unlike Sen, Nussbaum also brings in the issue of threshold levels and designs a specific list of capabilities (see Nussbaum's contribution in a section below).

### **5.3.2 Human Capabilities, Welfarism and the Human Rights Approach**

Nussbaum observes that one cannot construct an idea of Capabilities without referring to conventional ideas about rights and liberty, which are foundational to the international human rights movements. Her Capabilities Approach, by virtue of

... making the idea of human choice and freedom central entails a strong protection for these traditional rights and liberties. A society that aims at well being while overriding these has delivered to its members an incompletely human level of satisfaction (Nussbaum 1999:238; 2000:96)

Endorsing Sen's affirmation that conventional rights and liberties are important for the fulfilment and formulation of needs, she argues that capabilities are closely related to human rights as understood in the current international discussions. These "political and civil" and "economic and social rights" resemble what is strongly advocated by feminists (1999:239). Further, Nussbaum confirms that capability and rights have the same function, that is, "they provide the philosophical underpinning for basic institutional principles" (Nussbaum 1999:239; 1995:97).

However Nussbaum has problems with *rights* language. She is of the opinion that rights language is ambiguous especially when it comes moral obligation and actual benefit. For her it is crucial to differentiate between what someone is entitled to and actual benefit of the same entitlement. For instance she argues:

People differ about what the basis of a right claim is; rationality, sentience, and mere life have all had their defenders. They differ, too, about whether rights are prepolitical or artefacts of laws and institutions...they differ about whether rights belong to individual persons, or also to groups. They differ about whether rights are to be regarded as side-constraints on goal-promoting action, or instead as one part of the social goal that is being promoted. They differ, again, about the relationship between rights and duties... (Nussbaum 2000:97).

She presents the advantages of capabilities over and against human rights language. She argues that until a right is given enforcement to happen it is easy to say one has a right to something; but it is completely another thing to have the realisation of the same. She prefers rights seen as ‘combined capabilities’ (see below) because in her view, some of those things that are referred to as rights are only capacities to function. But the capacity to function must be coupled with the social environment to function. The argument therefore is, when one talks of right to something it is not guaranteed for instance, - one has a right to housing by virtue of being human and yet this does ensure that one has that house. But when we talk of capabilities, you are actually saying that a given country gives its citizens a right to housing, which translates into being the responsibility of the given country to ensure that housing is available to her citizens. For instance she argues:

A capabilities analysis, by contrast, looks at how people are enabled to live. Analysing economic and material rights in terms of capabilities thus enables us to set forth clearly a rationale we have for spending unequal amounts of money on the advantaged, creating special programs to assist their transition to full capability (Nussbaum 2000:99).

It is therefore crucial to understand that equal distribution of resources may not necessarily be the most appropriate way of realising equality. This is because, while we could look at a group of people as a group, it is more significant to consider individual to determine who gets what and what that would mean to the clients. People may not be requiring the same attention making it difficult to meet each person needs and as process of ensuring the realisation of freedom, equality and.

### **5.3.3 Nussbaum’s Contribution to the Human Capabilities Approaches**

Nussbaum brings a method of investigative philosophy to bear on basic questions of justice and equity in the developing countries. Her main concern however is the persistent discrimination against women in most of the developing world and the fact that a concern for justice for women is silenced in many debates about international development. She calls for a project that focuses on constructing basic political principles for all. For Nussbaum, unequal social and political circumstances give women unequal human capabilities. Arguing from a

feminist, philosophical and legal perspective, she challenges international political and economic thought to be feminist attentive as she firmly asserts:

We need to ask what politics should be pursuing for each person and every citizen, before we can think well about economic change. We need to ask what constraints there ought to be on economic growth, what economy is supposed to be doing for people, and what all citizens are entitled to by virtue of being human. That citizens...should be able to live with a full menu of opportunities and liberties, and thus be able to have lives that are worthy of the dignity of human beings (Nussbaum 2000:33).

Her basic aim in and through the capabilities approach is to provide the theoretical foundation for an account of basic constitutional principles that should be respected and put into action by the governments of all nations, as an essential minimum of what human dignity requires. The approach therefore focuses on what people 'are actually able to do and to be' in a way conversant with a natural idea of a life that is worthy of human dignity. She therefore argues that capabilities should be pursued for all individually and that each person should be treated as an end.

In the conceptualization of what it is to be human and what it is for one to live a good human life, Nussbaum identifies three different levels of capabilities. The first is the physical qualities that are actually criteria of defining a human being which she call *basic* capabilities like the ability to eat, move and talk; *Internal* capabilities are those that are internal to the person, or what we sometimes call personal capacity or ability. *Combined* capabilities are those that require both the internal capability to do something, and the socio-political and economic environment to flourish. Below is an outline of the three categories of capabilities as presented by Martha Nussbaum:

1. *Basic capabilities*- these are necessary for developing a more advanced capability. This could be a situation whereby the capability is not ready for functioning.
2. *An internal capabilities*- *internal capability* is actually personal capacity which develops with help of convenient social environmental circumstances.
3. *Combined capabilities*- personal capabilities combine with suitable external conditions for the exercise of the function (Nussbaum 2000:84-85).

As a feminist and one influenced by Marxist thought, Nussbaum is not happy to just focus on the first two types of capabilities. She recognizes that women are vulnerable not just because they lack personal capacity, but because the socio-political, economic and legal structures do



not support women to exercise their capabilities. She also sees the dialectic between the internal and combined capabilities in that social opportunity does allow for greater development of internal capability. She argues that there is need for nations to promote the appropriate internal capability by providing an environment that it is favourable for the exercise of human functioning. The government for example, should actually create an environment that ensures that everyone is treated with dignity and express real value for them because developing internal capabilities require favourable external conditions. For instance, external conditions could include among other things; the education opportunities and facilities, health facilities and opportunity to live healthy lives, shelter, and security for all.

Nussbaum then moves to a formal proposal of what these combined capabilities should be by proposing a list of ten capabilities that should be protected and supported by all states. This list involves the idea of a threshold level of what is the minimum that should be provided so that people have the space for truly human functioning.

By insisting that the capabilities on the list are combined capabilities, I insist on the twofold importance of material and social circumstances, both training internal capabilities and letting them express themselves once trained; and establish that the liberties and opportunities recognized by the list are not to be understood in a purely formal manner. They thus correspond to Rawls's idea of "the equal worth of liberty" and "truly fair equality of opportunity" rather than the thinner notion... (Nussbaum 2000:86)

I here turn to central human functional capabilities and present Nussbaum's list of ten central human functional capabilities and later turn to its implication for government, law and public policy.

#### **5.4 The Ten Central Human Functional Capabilities**

The ten central human functional capabilities that Martha Nussbaum comes up with in her capabilities approach is shaped by what she believes makes up what can be understood as being human and what the quality of life would involve (Nussbaum 1995:61-104 cf. Croker 1995:153-198). This in her view should translate into what one would be expected to be having if one has to be considered as living a human life with some quality. The list therefore

touches on the issues encompassing what human life ought to be and involve, including bodily health, bodily integrity, psychological and sociological aspects that should be put into consideration when one talks of threshold levels under which no human being should go below.

She leaves her suggestions open for improvement and adjustments when they are implemented in particular localities. Therefore, she provides universal guidelines that take seriously the contextual particularities. In the next section therefore, is the list of ten central human functional capabilities as Martha Nussbaum presents it.

#### **5.4.1 Nussbaum's proposal.**

Nussbaum's list of Central Human Functional Capabilities is here reproduced with minor alterations.

1. *Life*. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is reduced as to be not worth living.
2. *Bodily health*. Being able to have good health, including, reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.
3. *Bodily integrity*. Being able to move freely from place to place, having one's bodily boundaries treated as sovereign that is being able to be secure against assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.
4. *Senses, Imagination, and Thought*. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think and reason – and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice: religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experience and to avoid non-necessary pain.

5. *Emotions*. Being able to have attainments to things and people outside care, and ourselves; to love those who love and care, to grieve at their absence,; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development).
6. *Practical reason*. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life – this entails protection for the liberty of conscience.
7. *Affiliation*. (A) Being able to live with and towards others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation; to have the capability for both justice and friendship. (B) Having the social bases of self respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails protections against discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, religion caste, ethnicity, or national origin
8. *Other species*. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
9. *Play*. Being able to play, to enjoy recreational activities
10. *Control over one's environment*. (A) Political. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life, having the right of political participation, protection of free speech and association. (B) Material. Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods); being able to seek employment on equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers (Nussbaum 2003:41-42; Nussbaum 2001:4-5; Nussbaum 2000:78-80; Nussbaum 1999:227).

Nussbaum argues emphatically that the items in the list are of equal value, and that they are discrete in quality therefore, they are of equal significance. Arguing that practical reason and

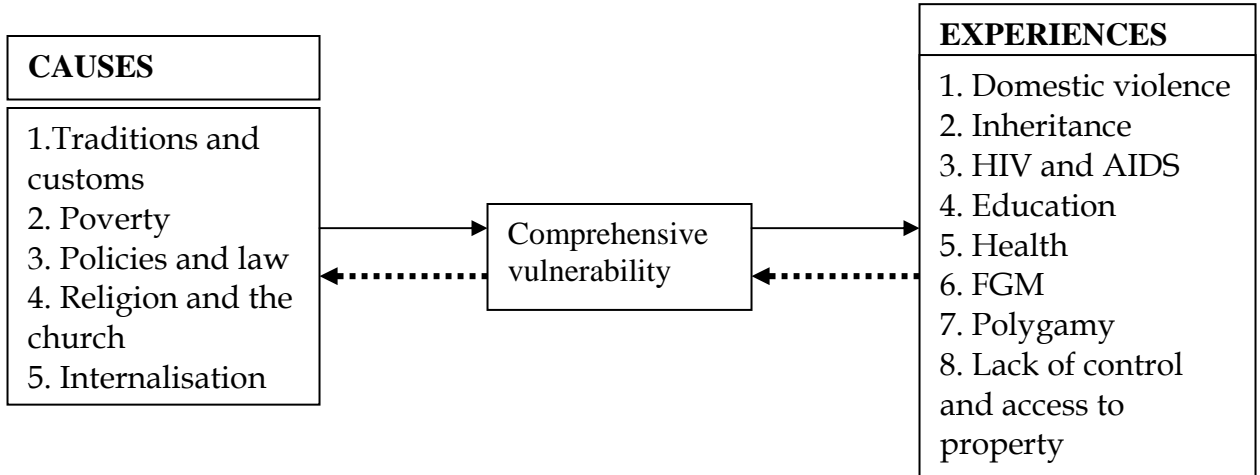
affiliation are crucial to all the other capabilities, she firmly cautions that all the capabilities are of equal worth and none should be undermined at the expense of the other.

Nussbaum's approach and this list acknowledges the fact that one may have the ability or capacity to do something but not have the opportunity to do it. She contends that everyone should be provided with basic requirements for quality life and that no one should be treated as a means to an end but all should be treated as ends in their own right. While she calls upon the government to do the implementation of the basic social minimums, she does not require that people be pressurized but that the conditions should be such that everyone is given the opportunity to understand their options and therefore be able to make choice without unnecessary influence.

Thus this conception of human capabilities as combined capabilities presents governments and nation states with a challenge, as to how to structure laws and policies to enhance the human capability of citizens. It clearly lays the philosophical framework for an engagement with constitution and law making that would support the feminist idea of each person and as an end.

The focus on what it requires for one to live humanly and to live a life that is really human is clearly captured. Explicitly, the approach acknowledges the fact that one may have the ability or capacity to do something but not have the opportunity to do it. She contends that everyone should be provided with basic requirements for life and that no one should be treated as a means to an end but all should be treated as ends in their own right. While she calls upon the government to do the implementation of the basic social minimums, she does not require that people be pressurized, but that the conditions should be such that everyone is given the opportunity to understand their options and therefore be able to make choice without unnecessary influence.

If we look again at the challenges posed to us in our analysis of women's vulnerability in Kenya in chapters 2 and 3 we can see the significance of Nussbaum's proposal. Here we are reminded of our framework:



There are a number of clear reasons why Nussbaum's framework is ideally situated to deal with this situation of women's vulnerability in Kenya. First, Nussbaum is not interested in 'rights' on paper, but in the real life experiences of women; what they are able to be and do. This is in harmony with our vision throughout this thesis, and with the concerns expressed by the women in chapter 2. Nussbaum's focus on human capabilities provides us with a way of looking at how women are actually functioning, and thus is able to take seriously the list of 8 key negative experiences of women that were identified through the field work. Taking seriously her list of 10 fundamental combined capabilities would go a long way to overcoming the experiences of vulnerability. All eight of the key experiences are specifically challenged by Nussbaum's list which would have the state through its constitution, laws and policies protect women's bodily health and bodily integrity including reproductive health, nourishment, security against sexual assault, and choice in matters of reproduction (capabilities 2 and 3); provide for women to develop their senses through adequate education and having freedom of expression, to love and to not have fear and anxiety (capabilities 4 and 5); to protect women so that they are able to plan their's own life, to affiliate with whom they choose, and not to be discriminated against because they are women (capabilities 6, 7a and 7b); and to support their being able to participate in political organisations, being able to own property, and to be able to seek employment on an equal basis with others (capabilities 9 and 10).

Second, it is clear that when given a chance, women have the individual capacity to achieve much. Thus there is evidence of basic capabilities and internal capabilities. However, it is the combined capabilities that are not there because the government, laws and policies are not designed to create the social opportunities for women to enhance their capabilities. Furthermore, Nussbaum's notion of combined capabilities is a reminder of the circular relationship between internal capabilities and combined capabilities, just as we saw that there is a dialectic link between the 'causes' and 'experiences' of women's vulnerability. Thus whilst girl children are just as clever as boys (internal capability), they do not get the chance to go to decent schools (no one is protecting this combined capability), and so are not able to further their education (enhanced internal capability). The combined capabilities approach, providing as it were a formal challenge to the state to provide these social opportunities would also go a long way to deal with the 'poverty' we have identified as a cause of vulnerability. For the poverty is not just a case of low income, but of 'capability deprivation' as noted by Sen.

Nussbaum's argument for a universalist position that can critique individual cultures and religious expressions is also something that the women of Meru South are desperate for. They need a theory and a social vision that strongly proclaims that each person is an 'end' in herself, and not a means to someone else's end. This is a solid foundation from which one can critique two of the key 'causes' on the left side of our framework, namely, traditions and customs, and religion and the church. At the same time, it would provide a new way of conceiving policies and laws that could protect and enhance the capabilities of women in Kenya. Clearly this position can be labelled 'paternalistic', but it is hard to imagine how one can deal with this comprehensive vulnerability without a normative idea of what is right and wrong.

Finally, Nussbaum's position in support of a universalist ethic enables us to deal with questions of the internalisation of vulnerability. She speaks of 'preference adaptation', which is a way of recognising that vulnerable women adapt their preferences in the light of their vulnerable circumstances and the very real threats that they face should they try to speak out or resist. This is an important point, because we have seen in chapters 2 and 3, the

internalisation of their second class status is one of the causes of women's vulnerability. Promoting the Human Capabilities approach, and having a very clear idea of what is needed to create a society in which women are able to be and to do what they want and need to do, to function as dignified human beings, is a key task for those concerned about the comprehensive vulnerability of women.

### **5.5 A Christian Appraisal of the Nussbaum's Human Capabilities Approach**

The Human Capabilities approach is therefore able to respond in a significant and comprehensive way to the real life experiences we noted in chapter 2, and the analysis of women's vulnerability in Africa in chapter 3. What remains is to see if this is an approach that can be supported by Christians and the church, even though it is not promoted as a Christian policy. This is important, because the task of a public theology is to find a way to speak from out of the Christian perspective into the public sphere. Nussbaum's framework is an adequate public theory. The question now is: has it an adequate proximity to the biblical witness and our theological tradition?

To answer this question we need to return to the theological vision that we promoted in chapter 4, section 4.1. There I wrote:

In exploring what God's perspective on women's vulnerability might be, I will reflect on three particular aspects that emphasize humanization in the face of the experience of dehumanized women: (1) The importance of women's *dignity* in a patriarchal constructed society in relation to the understanding of the fullness of life and women's humanity as a creation of God. (2) The importance of women experiencing *freedom* as women in society, in relation to God's intention that all should experience life in abundant freedom from all forms of bondage. (3) The importance of women's *equal and just entitlement* with men to the benefits of society in relation to God's purpose of creation and providence for all humanity. (see 4.1.1.)

In section 4.1 I engaged with these three themes, all of which have a fundamental congruence with Nussbaum's conception of the combined capabilities. I argued that God is a God who upholds the dignity of each and every person, affirming that each person is an end in herself, and not a means to someone else's end. We saw this illustrated in the way Jesus dealt with

women, and clothed them with dignity and respect. This is a fundamental agreement with Nussbaum's foundational principle.

I argued that God is a God of freedom and liberation. This freedom is a freedom from all the structures and institutions that restrict the ability of women to 'be and to do' in ways that can be expected of humans. It was illustrated how African culture imprisons women, and how there is a need for a fundamental freedom from the cultural restrictions which hold women back and dehumanize them. This second principle stands in harmony with Nussbaum's proposal. Finally in I looked at the theme of justice from a theological perspective and saw that whilst women experience terrible injustice, God is a God who demands justice. This justice is not just charity, but it is the structures of laws and policies that enhance life. This is again in harmony and congruence with Nussbaum's proposal for Human Capabilities.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

The chapter has argued for using Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach in formulating a framework that can be used in eradicating women's vulnerability. It is argued that the approach is able to be used by both the church and the government in eradicating women's vulnerability. Indeed, we are convinced that Nussbaum's vision provides us with an adequate social theory for an African Women's Public Theology for three reasons. First, it speaks directly to the causes and experiences of vulnerability that we have identified amongst women in Meru South, and by implication in many other parts of Africa. Second, it provides a clear way of dealing with this vulnerability that can be argued in the public sphere without recourse to a particular faith tradition, and therefore can be adopted by secular states in a religiously pluralist world. Thirdly, it is congruent with a Biblical faith that promotes Human Dignity, Freedom and Justice. We are thus comfortable with building our African Women's Public Theology in dialogue with Nussbaum.



## CHAPTER SIX

### FROM AFRICAN WOMEN'S THEOLOGY TO AFRICAN WOMEN'S *PUBLIC* THEOLOGY

#### 6.0 Introduction

In chapter four, I noted that African Women Theologians have been and are at the forefront in the advocacy for women's justice and freedom through conscientisation and activism. However, stimulated by an engagement with Public Theology, I argued that there is need for a theological paradigm capable of dealing with women's comprehensive vulnerability in the public sphere – and not just in the church or in the family. On recognizing that male oriented public theology in Africa (such as Mugambi and Villa-Vicencio), like most male theologies, is limited by its failure to appropriate a thorough-going gender analysis of patriarchy in the African context (see Kanyoro and Oduyoye 2006, Maluleke 1997, Kanyoro 2006, Phiri 2006), I suggested the need for an African Women's Public Theology, understood as a member of the family of African Women Theologies.

It became clear that insofar as African Women's Public Theology engaged the public sphere, it would need an appropriate 'public' inter-disciplinary framework for dealing with women's comprehensive vulnerability. As a result, in chapter five I have explored Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach as such a framework. I argued that this approach, rooted in a feminist commitment, provides the language and vision which would enable the church, the government and civil society to mutually engage in formulating policies, law and a constitution that would ensure justice and freedom for all in the society – and particularly for women who are the most vulnerable.

I have noted how this approach, explored in chapter 5 would bring together a commitment to meet the challenge of women's experience of comprehensive vulnerability as examined in chapters 2 and 3, as well as the theological commitment explored in chapter 4. We are now ready in chapter 6 to explore what an African Women's Public Theology would look like.

## 6.1 African Women Theologians in the Public Arena

This chapter recognises that African women theologians have worked in the public arena in significant ways. However, their actions are largely focused on the spheres of religion and culture, and this is where much of the theological writing is concentrated. Yet as we have seen throughout this thesis women's experiences of vulnerability are also shaped by the public arena of politics, law, economics and social policies, and dealing with them requires deliberate theological engagement that reaches out to all institutions of life, and that engages an adequate public social theory. This therefore makes it necessary to develop a *public* theology. Arguing that women's public theology remains in the family of African women's theologies, in this chapter I provide the features of African women's theology. This however begins by an understanding of the concept private and public sphere as they are understood in this thesis.

We use the concept of public and private spheres as outlined by Pilcher and Whelehan (2004) who understands the distinction between the public and private realms in this way:

The public realm is characterized by activities individuals undertake in wider society and in common with a multitude of others, such as engaging in paid work, and exercising political, democratic rights, under the overall jurisdiction of government and the state. In contrast, the private realm is characterized by activities undertaken with particular others, relatively free from the jurisdiction of the state. It is this realm of the household, of the home and of the personal of family relationships. Within gender studies, interest in the public/private dichotomy arises from its gendered nature, from the association of masculinity and the public and femininity and the private. Historically, it is men who have acted within the public realm and moved freely between it and the private realm while women (and children) have been mostly restricted to the private realm, and subjected to the authority of men within it (Pilcher and Whelehan 2004:124).

This is in agreement with how Sue Ellen Charlton articulates the same concept in chapter three of this thesis. As it is argued by other scholars (Charlton 1984, 1989; Forrester 1997), and noted in this thesis in chapter two, women tend to be confined to the private, domestic sphere. It again raises the concern that African Women's Theology, which we have identified as at the forefront of the struggle against African patriarchy, seems to be consciously or unconsciously

dealing with the private sphere. Even where it does enter the public sphere, the tools are not fully theorised, theologised and effective.

As noted in chapter four, African Women's theologians are in the forefront with other global organizations that are creating awareness on women's status and place in the church and society. They are also activists at different levels. Looking at the work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians it is correct to say that women have taken the initiative in empowering each other and exposing discriminative, oppressive patriarchal structures. African Women's Theology is first and foremost committed to ensuring that African women's place is recognised in the church and society. We have exposed, social cultural, political and economics barriers that maintain women in vulnerability. Nyambura Njoroge has written:

... doing theology implies participation and exploration emphasizing the activity that produces theology. We 'do' theology by seeking to live out our faith in the contemporary world, applying our skills and God-given gifts and addressing the problems confronting individuals and communities. We are not addressing hypothetical or abstract ideas, or answering questions raised by other generations. But rather we are dealing with today's life-threatening/destroying and life giving/affirming issues. Doing theology means wrestling with God's Word as we confront the powers and principalities of this world (Njoroge 1997:78)

This can quickly be illustrated by the work of the circle in dealing with the HIV and AIDS pandemic. By way of publications, community awareness, community engagement and mobilization, African women theologians have facilitated preventive measures, embraced those who are infected and affected and at large affected the process of healing in Africa (and hopefully in the wider world). This fact is evidenced in the stream of publications on and about the pandemic and community projects that have evolved (Dube and Kanyoro 2004; Phiri and Nadar 2006).

However, the question that emerges is whether there is an adequate theological foundation for this public activism. When I survey the publications of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, I find that most of the articles are dealing with issues to do with the

bible, church, and culture, and family, and how such issues impact on African women. Most of these publications focus on providing resources to deconstruct patriarchal theology and church practice, as well as to offer empowerment to confront structures that cause women's vulnerability. However, the publications lack an explicit theological engagement with public, legal or political matters. To illustrate the point, I will analyse five of the most recent publications.

(1) M.A. Oduyoye, and M.R.A. Kanyoro (eds.) (2006). *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*. (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications). The twelve chapters in this book are divided into three sections: (i) African women in culture; (ii) African women and sexual practices; and (iii) African women and the Christian Church. The key issues dealt with are:

- African rituals
- Christianity
- Polygamy
- Marriage
- Sexuality
- Religion
- Priesthood of church women

There is nothing in the book that deals with politics, public policy, constitutions and law making.

I.A. Phiri, and S. Nadar, (eds.) (2006). *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*. (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications). The fourteen chapters in this book are divided into four sections: (i) Celebrating Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye; (ii) African Women, the Bible, and Health; (iii) Women as Traditional Healers in Africa and (iv) African Women's Experiences of Health and Healing, Endurance, and Peace making. Key issues are:

- African women
- Religion
- Health
- Women and health
- Healing/Healers
- HIV and AIDS
- Poverty

- Peacemaking
- Endurance
- Gender

While article five seems to take up the issue of human rights, the essay focuses on bible study and does not deal with any legal aspects of human rights. The section entitled “An issue of women’s and children’s rights” seems to take up a public policy direction but the writer lacks the ability to contextually engage with the issue of women’s and children’s right with the applicable constitutional and legal tools illustrating the need for an explicit public theology that is willing to work in an interdisciplinary manner with social theory.

M.W. Dube, and M.R.A. Kanyoro, (2004). *Grant me Justice!: HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible*. (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications). All the nine chapters in this publication are resources for biblical studies in different situations of HIV and AIDS. The articles capture the social issues related to gender justice; poverty; stigma; violence; and international injustice as they relate to HIV and AIDS. This is pointing in the right direction, however this publication does not have articles that engage institutional structures that influence public policy towards ensuring such constitutional and legal entitlement for those affected and infected by HIV and AIDS.

I.A. Phiri, B. Haddad and M.M. Masenya (2003). *African women, HIV/AIDS and faith communities*. (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications). This publication has thirteen chapters. They are divided into three sections: (i) Re-reading the Bible; (ii) Challenging faith communities; and (iii) Practical Resources for Faith Communities. Key issues are:

- African women of faith
- Re-reading the Bible
- HIV and AIDS
- Faith communities
- Resources
- Curriculum for theological institutions

There is nothing in this book that resembles what I would call an African Women’s Public Theology.

I.A. Phiri, D.B. Govinden and S. Nadar (2002) *Her-stories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa*. (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications). The twenty articles are divided into five sections: (i) Theological movements for change; (ii) Collective voices of women in the church; (iii) Women leading the church; (iv) Women transforming church and society; and (v) Journeys of faith. Keys issues are:

- Naming our mothers
- Discovering theological voices
- Stories of faith
- Women's organizations
- Journeys of faith
- Single women
- Ministry
- Liberation

At first glance the final issue, liberation, looks like it deals with the public sphere, but in fact it focuses on liberation from traditional, religious and ecclesiological bondage.

The sample used here does not imply that all publications by African Women Theologians lack completely in public theology. It is only suggested and firmly so, that there is an urgent need for a concerted effort to consider a paradigm shift. In the next section we explore into the proposed paradigm shift.

## 6.2 The widening csope of African Women Theology

A paradigm shift involves a change or shift of emphasis. Among the Ameru people, after a given period of time there was what was called *Ntuiko*, cutting or breaking the existing pattern of authority among the Meru people (Fadiman 1982:127; see also Middleton and Kershaw 1972; Gathogo 2006).<sup>69</sup> This was specifically during the transfer of power from one *rika*, or age set, to the other. At this point in time, the name of the age group changed. That is why,

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<sup>69</sup> This wAs also common among other neighboring communities Mbeere, Embu and Gikuyu. Among the GikuyU people it was called *Ituika* and stood for the same purpose (J. Middleton, and G. Kershaw, 1972 *The central tribes of the Nor4h-Eastern Bantus (The Kikuyu, includinG, Embu, Meru, Mbeere, Chuka, Mwimbi, Tharaka, and the Kamba of Kenya)*. (London: International African Institute). This is the same concept implied by Jesse Mugambi and Charles Villa-Vicencio when they argue that the liberation theology has to concede the emergence of reconstruction theology in the publications under review in this thesis.

although people have their given names they also had names of their age set. These people did not cease to belong; they only changed their name, focus and the way of doing things. I am therefore suggesting that the shift does not make a radical change but as a result of felt need and new challenges for a new generation, there is a need for widening the scope. In the next section we will make a more formal proposal about the nature of an African Women's Public Theology; and we will do so by identifying and discussing seven key features of African Women's Public Theology that emerge in the work thus far.

### **6.2.1. African Women's Public Theology is a member of The Family Of African Women's Theologies**

African Women's Theologies are part of a range of global feminist theologies (Rackozy 2005, Oduyoye 2001), but contribute a special methodology and approach (Okure 1992), where the issues and concerns of African women are articulated by African women from an African perspective and context. The features of African Women's Theologies as articulated by Mercy Amba Oduyoye in her *Introducing African Women's Theology* (2001)<sup>70</sup> are as follows:

1. Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics
2. Narrative Theology
3. Theology and social advocacy
4. Communal theology
5. Bible and African women theologies
6. Race, class and gender in African Women's theologies
7. Inter-disciplinary and multi-faith nature

African Women's Public Theology has the same characteristics as Africa Women's Theologies, and uses the same approaches and methodology and sources but goes a step further in that it engages the church, the government and the society in complex areas like economy, law, constitution and politics, in a quest to include women's perspective in the public arena. In this sense it lays particular emphasis on the third and seventh features noted

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<sup>70</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye is the pioneer of The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and her concerted effort to search for African women theologian and the process of nurturing the effort is manifest the majority of the Circle publications which finds its climax in the most recent publication I.A. Phiri, and S. Nadar, (eds.) 2006. *African women, religion, and health: Essays in honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster

above, namely, social advocacy and inter-disciplinarity. We shall return to these two elements below.

This means that African Women's Public Theology is not promoted as a criticism of African Women's Theology, but is a member of the family that makes a particular point towards ensuring the realization of a human community that recognizes and protects the humanity of women and men in the public sphere.

### **6.2.2. African Women's Public Theology is grounded In the Reality of the Lives of African Women, characterized by Comprehensive Vulnerability**

Women's experience of injustice is as a result of comprehensive vulnerability, which is the major concern for this work. In chapters two and three we examined and analyzed the social, cultural, religious, economic and political conditions of women in Meru South District of Kenya. Here the aspects of patriarchal culture that deny women the possibility of realizing and experiencing their human dignity and worth were identified as:

- Culture and traditions
- Poverty
- Policies and law
- Religion and church
- Internalization

These elements then lead to the following experiences:

- Domestic violence
- Loss of Inheritance
- HIV and AIDS
- Education
- Health
- Female Genital Mutilation
- Polygamy
- Lack of control of and access to property

This analysis led us to speak of women's experience of "comprehensive vulnerability". It is clear that African Women's Public Theology acknowledges this comprehensive vulnerability to be a reality that requires urgent attention by the church and the government. This in turn leads us to the importance of the three theological themes of justice, dignity and freedom. In



focusing on these theological themes in the light of African women's experience of comprehensive vulnerability, African Women's Public theology stands alongside other liberation and prophetic theologies seeking to empower the victims of society to claim life in all its fullness. We will return to this in more detail in 6.2.5 below.

### **6.2.3 African Women's Public Theology claims the Right for Women to do Theology in the Public Arena**

For obvious reasons, this is perhaps the most important element of African Women's Public Theology for it strikes at the heart of one of the fundamental pillars of patriarchy, namely, the divide between the private and the public domains. Patriarchy confines women to the home and to domestic issues like child-care, sexuality, health, and food-preparation. Women are thus important bearers of culture, and usually recognized for this. Furthermore, patriarchy acknowledges women as important members of organisations like churches, and allows them leadership in certain spheres, but resists public leadership. In this way, women are not usually welcome in the public sphere of politics, law, and government administration. This is understood as the realm of men to provide leadership to society, culture and families.

In a sense, African Women's Theology has itself avoided the public realm, and ironically reinforced the idea that this is the realm of men and male leadership. It has focused its gendered critique upon culture, domestic relationships, sexuality, and religion - including the church, the Bible, and theological institutions. It has not consciously formulated a public theology to contest the assumption that the public sphere – the sphere of law, constitution and public policy - is the male sphere.

Now this contention may be questioned given that one of the elements of African Women's Theology (as noted in 6.2. above) is 'social advocacy'. Our analysis of recent publications from the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has indicated that this has not yet led to a conscious and articulate *public* theology. Furthermore the limitations of this 'social advocacy' are noted in a very recent essay by Sarojini Nadar and Isabel Phiri which provides a helpful analysis of these elements within the context of the Circle of Concerned African

Women Theologians. While correctly noting that “the focus on the transformation of society places African women’s theologies firmly within the discourses of liberation theologies” (2007:5), they then point out that “the way in which the Circle achieves its advocacy goals are primarily through theological institutions” (2007:5). The recent focus on HIV and AIDS advocacy has also focused on education within the faith community.

Thus, we have seen in chapters four and five; African Women’s Theology has a weakness because of its confinement to the issues of family, church and culture. – whereas women experience comprehensive vulnerability driven also by public structures. It is therefore argued that African Women’s Theology must go beyond just a critique of the bible, culture and church and be interested in wider public issues. It goes beyond speaking to domestic life and the church, to include speaking to the market place, schools, business, politics, law, and constitution. It must contest the idea that the public realm is not a place for women to provide leadership, and thus it should start to engage with policy, law and constitution. This is what African Women’s *Public* Theology seeks to offer to African Women’s Theology.

#### **6.2.4 African Women’s Public Theology Works Self-Consciously In an Inter-Disciplinary Manner**

African Women’s Public Theology engages the public sphere, and therefore must work self-consciously in an inter-disciplinary manner engaging those disciplines, which shed wisdom and knowledge about the public sphere. As we noted in 6.1.1 above, the seventh element of African Women’s Theology identified by Mercy Oduyoye is that it has an inter-disciplinary and multi-faith nature, so this is not a completely new idea. However, again as illustrated by the recent essay by Nadar and Phiri, the multi-faith aspect of this element has tended to drown out the inter-disciplinary one (see the discussion in 2007:7). While there is reference to significant work done on feminist post-colonial criticism by Musa Dube, there seems to be very little work done in engaging feminist readings of such crucial fields as economics, law, politics, environment, public health and public policy. Thus we are justified in concluding that while African Women’s Theologies have a tendency to deal and engage with issues that are concerned with the church, religion and culture, its interdisciplinary engagement is limited.

If African Women's Public Theology is to make a mark, it will have to engage in interdisciplinary work with other crucial disciplines such as economics, law, politics and environment. Here we can learn from the Public Theology discussed in the current study above from theologians Duncan Forrester, Charles Villa-Vicencio and Jesse Mugambi, who all agree in the way theology needs to take an interdisciplinary perspective. Villa-Vicencio observes that:

A theology of reconstruction, required to address legal, political and economic concerns must be undertaken at the interface of the social services...to do so theology is obliged to at once take the challenges and insights of other disciplines seriously, while making its own contribution to this process in a language that makes sense to, and understood by, other disciplines...the interface between theology and law stands at the center of the interdisciplinary encounter, providing a framework within which the debate on human rights, economics and culture building is to be pursued (Villa-Vicencio 1992:276-277).

Therefore, African Women's Public Theology works in dialogue with the political, philosophical, economic and social thinkers who take seriously issues of justice and equality for women including feminist thinkers, secular thinkers, and other religions to ensure dignity, justice and freedom for all especially women and children.

### **6.2.5 African Women's Public Theology Challenges the Church to Be More Active In Seeking Social Justice, with an emphasis on Gender Justice**

In examining the fifth element of African Women's Public Theology, we move from methodological concerns to concerns of content. As we noted in 6.1.2 above, African Women's Public Theology responds to women's experience of comprehensive vulnerability with a focus on justice, dignity and freedom. It highlights these as fundamental biblical and theological values, and challenges the Churches to take them seriously by being more active in seeking social justice, with an emphasis on gender justice.

We have seen the Churches respond to calls for gender justice within their own structures. After decades of calling on the church to include women in the church structures and

institutions, the first woman was ordained in 1976 by the Anglican churches in Kenya and the second one ordained in 1982 by the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. Since then the church in Kenya has seen the ordination of women and participation in other sections grow from one level to another. This happens in a cross section of denominations including the mushrooming ministries.

We can also acknowledge that the church champions the sponsorship of education institutions and hospitals, and the best of these institutions in the country belong to the various denominations. There are also homes for the disabled, rescue homes for the abused women and girls.

I argue, however, that the role of the church is not only that of making women included in the institutional church structures, and making available charity and support for victims, but it is also for ensuring that there is a society in which there are no victims. The church has to learn again and again that prevention is better than cure, and that to meet the challenge of comprehensive vulnerability requires a long-term engagement in bending the structures of society towards justice. African Women's Public Theology calls upon the church to take the following seriously: Civic education, public protest, policy formulation, constitution making, and legal advocacy.

#### **6.2.6. African Women's Public Theology Focuses On Women's Capabilities – What They Are Actually Able To Be And To Do**

If the Church is to be involved in 'bending the structures of society towards justice', and to do so in a pluralist and secular society, then it needs a framework that can give expression to the theological concerns of justice, dignity and freedom, and yet be accessible to all who engage the public sphere of policy and law making. Here it is proposed that the Human Capabilities approach – as exemplified by Martha Nussbaum and examined in chapter five - provides the church with such a framework. Thus African Women's Public Theology focuses on women's capabilities, what they are actually able to be and to do, rather than just on human

rights, which exist on paper, but which in practice, are trampled upon by patriarchy (which we saw in the case in Kenya in chapters two and three).

Standard development approaches and ways of assessing the quality of life have proved to be inadequate. As a result, the human capabilities approach as pioneered by Amartya Sen is gaining popularity as an adequate framework and has already had an impact in the United Nations Human Development Index, and the thinking behind the Millennium Development Goals. In chapter five we saw how Martha Nussbaum has developed this idea, and given it a particularly feminist interpretation. This would accord well with the recent focus in Circle publications on issues of health.

Nussbaum suggests that the governments of all nations should be obliged to ensure that their citizens get the ten central human functional capabilities (2000:78), and that these need to be maintained beyond a threshold level. In this way one can concentrate on what women are actually able to be and to do. It is crucial to note that the capabilities are not just an end-in-themselves provided by the government for passive citizens, because as they gain capabilities people gain agency. This is a crucial aspect of the notion of capabilities for both Sen and Nussbaum. Thus by ensuring that women have capabilities like basic education, health care, decent housing, access to markets, and protection from abuse, governments ensure that women can become more active in social life promoting more freedom and justice, and raising the capability threshold level.

For these reasons, it is proposed that the Capability Approach, as argued by Nussbaum, is promoted by African Women's Public Theology as a secular theoretical framework for assessing the quality life of women in Africa, and the basis for calling the government to action.

### **6.2.7 African Women's Public Theology Challenges The Hitherto Male-Dominated Public Theologies To Take Seriously The Concerns, Wisdom And Passion Of Women Seeking Gender Justice In Africa**

The very fact of the emergence of African Women's Public Theology is a challenge to the hitherto-male dominated discipline of public theology. We noted how Jesse Mugambi is strongly convinced that once personal, social, ecclesial and cultural reconstruction is achieved in Africa, then the African problems will be solved. On the other hand Charles Villa-Vicencio holds that once human rights, law and constitutions are in place, the process of nation building is accomplished. However, there is a certain naiveté here about the reality of women's experience of comprehensive vulnerability.

By way of illustration, we suggest that from the perspective of African Women's Public Theology, Mugambi's social reconstruction project is wanting for the following reasons: Firstly, his assumptions fail to consider that national and international social structures and institutions are highly gendered. As a result he fails to recognize how such patriarchal institutions impact on women in social, economic, ecclesial and political institutions. Secondly he argues for cultural preservation without considering what cultures mean for all in the society. Mugambi does not acknowledge that fact that there are some African cultures that need to be revisited and others that need to be discarded in the process of reconstruction. For example Female Genital Mutilation is worldwide condemned but Mugambi says nothing about this as he argues for cultural reconstruction. Language is another aspect that is crucial in Africa because proverbs, similes, and idioms are full of demeaning and castigating overtones against women (Oduyoye 1995) yet he is silent about it. Thirdly the fact that Mugambi, is silent on the place and status of women in the church as he deals with the ecclesial reconstruction is worrying.

The point we are making here is not a fully-fledged critique of Mugambi's theology, but an illustration of the impact that the emergence of an African Women's Public theology could have on hitherto male-dominated public theology in the African context.

### **6.3. Conclusion**

While African Women's Public Theology uses the same approaches and principles as African Women's Theology and belongs to the family of the global feminist theologies it is crucial that we recognize the difference, and the unique contribution it makes to the field of theology in general, and African and global feminism in particular. It calls upon African Women's Theologies and global feminism to be vigorous and determined in their engagement in the public arena.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONCLUSION: FROM VULNERABILITY TO CAPABILITY

#### 7.0 Introduction

We are now at the end of our proposal for an African Women's Public Theology. In this final chapter we draw the threads together in the form of a summary, and make some recommendations for future research and reflection.

In this thesis, it has been demonstrated through field work and argued in dialogue with a range of scholars that African women are vulnerable. It has been assertively stated that there are fundamental causes of this comprehensive vulnerability, and that these result in gross experiences of hardships and injustices among women and that they must be addressed. It has also been argued that to address that situation there is a need for an adequate theological paradigm and a theoretical framework for doing so.

I have examined and analysed the life experience of women in Kenya, which I have characterized as one of "comprehensive vulnerability", a vulnerability that goes far beyond just issues of culture, domestic life and the church - and encompasses matters to do with human rights, law and public policy. While I noted the vitality of African Women's Theology in the former areas, I have argued that as currently expressed, this body of work does not adequately address the public sphere. I have therefore suggested that a dialogue with public theology will provide helpful resources to address the deeper experiences of women. This took me into an inter-disciplinary dialogue with the work of feminist philosopher and development theorist, Martha Nussbaum, and specifically her capability approach. As a result of the research work and theorizing, I have made a concrete proposal for an African Women's Public Theology, and have further identified and examined seven of its most important characteristics.



## 7.1 Summary

Due to the nature of the thesis, we used a combination of methodological approaches using a wide range of analytical tools and concepts from various fields including gender and development, feminist studies, African women's theology, theology and development and social analysis. The thesis is explicitly premised within the feminist research paradigm and has employed feminist research methods and social analysis. It is explicit in this thesis that central to feminist research is the principle that feminism is a perspective rather than a methodology, which enables the use of many innovative methods of inquiry and reaches across disciplinary boundaries and puts the issues and concerns of women at the centre.

The research involved a case study of 126 women in the Kenyan district of Meru South. To locate the stories in their context, it was necessary to first take a brief look at the historical, geographical and cultural background of Meru South. Consequently, field work was undertaken through interviews, focus groups and participant observation, and revealed that women experience vulnerability in eight key areas, namely, Domestic violence, Inheritance, HIV and AIDS, Education, Health, Female Genital Mutilation, Polygamy and a lack of control and access to property. At the end of this process, a photographic essay was provided which presents graphically the lived experiences and activities of women.

Through the methodologies used, social analysis, and critical analysis of the conceptual framework, it was confirmed that while women and men experience discrimination and oppression, women are extremely vulnerable. The stories cut across the issues that were raised and that were identified by the interviewees as experiences of injustices. The interviews presented here confirm that patriarchy, culture, socialisation, attitudes, religion, institutional structures and globalisation negatively impact on women. The experiences of gender inequality, discrimination and oppression against women and girls that is demonstrated by the research finding makes it necessary for one to pursue ways and means of achieving gender justice in order to realize justice, equity and freedom for all.

Also identifiable in the interviews is the fact that women have resources capable of overcoming their inherent vulnerability but social institutions, structures, policies and the law are inappropriate to address their needs. We see that women have tried to form their own empowerment structures, such as community and churchwomen groups and associations. However, due to the very strong patriarchal social influence and a lack of leadership abilities among women, many of their initiatives tend to collapse before yielding the anticipated outcome. For example women engage in small-scale informal businesses like selling an assortment of foods in the open markets and tuck shops, and in other vigorous engagement in the agricultural activities.

As a result of our theoretical work and dialogue with a range of scholars who have reflected on the situation of African women, a contextual theory is developed for analysis, which takes seriously socio-cultural, socio-economic and socio-political aspects that influence social justice and freedom.

The conceptual framework illustrates the interrelationship between causes of vulnerability and the experiences of injustices. The framework also illustrates how the church and secular structures and institutions concerned with policies and policymaking can work together in addressing both the causes and the experiences that negatively impact on women. The framework illustrates how such an engagement would ensure women's capability development as a process of achieving women's empowerment in the church and society. Such empowerment, as it is argued in this thesis, would result in justice and gender equity, which would improve women's quality of life and their human dignity and integrity.

The outcome of the field research and theoretical conceptualisation necessarily calls for a theological response. The thesis therefore examines an appropriate response from Christians and the Church to this experience of comprehensive vulnerability. It is realised that many of these concerns are voiced by African Women's' Theology, but further realised that AWT does not deal with the experience of comprehensive vulnerability as it is driven by forces in the public sphere. It is proposed; in order to deal with it adequately there is a need to engage the field of public policy, constitutions and law making. It was identified that to be able to do this,

a technical language is crucial. In search of a language, public theology was proposed. An engagement with the existing public theology is sought resulting to an engagement with three male public theologians, Duncan Forrester, Jesse Mugambi and Charles Villa-Vicencio. These three provide the impetus to develop a public theology, whilst at the same time the thesis endeavours to offer a gender sensitive critique of these attempts.

The thesis holds that any public theology needs a social theory in order to engage the public sphere, and this thesis examines the work of the feminist philosopher and jurist, Martha Nussbaum in promoting the Human Capabilities Approach. Her formal proposal of the ten fundamental human capabilities is examined and supported as one that should be supported by church and governments. Her work was affirmed for three crucial reasons, namely, it deals with the reality of women on the ground as revealed through the field research, it provides a public way of dealing with this vulnerability that is not based on one faith tradition, and yet thirdly, it is congruent with a Biblical faith that promotes Human Dignity, Freedom and Justice.

In bringing the research to a close the thesis proposes an African Women's' Public Theology with the following seven characteristics. African Women's' Public Theology (i) is a member of the family of African Women's' Theologies, (ii) is grounded in the reality of the lives of African women, characterized by comprehensive vulnerability; (iii) claims the right for women to do theology in the public arena; (iv) works self-consciously in an inter-disciplinary manner; (v) challenges the church to be more active in seeking social justice, with an emphasis on gender justice; (vi) focuses on women's' capabilities – what they are actually able to be and to do; and (vii) challenges the hitherto male-dominated public theologies to take seriously the concerns, wisdom and passion of women seeking gender justice in Africa.

## **7.2 Recommendations**

Now that women do not just 'play the victim' in the face of vulnerability and have demonstrated the capability of working against their vulnerability, the church and the government should find ways of ensuring that all the loose ends of the policies and legal

frameworks that are said to predispose women to the experiences of injustices and vulnerability are sealed.

Christians, theologians and the church are confronted with a fundamental ethical challenge characterised by severe human suffering that places the cry of injustice, hardship and vulnerability squarely before those who claim to worship God and follow Jesus, and it demands an appropriate response from true worshippers. The proposed framework helps to articulate what that response needs to focus on, namely the “*experience of comprehensive vulnerability*”.

African Women’s Theology must also become a *public theology*, taking up issues that women face in the public arena. This responds to the question: *How* should the church respond to women’s vulnerability. In other words it must begin to deal with issues of public policy, constitution writing and law making if it is to help ordinary women overcome the comprehensive experience of vulnerability that they face in society.

African Women’s Public Theology must focus not on the rights that women may or may not have, but on what women are “actually able to do and to be”, what has become known as their *human capabilities* therefore be able to articulate *why* and *how* the church should respond to women’s comprehensive vulnerability in Africa.

The thesis endorses the Martha Nussbaum’s Human Capabilities Approach as the most adequate framework because it provides a coherent articulation of the capabilities approach for development theory, in dialogue with third world women.

The quest to develop a language and vision that is adequate in dealing with comprehensive vulnerability, necessarily calls for a theoretical framework that works in an interdisciplinary way, and draws on feminist thinking in the area of constitution, law and policy. Consequently, although this approach does not in itself claim to be Christian or theologically grounded, it should be used by the church in addressing the government towards ensuring justice, freedom and equality for all, especially women and girl children, because we are convinced that

Nussbaum's vision provides us with an adequate social theory for an African Women's Public Theology for three reasons; Nussbaum's Human Capabilities Approach is rooted in a feminist commitment, provides the language and vision which would enable the church, the government and civil society to mutually engage in formulating policies, law and a constitution that would ensure justice and freedom for all in the society – and particularly for women who are the most vulnerable. We are therefore comfortable with building our African Women's Public Theology in dialogue with Nussbaum.

African Women's Public Theology uses the same approaches and principles as African Women's Theology and belongs to the family of the global feminist theologies but it is crucial that we recognize the difference, and the unique contribution it makes to the field of theology in general, and African and global feminism in particular. It calls upon African Women's Theologies and global feminism to be vigorous and determined in their engagement in the public arena.

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The following 31 woman were interviewed, and asked that their names be recorded in the thesis. Of these 31, 19 interviews have been written up and are attached to this thesis.

1. Agnes Ruguru M'Mugambi - 10.2.2003
2. Basilia Kanyamu Ntwiga -12.02.2003
3. Bernice Gatwiri Riungu - 9.02.2003
4. Bridget Ntue Kiburi - 13.02.2003
5. Charity Maitha Njeru – 20.02.2003
6. Elfridah Muringo Nyaga 26.02.2003
7. Elsie Muthoni Nyaga - 26.02.2003
8. Edith Gata Kamundi - 13.02.2003
9. Eunice M Muriungi - 9.02.2003
10. Eunice Nkatha Muriungi - 14.02.2003
11. Florence Kaburo Mbungu - 14.02.2003
12. Florence Mugai Mugambi - 9.02.2003
13. Gladys Mbura Kavingi - 23.02.2003
14. Gladys Mukwaiti Marangu - 10.02.2003
15. Grace Kanini Nyaga - 11.02.2003
16. Grace Mukwanjeru Karani - 11.02.2003
17. Irene Gatitu Karani - 11.02.2003
18. Jacinta Gatakaa Kimathi - 9.02.2003
19. Jane Muthoni Njeru - 12.02.2003
20. Janet Mbaka Ileri - 20.02.2003
21. Jones Kaari Mutegi - 06.02.2003
22. Josephine Muringo Njiru - 23.02.2003
23. Josephine Wanyaga Mbae - 23.02.2003
24. Joyce Ciangai Njeru - 11.02.2003
25. Joyce Rigiri Mati - 11.02.2003
26. Leah Mwari Mpungu - 11.02.2003
27. Margaret Kawira Munene - 15.02.2003
28. Mary Kanjira Mbaabu - 9.02.2003
29. Priscah Thigaa M'Miriti - 10.2.2003
30. Rose Kanjiru Mbundi -12.02.2003
31. Rosemary M. Mutembei – 12.02.2003

As noted in the thesis itself, some of the women asked to be anonymous and are not included in this list. Those who attended the focus groups meetings are noted below.

## **Focus Group Discussions**

### **Makena Women's Group - 10.02.2003**

Agnes Irima Mbuthia  
 Alieta Kainyu Mati  
 Alieta Kainyu Mati  
 Alison K Mutegi  
 Jacinta Karimi M'ribu  
 Joyce K. Mati  
 Lucy Karauki Kinegeni  
 Mary Wanja Nkonge  
 Pamela Kajugu M'Arimi  
 Phylis Igonji Nkanata  
 Priscila Gaturu Kithinji  
 Rosemary Karuru M'Kanga  
 Sabina Ndeguru Mwihandi  
 Silica Mukwa-Mugo Miriti  
 Silveria Maringa Nkonge  
 Virginia Ntagana Ndeke

### **Participants Of Igambang'ombe Women's Focus Group Discussion - 17.02.2003**

Agnes Wawira Nyaga  
 Annet Wanjiru Nyaga  
 Dorcas Nguga Njue  
 Esther Mumbi Nyaga  
 Jane Wanjagi Kiringa  
 Prisca Utuku Njeru  
 Rehab Igoki Njue  
 Rose Mwikali Njeru  
 Winfred M Nyaga

### **Agricultural Extension Workers In The Ministry Of Agriculture - 12.02.2003**

Agnes Ndundu Mwenda  
 Anisia Wanja Kibaara  
 Anne Wangari Muriuki  
 Dorothy Ikuu Mugambi

### **High School Teachers - 12.02.2003**

Cathrine Karwitha Mukua  
Eunice W Githinji  
Euphemia Kariithi Thairu  
Jennifer K Murigu  
Mercy Kathoni Muthuri  
Regina Kimathi

**Chuka Presbyterian Woman's Guild – 16.02.2003**

Agnes J Muturi  
Ann W Ngai (Secretary)  
Beatrice K Njoka  
Beatrice Ndura  
Ened E Njeru  
Florence C Ileri  
Grace M Njoka  
Hellen M Nyaga (Treasurer)  
Mary K Isaak  
Priscilla K Njagi  
Rose K Mutegi  
Rose U Crispus  
Stella Neru



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Questionnaire

1. DATE: \_\_\_\_\_  
 TIME: \_\_\_\_\_  
 PLACE OF INTERVIEW: \_\_\_\_\_
2. PERSONAL DETAILS  
 NAME: \_\_\_\_\_  
 AGE (AGE RANGE) OPTIONAL –(13-29), (30-49), (50 and above)  
 MARITAL STATUS: \_\_\_\_\_  
 EDUCATION ATTAINMENT: \_\_\_\_\_  
 OCCUPATION: \_\_\_\_\_  
 DENOMINATION: \_\_\_\_\_  
 DIVISION: \_\_\_\_\_  
 CONTACT ADDRESS (OPTIONAL): \_\_\_\_\_  
 TEL: \_\_\_\_\_  
 CELL: \_\_\_\_\_

3. How would characterize “Women’s life” in Kenya?

4. Why is it like this?

5. Which if these issues is most pressing and Why?

- Education
- Land /inheritance
- Public participation
- Domestic violence (incest, rape, battering or verbal abuse)
- Domestic life (Child care, early marriage, teenage pregnancies, chores, firewood and water)
- Agriculture
- Female Genital Mutilation
- Religion and church
- Employment
- Health (reproduction health, Malaria, general hygiene, HIV/AIDS)

6. What can be done about it?

- By the government
- By women and women organizations
- By the church

Do you think the church should influence public policy and laws to help women and why?

**Appendix 2: List of members of the Kamathiki Self.Help Group - 15.01.2003**

1. Obadia Kubai
2. Harriet Wanja\*
3. Justin Micheni
4. Alice Kathomi\*
5. Gladys Ruguru\*
6. Dishon Mugambi
7. Silas Kinegeni
8. Dororthy Muruja\*
9. Sammy Muriuki
10. Eunice Nduati\*
11. Lucy Igoji\*
12. Assenath Gatakaa\*
13. Lucy Gacivi\*
14. Grace Kendi\*
15. Hellen Mbuthu \*
16. Phineas Mbae
17. Laban Gitonga
18. Gerald Mugambi
19. Douglas Nkonge
20. Lucy Gatakaa\*
21. Mary Muthomi\*
22. Regina Njoki\*
23. Kaburu Murianki
24. Loyford Kinegeni
25. Filliah Gatwiri\*
26. Winston Gitonga

This Self help group consist of twenty six (26) members of which fourteen (14) are women

K-REP Bank ltd (micro-loans) – Micro-Finance Institution,

### Appendix 3: Tribes that practice FGM in Kenya

#### Circumcision among women age 15-19 in Kenya (1998) KDHS

#	TRIBE	PERCENTAGE %
1	Kisii	97
2	Masaai	89
3	Kalenjin	62
4	Taita Taveta	59
5	Meru/Embu	54
6	Kikuyu	43
7	Kamba	33
8	Mijikenda/Swahili	12
9	Luo/Luhya	3

Source: Gachiri 2000:48

### Appendix 4: Age/Sex Projections

Age Cohorts	1989		1997		1999		2001	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
0-4	22,019	21,937	27,815	27,712	29,488	29,379	31,262	31,146
5-9	22,397	22,793	28,291	28,161	29,994	29,856	31,798	31,652
10-14	18,785	18,833	23,730	23,790	25,157	25,221	26,670	26,739
15-19	13,303	14,251	16,805	18,002	17,816	19,085	18,888	20,233
20-24	9,227	11,301	11,656	14,276	12,357	15,135	13,100	16,046
25-29	8,653	10,215	10,931	12,904	11,589	13,680	12,286	14,503
30-34	6,548	6,628	8,272	8,372	8,770	8,876	9,298	9,410
35-39	5,605	5,617	7,080	7,095	7,506	7,522	7,958	7,975
40-44	4,236	4,399	5,351	5,557	5,673	5,891	6,015	6,245
45-49	3,339	3,567	4,218	4,506	4,472	4,777	4,741	5,064
50-54	2,841	3,008	3,589	3,800	3,805	4,028	4,034	4,270
55-59	2,250	2,170	2,842	2,741	3,013	2,906	3,194	3,081
60-64	1,915	2,247	2,419	2,838	2,564	3,009	2,718	3,190
65-69	1,668	1,679	2,107	2,121	2,233	2,249	2,367	2,384
70-74	1,175	1,326	1,484	1,676	1,574	1,776	1,669	1,883
75-79	876	806	1,107	1,018	1,173	1,080	1,244	1,145
80 +	1,170	1,317	1,478	1,664	1,567	1,764	1,661	1,870
Age NS	151	135	191	170	203	180	215	191
Total	126,158	131,729	159,366	166,404	168,954	176,414	179,118	187,027

Source: District Planning Unit, Chuka, 1996

## APPENDIX 5

These pictures are adopted from COVAW (K) 2002. “Women’s silent cries: cases of violence against women in the printed media, a look at four Kenyan dailies from 1998-2001”



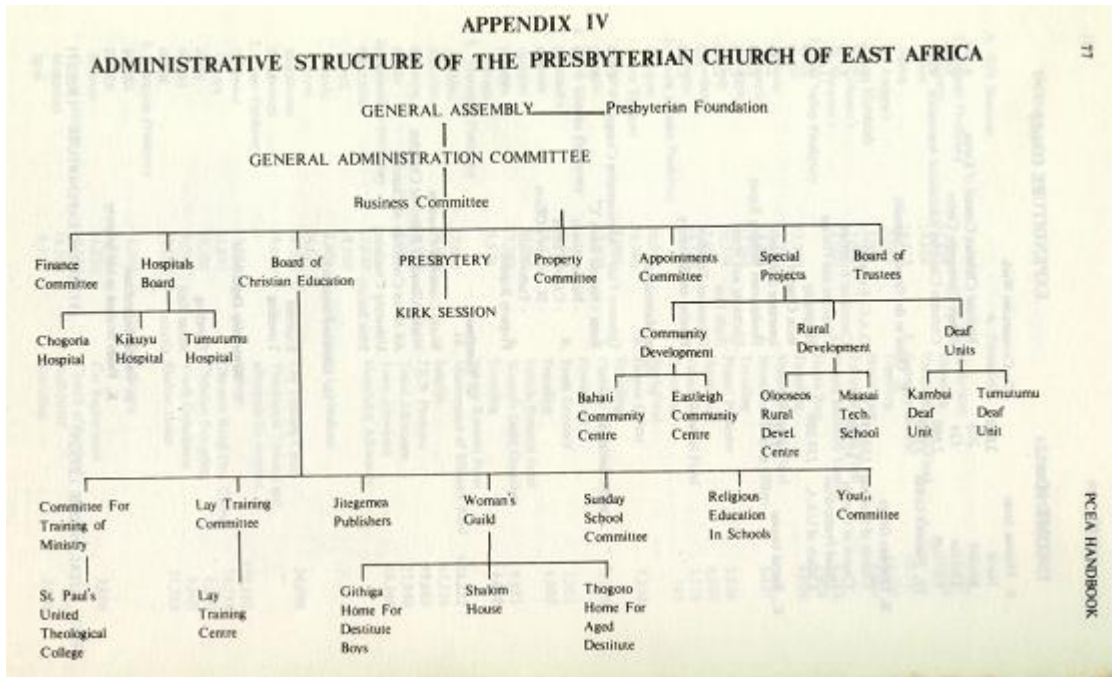
Photograph 25: Women’s silent cries

Source: COVAW (K) 2002

The clippings herein gives the illustration that women and men alike become victims of violence but this study firmly contest that the whole situation of violence affects women more adversely than men. Research has it that, these are just a few of the cases that get into the public because of their magnitude but wide range of women live in abusive relationships as a result of their inherent vulnerability caused by social, cultural, religious, political and economic factors that disadvantage women in the society

APPENDIX 6

PCEA ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE



(Adopted from Moffat R (1974) The Presbyterian Church of East Africa Handbook. Nairobi: Jitegemea Publishers).

## APPENDIX 7

**THE INTERVIEWS PRESENTED HERE ARE JUST A SAMPLE? OF THE MANY THAT WERE CARRIED OUT DURING THE FIELDWORK. ALL INTERVIEWS WERE CARRIED OUT BY THE RESEARCHER.**

**Date of interview 20-02-2003**

**Jennet Mbaka Ireri**

Jennet Mbaka Ireri from the Igambang'ombe division is sixty and a mother of nine children. She is also a grandmother and yet she still has some children in the primary school. Until five years ago her husband lived a very irresponsible life where he spent most his time and money consuming locally brewed beer. Jennet is also a church elder in the local Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) of Chuka Presbytery. She belongs to Kiaritha congregation of Kamwimbi Out Reach<sup>71</sup> and has been a leader in the church in different capacities. She recounts her challenges as a church leader:

My commitment to serve God is born of what God has done in my life for years. Even when life is really tough I have always believed there is a way because He is able. For all my married life until 1999, my husband has spent most of his money on beer drinking and yet I wanted my children to lead a life different from mine. Although the church has not helped in terms of material support, the spiritual nourishment that it gave me regularly enabled me move forward and face the following day. God has always blessed the work of my hands and now, apart from those in school, my children are able to a better life .

Currently five of Jennet's children are earning well for themselves Three of them own informal businesses and one works with a government ministry. She attributes their success to God and believes the other children will also do well. She also thanks God that her husband eventually stopped drinking the local beer. She believes that was a miracle. He now goes to the church and has acknowledged that he wasted much energy, money and time serving the devil. Jennet believes that he stopped at the time of God choosing and for a purpose.

Occasionally her husband would bring some money home. To feed and educate her children, Jennet engaged herself in various activities. The four main activities which yielded an income were (1) agricultural production on their farm. In their area she could only grow food crops (*millet, sorghum, maize, green grams, cow peas, finger millet and pigeon peas among others*) due to the climatic conditions and the fact the government did not encourage dry land cash crops like cotton. She had once tried growing cotton and had found the marketing to be a major problem. Since there is no controlled marketing for small scale or peasant farmers' produce, the income from her production is limited. Her children, both boys and girls, help her in the agricultural activities.

(2) She is engaged in pottery. She makes pots of various designs and takes them to the market. To make a pot she has to collect water from the river and look for firewood and grass to burn and dry the pots. She also has to walk long distances to find the right clay soil. Once the pots are made she has to carry them on her back to the market which is three kilometres from her home. Her girl children help in this project when they are not in school. During harvesting times in a nearby high potential area, she and the other women who engage in the same project, carry their pots from home to home looking for possible buyers and exchange them for food. Only a few are sold in a day. (see photograph no.).

(3) She also buys and sells cereal in the local market. Her business does not thrive because she does not have her own storage facility. There is not enough space in her home to store the cereal and she has no means of transport to take it from her home to the market so she has to rent a room at the back of the shops in the market. The rented places are not very secure so she keeps on losing her property which it is not insured (see photograph no.).

(4) She is also a member of women's group in the area. The women in this group agreed to help each other to buy kitchen items such as cooking pots, plates, cups and spoons. They also help each other during the weeding and

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<sup>71</sup> An Out Reach means that the area has not yet attained a parish status; it is still a mission area.



harvesting periods and help and visit each other during hard times. Initially they used to contribute money and keep it so that they could make loans when necessary but this has fallen away because they had problems with record keeping, administration and security. They had based their contribution on trust and had not used accepted accounting practices.

When asked to characterise the experiences of women, she said her personal experience was the only means that she could use to illustrate them. After relating the above facts about her life, she raised the following issues as being the ones which make women's lives very difficult.

- The place and status of a woman in the family. Her primary role is to bear and bring up children. She has to observe silence and tolerance whether her husband is responsible or not.
- Failure by the government to develop the low potential areas in terms of agriculture production. There is need for agricultural extension work in these areas and for a good road network.
- A limited market for their agricultural produce.
- The cost of educating children makes it difficult for children from poor families to obtain quality education or to further their education.
- Lack of water in the vicinity.
- Lack of fuel wood, which necessitates people walking long distances hunting for firewood.
- Lack of or inability to afford health facilities.
- People's ignorance and lack of knowledge.

Asked to say how she thought the government and the church could help in improving the quality of life for women in the area she raised the following points

- The church could help by conducting awareness seminars.
- The church should preach and educate people on how to live harmoniously and how to respect each person in the family and view them as equals.
- The government should improve the infrastructure to enable mobility.
- The government should ensure that a water supply is available in the rural areas and that the poor people can afford to install it their homes or at manageable distances from them.
- The government should make health facilities financially accessible to all.
- Children's education should be given priority.
- Government development policies should include rural areas.

***Date of Interview 06.02.2003***

**Jones Kaari Mutegi**

Jones Kaari Mutegi is sixteen years old and works as a house girl in the town of Thika. She is from Rubate in the Chuka Division. Her current place of employment is the third home in which she has worked. In the first one she was paid Ksh.700.00 per month and in the next one she was paid Ksh.750.00. She is currently paid Ksh.800.00. (*She earned the equivalent of less than US\$8 and later US\$8*) per month. In the first two homes she did not stay for long because she was overworked and the employers did not treat her kindly. She also found her salary insufficient for her needs. She currently earns at least Ksh.100.00 more than the first home and her employer is kind and appreciates the work Kaari does. In the previous places of work she had to wake at 05.00 and could only sleep at 22.00 after a heavy day's work. This was necessary because she had to prepare everyone's breakfast and prepare the children for school in the morning. In the evening, after everyone had gone to bed she had to tidy the house and set the kitchen for the following day. (*She worked approximately 18 hrs per day for less than US\$8 per month*).

In the current home she wakes at 06.00 and goes to bed between 20.00 and 21.00. Although the lady in the home is employed away from the home, she helps and encourages Kaari. This lady finds time to talk to her unlike her previous employers who were unkind and took her for granted.

Kaari has to share her salary with her mother but she (Kaari) sends the money with those who are travelling home because the cost of transport from Thika to her home is Ksh.250.00 one way and a return journey costs Ksh.500.00, leaving her with only Ksh.300.00. She rarely goes home. The remainder of her salary is only enough to buy budget clothes for herself.

She first went to look for employment when she was thirteen years because there was not enough money to pay the school fees for herself and her three siblings. Her brother and two sisters have studied up to standard eight. She alone had to leave school in her standard four year. Her parents were content when their children reached standard eight because they were able to read and write a letter. She says that given the opportunity she would want to go back to school but she knows that it will be difficult for her mother to afford clothes for her and even to feed them without the assistance she offers her. Asked to make general statement she had the following to say:

My schooldays were really difficult because most of the time we went school without food, sometimes not even having eaten in the morning. After my uniform wore out, there was no money to replace it and I had to go to school wearing a torn uniform. My mother struggled alone to find food and buy clothes for the four of us. My father did not assist her; he usually came home drunk and on many occasions beat her. The situation disturbed me and I thought I could help her out. I knew other girls my age who had gone to look for jobs and were helping their parents. I, therefore, suggested to my mother that I try to find a job to help them to pay the school fees for my brother and sisters, although I was not the eldest in the family. My parents welcomed the idea and I left school in standard four. I was thirteen. My brother and two sisters have studied up to standard eight. My parents cannot afford to send them to secondary school and they are also content that there are able to read and write.

Women get very tired because they are the ones who do the domestic chores like washing clothes, bathing the children, fetching water, collecting firewood, engaging in agricultural activities like planting, weeding and harvesting. Observation of the village activities reveals that women do all these duties while most men, like her father, do lot of idling and alcohol consumption and later come home and fight with their wives and children.

One of the challenges facing girl children is that they grow up to work just like their mothers and by the end of the day they are more tired than the boy children. Girl children must help their mother as a process of learning how to work when they grow up.

Circumcision of girls is also common in our area and has its own problems. For example, in our village some parents circumcise their girls and it is difficult for the circumcised and uncircumcised girls to relate because those who are circumcised are considered mature and those who are not are considered childish. There are names that differentiate the two categories (*mwanamwari* – circumcised; *muthera* – uncircumcised).

***Date of interview 23.02.2003***

**Josephine Wanyaga Mbae**

Josephine Wanyaga Mbae is a casual factory worker. She is thirty-five years old and a mother of three children from two different fathers. Currently the first two children live with their father and Wanyaga has no right to visit them. Wanyaga lives with the father of her third child. She relates her story with much apprehension because of her past and the current lifestyle. She was born in the Igambang'ombe division, and first married in Tharaka and later in the Mwimbi Division but she and her second husband live in the town of Thika.

As a young girl in her father's home, Wanyaga felt that her parents did not treat her justly. She recounts experiences of her schooldays in this way:

I very well remember that, while my older sister and I would stay at home for a long time because my parents could not afford the school fees, they were very careful to ensure that my brothers were not kept away from school. Furthermore, even when we were at home for holidays or after school, my brothers were reminded and pressurised to study but my sister and I had to help our mother with the household chores and only studied when we had finished the duties assigned to us.

While my brothers socialised freely we were only allowed to socialise with a limited number of people who were approved by our mother. We could not return home late and we had to explain where we went and what we were going to do. One of the reasons for secluding us was to make sure that we did not mix with bad company and fall pregnant before finishing high school.

The worst thing that my father said in my hearing was, "Now that you and your sister have completed high school you should know that there is no money for college training" and my mother added "By the way they are mature enough to marry if they choose to".

I do, however, appreciate what my parents gave us because many girls in the area did not have any education at all and many others only went up to primary school. I now realize that their actions were influenced by our culture, which did not put any value girls' education then. I do not think much has changed since.

Owing to this attitude, when I received an invitation to complete a diploma in one of the technical colleges, my parents said there was no money. I was not convinced because their previous comments still lingered strongly in my mind. I went to the city to look for a job. Later on, when our younger brothers needed tertiary education, my parents mobilized their resources to ensure that they went for training. They depended on agricultural produce since my father had retired. For them to find the money, my parents must have been fundraising from friends, and also called on my older brothers and sisters to contribute towards this cause.

Wanyaga's married life was equally challenging. She was a housewife and she suffered intensive domestic violence. Her (current) husband, to whom she is not legally married, is the father of her third child. The memories of her two older children torment her because she fears they do not receive the basics for life. Asked why they do not live with her, she relates her marriage experiences as follows.

Before I got married, I worked in a Chemist. The lady who employed me was a 'born again' Christian. I worked very hard for her in the city until she sent me to go and open another chemist in a smaller town. While working at the chemist I met my first husband who was a nurse by profession. I conceived before we got married and I dreaded the consequences. Incidentally, on learning that I was pregnant, my parents were very kind and insisted that I shouldn't get married because of the pregnancy if I was not convinced that it was the right thing to do. On learning of my plans to marry, my employer withdrew me from job.

I loved my husband and he insisted that we should be together before the baby was born and then we would formalize our marriage later. He also promised that when the child was old enough, I would study in college (*he meant that I would only go to a teachers' college*). At about that time a moratorium was placed on further enrolments at the teachers' colleges. The government teachers' college stopped taking more teachers until further notice. Four years later I had not gone to any college and had given birth to a second child.

At this time we moved from the town in which he was working to his rural home village and he commuted from home to work. Since I was not employed, I worked on our small farm. I bought many goats and chickens when I sold my agricultural produce. We did not need to buy food because I produced enough but sometimes, when there was a drought, the yield was poor. Then we needed money to buy some things from the market. The poor transport network hampered the marketing of our produce. Although I was a successful farmer, I did not find farming a fulfilling occupation. We built our semi- permanent house and I extended all my energies in this enterprise because we were becoming settled. We completed the building and installed the furniture.

He then opened a private practice where he attended to the patients after hours or in his free time. He also sold medicine. Although I had worked in a chemist for more than two years before we married, he employed another woman to work in his private practice. I soon realized she was not only an employee but also a close friend. He was now spending most of his time at the clinic and only came home when he chose to. I thought it was not safe for me and confronted him. This was the beginning of the end of our marriage.

Since I come from another tribe, although from the same district, his mother (my mother-in-law) had always advocated that his son should find another wife because I was a foreigner. Her wish began to become reality. There were regular quarrels and threats from that time. He regularly reminded me that I was not trained and if I dared leave him I would die of poverty. Already, however, he was not supporting me and I had to struggle for food and clothing for myself and my children.

The situation deteriorated until I had to return to my parents' home in 1999. They welcomed back and did everything in their ability to help me. My mother regretted that I had no tertiary training and that they now could

do very little which would make a difference in my life. They talked to my elder sister who agreed to take my two children and my brother my brother found a job for me in the factory where I now work.

Three months later when my husband realised that I was working and not suffering as he had predicted (*he had said that I should just leave and he would return to fetch me when I had suffered enough...*) he came and apologized and requested that I forgive him and promised that he would never treat me in that way again. With my commitment to my marriage I decided to return with him, although my parents, my sister and my brother opposed the idea. He came to my parents' home with his parents and clan representatives and they, my parents and their clan representatives talked and he repeated his apology and promises.

Little did I know that these were all lies? He only wanted to take our sons and then dismiss me. The men who had accompanied him for the negotiations knew it was a trick and ordered his mother not say a word because she would not be crafty enough. When all was done and we were on the way home, his mother burst out laughing and started challenging them,

*"Why did you have to cheat? You could have taken your children and left the woman instead of putting her into such a difficult situation..."* I knew that my future was not going to be what I had expected.

When we arrived home, he started issuing death threats. He gave me one thousand Kenya shillings and told me to go back to my parents' home or wherever I wanted to go. Not knowing what to do, I returned to my place of work traumatized. I went to my brother who is also a trained probation officer, thinking that he would help me to challenge my husband legally, but he said he could not help me because that would require much energy and money. I thought of approaching Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) Kenya, but my parents felt I should not follow that course, because they thought that, even if I won the case, this man might use witchcraft to ruin my life.

It was during this time of great torment that I met my current husband. I was now alone because my brother and sister, who had come to help initially, distanced themselves and my parents were too old to help (*my father in his eighties and my mother her late sixties*). I shared my life journey with him and he did the same and we both felt that we could live together. It was, however, difficult to marry because we cannot easily legalise our union due to various complexities.

Today Wanyaga is still working as a factory casual worker and her current husband has promised to do everything in his ability to make their marriage work. She has had a son with this man. When she speaks of her first two sons, he also promises to do whatever is in his ability to help them. According to Meru culture, children belong to the man, which makes it difficult for her current husband to assist her other children, unless legal action is taken to give the mother legal custody of the children. She is very positive about her current relationship because she is convinced that her former husband's behaviour is not representative of the behaviour of all men.

Wanyaga is still a Christian, although for some time, especially during the very troubled times, she kept distant from the fellowship of the "born again". She has a very low opinion of the church and because it is influenced by the social, cultural and economic situation. In her first job her Christian employer dismissed her because she thought she would not perform well while managing her marriage. Further, the elders of her former husband's church participate in his treachery, taking away her children because although they are church elders they are also clan representatives and must obey their culture first. She, however, has now decided to pick up the broken pieces of her life and put them together. She says:

It is difficult recounting my experiences. Perhaps God is punishing me for backsliding. I have decided to repent and live for Christ. I now make sure that we worship every evening, read the Bible and pray. God is good even when we go astray, he forgives us if we only repent. I prayed and repented and believe God will always be there for me and even for my children, God will surely provide for them in his miraculous ways. Sometimes I have sent clothes to them secretly through the church people. I must, however, confess that the churches down there need to grow. Do you know some of those people who were involved in taking my children were church elders? God will surely forgive them.

As far as the government procedures are concerned, it is almost impossible for the poor rural woman to benefit from what they can offer in times of intense injustice such as I have experienced.

**Date of interview 09.02.2003**  
**Florence Mugai Mugambi**

Florence Mugai M'Mugambi is sixty four years old. She is from the Mwimbi division and is a mother of six children; one daughter and five sons. All her children are now married. From 1958 when they married to 1985 when her husband retired from his professional position, she has lived in their rural home. Her husband tried to come home during his annual leave and to find some weekends within the year but these were very rare occasions.

To educate her six children she says, was very difficult with the small salary the husband earned. She had to engage in agricultural activities to supplement it.

- She grew a wide range of food crops (maize, sorghum, finger millet, beans bananas, cow peas, pigeon peas and green peas).
- She worked on the their cash crop (coffee is the major cash in this area).
- She reared livestock (cattle, goats and sheep) and also kept poultry (chickens).

She worked hard and the children helped her after school and on the weekends. Their agricultural produce was and still is used for their consumption and the generation of financial capital.

She could freely sell food crops and chickens without her husband's permission but not the livestock, especially not a cow. The coffee registration number also belonged to her husband and normally it was the husband who had the right to collect the coffee payment and sell livestock. Because Mugai's husband lived away from home, he gave her a mandate to collect the coffee payments. *(This was an exceptional case because in the majority of the families in the area, women were not allowed to collect the coffee payments. Still today, women and children work on the coffee farms but the men collect the payments and decide how the money is spent)*. On the occasions when it was necessary for her to sell livestock, she sought authority from him and his decision was final.

Florence and her husband, M'Mugambi, are now living in their rural home happily after his retirement. She says, when they both look back to where they started, they realise that much development has taken place in their home which has been achieved not through the salary which her husband earned' but due to the following factors:

- Mutual agreement between herself and her husband
- Careful integration of their resources (human, natural and social), and
- Assistance from their children, who are now employed, to complete the building of a permanent home. (Their children's effort should not be underestimated).

According to cultural requirements Florence Mugai and her husband, M'Mugambi, live with and take care of their two grandchildren who were born out of wedlock. Bernice Gatwiri is in her early twenties and has lived with her grandmother since she was a young baby. She is the child of Magai's eldest daughter who has now married. Her husband is not Gatwiri's father. Hilton Kibaki is in his late teens and has just completed high school. Kibaki was born to Mugai's second son, who works in the town and lives there with his wife, who is not Kibaki's mother, and their two children. He joined their family when he was seven years old. Culturally he was required to live with his father. Gatwiri has completed her high school schooling and her grandparents are keen to ensure that she obtain some skills training or tertiary education, although this will be difficult to fund. According to their culture this is the only inheritance to which Gatwiri has a right from her grandparents. While they may be willing to give more, there are cultural implications attached. Kibaki is different because, apart from education, he is entitled a land inheritance that the father should give to him.

When talking about development in the area, counts structural features that indicate levels of development thus:

In 1952, long before they married her husband put up a thatched (pole and daga) mud building (see photograph no.2.23). This is where they lived after their wedding in 1958 and their first three children born were here. In

1965, they constructed another (pole and daga) building that was made of sticks (wood) and mud but roofed with galvanised iron sheets. In 1978, they bought their first pure bred cow, which meant that she had to begin zero grazing, which necessitated the fetching of water for the cow from the river about 1.5Kilometres (Kms) away along a very steep path, although there was a water furrow which was 0.5Kms away but was not working for a long time. Currently Florence has piped water in the compound and lives in a permanent stone building.

For Florence, the life of a woman is characterised much hard work, exclusion from decision making, the care and the nurturing of the family members (immediate and the extended family members, she recalls her parents –in-law dying in her care). This comes naturally; it is fulfilling one's duty in the hope of receiving attention in old age.

Asked what she thought were the most crucial issues that would improve the quality of a woman's in the rural areas, she highlighted the following:

- The government should ensure that every home has piped water.
- Tree planting should be enforced to ensure that women do not have to go to fetch firewood very far away - for the sake of their health and time conservation.
- Health facilities and medicine should be accessible and affordable. Above all women should be educated on primary health care because they have to attend to others and themselves without the necessary medical knowledge.
- Agriculture is crucial especially for rural livelihood.
- Education should be ensured for both boys and girls because she realises that in the neighbourhood people emphasise education for boy children more than for girl children and yet, culturally, girl children are not entitled to other material inheritance.

**Date of interview 09.02.2003**

**Mary Kajira Mbaabu**

Mary Kajira Mbaabu is from the Mwimbi division. She is twenty-eight years old and is the mother two girls. She left school in standard eight when her father passed away. She, however, did a train in dressmaking and knitting. She had a small-scale knitting business that ceased when she married. As a housewife she does small-scale farming for food production and sometimes for financial capital. She also keeps chickens which are used for egg production and chicken meat. Her husband was employed in one of the local coffee factories but was retrenched in 2001. She is currently involved in a small-scale business (she sells cereals) and still continues with her small farm and household chores and she is also a member of one of the local women groups where they contribute money for each other and assist each other with garden work during the harvest periods. Mary's business is the major source income in the family. Mary has to organise on to leave her children with someone when going to the market

Apart from his earnings they did not have any other source of income. To supplement his earnings, Mary worked very hard and they sold the agricultural produce from their small farm. They have two small farms, one is 7km away and the other one is 3kms away. She has to make sure she fetches water from the river before she goes to the garden. There is no regular transport to these two destinations and even when there transport is available; Mary cannot afford the fare to her farm, so she has to walk. During the planting season, she carries her seeds, fertilizer (*when available*), and other garden implements on her back to the farm. Sometimes she is assisted by friends, whom she helps when they need assistance. She still has to carry food for them on her back. On coming from the garden she has to tend to her children and her husband. When coming from the farm she has to carry firewood that she uses as fuel.

Currently, now that her husband has been retrenched, she has started a small scale business. She buys and sells cereals (maize, beans, sorghum and millet etc depending on what is available). She goes to the market two on Tuesdays and Saturdays which are the official market days. (see photograph no. 2.6 Keri Open market). The remaining three days in the week she divides between her house and farm work.

Mary's husband drinks beer, which Mary feels is a drawback in her family. When the husband was still working, he used to drink frequently and come home late. At other times, especially on the payday, he would come home

and start fighting and life was very tough. It would have been worse if Mary had asked anything to do with money. In contrast, whatever Mary did with the little money she raised from selling some of the farm products like bananas, which women can sell without much difficulty, she had to account for.

On the basis of her own experiences, she says that the life of a woman is full of suffering and hard work. It is difficult fetching firewood and water and yet this is solely a woman's job regardless of how tired she is.

Asked to point to issues that she thinks are very crucial to improving the life women in her area, she says, issues related to health, education and marriage are very urgent ones.

On health - due to the kind of life women lead they are vulnerable to diseases and it is difficult for them to afford medication and healthy food. They also have to take care of the sick members of their family whether they themselves are well or not.

On education - Mary thinks if she had furthered her education she could be living a better life. She now works very hard so that her children will not be limited in achieving the levels of education that would enable them live a better life.

On marriage - Mary is a Christian. She feels that those who have contracted a Christian marriage could be living better than those who have married in the traditional way. She thinks that women who marry in church should receive more love and respect from the husbands than those married in the traditional way. She has been persuading her husband to legalise their marriage but he keeps delaying and, since he is the key decision maker, they are not yet legally married.

Asked what she thinks the government and the church should do to improve the quality of life of women, she makes this observation:

The church and the government should work out means to make medicine affordable to all people.

The church and government should also prohibit the brewing of beer to prevent men from drinking until they forget their families.

The government should make education affordable to all people, especially those are seriously disadvantaged. For example, she had to leave school when her father died because it was too difficult for her mother to provide for their food and the school fees. Her own experience and her mother's when her father died was very stressful and she thinks that the government and the church should, in ways she does not know how to explain, make better life for all.

**Date of interview 09.02.2003**

**Bernice Gatwiri Riungu**

Bernice Gatwiri Riungu is 23 years old and is from the Mwimbi division. This is the fifth year since she finished high school. She has been looking for either a job or training but neither of these has been forthcoming. She was born out wedlock and later her mother married a different man. Accordingly she was brought up by her grandparents.

According to Meru traditional customs, a child born out of wedlock is supposed to be taken to their biological father. In the case of Gatwiri, her biological father refused to take responsibility for her. So Gatwiri has never known her father. When her mother was married, Gatwiri was left with her grandparents. Her grandparents took full responsibility for her and, while her mother sometimes comes to see her, she offers her very little in terms of advice or material support.

While Gatwiri is loved and provided for fully by her grandparents, she feels unhappy about her situation. People around her keep on reminding her that she does not belong there. She struggles for identity. For instance, it is required that everybody should have a surname which should, in the Kenyan system, be one's fathers or husband's. Gatwiri has to use her grandfather's surname which leaves her open to ridicule.

Boy children who find themselves in this situation are assisted to find their fathers who are obliged by culture to give them an inheritance. This is true for her cousin, Kibaki, who returned to his father after seven years. For Gatwiri, it is frustrating because, even if she found out who her father was, she would gain nothing from him.

On the basis of her experiences and those of her mother, Gatwiri feels that traditional practices related to marriage and decision making need urgent attention and revision. This is required because women suffer because they are unable to fulfil their potential..

Asked what she thought the government should do about this situation, she said the church and the government should ensure that women and children are given a hearing or attention in matters related to their livelihood and decisions for life. For instance she said, "In my Presbyterian church only pregnant girls or women who conceive out of wedlock are interrogated and punished and no one bothers to find out who the father of the child was". She is also of the opinion that the government should review the Meru customary marriage practice that leaves women in a very vulnerable situation.

**Date of Interview 10.02.2003**

**Alison Kanyau Mutegi**

Alison Kanyau Mutegi is fifty years old and is from the Mwimbi division. She is a widow and works as an evangelist in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, Chogoria Presbytery, Kiera Parish.

She is a mother of six children. Due to the death of her husband her eldest daughter could not proceed to high school, but by the time the other children reached standard eight she had reorganised herself with the help of the church and they were able to proceed to high school.

Long after her husband had died, a boy who was said to have been her husband's child born out of wedlock, came to claim his father's inheritance. In accordance with the Meru traditions she had to allow this child into her home although her husband had not told her of him while he was alive.

As a widow, she says issues of inheritance and property ownership are a serious challenge. During the land subdivisions, she lost one acre of her husband's land to the clan. Further she is obliged to take care of this child who purportedly belongs to her husband, who is not even there to confirm the truth of this contention. As a woman head of the family, she says that issues of health, education and widowhood need to be taken seriously and treated with sensitivity. Not many can afford a healthy and nutritious diet, which would give the body proper immunity. It is also very difficult to afford medication and the school fees.

To go to work she has to walk long distances and yet come back to her attend to the domestic chores, involving collecting firewood, fetching water, cooking and preparing her children for school. In addition she is not excluded from community and clan activities.

As a widow, a mother and an evangelist, she says that the life of a woman is full of suffering and discrimination. Just because she was a woman and a widow she lost a piece of land that meant much to her. This happened because her interests were not well represented in the clan meeting that decided on the land subdivision. About the child that was brought to her as a husband's child, the brothers of her late husband met together with other clan members and agreed that she should take care of him and give him a share of land when subdividing for her sons. She had no right to query that decision. She says that church and the government should be in a position to question traditional practices that deprive widows of their personal rights and the right to decision-making. Issues of agriculture, health, education and transport should be improved in the rural areas.

As an evangelist she is involved in the life of the community. She observes that boy and girl children are treated differently in most families in the community. Most parents consider the education of boys as more important than the education of girls. Women are mostly the caretakers of the aged and disabled in the families. They, according to her observation, are the ones who sustain the community livelihoods because they are involved in all sectors and in addition they undertake all the domestic chores.

Commenting on cultural practices that are harmful to women and girl children, circumcision is one of them. Property ownership, inheritance and the dowry are practices that she does not approve of. Although the church opposes female circumcision, it is silent about the other three, which she thinks are equally bad for girl children.



As an evangelist and an elder of the church, she says even the church discriminates against women, especially in leadership and decision-making. For example, in their Kiera Parish Kirk session out of forty elders, only five are women. This discrimination is particularly evident in the discipline court or when the issue under discussion is that is women related.

- Issues that need special attention
- Agriculture
- Health
- Land
- Property ownership
- Education
- Transport
- Fuel (firewood/water)

**Date of interview 10.02.2003**  
**Gladys Mukwaiti Marangu**

Gladys Mukwaiti Marangu is forty six years old and is from the Mwimbi division. She is married and a mother of five children. She is a nurse in the local sub-district hospital (Magutuni). In her career she has trained as Kenya Enrolled Community Nurse (KECN, Kenya Enrolled Mid-wife (KEM) and Health Visitor (HV)(11). She is also a deacon in the church and a member of the local women's group. Her husband is a teacher and a church elder in their church. Her husband is a headmaster and he is also the chairman of the local congregation. Being the wife of prominent man in the community, a career woman, a leader in the community and in the church, Gladys is over-extended. (*She expresses this*). After attending to issues emanating from all these leadership positions, and her career, Gladys also checks on the work of their house girl and the farm attendant, especially in the livestock and poultry section. She also checks on their small tuck-shop which supplements their salaries, before closing. On ensuring that all is well she then engages in knitting. Her husband only takes charge when it is impossible for her to be there.

Asked to comment on the experiences of women Gladys makes several comments on different issues thus: Culturally a woman is usually overworked and yet disadvantaged for the following reasons:

- (1) She works long hours yet she does not own the property she works on
- (2) When it comes to marriage women must belong to the clan of their husband.
- (3) The issues of children born outside marriage is even more sensitive because a man is allowed by culture to claim the children born out of marriage without consulting the wife, yet women are not allowed to own the children born out marriage or even help them once they are married men other than the fathers of their children.

Economically women do not own property yet they are key participants in agricultural activities and all household undertakings. Giving my personal example, apart from being a nurse, I participate in our agricultural production, and I also supervise our tuck-shop, our livestock and poultry sections before I think of taking a rest and then I close my day by knitting garments for sale to supplement our salaries. (See photograph no.2. 3 on Grace Mukwaiti Marangu).

Health wise, she says as community health nurse and with her experience of working in the local area, women's health is a complex issue. She makes the following observations:

- Apart from taking care of their personal health, women are expected to take care of the health of others in the family, especially children and the aged. Women are in the majority in the hospital because they are either sick or they bring other family members.
- Generally women are overworked due to the hard work they do in the agricultural production, looking for fuel (wood) and water and for some, having to walk long distances carrying their loads on their backs.
- During my health visitation, I also discovered that, in addition to hard labour, women's eating habits are problematic. They either do not eat enough or they do not have healthy and nutritious food. In times

when the food is not adequate, women feed others and are left without food. There are also food taboos although many women are trying to fight that out.

- I am also concerned that although it is said that HIV/AIDS issues have been taught, many women do not realise the necessity for taking precautions or the realities of having the disease. In rare cases where they have the understanding of the dangers attached to it, they are not in control of their bodies. In our culture issues of sex and sexuality are taboo. They are not freely discussed and women especially are not supposed to question the decisions of their husbands. Currently women are asserting themselves in a few families.
- Issues of great importance in relation to women's quality of life are, education, health, agriculture, water and fuel.

Asked what she thought the church and the government could do to improve the quality of life of women, she made the following comments:

I am convinced that to improve the life women, there are three things that must happen:

- The church is a social institution comprised of great numbers of women who meet every Sunday, could be the ideal forum for creating awareness in women on the many issues on which they are ignorant. For example, human rights and injustices in women's lives which are taken as "normal" life situations.
- The government must formulate policies that protect women in a variety of arenas in their lives—property ownership, decision making, human rights and on issues of marriage, where most women are left vulnerable, as they are largely perceived as the work force but do not share the benefits equally.
- The church and the government must join hands in rethinking issues that affect women negatively. The church and the government have the ability to influence the legal and moral issues which cause women to suffer in the church and society.
- I am also convinced that women must take charge of their lives to facilitate change although this must be preceded by awareness campaigns. On this I am looking to the work of women groups and to the effects of women who are in leadership positions, such as our councillor. The women's guild has tried but much is yet to be done in realizing an improved quality of life for women.

**Date of interview 11.02.2003**

**Joyce Karuta Mate**

Joyce Karuta Mate is fifty two years old is married and is a mother six children; one daughter and five sons. Her husband is a retired agricultural officer, her daughter is in the university, one boy is still in the high school, and one of the sons was retrenched at the age of twenty seven. Joyce is the elected councillor in the location. She studied up to standard seven. She feels that her educational status has been a major limitation in trying to live up to her aspirations in life.

Joyce has been a housewife most of her life, but attended civic education through the church and the local government because she has always been very involved in the issues of women, specifically the women's groups. Her involvement in women's groups and social development projects earned her popularity with the people in the community hence her election as the councillor for her constituency.

Joyce Karuta Mate who was the chairlady of the discussion group, also convened the group. She has been a chairlady of the Woman's guild for many years, from which position she stepped down to stand for election to civic leadership. She has a special commitment to community development and notes with concern that although all the members of the community are in need of vital facilities such as a road network and health facilities, rural women are limited in their influence by the absence of resources and skills. One of the major limitations is their low level of education and sometimes even a total lack of education, because not many families take the education of girls seriously. She is of the opinion that without adequate formal education, one is vulnerable to a variety of other problems.

As a person who has been involved in community development projects in the area, Joyce observes that the life of women is characterised by much suffering, discrimination and oppression. A woman's life consists of much hard work accomplished with many difficulties. She makes the following observations:

Women and children are the main components of the workforce in agricultural activities but because they do not own the land, they do not have full authority to decide which crops should be planted in which localities. While most women have limited authority and freedom to use food crops, as far as the cash crop is concerned men are the ones who make decisions. For example, in this area coffee is the main cash crop and women and children are the main labour force, but pay numbers belong to the men.

It is Only recently that piped water Reached thE community but very few women have this facility in their homes or within a reasonable distAnce of their homes. (see also the interview with Florence Mugai). So women have to fetch water from rivers far away and they have to carry heavy loads on Their backs.

The indigenous forests which provide a plentiful supply of firewood have been destroyed and therefore women have difficulty finding firewood. The demARcation of land also limits women's movements in their seArch for firewood. Some have managed to plant exotic trEes and do not have many problems. Others however have to walk lOng distances looking for firewood aNd some have to buy the wood, which is also very expensive. It is ironi# that, because they do not own the laNd, women do0not have aUthority to plant On their husband's farms the very tRees which ould facilitate firewood collection and ease thEir load. The authority to plant or cut trees must come from the men who are the owners of thE land.

Women's groupS ha6e helped women in many ways such as socialisinG and improving their household equipment through merry go round actIvities (see also Florence Kaburo Mbung ). Women assist eAch other in buying household items such as plates, spOons and cooking pots

In some homes they have even bought water tanks. While this has been helpful for some women, others are not allowed to join women groups because it is said that once they join the women groups they will become “bad women”. The champions of women groups ARE said to be bad influence On “good” women.

Women and health is another major issue. The nature of women’s work (*walking long distances, carrying heavy loads on their backs, overworking in the gardens and in the house*) makes them vulnerable to opportunistic diseases since their bodies are weak. It is also a fact that not many are able to afford nutritious food, and the majority lack the knowledge required to use the locally available foods to prepare nutritious meals.

Housing and storage facilities present another challenge not only to women but to the whole community. Most people do not have adequate housing so storage is a problem. Food they grow stands the risk of either being spoiled or stolen (See the photograph no 2.5 on Jennet Mbaka and her pottery). For example, in our MaKena women’s group we have frequently lost our investment through cases of theft (see photograph no.2.9 and their mad structure in the background). In instances of a high yield we also face the problem of marketing. We first kept pigs but that became difficult because we had to fetch water from the river and when the piglets were born, after all our hard labour, we could not find a good market. The same happened with poultry keeping. As much as hard labour and lack of market are challenging the major problem is insecurity. Because of lack of facilities and finances women make semi-permanent structures and they are easily broken into by thieves.

Women and leadership in the community and in their women’s groups is another challenge. The majority of women in our locality are illiterate which creates leadership problems because, although the women are well organised, the keeping of records of the proceedings, the following up those who do not keep to the rules of the group, and also the evaluation of their undertakings, are hindered. We have to invest on trust, which is becoming so fluid these days.

As a person who has struggled in the community and is now a civic leader, Joyce on the one hand acknowledges the effort of the government in empowering women and improving the conditions under which the girl children grow. On the other hand she says that there is still much that the government can do to improve the quality of life for women especially in the rural areas. She says that her election as a councillor in her constituency can be attributed to the effort of both the church and the government to uplift the status of women in the society. She started by attending a number of church leadership meetings to gather courage to stand before a big crowd of people. She also attended a number of civic leadership seminars organised by the church under the auspices of the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK). She has also been very active in women’s group meetings where they discuss issues related to women and community development. The following are crucial in realising quality life for women:

- The government should put in place women friendly policies in agriculture, health, education, inheritance, property ownership, and the financial institutions.
- Education of girls in the rural areas should be encouraged.
- Policies should be formulated to outlaw traditional cultural practices that are harmful to girl children and women.
- The government must devise methods of ensuring the practical implementation of rights for girl children and women because it is one thing to say that all children have equal rights to inheritance and it is another for that right to be implemented.

**Date of the interview 11.02.2003**

**Joyce Rigiri Mati**

Joyce Rigiri Mati is a nurse from the Mwimbi Division. She is thirty eight and is a mother of four children; three girls and one boy. She has worked as a nurse for fifteen years and she has trained as a Kenya Enrolled Nurse, and Kenya Enrolled Midwife. After working for government for sometime and also in the mission hospitals, she now runs her own private clinic. As a Christian and a profession she is challenged by the health of women in the rural area. She says:

Just now I was attending a very fragile case. I call it fragile because that child was brought here by her old grandmother because her mother does not live here. The grandmother can hardly afford the medicine that would be the best for the child. I have now given some medicine to last until she is able to reach a hospital. I have referred her to the government hospital but am afraid our government hospitals have become so bad that even when there is medicine patient hardly ever get it. I am sorry for her because apart from the fact that she can probably not afford the taxi fare (*she was given medicine on credit and possibly she may not be having any money for fare*) I do not think she will catch the matatus (*the common mini-buses*) now.

Rigiri says that most people in this area die because of poverty. In the first place some do not have enough food to eat and most of those suffering are women. Women die of the diseases that could normally be cured but they go to hospital when they are very sick and when they are diagnosed they do not have money to purchase the medicine. Very few women are keen to go for normal regular check ups. Therefore many die of diseases like cancer of the uterus that could have been prevented. Others buy inappropriate medicine which does nothing to combat the disease. Women are overworked and do not have time to consider their own health but they take care of their husbands, children and the rest of the extended family.

I am of the opinion that strategies for poverty alleviation should be key to reducing health problems among women, because majority of women who come here have high blood pressure problems but when I ask them to reduce their workload they say it is not possible. They work hard and walk long distances during the day and at night in their homes they face fights and quarrels. For instance, in this area, traditional beer is consumed in copious amounts, which results in fighting. To eliminate suffering amongst women, the following issues need to be given attention:

- Health
- Education
- Agriculture
- Transport in form of road network
- Abolition of beer brewing and drugs because that is where many men spend their time and money.

**Date of the interview 11.02.2003**

**Irene Gatitu Karani**

Irene Gatitu is from the Mwimbi division and owns a small business (hair salon). She is a single mother of a boy. Irene has run away from her house because some thieves have invaded it. She feels very insecure. She thinks it is because she is single that people take advantage of her, so her desire is to marry. The challenge is that, although it is acceptable for a man to have children with many women and yet marry one woman, for women it is different. She shares her experiences and fears as follows:

When it comes to issues of marriage, when there are children born out of wedlock, men and women experience different realities. It is expected that girls must be virgins at marriage while no one really cares if men are or not. There is no way of proving their virginity either. In my opinion, almost all men engage in pre- or extra-marital sexual relationships but they all want virgins to marry. On the other hand, while married men can have extra-marital relationships, their wives are not expected to. No man wants to care for another man's child, especially if the child is a boy because culturally it is believed that particularly a boy child must trace his roots, his father, and after all the mother's efforts in brining up that child, she will lose him to the father.

I am, however, positive about my business because my parents have promised to support me until the business picks up properly. I also want to marry because the community despises single women and most of them have a bad reputation. While I may not explain in detail, the following issues are important to help women out of their suffering:

- Education
- Awareness of women's rights
- Improvement of economic policies to make credit facilities available to small scale business owners who are usually women
- Issues of women and health
- Roads and transport networks

**Date of interview – 11.02.2003**

**Grace Mukwnjeru Karani**

Grace Mukwnjeru Karani is forty eight and is a teacher at Kanini Primary School. She has taught for twenty eight years in five different schools in the district. The enrolment in these schools ranged between 160-1000 pupils, both boys and girls. Although she is a teacher in a public school, all her children attended private boarding schools. She says this is a common trend for those who can afford it because in most of the public schools facilities are limited in the rural areas, so, to ensure quality education for their children, it is better to send them to private boarding schools, although they are very expensive.

In our village only three families were able to send children to boarding schools and only five families, including the three families, are able to send their children to secondary schools without encountering financial difficulties. There are three other families who struggle very hard and manage to send their children to secondary schools. *(For instance they the sell firewood, charcoal, and their agricultural products. Mostly in the struggling families, girls are encouraged to study up to standard eight and then allow their brothers to continue to secondary schools).* Girls are also encouraged to marry so that the dowry that is paid can be used for their brothers' education.

In most of these schools in which I have taught, boys perform better than girls. The contributory factors to poor performance among girls are:

Girls are engaged in domestic chores after school to help their mothers while boys are encouraged to take their schoolwork seriously.

Particularly in this current school, the community is committed to the circumcision of girls. Immediately they go through the initiation their performance drops because after initiation they are more pre-occupied with their status. It is a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood and they are taught how to prepare for marriage. At this point, many girls also drop out of school to marry or because they have fallen pregnant.

To comment generally about education in the district I must say:

Poverty, cultural practices and stereotypes about women are key factors that affect women or girls' education in this area. Many children who start their primary education drop out in the course of time before reaching standard eight. Many of those who write their standard eight examinations do not manage to go to secondary schools because their parents cannot afford the fees. Many people depend for school fees on the sale of their agricultural produce, charcoal and firewood or they search for casual jobs which are very poorly paid. Sometimes the crop yield is poor because of the lack of required inputs such as fertilizers and labour which are necessary for a good yield. Also in most cases casual jobs are not available. At other times the rain is insufficient for the crops. Many girls also find employment as domestic workers to support the family. The impact of female circumcision affects school attendance because after the initiation, girls are pre-occupied with their status as a young woman and the need to marry.

To deal with women's suffering in this area I suggest the following issues need to be addressed and I will list in order of priority as follows:

- Education
- Health
- Agriculture
- Water
- Firewood
- Poverty

***Date of interview 17.02.2003***  
**Rose Mwikali Njeru**

Rose Mwikali Njeru is forty years old and a mother of four children. Mwikali and her husband depend wholly on what they produce on their small farm. For an income they have to look for casual jobs in the village. Sometimes the husband is given work felling trees and sawing timber but much of his money is used to support the local brewer. Their eldest child is now in standard seven and they are not sure whether they will be able to afford to send her to secondary school, yet her husband does not allow her to use contraception which means they are likely to have more children. She has the following to say:

I left school in standard seven, looked for a job and worked as a house girl for two years. My husband also left the school in standard seven. When we decided to marry, my husband assured me that things would be all right because he had a large piece of fertile land. This was not a major issue to me because our parents depended on tilling the land, so I thought we could do it too. Now that I am experiencing it, I find it really difficult, but I have no choice. To manage my daily activities is hard enough. For example, my two older children go to school, I leave the third one in the neighbourhood, and I have to carry this last one wherever I go (see photograph no.2.2). I have to look for jobs because we need money, as well as fetching water, collecting firewood and doing the cooking when I go home.

My husband also goes looking for jobs, but much of his money goes to beer drinking. I am not supposed to enquire how much he made or how he spent it. In my case he has to know where I was working, how much I made and how I spent the money. I go through very rough times but I have to remain in my marital home because my parents cannot allow me to return to my parental home because it is disgrace for the family and the land there belongs to my brothers.

I am encouraged, however, because now people are starting to think about women and girl children. In normal circumstances, especially when I was growing up, nobody cared if they suffered or not. Nobody cared where you are married or how you were treated as a worker. All that mattered then and still today is how much you do for the family especially as a mother and a wife. A poor woman does not make choices. I hope the employed ones with a personal stable income are able to do so. I wish I had managed to study and find permanent employment.

Some of the ways in which women suffer are:

- Our traditions and customs which place less value on girl children deny them adequate education.
- Women are always working and taking care of their families, which in most cases cause them to neglect their personal health.
- Women have to walk long distances because of inadequate transport provision and the lack of a transport network. I personally have to walk down a steep valley to the Thuci River to fetch water and also long distances to look for firewood. In addition I walk to the farm and to look for jobs every day. The bottom line is, poverty is the order of the day for most of us who are not employed.

***Date of interview 13.02.2003***  
**Edith Gata Kamundi**

Edith Gata Kamundi is from the Mwimbi division, and is a mother of six children. She is now retired nurse who trained as a Kenya Enrolled Midwife and a family planner. She is sixty eight. Of her six children the two girls attended school up to form four and three of the four boys studied up to university level. She attributes the differential educational attainment of her boys and girls to the environment in which they grew up. There was little encouragement of girls' education, which was a common trend in the area.

As a nurse I have had the opportunity to understand women's health and their experiences. Women's major complaints among others include:

- Problems in the joints caused by overworking.
- Headaches which in my assessment are related to the stress of overworking and family problems which range from violence to the daily struggle for basic needs.

I am now working as a private practitioner and therefore my clients must pay for the treatment. Financial problems are acute in the area. This affects both my client and the development of my clinic. Although I try my best to help, those who need help are more than I can handle. Some people die, not because of old age or natural death, but because medical care is either beyond what they can afford or there is not available.

The other aspect is that mostly women are the ones who bring the other members of the family to the clinic and this was also the case when I worked with the PCEA Chogoria Hospital. When women are sick they come by themselves and sometimes when they are in critical situations fellow women villagers bring them. Family planning in this area is well accepted which has helped to limit family sizes from ten to four in many households. It is only those methods that are put in place by women like pills and injections. They say that men do not want to use condoms let alone to have a vasectomy.

I must say that one of the problems, apart from the fact that they do not own property and are less educated, is that they also do not own their own bodies. I may not go into details about all that I think causes the problems but I wish to list them.

- Women's problems are exacerbated by the fact that women do not own property and land. The law should enshrine land and property ownership among women.
- Adequate health care for all is a priority because medication has become too expensive for the ordinary people to afford, especially the poor rural women.
- Boys and girls should be given equal opportunities in education.
- Violence against women should be eradicated.
- Agriculture should be given priority attention because it is the major resource for the majority in the area.
- The government should ensure accessibility to basic infrastructure like transport and a transport network, water and fuel wood.



**Date of interview–13.02.2003****Bridget Ntui Kiburi**

Bridget Ntui Kiburi is from the Mwimbi division and is fifty five. She is a retired primary school teacher. Apart from her teaching profession she was engaged in small-scale farming, which included zero grazing. To manage three Friesian cows without in the vicinity was no an easy task. She always woke up at 04.00 in the morning to make sure that she fetched enough water from the river for the cows and to take care of her other domestic chores. In addition to that she made sure that food for her family for the day was prepared and firewood set for use in her absence. During the day she was at school and night she worked in the house. She usually only had three hours sleep a night. She has the following to say:

Culturally a woman's work is clearly defined. For that matter men are not allowed to do such jobs as fetching water and firewood. While my husband and I were both teachers, I actually did more work because after school I did the domestic work while he was able to chat with colleagues and read newspapers. We both came home from school tired and attended the animals in the sense that he would check if they were well and cut grass for them while I ensured they had water and served the family with the help of the children. I tried to make my children share duties in the home but the society also influenced their participation. So as a mother of two girls and three boys, I can testify that with proper upbringing there can be sharing of responsibilities in the family, but because of the social influence, girls always work harder. This happens because, socially it is perceived that domestic chores are supposed to be wholly a woman's job and girls must work with their mothers as part of training while boys must also learn how to behave like their fathers.

Culturally boys and girls are viewed differently. This raises the question of property ownership and the education of girls. Property in this community is mostly land, livestock and more recently money. It is seemingly assumed that the more educated one is the more money one is likely to have. This is true to a certain degree. This perception does not hold for women and girl children because they cannot own property as culturally men are the owners of property and are believed to be the sole providers.

Just to make a general comment, the kind of life women live is the total inheritance young girls can expect because, from the fireplace where men used to sit exchanging ideas in the evening, they have now turned to watching the television and listening to the radio while the women and girls prepare the food. The boy children usually join their fathers and those who help their mothers in the kitchen are ridiculed.

A time is limited I shall simply list the issues that I think dehumanise women or make their work very difficult:

- Education and property ownership
- Policies that are not women friendly
- Cultural beliefs, customs and practices (FGM, early/forced marriages, polygamy etc)
- Health and women
- Division of labour - for example domestic chores like fetching water and firewood
- Domestic violence

**Date of interview 14.02.2003****Florence Kaburo Mbungu**

Florence Kaburo is from the Chuka Division and is forty nine years old. She is a trained evangelist with the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, Chuka Presbytery, working in the Ndagani Parish. She is an elder of the church on the Ndagani parish kirk session. She is also a wife and a mother of four children; three boys and one girl. In her ministry as an evangelist she has been able to interact with people at different levels. She has the following to share:

As a woman, in my interaction with my fellow women in the woman's guild, I have realized that women are more than willing to help each other. One of the areas in which women come together to

help is what we call a merry go round. Through this we form groupings and set goals for the equipping of our homes. We started by buying cups for each member, then plates and cooking pots. After equipping our kitchens we agreed to contribute a given amount of money per person and to buy items of individual interest. In this way many women installed water tanks in their homesteads and contributed towards the school fees of their children. We also organize ways to help one another on our farms during the harvest periods. One thing that is common in this area is that, irrespective of whether you are a teacher or a professional woman, you have to do your domestic chores, and make sure that your farms are well tended.

As an evangelist and an elder of the church there are a number of issues I feel are very challenging. In the first place we have always had men ministers or clergy. The only time we had a woman was when we had you (the researcher) as a student minister. We were happy and appreciated one of us being a minister but we were surprised that immediately after your ordination you went to the schools as a chaplain. When it comes to elders, women are in the minority. Currently we have forty five elders of which five are women. This indicates that if a given motion does not favour the men, it is not passed.

The other area that is difficult to handle is the church discipline. Most of the cases that are discussed are those of women who ran away from their homes because of violence. Mostly, instead of investigating the cause of desertion, those women are ex-communicated and reminded that they have to treat their spouses with care. They are reminded of what Proverbs thirty one says about a virtuous wife. In this way women have remained in abusive relationships to be good Christians.

The other common crime to come before the church disciplinary courts, is teenage pregnancy in unmarried girls. I have not heard cases brought against the men who impregnated the girls out of wedlock. Most of the disciplinary cases that we hear involve people whose children were conceived out of wedlock who have come to request the baptism of their children. Others come to be reinstated so that they can be married in the church. It is difficult for women because the constitution of the church states that to bring a charge against another, tangible proof is required. Most of the pregnant women do not dare expose their men partners for fear of the outcome. It is commonly held that women are the ones who tempt men in cases of sexual offences. Surely as women leaders, our hands are tightly tied.

The issue of female circumcision is another one that is very sensitive. For many years the Presbyterian Church has fought against it but since it is a long treasured tradition, it continues to be practised. Those who are not Presbyterians do it openly. There are some Presbyterians who support it and practise it but who want remain in the church so they secretly take their daughters either to their grandparents or to friends who are not bound by this regulation. Surprisingly when these incidences are discovered only the mothers and daughters are ex-communicated and it is assumed that the father was not involved which is not the case. In the first place, a woman would not dare to do it with out the consent of her husband.

Others issues include health, education and dowry. I put them together because women and girl children are negatively affected by them all. On the health front, women take care of the sick in the family to the extent that their health comes last. For instance, now with the issues of HIV/AIDS, women are supposed to take care of the sick and are not supposed to disclose the HIV status of the patient. Unfortunately most of them do not know how to protect themselves from being infected. Their spouses have infected others because, even when they know that their husbands are unfaithful, they cannot confront them. Women are at risk because they have no authority over their own bodies.

On education, up to this time there are families where boys are given priority. In those kinds of families girls will be taken to the schools with lower fees irrespective of their performance. In case of financial constraints, girls step aside for their brothers to continue. I am, however a witness to the fact that girls help their parents more even after marriage.

The dowry has lost the meaning it had in the traditional Meru culture. It was entirely a social connection for the two families and of course something to legalize the marriage. Today many

families have made it commercial and one of the implications is that the wife is perceived as a commodity. Accordingly she has to be made to work or else...

*Date of the interview 20.02.2003*

**Charity Maitha Njeru**

Charity Maitha Njeru is sixty seven years old. She is a mother of ten children of whom seven are her biological children, and three belong to her co-wife who died when her children were quite young. She has a background of a polygamous relationship. She was the second wife. Charity Maitha lives a life torn between the Mbeere culture and Christianity

She values both and she tries hard to live conveniently in the midst of such complexities. While she holds dear her Mbeere traditions and customs, she also embraces Christianity because her children are firm Christians (A mother of a Presbyterian minister and Redeemed Gospel pastor). With time however, she has become committed to her church and challenges her fellow Christians to practice what they preach especially when it comes to issues of female circumcision and fidelity in marriage. She has the following to say:

I started going to the church recently. In fact my children who now all have their own families motivated me. I have lived most of my life in accordance with Mbeere culture. Among other things my husband is polygamous although my co-wife died. I am the second wife. I did not force myself into his home. It was arranged between his first wife and his mother that I should marry him. This was acceptable and we lived with respect for each other. She died quite early, leaving behind three very young children. I took care of those children until each of them married. Including my seven biological children, I am a mother of ten children.

Issues that I know are difficult to handle as a woman in my culture are issues of death. From experience I know that once one loses a child to death, one has to be excluded to ensure that one does not spread the spirit of death. A cleansing ritual is performed by a medicine man so that one can be reunited with the society. This also happens when one loses a husband or wife. The issue of seclusion and the cleansing ritual are not taken as seriously by men as by women.

The issue of female circumcision is becoming very difficult because Christians say it is sinful. Fortunately, before I started going to the church all my daughters had gone through circumcision rite of passage. Even if it is said to be wrong, it keeps the girls from being sexually loose. Those girls who are not circumcised are very loose and most of them give birth before getting married. I would not encourage anyone to keep uncircumcised girls but I cannot force any one to it either.

Most of those who are calling it sinful did it and they also do it to their children in secret because they know it helps. To exonerate themselves they take their daughters to their grandmothers for circumcision for the sake of appearing to be good churchwomen. They should either stop it or do it in the open. They send their daughters to their grandmothers in order to retain their positions in the church. It is happening in big numbers but you only know of very few cases.

Other issues that are very important are, education and the dowry. To start with education, my husband and I are among the few who took education seriously in the 1950s and 1960s. To educate girls in early sixties was such a battle. We had to live with ridicule, and also to convince our children to take education seriously amidst peers who attended traditional dances, married early which was recommended especially for girls. Our eldest daughter, in the family (she was the second child of my co-wife) refused schooling. Fortunately all the others accepted it and reached tertiary level. There is big difference between a girl who has education and one who does not. Girls were only supposed to have an education which enabled them to write a letter, not for employment because their destiny was supposed to be marriage. To break this legacy was caused our daughters and ourselves to be outcasts from society. (Charity Maitha Njeru -20.02.2003).

**Interview date 10.02.2004**  
**Prisca Thigaa M' Miriti**

Prisca Thigaa M' Miriti is seventy nine years old and has been widowed twice. After the death of her first husband, she married her husband's brother, which is a cultural requirement. Culturally the children she bore with her husband's brother belong to her late husband. The husband therefore took care of everything; her material, social and emotional well-being. In short, this is a leviratic union. Prisca Thigaa does not complain about her leviratic union because that is her culture but her story reveals that women are exploited and oppressed. She has the following to say:

When my husband died we had two children. We had been married for a very short time and I was very young. This was not an end for me. I only needed to heed the cultural requirements. I had to undergo a cleansing ritual to free me from the spirit of death. The elders of my (marital) clan looked for a man who could perform the ritual. I was accepted back from seclusion by the community and then was united with my husband's brother. I lived with him until 1996 when he also died. We had three children together. I am therefore a mother of five children.

According to our culture these five children belong to my former husband. Since my husband's brother had another wife, my children and I have gone through very difficult times because there was no time when we seemed to belong. The most painful of it all was when the sharing of property came and my children were considered secondary to the others. Despite the fact that my former husband had much land and livestock my children struggled. They had to struggle for themselves because all that belonged to my former husband had been taken away. I had to endure my experiences as a remarried widow.

Owing to the difficult lifestyle to which my children were exposed, they did not do very well in school. Although there were struggles I must acknowledge the fact that marrying my husband's brother helped because, unlike many widows, I lived a life of respect and I was protected from other social problems. For instance, I did not have to struggle to secure land for my sons which were very crucial, although in the end they did not receive the full measure of what I all along knew belonged to them.

Other traditions with which people have problems are the dowry and female circumcision. As far as I am concerned giving a dowry is good because it was meant to show appreciation for the work that had been done by the bride's parents in bringing her to adulthood. Also it was a sign showing that her suitor valued her and that he would be responsible. In the event that he mistreated her or the marriage came to an end, he was not supposed to be given the dowry back. The dowry was not a payment, but something that cemented the relationship between the two families. People are now saying it is bad but that is because it is not done the right way.

Female circumcision is also something I cannot fully comment on today. During our days, it was a taboo for an uncircumcised woman to fall pregnant. She was considered a child. She would not manage her wifely duties well. It was during the circumcision that girls were taught how to be good wives, daughters-in-law and mothers. No wonder these days women keep on going back to their mothers because they are unable to manage their homes. (Prisca Thigaa M' Miriti 10.02.2003).

**FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS**

Of the five focus group discussions, three were held in Mwimbi Division one in Chuka and one in Igambang'ombe Divisions. One of those held in Mwimbi Division involved "homesteaders" who are unemployed, most of them living under intense poverty but who are engaged in various activities around the homestead to earn a living.

The second group involved women extension workers from the Ministry of Agriculture in Mwimbi Division. These women are actively involved in extension work in the district but currently based in Mwimbi division. While some were born in Mwimbi, some were not.

The third group involved women high school teachers from in Mwimbi Division drawn from three different schools (Chogoria boys High School, Chogoria Girls High School and Thigaa secondary). These teachers have a wide range of experiences because they have taught in other schools before. While some were born in Mwimbi others were not but have worked there for a long time.

The fourth group came from a PCEA Women's Guild from Chuka Presbytery. It was held at Chuka town. This group included women from different divisions because it was a presbytery level meeting. Chuka Presbytery includes the following divisions: Chuka, Magumoni and Igambang'ombe divisions. Women's Guild is basically comprised of women church leaders from the whole of the Presbytery. It also comprised of different categories of women (teachers, nurses, social workers, homesteaders etc) of women.

The fifth group comprised of some members of an NGO called Save Child Canada. This group is basically an activist group on issues related to girl child in the area. They create awareness about the significance of children's human rights like education, protection against early marriages, FGM, child labour and any other type of injustice against them.

Time and transport constraints prevented me from meeting with the groups in two divisions namely Muthambi and Magumoni in their own divisions. Fortunately I had already had discussions with women from these divisions in other groups for instance, among those who were Agriculture extension workers one of them came from Muthambi and also among the High School teachers one was from Muthambi. Three of those who were in the Women's Guild group came from Magumoni Parish because each Parish Council was supposed to send three members. In short all the divisions were represented in the focus group discussions.

In the next section we will look at each of these focus group discussions as they were carried out during the field work.

### **MAKENA WOMEN GROUP - MWIMBI DIVISION -10.02.2003**

Makena Women's group is comprised of forty-five (45) women. Only fifteen members managed to turn up for focus group discussion as reflected on the table below. Although they are faced with a lot of problems they have engaged in the following projects: - pig keeping, poultry keeping, running a grain store, helping in gardening and contributing money to assist (loan) one another. Among others, the problems of leadership and security have been major struggles in their endeavours.

Joyce Karuta Mate who is also the chairlady of the group convened the group. She is the elected councillor in the area. She has been a chairlady of the Women's Guild for many years, which she stepped down from to vie for civic leadership. She has a special commitment to community development. She notes with concern that although all the members of the community are in need of some vital facilities like road network and health facilities, women are hard hit because the majority of women in the rural community are so limited by resources and skills. One of the major limitations is low levels or lack of education because not many families are taking the education of girls seriously. She is of the opinion that without adequate formal education, one is vulnerable to all other problems.

The following issues were raised in this focus group, as being the key elements of women's experience:

- Low or lack of formal education
- Poor health or lack of health attention
- Hard labour in agricultural production, with little or no benefits - especially in cash crop production
- Domestic violence
- Lack of water in the vicinity
- Inheritance and property ownership
- Lack of credit facilities
- Difficulties around security for their properties
- Exclusion of women from decision-making forums
- Traditional widowhood cultures and practices that are not women friendly like FGM, early marriages, property ownership

The members that turned for the focus group discussion are tabulated below.

**Table 13: Names of the participants of Makena Women's Group**

	<b>Name of participants</b>	<b>Age (Yrs)</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Comments from the participants</b>
1	Priscila Gaturu Kithinji	71	Member	I feel very tired of our projects because we have continued to lose to the thieves all the time.
2	Sabina Ndeguru Mwihandi	55	Member	When property in our group is not secure we cannot promise to stay well because for example my husband does not help yet he wants to know how we are progressing. He threatens to stop my membership
3	Joyce K. Mate	52	Chairlady	It was out of the concern of the struggles that I go through as a woman that made me think of contacting my fellow women so that we could assist one another in thought, working together and improving our homes.
4	Alieta Kainyu Mati	52	Secretary	Joyce is better than us because she attends women's meetings at Chuka and other places. She has really helped us because by working together we have improved our homes in many ways.
5	Virginia Ntagana Ndeke	50	Member	All I want is to revive our original working spirit and identify a secure place.
6	Alison Kanyua Mutegi	50	Committee Member	I believe God has reason for all that happens to his people. God is on our side (Alison is also an evangelist in the area with the PCEA).
7	Rosemary Karuru M'kanga	50	Member	When we first started this place was so secure. It is recently that we have started experiencing thefts.
8	Phyllis Igonji Nkanata	45	Treasurer	Although I am the treasurer I do not know how to keep very good records but together with other officials, we help each other to keep the record of payments. I have a lot of problems trying to keep up with the banking requirements.
9	Agnes Irima Mpuhia	41	Member	It is through the group that I managed to buy my kitchen items (cooking pots, plates, spoons etc).
10	Mary Wanja Nkonge	38	Member	People talk about loans but I think they are supposed to be done by employed people.
11	Silica Mukwamugo Miriti	35	Member	The moment we allowed other people to advise us, some took advantage of us. We have since then lost a lot of property.
12	Silivenia Maringa Nkonge	30	Member	Some envious people and even some of the husbands of our group members, discourage our efforts. Some men say that if you allow women to have lot of money they become proud and disobedient.
13	Lucy Karauki Kinegeni	26	Member	Other men say, the moment women get money, they become disobedient to their husbands and do not attend to domestic duties well.
14	Jacinta Karimi	25	Member	I just want to learn from the older members since

	M'ribu			I joined the group the other day.
15	Pamela M'rimi	Kjuju	23	Member
				Now that I am new in the group, my prayer is that it gets revived because when we meet we are able to build one another materially, spiritually and morally.

#### **IGAMBANG'OMBE WOMEN ACTIVISTS GROUP IN GIRL CHILDREN'S RIGHTS WORKING UNDER (SAVE CHILD CANADA) – 17.02.2003**

This focus group involved some of the women who are actively involved with activities of *Save the Child Canada*. This is an NGO, which is active in Igambang'ombe Division advocating for the rights of girl children. This NGO puts an emphasis on the fight against Female Genital Mutilation, against early marriages and advocacy for children's right to education and more emphatically, that of girl child.

Winfred Mukami Nyaga and Jane Wanjagi Kiringa are workers with (Save Child Canada). Mukami is the Location's Program Officer in Kamwimbi location of Igambang'ombe Division. With the assistance of the two women (Wanjagi and Mukami), it was possible to bring eight women together. The NGO organises training for the trainers (TOT) and occasional workshops. The trainers penetrate the community who work very close with the local leaders like the chiefs, assistant chiefs, educationists and the church leaders in their areas of operation.

Winfred Mukami Nyaga, who is also the location programmer, makes the following remarks:

One very destructive aspect in the location is the fact parents still hold on the traditional belief that boy children are more important than girl children and therefore believe that it is more important to educate boy children. In most families, after the initiation girls are encouraged to get married. In other families girls step out of school for their brothers especially at high school levels. If this trend continues, low or lack of education will continue pulling women down and living in suffering.

Implicitly Mukami observes that traditional socialization continues to hold women captives, in that they have no authority not only in decision making but also about issues that concern them directly and even their own lives and bodies. To her, this situation has continued being a major obstacle to realizing quality life. Even when there are opportunities, women must wait to get permission from male members of the society. They are also keen to search whether whatever they wish to undertake is socially acceptable.

During the brainstorming session and discussion of the selected issues, members identified the issues and concerns listed below as the ones that contribute to women vulnerability.

- Education of girl children is taken as secondary to that of boy children in many families
- On decision making: -girls have take to take responsibilities made for them by others for instance, early marriages and Female Genital Mutilations (FGM),
- Traditional practices, beliefs and customs that are harmful to women eg FGM, forced and early marriages
- Sexual exploitation and abuse
- Child labour
- S.T.I and HIV and AIDS
- Lack of water within manageable distances
- Difficulties in hunting for fuel wood
- Transport
- Women and Health

This group went a step further to suggest what they thought the government and the church should do to transform their lives. They suggested that the government and the church could do the following:

- The government needs to continue community training which seems to be making some difference in the community as far as social construction and traditional beliefs are concerned.
- Tough measures should be taken against those caught in whatever kind of abuse.



- Government to enforce policies that are women-friendly and ensure that they are put in practice through local authorities.
- The church should join hands with the government to educate the masses on human rights and creating awareness about the negative traditional beliefs, norms and practices.

The names of the participants in this Focus Group Discussion are provided and tabulated in the table below

**Table 14: Names Of The Participants Of Igambang'ombe Women Activists Group**

Numbers	Name of participants	Age (Yrs)	Responsibility	Comments from the participants
1	Priscica Utuku Njeru	79	Member	I am happy to see what women can do now. When I was young only men could do such things. These days there are women doctors, police women, women church minister and others.
2	Annet W Nyaga	47	Member	As a nursery school teacher and a church leader, I am glad that I can now see a future in our society. Save Child Canada is such a blessing.
3	Rehab Igoki Njue	46	Member	As I grew up, what we are calling children's right did not exist. What our parents said was done without question and was the final authority. Am glad my children will have a different and better life.
4	Dorcas Nguga Njue	41	Member	It is true that girls do a lot of work not only because they are willing to help their mothers with domestic chores but because they are also taught from young age that it is their obligation to do so..
5	Rose Mwikali Njeru	40	Member	Girls are always there for their mothers but boys are out there hunting or fishing
6	Agnes W Nyaga	30	Member	While parent's tendency to protect girls is positive, it denies the girl child the opportunity to discover her potential independently. While my brother is free to do things, I am monitored and stopped from venturing.
7	Jane Wanjagi Kiringa	30	NGO worker	Working with (Save Child Canada) is such an opportunity for my child and I. I used to feel very bad about being a single mother but I am now empowered to know that I am capable of a better life and a future.
8	Winfred M Nyaga	24	NGO worker	Working with (Save Child Canada) has made me to know that young as I am, I can make a difference in the society and in the life of women.
9	Esther Mumbi Nyaga	13	Teenager	I enjoy following my aunt when they go to the women group meetings. I am also hoping to grow up to work with such organization because they plan good things for girls and women.

### **HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS – MWIMBI DIVISION 12.02.2003**

Eunice Warigia Githinji was the contact person who made it possible to gather together seven high school teachers. These teachers teach in the following schools: Thigaa Secondary School, Chogoria Boys' high school and Chogoria Girls' High School. There were more women teachers in these schools who were willing to attend the discussion but their husbands did not approve of their wives attending a womens' group meeting and to them this activity was classified as such.

The meeting was held in the house of one of the lady teachers whose husband was in support of this kind of undertaking and encouraged the ladies who were present to take advantage of such forums for their personal growth and development. The teachers chose to meet in this house because they thought that it would be a safe place for them as they share their experiences. They also had to meet after hours because they were coming from different schools. The following issues were raised in this focus group discussion and members suggested that they were key elements of women's experience:

- Government policies, acts of parliament and laws are not known to women therefore women continue to suffer injustices and dehumanization. They suggested that women need to be educated on and about them.
- Discrimination against women when it comes to the work place - especially on the issues of promotion of teachers and especially those who came from purely boys high schools. This is more severe if the head teacher is a man.
- Although the government and the NGOS are putting much emphasis on the education of girl children, cultural norms and beliefs remain major barriers to the education of girl children.
- Female circumcision affects girls adversely because once girls go through the initiation, they become unruly in school and a big number of them either get married they complete their studies or become victims of pre-marital pregnancies.
- Domestic violence. In most cases quarrels and fighting arise because men feel that women have no reason to enquire about their spending yet they expect that women should account for each and every coin they spend. Most of them argue that culture does not allow women to own property or keep on following up their husbands' spending. For those of us in paid employment, it is unfair but that creates tensions in the family resulting in violence.

During the brainstorming session, the members identified some issues and concerns and made the following suggestions. The church and the government should put specific machinery in place to ensure that there is:

- Unbiased participation and decision making
- Sharing responsibility in the family between husband and wife
- Responsible living
- Availability of health facilities bodily health, nutritional health, reproduction health and care taking.
- Transparency
- Accountability

On the same note one of the women requested that her observation and concern be noted and recorded as follows:  
I Jennifer K Murigu, wish to make the following observation:

While low or lack of education puts women down, those of us who are "educated" are still oppressed by the institutional structures that are so patriarchal. It is more dehumanising when a woman is employed, contributes to the economy of the family and yet her contribution is not given due regard. Even in families where men and women are both in paid employment, men have the upper hand in decision-making; more so men are the owners of property in our society. At the places of work, women must work more to prove themselves. My other major concern is that even if there are policies that ensure equal treatment of women and men I am not sure they are rightfully functional to help women enjoy the promise equality.

Names of the high school women teachers who participated in the focus group discussion are provided and tabulated below.

**Table 15: Names Of Participants Of High School Teachers**

	<b>Name of participants</b>	<b>Age (Yrs)</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Comments from the participants</b>
1	Regina Kimathi	37	English	It is a real challenge for women who are in professional careers because at the end of the day they have to attend to their domestic chores while husbands wait to be served.
2	Euphemia K. Thairu	29	Commerce	My experience as one working away from home, and married in a different tribe is that women in most Kenyan tribes struggle with the same issues of life.
3	Cathrine K Mukua	33	Business Ed.	Life is a challenge especially when a woman is married in a different tribe.
4	Janeffer K Murigu	28	Kiswahili	I agree that I am a high school teacher and church minister's wife, but experience has taught me that being a woman places one in a corner that denies one authority of what she has even worked for. Education is important, yes, but social construction determined by patriarchy is terrible.
6	Mercy K. Muthuri	32	Geography	I look forward to a moment when the government will be able to address women's vulnerability adequately especially on the issues of property ownership and inheritance.
7	Jane Kathurima	39	History	The Meru tradition that denies women custody of children denies women and children certainty and hope. If the man decides to divorce, children and mother are assured separation whether the man is responsible or not.
9	Mukwanjagi	32	Homescience	There is a misunderstanding that home science is for girls. Very few boys venture into this field.
10	Eunice Warigia Gthinji		Mathematics	I take my career very seriously but also find satisfaction in social gathering and church leadership. I also motivate girls and parents to know that boys and girls alike can do well in mathematics.
11	Joyceline Kawira	27	Chemistry	Many people wonder that I teach Chemistry. It is commonly believed that chemistry is a men's subject. I am happy to be a role model to the young girls.

### MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE EXTENSION OFFICERS -MWIBMBI DIVISION – 12.02.2003

This group involved women working as extension officers in the Ministry of Agriculture and who are actively involved in extension work in Meru South District based in Mwimbi division headquarters - Kieganguru.

Agnes Ndundu Mwenda who is also the Division Horticultural Crops Officer was the contact person who managed to bring the other three extension workers together. Agnes is currently carrying out research on the effects of bad health on agriculture in the district. During the brainstorming session and discussion of the selected issues the group came to a consensus that among other things women experience difficulties and hardships and raised issues of concern in the following order:

- Land ownership
- Land inheritance/ property ownership
- Discriminatory culture that excludes women
- Cultural assumptions that prescribe duties of a woman in a family set up.
- Domestic violence
- Marketing
- Transport
- Credit facilities not available for women
- Poor health (Women, health, and hard labour)
- Water
- Land and widowhood
- Low education status for women and the difficulty in advancement due to:
- Negative attitudes towards education for girl children.

The names of the women who participated in this Focus Group Discussion provided and tabulated in a table below.

**Table 16: Names of the Participants of Ministry Of Agriculture Extension Officers**

Numbers	Name of participants	Age (Yrs)	Responsibility	Comments from the participants
1	Dorothy I Mugambi	45	Extension services Maara Location	It is sensitive to make comments because they are usually not taken kindly. However, as an extension officer for a long time now, I must say farmers do not take women as seriously as they do men.
2	Agnes N Mwenda	41	Horticultural Crops Officer incharge Mwimbi Division	The issues of decision-making, ownership of land, inheritance, property ownership and the traditional perception that women do not own property are most dehumanising and have retained women in poverty and gross injustice.
3	Anne W Muriuki	41	Extension services Ganga Location	Transport is a major challenge for extension workers. Yet farmers expect so much from us in terms punctuality and output.
4	Annisia W Kibaara	37	Extension services Chogoria Municipality	Farmers expect us to provide them with basic farm implements but the government does not supply. We end up in a big dilemma

### **CHUKA PRESBYTERIAL WOMAN'S GUILD MEETING HELD ON AT PCEA CHUKA TOWN CHURCH 16-02-2003**

Woman's Guild is one of the standing committees in the PCEA. The leadership of this group starts from the grassroots and goes up to the national level. At the Presbytery level, women from from all the parishes of that given presbytery gather together to discuss issues that pertain women in the Presbytery and the Church in general. This leadership draws women from different professions and categories. In this case it also drew women from three different divisions including Chuka, Magumoni and Igambang'ombe Divisions.

During the brainstorming session and discussion that followed women put together the following observations:

- Woman's Guild is the strongest church group in the PCEA thus far in terms of financial ability and general support to the church. Most of our projects are non profit and those that profit making, make marginal profits. Our projects include institutions of learning, rental houses and now the newly opened Guest House and Conference Center at Makupa, Mombasa.
- Women are few in major decision forums of the church which are characterized by the three major courts of the church namely; Kirksession, Presbytery, and the General Assembly. I am concerned that we rarely get women moderators and clerks of the Presbytery not to mention that we really get women in the Head Office in the GA secretariate.
- The general assumption that women are supposed to clean the church and make tea for the church leadership, has distorted the understanding of women in leadership. The majority of women in church leadership is at the level of deacons who are not involved in the decision and policy making of the church.
- Immoral cultural practices are crucial for our church. These practices include: Female Genital Mutilation, early marriages, polygamy, and compromising girls' education. As a church woman's committee, we are trying our best to fight but also call on the wider church and the government to join hands to ensure that everything is under control.
- Absence of women in decision-making forums is conspicuously noticeable in the church and society.
- In terms of the church and social development, the Woman's Guild has projects from grassroots to central committee level that all women who are members are shareholders. Through this, we train women how to participate in social development and also to become self reliant.

The names of the the participants in this Focus Group Discussion are provided below and their individual comments are also provided.

**Table 17: Names of Participants of Chuka Presbyterian Woman's Guild**

	<b>Names</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Comments</b>
1	Priscilla K Njagi	40	Chairperson	Women and children are at risk of immoral cultural practices like FGM. Girls' education is not taken seriously; child labour is still prevalent although we are trying our best to change the situation.
2	Ann W Ngai	46	Secretary	Our Presbyterian is unique because of the variety. Those members that come from lower zones have different experiences than those from the upper zones. There are more cases of school drop out in the lower zones than the upper. By upper zones I mean from Magumoni parish upwards. And by lower zone I specifically mean Igambang'ombe and some parts of Magumoni.
3	Hellen M Nyaga	47	Treasurer	I experience difficulties getting cess from the parishes that are in the lower zones. Some of our congregations from Magumoni parish and Kamwimbi Outreach have

				difficulties completing their cess.
4	Rose U Crispus	57	Member	I look back to the 1980s when some of our women church ministers were young girls and we got so excited. 1989 we had more than ten girls doing interviews for church ministry. Five qualified for sisterhood and two for ordained ministry. Most of these girls were members of Woman's Guild when they were really young.
5	Agnes J Muturi	53	Member	It is very difficult sometimes when one is willing to help girls but there are no legal machineries to assist. For instance, in many cases people will refer one to what culture requires.
6	Ened E Njeru	54	Member	As I share with a number of women colleagues in the committee and at the place of work, women are very disadvantaged financially because even many of us who are employed have to explain how our money is spent. That is one of the reasons why some women do not have money to pay when we agree as woman's guild members to pay a given amount for for our projects.
7	Betreace K Njoka	38	Member	In many areas where FGM is practiced, it is done in deep secret especially among PCEA Christians because once it is known to have been done for her/his girl/s one is ex-communicated from the church for at least six months.
8	Mary M Isaack	42	Member	I must say that in Kenya many families should be charged for child labour in the name employing primary school leavers as "house girls". Rarely will one find domestic workers who are mature men and women.
9	Grace M Njoka	57	Member	The Woman's Guild and the church at large has really helped our communities to realize that all children should be treated equally although it is really difficult to realize the anticipated result.
10	Florence C Ireri	64	Eastern Region Organizer	For the more than twenty years that I have worked with the Woman's Guild, I have always struggled to ensure that women fellowship with each other and their faith commitment are emphasized.
11	Stella Njeru	50	Member	As an educator and a Christian I am an activist on the need to teach children about God when they are still small. I therefore ensure PPI is taken seriously.
12	Rose K Mutegi	44	Member	We organize seminars for different ages but I thank God because the Christian Education department is now taking seminars very seriously for all categories of members and taking care of the PCEA sponsored schools.
13	Beatrice Ndura	38	Member	We ensure that all the women across the church are members of the national project by way of paying given registration fees when they are entering the Guild..

## **SUMMARY FROM THE FIVE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS**

First and foremost, it is important to note that focus group discussion as a method of data collection involves persons specifically selected owing to their particular interest, expertise or position in their particular community. This is done in an endeavour to collect information on a number of issues, as well as brainstorming a variety of solutions and ultimately to facilitate group discussions, as a tool of data collection and possibly policy construction (Sarantakos 1998).

The different groups of people were able to come together, discuss the identified issues and brainstorm together the possible solutions. While the discussions were geared towards data collection, individual experiences shared in a group discussion were helpful to individual persons as they related their own experiences to each other's experiences.

The five different groups that held focus group discussions were people who either worked together or had related interests. For instance, the contact persons for the women teachers reported that six of the nine teachers who turned up did so because they really needed a space where they could share their personal experiences. These teachers also had major concern for the girl children at homes and in schools. The other common factor was that they had issues they felt were important for them as professional teachers. While they did not have solutions to most of the issues they raised, the members felt that the discussion was very empowering as each of them reflected on their individual experiences.

The group discussion held at Chuka was with churchwomen leaders, although they were all leaders, they were from different division, different economic backgrounds and different professions. But they were church leaders entrusted by their local churches and together have a commitment to preaching the Gospel in word and deeds. In a personal interview with the Regional Woman's Guild Organiser,<sup>72</sup> she said, "as women in the church leadership we are committed to realising development in the church and in our community. We have built church and church halls, schools, rental houses and encourage each other to be good examples in our own villages by working hard and keeping our homes neat".

Although they were carried out at different times and places, all five discussion groups identified the need for the church and the government to join hands in finding solutions for the gross injustices experienced by women. Three (women of Makena women's group in Mwimbi Division; Church women leaders in Chuka Division and the group of women from Igambang'ombe Division) out of the five groups identified education as core to quality life for women. The other two groups (extension officers in the Ministry of Agriculture in Mwimbi Division and the group of women high school teachers) identified the need to have policies that take women and their concerns seriously. The list of issues are long as listed below but after the discussions and brainstorming the groups were of the opinion that all other issues put together are important but the need for appropriate policies and laws that must enforce and ensure justice is granted to all especially the vulnerable in the society.

## **SUMMARY OF THE CONCERNS OF WOMEN THAT CUT ACROSS THE FIVE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS**

The focus group discussion under review in the previous section took place in different places and times. It is however important to note that a number of issues and concerns were alike and took the same dimensions. In the section below, are the ten key issues that were identified and prioritized in the five groups.

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<sup>72</sup> Eastern Region that she organizes covers and goes beyond the old Meru District to Isiolo and Marsabit. The Woman's Guild was among the first Christian groupings to fight for women's human dignity and wholeness by challenging female circumcision which the Government heeded and banned irrespective of its cultural deep roots. See Njoroge J.N. 2000. *Kiama Kia Ngo: An African Christian Feminist Ethic of Resistance and Transformation*. Accra: Legon Theological Studies.

- (1) Women are excluded from *decision-making*. For instance in issues of land ownership, only men are called when the father wants to pass on the land inheritance to his sons. The wives do not participate nor are they supposed to be briefed on the proceedings. This happens even to the ones whose husbands are not alive. And the share of land (if any is given to her) is allocated to the boy children.
- (2) Issues of *property ownership*. While the government has it that woman has a right to property ownership, on the ground there is much discrimination when it comes to such.
- (3) *Traditional socialization* that continues to present women as ones that to belong to the fathers, brothers, and clan seem to be persistent and continue to deny women a sense of identity.
- (4) Dehumanizing *cultural traditions* and practices like FGM, early marriages, polygamy various taboo and rituals were cited in all five groups which makes it a crucial aspect of concern.
- (5) *Participation*. In this region women are major workers for agricultural production. When it is time for picking tea or coffee women are major labourers but interestingly, they are not the ones who go for the pay out, or who are involved in decision making on the spending of the outcome. Women turn up in big numbers for training but they are not there when the men vote for the cooperative leaderships.
- (6) Government *policy makers and laws* should be able to take seriously the gross injustices experienced by women.
- (7) Minimal number of women in the church's major *decision-making bodies* is seen as a major challenge to the church in her role in engaging the society in the process of engendering administration and social structures.
- (8) Women's experience of vulnerability and gross injustices also *cut across the focus group* discussion which confirms the need to investigate into the issue of vulnerability critically.
- (9) The issue of women's *health and HIV and AIDS* also emerged very strongly and a call to address it seriously was underscored.
- (10) Education was identified in the five discussion groups as crucial factor that has held girl child and by extension women captives of immeasurable injustices and vulnerability.