


Proverbs 31 in dialogue with Acts 9:36–43: An Afro-feminisation of Mother Earth for equity

**Author:**Dorcas C. Juma¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Pwani University, Kilifi, Kenya

Corresponding author:

Dorcas Juma,
jumadorcas@hotmail.com

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A close relationship between masculinity, alcoholism, widowhood and gendered poverty is evident in contemporary African society. Alcohol consumption among young men begins at an increasingly early age due to availability of low-priced alcohol presented in different varieties. Young, beautiful and sexy girls are used to advertise alcohol. Many young men are addicted to alcohol and totally unable to be free from alcohol addiction. This sad state coupled with the impact of globalisation on the economies of many African countries has left many men jobless. Consequently, many households are headed by women in a patriarchal context where men are supposed to be the heads of the family. Through an Afro-feminisation of Mother Earth lens, this article re-read Proverbs 31 in dialogue with Acts 9:36–43, to show the role of women in the socio-economic sustainability of the family, society and in enhancing gender equity.

Contribution: This article re-read Proverbs 31 in dialogue with Acts 9:36–41 as resources for enhancing gender equity. An Afro-feminisation of Mother Earth for sustainable development was presented in ways that open up possibilities for the life of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 1:28 to flourish.

Keywords: dialogue; Afro-feminisation; equity; Mother Earth; development.

Introduction

Proverbs 31:10–31 continues to be celebrated by men and women readers in African Christian settings because of how 'the noble wife' is described in form of a question in 31:10 'a wife of noble character who can find?' Thus, Proverbs 31:10–31 continues to inspire many African Christian men to yearn for a wife with such qualities and women to desire to be like this noble wife. Even so, for Anderson (2020:214), 'this passage was written not as a description of a specific woman, but as a list of specific qualities that a man should look for in a future wife'. In fact for Bland (2002:283), 'if such a noble wife is perceived as a real wife who existed, then it creates an impression that a woman only exists to serve her husband'. This way, the husband can have free time to idle and loiter around in the town square receiving praises on account of the hard work of his wife. While this noble wife may seem a figment of imagination, hard-working women like that of Proverbs 31:10–31 do exist in African patriarchal settings (Juma & Cherop 2015:207). Unfortunately, alcohol consumption and sexual immorality have highly increased in many African countries and many young women have been forced to work extra hard to support their families and extended families (see Pompili et al. 2010). Due to overconsumption of alcohol, or depression as a result of withdrawal symptoms, some men have committed suicide or died due to kidney failure, leaving behind young widows who must work hard to provide for the family.

Acts 9:36–43 gives a picture of the presence of widows who were economically supported by the handwork of Tabitha. It has been observed, that 'the widows seem to have lost their means of support and identity within a male dominated society and were in many ways helpless' (Studia Missionalia 2000:288). It is not immediately clear from the text if the husbands of the widows died as a result of alcoholism. However, it is possible to see that Tabitha used the skills of her hands to engage in trade to cushion widows from harsh economic challenges (see Calpino 2014). This way, she directly contributed to the economic development of her society, thereby transforming the lives of the vulnerable and bridging the gender gap in a patriarchal society in which trade, leadership, and the public space are dominated by men (see Williams 2001:43). In the rural areas of many African countries like Kenya, women work hard in the farm, while others venture into

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small-scale businesses in order to improve their livelihood. In fact, most of the women have organised themselves into socio-economic self-help support groups that have even enabled them to purchase land and construct rental houses.

Direct contribution of African women to sustainable development and the bridging of the gender gap cannot be underestimated (see eds. Bellucci & Eckert 2019:606; see also Kinyanjui 2014:1). In many women fellowships in African churches, Proverbs 31:10–31 is read to encourage Christian women to strive and be like the noble wife of Proverbs 31. Many African women have viewed the noblewoman of Proverbs 31:10–31 as a role model that other women, especially African women can look up to if women want to transform their lives and families into respectable role models regardless of race, class and culture (George 2008:191). Africa is a patriarchal society. A patriarchal society is that in which male dominance over women is systemic and well-structured in ways that socialise women to believe that patriarchy is a norm and male dominance over women is a societal tradition. Bahlieda (2015:15–67) has re-emphasised how ‘patriarchy is now draped in the clothing of postmodern civilisation with all its superficial artifice and guile operating in exactly the same way that it did thousands of years ago’. In the name of religion and culture, religious sacred texts, both oral and written, continue to be used to make women custodians of the very oppressive systems that empower men to dominate women. What is more, the impact of globalisation that has rendered many men jobless and subjected them to alcoholism has made Proverbs 31 to find a fertile ground of misinterpretation in African Christian settings. Lars Kamer (2022), for example, has given the statistics of the consumption of alcohol per capita in Kenya by beverages in the years 2010–2019. The statistics shows that ‘alcohol consumption in Kenya alone was measured at an average of nearly 1.7 liters of pure alcohol per capita in 2019’. Notably, ‘Beer was the source of around 0.81 liters of pure alcohol consumed per person in the country’. ‘The same amount’ it is observed, ‘registered with the consumption of spirits’ so that ‘overall, the volume of recorded alcohol consumption in Kenya increased to the extent that around 1.5 liters of pure alcohol per capita were consumed in the country in 2010 alone’.

Some men have understood Proverbs 31:10–31 to imply that if a man finds a wife with such qualities, he will just relax at the expense of the hard work of the wife. On the other hand, Proverbs 31:1–9 is understood by some men to imply that alcoholism is allowed to help poor men to forget their troubles albeit for a while. This is something that should be of concern in patriarchal societies where negative masculinity goes un-criticised, and gender-based violence is blamed on alcoholism creating gender inequality while widows have no voice, hence engendering poverty (see Berger 2016:166). Thus, Proverbs 31:10–31 and Acts 9:36–43 can arguably offer a platform for engaging socio-economic dignity talks for sustainable development and gender equity. According to Manyonganise (2010:20), in African countries like Zimbabwe, ‘discriminatory cultural beliefs deter women and girls from participating in socio-economic empowerment of a country’.

Manyonganise (2010:20), therefore, proposes that ‘gender equality and women’s empowerment are essential for poverty elimination and sustainable development’. It is from this perspective that one sees the need to steer conversations on women empowerment especially from an Afro-feminisation of Mother Earth for gender equity and sustainable development from a biblical point of view. An Afro-feminisation of Mother Earth for gender equity and sustainable development is anchored on the ‘ecofeminist philosophy which is open to ideologies that respect, revere and care for living beings’ as proposed by Porselvi (2016:35).

An Afro-feminisation of Mother Earth, sustainable development and gender equity

The inspiration towards an Afro-feminisation of Mother Earth is anchored in Genesis 2:9 where one gets the opportunity to envision a beautiful world where all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that are pleasing to the eye and good for food. According to Genesis 2:9, out of the ground, God caused to grow every tree that is pleasant to the eyes, that which is good for food, the tree of life and also in the midst of the garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Besides the beauty of the trees for food and for the knowledge of good and evil, the beauty of the Garden of Eden is that God created men and women in God’s image and likeness and are both given the powers to dominate over the earth in a way that can allow for life to flourish. According to Long and Strickler (2001:1) in Genesis 1:27–18; ‘Adam and Eve were created to be helpmates. They are to share equally in the responsibility of dominion over the earth’. Thus, a re-reading of Proverbs 31 in dialogue with Acts 9:36–43 and an Afro-feminisation of Mother Earth for sustainable development and gender equity mean the following:

- addressing the link between masculinity, alcoholism, widowhood and gendered poverty in African communities,
- creating a link of the synergies between gender equality, on the one hand, and economic, social and environmental sustainability on the other,
- recognising the fact that when women have greater voice and participation in public administration and the distribution of public resources it is possible to mitigate poverty and address gender disparities.

This way, it is possible to see that gender equality and sustainable development can reinforce each other in powerful ways and enhance the goal of achieving sustainable development for all and to realise human dignity for all as proposed by the United Nations report on World Survey on The Role of Women in Development (2014).

An Afro-feminisation of Mother Earth for sustainable development and gender equity can be achieved if one understands the link between masculinity, alcoholism, widowhood and gendered poverty in Africa. Speaking about the shock of widowhood, marital status and poverty in

Africa, Van De Walle (2016) points out that 'by the age of 80, 80% of women are living in widowhood'. Just like gender, masculinity is a social construction. It has been observed that 'in the case of western societies, masculinity is primarily defined through ideals of dominance and physical power over women, men, and children' (Zevallos 2013). Socialisation normalises aspects that allow for those who control 'the others' to maintain the status quo. At the same time, the controlled and dominated are socialised to believe that masculinity is biological and therefore the norm. The traditional traits of views that are also accepted in contemporary Western and African society as masculine include sexual prowess, physical strength, courage, independence, leadership, assertiveness and a life spiced with the drinking of alcoholic drinks such as wine or whisky (see Carrasco 2018:58). Western society presents itself as civilised in the sense of criticising male dominance over women. Yet, the traditional patriarchal aspect of the father as breadwinner and the mother as homemaker is still upheld as ideal, an aspect that is highly emulated in African settings as a Christian virtue (see Mäkelä 2004:202).

Notably, many African countries were colonised by Western European countries. Thus, the Western concept of masculinity has found its way into the African patriarchal context. In contemporary African society, masculinity varies by social class (see Rosenfield & Mouzon 2012:281). Gendered power relation continues to contribute to negative masculinity, alcoholism, widowhood and gendered poverty in Africa. Socially constructed gender roles are used to define women in categorisations of wife material, 'spoiled brats', slay queens, ideal wives, mothers as caregivers and fathers as wage earners, or men as strong men or real men (see Sackey 2006:61). Such socially constructed gender roles continue to widen the gap between men and women preventing women's socio-economic contributions to societal development from being appreciated, supported, or even integrated into the global developmental agenda. Many women in Kenya, for example, depend on farming and leasing of land for economic sustainability in the rural areas or rental houses in the urban areas. But when a husband dies, the land is mostly taken away from the widows, and the property in the form of rental houses is also taken away from women. This continues to happen in many African countries that have constitutional laws that protect the rights of women to land and property owners because of religious ideologies and cultural laws (see Akinola 2018; Ross 2013:1–10).

The globalisation of the world brought with it the need for a global approach towards women's socio-economic empowerment for sustainable development. As used in this article, the term globalisation is used from the context in which trade and technology have made the world into a more connected and interdependent place (see McGovern & Wallimann 2016:143). One aspect of globalisation is the promotion of forms of industrialisation and agriculture that are more exploitative of both human and natural resources (see Dixon et al. 2001). The Beijing Declaration and Platform

for Action which was signed in 1995 committed the world to end discrimination, promoting women's rights, and advancing gender equality and women's empowerment (United Nations (UN) Women 2020). However, the word Beijing seems to have triggered a negative aspect of masculinity in many African countries. In Kenya, there was an outcry from men who felt that women had been given the power to disempower men. Many men felt threatened and continued to remind women about their responsibilities of cooking for their husbands and taking care of the children (see Twasiima Patricia Bigirwa 2020). Going forward, women started to be differentiated and categorised as ideal or spoiled women. Some women got the opportunity to be economically stable and ventured into income-generating opportunities in the public sphere. Unfortunately, in contexts where men became jobless as a result of negative aspects of globalisation, alcoholism became an avenue to either hide their sorrow or demand their rightful positions in the household as heads of the family (see International Monetary Fund [IMF] 2000).

An Afrocentric approach to Proverbs 31 in dialogue with Acts 9:36–43

In this article, an Afrocentric approach to Proverbs 31 in dialogue with Acts 9:36–43 is used in order to offer a contextually grounded social-economic approach. The approach is applied to Proverbs 31 in dialogue with Acts 9:36–43 in ways that offer a counter and redemptive reading that can allow for African Christian patriarchal settings to value women's socio-economic contributions to sustainable development. In many African Christian settings, the Bible in general and Proverbs 31:10–31 in particular are used to socialise women to believe that it is noble to work hard and submit all their income to their husbands. Thus, many women work very hard to earn money, but submit the income to the head of the family, so that the husbands can decide how the money should be spent. Oppressive interpretations of Proverbs 31 continue to find fertile ground in African Christian settings where the Bible is used to stamp the authority of men over women in the name of God. Women will always be reminded of what 'the bible says'. In contexts where women transform themselves into characters in the Bible in order to tell their own stories, it is important to re-read Proverbs 31 and Acts 9:36–43 in ways that are liberating and not oppressing.

Proverbs 31 speaks about two women – the nameless mother of King Lamuel in 31:1–9 and the noble wife of 31:10–31. While the 'noble' wife of Proverbs 31:10–31 was busy working hard to add economic value to her family and, the Mother of King Lamue was the voice of the voiceless who reminded his son that it is not good for Kings to use their energy on sex and be drunk with alcohol (31:3). The mother of King Lamuel was raising this concern at a time when men were drinking themselves to death while a woman was working so hard to make a difference in a socio-economically broken society. Just like the Song of Songs, Proverbs 31 is dominated by women.

Implicit in this is the fact that women are endowed with inherent wisdom and courage to fight for a just society that allows for the lives of all to flourish. Notably, a just society can only be realised if the voices from the margins are empowered to speak. This can be made possible through the transformation of unjust societal structures in ways that allow for the voices of all to be heard (see Longchar 2021:119). In Proverbs 31:10–31, we encounter the efforts of a woman who is sharing what she has earned out of trade and the proceeds from her land with her family and the female servants in her household. We are also told that she opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.

In Acts 9:36–43, we are told that in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha whose Greek name is Dorcas. She was always doing good and helping the poor. When she died, the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda. They sent two men to him to urge Peter to come where the body of Tabitha was lying upstairs in the room. When Peter arrived, widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. Arguably, Dorcas was using her handcraft to support widows. It is not very clear from the text if the widows had been neglected and were oppressed. In African matrilineal societies widows are subjected to gender discrimination and mental torture through rituals that remind them that they are a special case (see Phiri 2007:35). Thus, through an Afrocentric approach to Proverbs 31 in dialogue with Acts 9:36–43, it is possible to see that:

Gender discrimination, negative masculinity, the problem of alcoholism and the discrimination against widows characterise all societies but most negatively affect the poorest and the most vulnerable groups in society, including women, girls, widows and children (see Ukagba 2010:268).

In Kenya, for example, the oppression of widows on matters of land continues to widen the gender gap. According to Nyawira (2017), Kenya is under the category of countries that are notorious for oppressing widows. That is why Kanengoni (2016:44), has observed, that ‘women’s access to land in many African countries is a matter of life and death’. In the Old Testament, widows are put in the same category as orphans – the fatherless (Ps 68:5). Unfortunately, in the contemporary world, the rapid globalisation of the world’s economies has come with structural adjustment programmes that weaken mostly national economies and nation-states of African countries that were already struggling with the impact of the slave trade and colonisation (see United Nations Human Settlements Programme [UNHSP] 2012:3). Yet, the voices of women have the power to challenge power structures and demand justice for the marginalised while at the same time recognising the role of women in societal transformation. In Proverbs 31, it is possible to see how the voice of the mother of King Lamuel challenges her son to speak for the voiceless and demand justice for those whom societal structures have silenced through oppression. In a society in which alcoholism is supposed to be a source of solace to the poor and needy, the voice of a woman gains the courage to remind the kings and

rulers to be the voice of the voiceless (Pr 31:1–2). The kings and rulers are supposed to streamline unjust structures in ways that can allow for all to live a life of dignity.

In a society where women have been forced to work as commercial sex workers, (31:1–2), female servants (31:15), or are languishing in poverty, a woman is working extra hard in the fields; she is holding the distaff and grasping the spindle with her fingers so that she can open her arms to the poor and also provide for her female servants. Akemu (2021:40–41) points out that ‘the root cause of the problems of Proverbs 31, which forced women to target kings and rulers with their sexuality to earn some income was poverty’. In fact, it seems that the oppression of the poor characterised the Old Testament to the extent that Isaiah had to implore the Israelites to learn to do right, seek justice, to defend the oppressed, take up the cause of the fatherless and to plead the case of the widow (see Is 1:17).

In a society in which widows are discriminated against, we also see a woman in Acts 9:36–43 using the skills of her hands to support widows. Many African women are hardworking, working on farms and running small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and even have shares in real estate business. Some are skilled with handcraft work and they have used the skills of their work to transform society.

Anna Elisha Mghwira, one of the founding matriarchs of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (Circle), for example, was creative with her hands (see Wikipedia 2021). Mghwira, came from a socio-economically humble background. Thus, she used her skills in braiding hair and crocheting work to contribute to her school fees for her 2 years of secondary education. In fact, some of her products were sold in the United States by one of her teachers, earning her US\$1200 (Wikipedia 2021). Eventually, her handicraft turned profitable after her clients learnt of her skills and decided to donate more through the purchasing of her products so that the income can go towards her school fees in which, she used her handicraft to educate herself up to ‘A’ level (see Anna Mghwira Profile | CV | Biography 2021). After being equipped with the agenda of the Circle, that is, the liberation of African women from negative masculinity, Mghwira combined religion and politics to transform her society in ways that paved way for the first female president in Tanzania. In her, it is possible to see the mother of King Lamuel of Proverbs 31:1–9, the noble wife of Proverbs 31:10–31 and Tabitha of Acts 9:36–43.

Mothering the earth from an Old Testament gendered perspective

The concept of mothering the earth from an Old Testament gendered perspective is a personification of the earth from a feminine perspective. The concept focuses on the life-giving and nurturing aspects of the earth by embodying it in the form of the mother. In Isaiah 66:13, it is written ‘as a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem’ (NIV). The preliminary chapters

of Isaiah, especially Isaiah 1–39, centre around the announcement of YHWH's judgement against Israel and Judah and a proclamation of judgement against Israel. Following the proclamation is the devastating destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the exiling of God's people. In Lamentation 1:1, it is written:

How deserted lies the city, once so full of people! How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave. Lamentations 1:1 (NIV)

In the context of gloom, Isaiah 66:13 envisages redemption arising from it. In the recent past, there has been an outcry of a 'triple crisis that is threatening the well-being and survival of millions of people around the world' (United Nations [UN] 2022). It has been pointed out that 'the building blocks of happy, healthy lives, clean water and fresh air; a stable and predictable climate is in disarray, putting the Sustainable Development Goals in jeopardy' (UN 2022). Genesis 1:10–14 gives one an opportunity to envision Mother Earth from which life flourishes. Genesis 2:10–14 speaks about a river that flowed out of the garden of Eden to water the garden, a river which divided and became four rivers, namely Pishon, Gihon, Hiddekel (the Tigris) and Phirat (the Euphrates). The springs of water are an embodiment of life. Her bosom feeds plants, animals and human beings. Through the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:10, one arguably envisions a transformation of death in the contemporary world into life.

Mothering the earth from an Old Testament gendered perspective begins from the Garden of Eden in Genesis. In Genesis 1:27–28, God created a man and a woman in God's own image and blessed them, saying to them 'be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it'. Genesis 1:27–28 has been underscored as a hotbed of discussions by Jonker and Lawrie (2005:224). However, the beauty of contextual biblical interpretation is an open-minded approach that allows for a multiplicity of voices (Jonker & Lawrie 2005). Thus, Genesis 1:27–28 can be understood as the foundational teaching on mothering the earth from an Old Testament gendered perspective. In the text, man and woman are both given a divine command to be stewards of Mother Earth. The term Mother Earth is used from the perspective of the Old Testament to argue that mothering the earth for sustainable development and gender equity means:

Firstly, being fruitful from a mothering perspective! In Psalm 139:13–14, a mother's womb is presented as a place where God's wonderful divine artwork of the creation of life takes place. In the same way, the Garden of Eden displays that divine wisdom of how God brings forth life. God has blessed the womb of a mother with the power to be fruitful and to bring forth life. In the same way, God's people can nurture life if both men and women treat each other with dignity as equally created in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:27). There is a need for both men and women to empower each other because they were both given the powers to rule over

the earth and subdue it. Global climate change, the environment and wildlife protection continue to be talked about. Yet, the role of women in mothering the earth needs to be explored further from the context of Proverbs 31 and Acts 9:36–41. In Proverbs 31:25–30, strength and dignity are the clothing of a woman. We are told that she laughs at the time to come. If the voices of women against societal injustices are empowered (Pr 31:1–2) and the strength and productivity of women in multiplying resources in socio-economic contribution are explored (Pr 31:10–31 and Ac 9:36–43), it is possible to envision Mother Earth from a feminine perspective.

Secondly, multiplying God's resources in order to fill the earth so that there is enough for all. In Proverbs 31:10–31 and Acts 9:36–43, some women can be said to have heeded the divine command of God to multiply God's resources. There is so much war in the world because of the desire to control resources. It seems that God's people are afraid that there is a scarcity of resources. The issue of controlling power is only affected when the vulnerable in society continue to be disempowered. But when those seeking to disempower fail, they compensate for that through violence or alternative means such as alcoholism and substance abuse in general. In the context of a similar society, one sees how women multiply available resources in ways that the resources are shared among the vulnerable in the society. In Genesis 2:10–17, a river flows out of Eden to water the garden and from there divides into four rivers. This is a strong concept of multiplication of God's resources by Mother Earth. In the same manner, the womb of a mother is where the seed of humanity is multiplied. There are enough resources on Mother Earth. All that needs to be done is to put in place measures to ensure that all embrace aspects that allow for gender equity to flourish. This way, it is possible for all of God's people to enjoy the blessings of Mother Earth.

Thirdly, subduing the earth – a command that denotes co-ownership of Mother Earth between man and woman but also with God. Man and woman are created in God's image and likeness. They have both been given the power to dominate God's creation but also to be stewards of Mother Earth. So, we see the power given by God to women too when the mother of King Lamuel in Proverbs 31:1–2, scolds her son for not being the voice to the voiceless. In Proverbs 31:10–31 we see a woman taking upon herself the roles that men control in many African patriarchal societies. In Acts 9:36–43, we see a woman touching the lives of the widows, one of the most marginalised group in African societies. Thus, mothering the earth the Old Testament way and the gendered perspective means that in spite of the obstacles against efforts for sustainable development and gender equity, there is hope for life to flourish again.

Conclusion

Every patriarchal society like Kenya remains the most vulnerable part of the developing world because of

gendered poverty, the effects of alcoholism and the discrimination of widows. Gender inequality continues to prevent the contribution of women towards socio-economic development to be realised. However, when one puts Proverbs 31 in dialogue with Acts 9:36–43 and re-reads the texts from an Afro-feminisation of Mother Earth, it is possible to steer dignity talks for Sustainable Development and Gender Equity. While alcoholism remains a major problem that contributes to gendered poverty, Proverbs 31 in dialogue with Acts 9:36–43 shows how women continue to triumph against the odds to provide for their families creating a new pattern of households that are headed by women, yet revered and admired by men who yearn to find a noble wife of Proverbs 31:10–31. It is from this perspective that this article has shown how Proverbs 31 in dialogue with Acts 9:36–43 creates an opportunity for an Afro-feminisation of Mother Earth for Sustainable Development and Gender Equity.

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The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

Author's contributions

D.C.J. is the sole author of the research article.

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