

# Deconstructing gendered glorification of charitable work: A case of women in Nomiya Church

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Human immunodeficiency viruses (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), COVID-19 and Ebola have exposed the magnitude of care-related tasks on women. Most often, because of the gendered nature of domestic and reproductive roles, women are expected to assume unpaid care-related, nurturing and domestic work. Despite the valuable duties, women are economically poor and othered. These unpaid care duties are exacerbated by pandemics and ratified even further by religion. For instance, in Nomiya Church (NC), the first African independent church in Kenya, women's experience narratives and biblical texts such as the story of the Proverbs 31 virtuous woman are used to glorify unpaid charitable work for women. Women's virtuous personality, hard work and character are upheld in Christian spaces, thus obstructing sound work theologies. This article employed African Women's theological lens in view of pointing out repressing and transformative tenets in charitable theologies of work for social and gender justice. While applying womanhood hermeneutics in the passage, the article points to valued behavioural postures of hard work in responding to God's stewardship mandate. An affirmation of fair reward and accumulation of property is embraced as a familial complementary role, especially in pandemic contexts. The article amplifies the accumulation of property as a human right and the mandate of stewardship for all earth communities. Hence, charity work is a stewardship framework that all earth communities must engage in for replenishment and sustenance for all.

**Contribution:** The article challenges literal biblical interpretations that glorify charity work. It advances a stewardship framework in understanding unpaid and charity work that all earth communities must engage in to replenish and sustain all creation. The framework affirms the dignity of all human persons through a transformational understanding of the theology of work as enabled by the African theological hermeneutics.

**Keywords:** African women's theological lens; Bosadi; COVID-19; gendered glorification of charitable work; gender justice; Nomiya Church; Proverbs 31 woman and transformative theology of work.

## Introduction

Gendered roles situate women in nurturing-related duties that point to reproduction and caregiving. Women's perceived normative roles are unique and are dictated by culture, religion, traditions and beliefs. Despite these, their contribution to caregiving is underrecognised, leaving them with a high level of burden because of inadequate preparation for the caregiver's duty and meagre resources (Asuquo & Akpan-Idiok 2021). The outbreak of human immunodeficiency viruses (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), Ebola and COVID-19 pandemics in recent years has unmasked the bias in gender inequalities portrayed through economic status and cultural and societal norms. While African women theologians have dedicated a considerable amount of energy and time critiquing and naming the biases borne, bred, inculcated and spread through the patrilineal culture and religion, the glorification of charitable work, as found within biblical texts and replayed in our contemporary societies has received little or no critical attention. The gendered role of caregiving, whether babies or convalescents, receives accolades in the name of virtuous personality, morally upright character and restoration of life (Ac 9:36–43). The repression and subordination driven by this unpaid work go unrecognised as the notable biblical stories glorify the woman's virtuous character, which in practical life leaves women economically poor and psychologically drained. In addition, social, cultural and religious aspects often assign women these roles in the community (Kanyoro 2001), at home and in the church. Nurturing and caring chores, as much as they are charitable from a roles and responsibility perspective, put more burden on the women, even though the work remains unrecognised.

**Note:** Historical Thought and Source Interpretation.

Nomiya Church (NC), the first African independent church in Kenya, was inaugurated by Johana Owalo in 1912 (Sudhe, Gumo & Iteyo 2015). Owalo chose one Old Testament practice, African heritage practices and blended it with Judeo-Christian practices to yield an African practice. As such, its cultural and Judeo-religious touch gives it a patriarchal outfit, components that determine the role, status and place of women in the church. Owing to its reliance on traditional and patriarchal cultural practices, women in NC are denied church leadership and are relegated and othered to feminine roles of care (Ndeda 2003). Furthermore, they are deterred from entering the church, either upon the birth of a child or while menstruating, keeping to purity dictates, among other prohibitions. This article employed ethnographic methods that include focus Group discussions, participant observation and interviews among women in NC, Eastleigh, Nairobi County, Kenya, to elicit narratives on their experience of their increased unpaid care roles and responsibilities that the COVID-19 pandemic brought about. Roles and responsibilities, although tiring, often go unrecognised, unpaid or underpaid, thus negatively impacting the economic standing of women in a capitalistic culture.

Denise Ackermann (1985) rightly observed that the source document of Christianity that guides society on work is written by and for men, and the Christian churches are largely shaped and run by men. Thus, women do theology in an environment dominated by men and live in a largely patriarchal society, and all this affects the formation of identity that women want to embrace. Women's struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic to care for their children, sick spouses and parents amidst economic challenges attest to the repressing socialised trait of conforming to the gendered patriarchal dictates. Women in professional and formal workspaces had to dig deeper into their dwindling energies to balance home-care duties and work-related responsibilities, where outputs measure standards that do not recognise ensuing gendered imbalances. Working from home public health protocols adopted during COVID-19 challenged women's output in academia, the church, healthcare and society at large, prompting a cry for their recognition as whole human beings (Clark et al. 2020). Therefore, this article utilises the African Women's theological frameworks of calling to life what has died (Dube 2009) to examine how the glorification of charitable work on women is reinforced through literal interpretation of biblical texts as seen in NC women's stories.

According to Dube (2001a), African women's theology is transformative and significant in deconstructing repressive theologies. The methodology employs lived experiences and stories to highlight the empowerment of women and the recognition of human dignity. It confronts factors that deny African women and others their human rights and dignity. These methodologies seek to keep the interconnectedness of life and a continuous flowing force that both men and women must nurture. It further emphasises the African context as a specific focus, acknowledging that African women are also

part of the life force of creation, where all share power: a power that should flow to the whole of creation. Therefore, it stands within life-affirming theologies that are liberating, seeking to clear a space for the transformation of all.

A critical examination of the biblical stories that glorify charitable work over and against NC women's lived experiences can challenge the inculcation of virtues that oppress women. This examination also challenges the Circle, especially in Kenya, to initiate even informal theological training and Bible studies (Oduyoye 2001), not only among NC women but also among her male clergy. The clergy at NC never engage in theological training before attaining leadership positions. A leadership appointment into the NC's ministry of the word is based on one's obedience and piety to the sitting leadership. This clergy arrangement increases gatekeeping restraints and fuels the oppression of women in the Church. It creates a hostile environment for further interrogation by outside health groups, theologians and even the government. Critical engagement of context-based experiences regarding virtuous, charitable work is argued to help transform these harmful theologies of unpaid work and bring about equitable social and gender justice.

Towards this goal, the article proceeds in four major sections. After the introduction, section two delves into a critical examination of Proverbs 31: woman and the glorification of charitable work over and against African women's theological lens. Section three highlights the methodologies utilised, field data from Nomiya Church and Women's Field Narratives. The fourth section advances an embrace of transforming theology of work characterised by values of equity, complementarity, mutuality and gender justice.

## A critical examination of Proverbs 31 woman and glorification of charitable work

Proverbs 31:10–31 paints a picture of a woman, a wife of noble character. According to Biwul (2013), an Old Testament scholar, the wisdom poem:

[G]ives the reader a clear picture of the characteristics of the woman of virtue who is a wife and mother; and by her noble character, a friend to her neighborhood and society. (p. 276)

### Epilogue: The wife of a noble character

- 10 A wife of noble character who can find?  
She is worth far more than rubies.
- 11 Her husband has full confidence in her  
and lacks nothing of value.
- 12 She brings him good, not harm,  
all the days of her life.
- 13 She selects wool and flax  
and works with eager hands.
- 14 She is like the merchant ships,  
bringing her food from afar.

- 15 She gets up while it is still night;  
she provides food for her family  
and portions for her female servants.
- 16 She considers a field and buys it;  
out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.
- 17 She sets about her work vigorously;  
her arms are strong for her tasks.
- 18 She sees that her trading is profitable,  
and her lamp does not go out at night.
- 19 In her hand she holds the distaff  
and grasps the spindle with her fingers.
- 20 She opens her arms to the poor  
and extends her hands to the needy.
- 21 When it snows, she has no fear for her household;  
for all of them are clothed in scarlet.
- 22 She makes coverings for her bed;  
she is clothed in fine linen and purple.
- 23 Her husband is respected at the city gate,  
where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.
- 24 She makes linen garments and sells them,  
and supplies the merchants with sashes.
- 25 She is clothed with strength and dignity;  
she can laugh at the days to come.
- 26 She speaks with wisdom,  
and faithful instruction is on her tongue.
- 27 She watches over the affairs of her household  
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
- 28 Her children arise and call her blessed;  
her husband also, and he praises her:
- 29 'Many women do noble things,  
but you surpass them all'.
- 30 Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;  
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
- 31 Honor her for all that her hands have done,  
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

Even though it is straightforward for biblical scholars and theologians that the text presents wisdom literature, where wisdom is personified in a female figure, a classic prototype of a woman of virtue, literal reading of the text dominates most churches in contemporary societies, including NC. This, among other texts in the Bible, such as the story of Tabitha in Acts 9:36–42<sup>1</sup>, Titus 2:3–5<sup>2</sup> and 1 Timothy 5:13–15,<sup>3</sup> has been read and interpreted literally to socialise women into virtuous standing within their Christian circles, in turn resulting in the glorification of unpaid work. A sermon on embracing hard work in NC, purported to serve as an encouragement to bounce back from the economic fall necessitated by COVID-19, was not only intriguing but also provoked insights for this article. While citing the said passages, verse 30 of Proverbs 31 heaps praise for this hard-

1. Acts 9:36–42 – Tabitha made clothes for the widows in Joppa. When she died, Apostle Peter prayed for her resurrection, which was granted. The writer is keen to notice that the resurrection was pegged on Tabitha's good works!

2. Titus 2:3–5 – In the same way, instructs the older women to behave as women should who live a holy life. They must not be slanderers or slaves to wine. They must teach what is good, in order to train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure and to be good housewives who submit themselves to their husbands, so that no one will speak evil of the message that comes from God.

3. 1 Timothy 5:13–15 – They also learn to waste their time in going around from house to house; but even worse, they learn to be gossips and busybodies, talking of things they should not. So I would prefer that the younger widows get married, have children, and take care of their homes, so as to give our enemies no chance of speaking evil of us. Some widows have already turned away to follow Satan.

working woman, to the point of disputing the beauty that most men pursue outside the home, as the wife works to fit in the 'Godly praises'. As Chitando (2004:152) affirms, in Africa, it is 'the Bible that is used to sustain traditions and practices that suffocate African women'. This article unpacks these teachings wrapped in virtuous women cliché to perpetuate unpaid labour that often leads to violence. African women's theological lens of biblical analysis spills liberative angles that would do justice to such texts for women's sake.

African women's theologies embrace women's lived experiences in cultural and religious spaces to understand texts and traditions in view of calling out subordinating and repressing tendencies embedded in these socialising canons. As such, a hermeneutics of suspicion, coined by Paul Ricoeur in the 1970s, to denote a literary interpretation style that involves reading texts with skepticism to uncover hidden or repressed meanings (Ricoeur 1978), becomes paramount for decrypting demeaning principles wrapped in biblical texts and cultural traditions. African womanist hermeneutic, as propagated by Masenya (1995), guides the endeavour strived in this article, as she contends that:

[R]eading biblical texts from an African womanist perspective can help Black women to resist those things within their culture and within the biblical texts themselves that are found to be antagonistic to their sense of identity and their basic instincts for survival. (p. 153)

To achieve this goal, Masenya insists that a hermeneutics of suspicion is called for, given the androcentric frame of the biblical text in itself compounded by the socialising interpretations that are propagated by men who have assumed leadership, both in the church and in societal orders. Dube (2001b) puts the challenge into perspective, asserting that:

African patriarchy is often seen to be supported by biblical patriarchy; thus, the two collude against the empowerment of women in the process of reading, seemingly ordaining the oppression of women. (p. 8)

Masenya (1995:154) thus grounds the need for 'a womanist hermeneutics that includes a hermeneutics of suspicion for African women [to]... find some elements of liberation in the Bible'. The hermeneutics of suspicion is applauded for its attempts to decode meanings disguised to satisfy androcentric appetites of power and dominance.

Thus, according to Masenya (2001):

... an African woman's liberative practice ought to critique oppressive elements of African culture manifested in women's lives while reviving aspects that uplift the status of women; critique the oppressive elements of the Bible while highlighting the liberative elements and uphold the significance of the family for Africans ... as is of such sociological importance that it cannot be overemphasized. (pp. 148–149)

Masenya advocates for a balanced approach to living out cultural and biblical principles within families. Thus, African womanist theological analysis invites women to read the

Bible, not just 'in front of the text' but also 'behind the text', because 'reading "behind the text" encourages readers to critically analyse and reconstruct biblical texts to reclaim the history of women's struggles for liberation' (Masenya 1995:154). The conceptualisation of 'behind the text' provides an open playground for critical engagement with texts that ought to affirm women's faith within a free and fair world. It means stepping out of the biblical text and pitting it over and against one's lived experiences in wondering whether the woman described in Proverbs 31 exists, especially in our contemporary settings. Are women to be praised and honoured because of the work of their hands? In a capitalistic, highly consumeristic, and pandemic-vested life phase, will charity work bring women back to life, as attested in the story of Tabitha in Acts 9:36–42?

Using the African womanist hermeneutic grounded on the hermeneutics of suspicion, a literary re-reading and understanding of Proverbs 31:10–31 ensues to form a solid ground for understanding NC women's struggle with meagre pay or unpaid care work during COVID-19 pandemic. A literal reading of the passage taking an 'in front of the text' caveat presents a married woman whose worth, honour and praise are pegged on her hardworking trait. The passage presents us with a hardworking woman who is engaged in multiple activities that deprive her of sleep. She wakes up early to provide food for her family and female servants. Besides, she makes scarlets for the family in preparation for the cold seasons and makes fine linen garments that she adorns. She makes fine linen clothes for her family members, for covering her bed and for gifting to the poor and the needy in her society. With the extra linen clothes, she sells them to the market for a profit. From her business, she accumulates enough to buy a field – a vineyard where she plants food for the family, people experiencing poverty and those in need. She is likened to a merchant ship that ferries food stuff to her family and associates. The Proverbs 31 noblewoman is a treasure worth more than rubies. Her husband is respected within the community because of her hard work caring for the household. The woman is honoured and praised as blessed because of her generosity, strength and hard work towards keeping the household together.

In agreement with Masenya (1995:153), 'An African woman, like the woman of worth, is a family woman; the needs of her family, be it nuclear or extended, are at the heart of her existence'. While Masenya argues for a balanced family and family-oriented perspective for women's liberation, the imbalance in the text sanctifies women's domesticity that 'became linked with women's spiritual calling' (Barr 2021:119). Praise and honour not only for her but also for her husband and the entire city, draw from her hard labour. Unmasking the hidden repressing hints in this story calls for a reading 'behind the text'. Masenya (1995:153) has highlighted liberating tenets in her reading of the text using *Bosadi* hermeneutics, where the position of a woman as a 'controller of the household' is deemed a 'position of power'. Her industrious traits, generosity, selflessness, hard work

and serving others are other qualities highlighted as liberating. Nonetheless, in the contemporary context, and especially in an environment marred by a contagious pandemic (COVID-19), one wonders whether these liberating components are truly liberating.

The lived experience of this noble woman would, at face value, be conceptualised as hardworking as expected within most social circles. However, more meets the eye than what the narrator persuades the listener to adopt as the moral of the story. As a contemporary woman reading this descriptive story, a few statements sent chills down my spine. We are presented with a woman who works round the clock, to the point that sleep is equivalent to laziness and dishonour. Verse 15 reads, 'She gets up while it is still night', and Verse 18 reads, 'Her lamp does not go out at night'. One would argue it is a literary genre of writing a story, which is agreeable but overworking to maintain a household that is expected to be a friendly relational community where mutuality nourishes all clause is flattery and condescending. Overreliance on one person for upkeep is draining and selfishly borne. Furthermore, this woman's work can be classified within the blue-collar jobs that do not have colossal remuneration. Accumulating the meagre pay and 'considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings' and going further to 'plant a vineyard', as recorded in verse 16, is a tall order. Besides, in ancient Judaism, women were the property of their husbands and were not even allowed to own property (Kofsky 1988). The purchase of land in the story appears to be an exaggeration of praise to maintain the status quo of a hardworking woman who keeps her household intact. To repress her further, she is discouraged from embracing beauty as it is fleeting but is encouraged to fear the Lord and uphold hard work (Pr 31:30). The internalisation of this spiritualised call to hard work for one's household and associates to the point of neglecting oneself amounts to the glorification of unpaid charity work that not only harms our health but also sets a precedence of continued repression in home spaces. A literal reading and interpretation of these and other biblical narratives continue to perpetuate repressing teachings that unsuspecting women internalise as the gospel truth. In the preceding section, we engage with ethnographic qualitative data from women in the NC in view of highlighting how biblical texts have necessitated participation in unpaid or charity work.

## Nomiya Church and women's field narratives

Nomiya is a DhoLuo word that means 'I was given' because Yohana documents receiving a call to start a Church by God himself. Owalo held his call with high regard to the point of including it in the Nomiya prayer book with the commission inscribed in it: 'Go! Take a well-sharpened knife to circumcise all men. He who has an ear, let him hear and adhere but leave the disobedient alone'. The formation of the NC marked a departure from the dominant Christian denominations that followed missionary structures and Christian values. This

breakaway was driven by a desire for autonomy and a need to establish a church that reflected the cultural values and traditions of the Luo people (Ndeda 2003; Opwapo 1981). The Luo are the largest ethnic group in the Nyanza region of western Kenya, including in Kisumu County. Customary Luo religion featured a central deity, Nyasaye (translation for God), who created humanity and the universe. Today, approximately 90% of the Luo are Christians, but many still engage in customary rituals. Traditional Luo culture allowed for polygamous marriages, and the size of a compound was generally relative to the number of wives a man could afford. It was easy to determine how many wives and children a man had by counting the number of huts in his homestead (Ogutu 2001; Oriare 1996). Polygamy, among other factors, prompted Owalo to shun missionary Christianity, which taught monogamy.

Nomiya Church is thus a patriarchal, male-led 'institution in all its aspects and regarded women, even within its own service, as shallow, self-centred and the cause of trouble' (Ndeda 2003:250). Men's domination of church leadership is evidence that women are subordinated to caring and nurturing roles. In the church, Ndeda (2003:270) asserts that 'men regarded themselves as superior to women'. Ojore (2020:143) states, 'the Luo are a patrilineal society that treats descent, inheritance, and succession exclusively or preferentially through males. As a result, property is held in the male line'. As men's roles increased in number and importance, women were denied equal opportunities, staying clear of critical areas of decision-making and participation. Besides, NC adherents increased in number and continue to hold firm even in urban centres owing to its embrace of polygamy, among other factors. In this chapter, women from NC Eastleigh shared their experiences of doing menial jobs, feeding their household and caring for their sick members in Eastleigh, Nairobi.

## Nomiya Church Eastleigh women's work experiences during coronavirus disease 2019

Raw data for this chapter are drawn from a broader study on the value of African communality and religious experiences amidst COVID-19: a project funded by the Nagel Institute. The qualitative data were collected for nearly 1 year (March 2021 to September 2022) after COVID-19 public health protocols eased in Nairobi, Kenya. Ethnographic data collection methods such as participant observation, focus group discussions and seven face-to-face interviews were conducted. Two focus groups comprising seven women and six interviews were conducted, eliciting the data used to tease out themes on the glorification of unpaid care and charitable work. As data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher ensured that preventive measures such as wearing of face masks and social distancing were maintained. Field notes and recordings were transcribed for analysis, whereby during the analysis, the focus group discussions were labelled as FGD 1 (W1–W7) and FGD 2 (W1–W-7). The

women in both FGDs were varied in terms of the work they do – informal jobs, housewives and professional women; relationships – single with children, single without children, married and widowed. The interviews were conducted among women attending in-person service in NC Eastleigh, where respondents were labelled KI for key informants and W for women (1–6). A total of six women were interviewed separately to describe their work experiences during lockdowns when homecare duties dominated their schedules, socialisation and internalisation of charity work as Godly. Participants' observation on women serving in the Church and sermons by the church pastor supplemented the article's findings. The researcher acted deliberately to interview married women only, as it was presumed that they would have a first-hand experience living with patriarchal Luo husbands as well as their lived experiences in unpaid care work. The findings are thus discussed thematically, as outlined next.

### Increase in domestic work and care

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns, closures and other public health protocols confined women in houses, where they had to grapple with increased domestic work. Closure of several industries, schools and markets among other job avenues meant that people would stay home until the virus was controlled. Then, all the children and spouses were confined at home to face the reality of domestic work. From narratives of Nomiya women, domestic work increased as every family member called for attention, especially from women, either as mothers, wives or sisters. From the FGDs, one woman narrated how her house has just become small as three of her sons were back from high school. She noticed:

'I have three boys, form two, form three and form four. They do nothing in the house. They get into their phones, sometimes even using earphones they do not hear when you call them. I am cooking for four men in the house. They help when you ask them to, but they do not have the initiative themselves. I am adamant they have to wash their clothes and clear the room they all share. But I could be copying their dad; he does no domestic work, and he is always on his computer, from computer to TV to the phone.' (FGD 1, W2, 17 October 2021)

One outstanding resultant achievement of the COVID-19 pandemic is the penetration of digitalisation within communities. Technology and the internet became socialising and entrepreneurial avenues for middle and upper-class individuals in most countries, of which Kenya, Nairobi and Eastleigh, to be specific, are not exempt. Given the gendered nature of domestic work, most women lost out on these online business opportunities because of the nature of domestic household work, which was even rendered invisible (Lukács 2020). One interviewed professional woman painted the picture with her assertion that:

'I would even clean their (referring to husband and children) feet as I mopped the house. They were all deep in their gadgets. I would cook, clean, and do laundry before I could sit at my

computer to work. Tired from household chores, what would you think will be your output, really?!" (KI, W3, 24 October 2021)

Women's work increased with COVID-19 lockdowns but remained utterly invisible. Professional women who were expected to work from home, clean, cook and care for loved ones before they could attend to their professional work. Irrespective of the burden of this unpaid labour, appraisal standards remained unchanged for both men and women. For instance, in the field of academics, studies have shown that female academics had less output in terms of research and publications. According to Babalola et al. (2021:89), 'women scientists' time spent in research work, research grant writing, publishing, and overall academic productivity was significantly lower during the pandemic period'. In fact, Alexandra Palt (2020) rightly argued that:

... women scientists in Africa would be significantly endangered if this situation [COVID-19 lockdowns and working from home] continues because the 'publish or perish' rule is the custom in scientific fields.

The invisibility of domestic and care work evolves from socialised gendered roles where men do masculine jobs such as cleaning cars and going to the garage. In contrast, women do feminine jobs such as cleaning, cooking, laundry and care duties. As a result, the house chores kept most women indoors as expected by the public health protocols. However, this did not infer that they were free from the coronavirus, as men remained mobile, endangering their wives' health. A KI lamented:

'A Luo man can not stay indoors. He will go out to wash his car and meet with friends but not stay in the house. That is how he contracted COVID-19 and brought it to the house. All the children got a very serious flu, which was COVID-19-like but not as severe as he was. I nursed them. Luckily, I had the mild flu ... maybe it was COVID-19 or not.' (KI, W5, 24 October 2021)

The burden of caring for the sick rested squarely on women amidst other household chores. Normalised attitudes that these are feminine roles are a burden to women. They take it upon themselves to make every family member comfortable without asking for help, driven by a socialised internalisation that women are carers and nurturers. Nomiya women extended these services to their churches. On several occasions that the researchers visited the church, women cooked and served the church leaders, often male, with breakfast and lunch. The researchers observed a group of three to five women in the kitchen every Sunday cooking. Upon enquiring, one opined that it was their culture to cook for elders, and besides, they were doing God's work:

'Even [cooking] this is God's work. We will be paid in heaven. Those who are in the church following the service and us in the kitchen are the same. We are serving God. ... Women have to cook for men. It is our [Luo] culture. Our men do not get into the kitchen, it is a taboo.' (FDG 2, W1, 19 July 2022)

It is apparent that NC women have internalised the culturally inculcated gendered roles. They equate serving in the church as service to God, hence a need to do it cheerfully as their

reward is in heaven. The futuristic perspective perpetuates the glorification of unpaid work in the name of service to God, which has the potential of constraining women economically. A similar scenario plays out in the kind of jobs housewives and unemployed women took up to sustain their households.

## Menial jobs for sustaining households

The closure of businesses and working from home mandate left many people jobless. Even after the public health preventive directives were lifted, many businesses struggled to pick up as the economy dwindled globally. In Kenya, most middle-class households keep house help in their homes to assist in managing household chores such as baby care, cooking and laundry, among others, especially in contexts where the woman is working full-time. Most households, especially within Eastleigh, were financially destabilised as these houses help run their homes financially with this job. As the lockdowns persisted, most families lacked food, rent and money for medication, having exhausted the little they had saved. The situation prompted women to look for jobs that they could do to sustain their families.

The women in NC narrated that laundry and cleaning jobs came in handy from the rich families in their estates. One narrated:

'Now the jobs that are available are not for men. We women can clean, do laundry, and cook for the rich. At least to sustain our families until this thing [COVID-19] is over.' (FGD 2, W4, 19 July 2022)

The COVID-19 rendered most men jobless. Those who worked in industries and hotels found it difficult to find jobs that would enable them to sustain their families. The menial jobs they got were not sustainable, as one KI explained:

'My husband got a job last week to mow a lawn after he was paid, he just sneaked and went to the village.' (KI, W2, 24 October 2021)

Most women were in agreement that men find it meaningful to live with their families when they are in a position to provide. When deprived of this ability, as COVID-19 did to them, a majority chose to either abandon their families in urban areas or relocate to rural areas to save their ego. Women had to bear the burden of caring for the children and paying rent on their own. Those who stayed in town during the pandemic were reported to be unnecessarily violent, rude, disengaged or depressed. As such, women navigated menial jobs and maintained healthy family relationships in what was rather a depressive situation for most of the families represented in the NC. The scenario paints a testament that the socio-economic empowerment of women is paramount.

## Domestic and spousal violence

Dipped shadow pandemic by the United Nations Women (2020), domestic and spousal violence increased during COVID-19. Nomiya Church women were not exempted from the menace. Most women reported being harassed to give out the little money they had earned from the menial jobs:

'You go working, cleaning and washing clothes for an entire family ... mmh from morning to evening without eating anything for Kshs, 500 ... if you get a good family. Then you get to the house and someone [*spouse*] claims half of it to take alcohol. Failure to surrender it then you endure blows.' (FGD 1, W3, 17 October 2021)

Globally, studies reported increased intimate partner violence (World Health Organization [WHO] 2022). Extra stress in the COVID-19 pandemic caused by income loss and lack of ability to pay for housing and food has exacerbated the often-silent epidemic of intimate partner violence (Nakyazze 2020). Culture and religion have socialised women to embrace *vunilia* [perseverance] theology (Mombo 1998), a concept that Mombo and Joziase (2022) have endeavoured to deconstruct. On Sunday, 16 May 2021, the Nomiya Eastleigh Church pastor preached on the passage on David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11:1–12:9. The pastor narrated how Bathsheba, who was having her bath, had performed it in order to tempt David. Women were thus warned against tempting men to rape them by their mode of dress: an aspect that NC takes seriously. Women are expected to wear long white dresses and cover their heads without any jewellery on their bodies. Men and women sit on separate pews and use different doors to enter the church. Such literal biblical interpretations and perceptions ratify the different forms of violence inflicted on women. It is no surprise that men impregnated their daughters and raped their spouses, blaming it on their dress and proximity because of COVID-19 lockdowns, as reported in several studies (Onyeaka et al. 2023; Odwe et al. 2021).

### Depression and mental health

Women bore the mental burden resulting from COVID-19 ills. Constant concerns about how to fend for the family, the safety of their daughters and fatigue from menial chores contributed greatly to depression. Women narrated experiencing untold tiredness, both physical and mental but had to keep going. The researcher enquired from women cooking on Sunday 24 October 2021, how they navigated their house chores before heading to church to clean and cook. One opined:

'This is our work. Whether you are tired or not, you are on duty, not for the chairlady but for God. When we serve the church leaders, we serve God in this capacity ... mmmh ... but truth be told, I am just tired.' (KI, W5, 24 October 2021)

Those who worked from home expressed dissatisfaction for failing to meet targets and feared losing their jobs. Such episodes, among others, attest to the fact that working from home reduces output and social contact among colleagues, resulting in higher levels of the symptoms of depression for women (Burn et al. 2022). The cost of unpaid work weighed heavily on women, and the cushioning that the church offered was more unpaid work with anticipation of heavenly reward. The gospel of keeping treasure in heaven where moths cannot destroy them and offering our bodies as living sacrifices Holy and acceptable to God permeated their hearts,

minds and bodies into their blood vessels. A study by Willer, Wimer and Owens (2013) found that women contribute more to charity organisations because of their emphatic nature than men. The global economic recession and unpaid charitable work require critical rethinking on transforming theological perceptions of charity and unpaid care work gleaned from literal reading and interpretation of culture and biblical texts.

### Embracing transforming theology of work

While it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the theology of work as envisioned in various scholarly and religious traditions, a few aspects guided the argument advanced in this article. In the book of Genesis, God is presented as the first worker, creating the earth and all that is in it and resting on the seventh day (Gn 1–2). God goes ahead and becomes the first employer, commissioning the work of stewardship to all humanity. In agreement with Dickie (2015):

From the very start, our relationship with God was defined by the work God gave us. We are stewards or caretakers by birth to care for the things God has entrusted us. We are to use our life, gifts, and talents to serve God and build his kingdom. There is no hierarchy of work. We are all called to be faithful in executing the duties we have been given, whether great or small. (p. 77)

Distorted views on work would later emerge, likening work not as a foundational relationship with God but as a curse associated with the fall of mankind. Categorisations and classifications of gendered work might be said to have arisen from such a misleading theology that has crept into God's church. In such instances, work for all became relegated, and gendered work division emanated in the home sphere, thus affecting women's well-being in an economic-driven world. A critique on the overreliance of the fall in defining work is called for, as it assumes the patriarchal notions present in biblical authorship. It further lays the burden of provision on men overly from hard labour. Such biblical sentiments, once literally internalised, have trivialised the relational and complementary work tenets that are life-affirming and liberating. The role of women to bear children, care for and nurture the family are underestimated and hence lowly remunerated or entirely unpaid.

However, in Matthew 25:14–30, the parable of the talents is narrated to allude to the expected bountiful output that is expected of every servant, regardless of gender. In achieving bountifulness within families, both men's and women's complimentary attitudes should take precedence for sustenance and stability. Cognisant of the hard economic times, the resounding job unavailability and replacement owing to technological advancement, life-affirming perceptions of work ought to be embraced that go beyond the glorification of charity work. No type of work, however menial, should go unremunerated as output is a component that defines a sound theology of work. Distinguishing a person's behavioural traits and personality from work

remuneration is crucial in rectifying the gendered theology of work, which is overtly misleading. Thus, in adopting a proper and transforming, life-affirming and empowering theology of work, we are invited to focus on God's intention of work being relational between God and earth communities, with the output focusing not just on obeying God's assignment of stewardship but also on replenishing ourselves and the rest of earth communities. Thus, the behavioural traits of hard work, love, care and concern are charitable postures that necessitate humanity's thriving. The argument means that self-satisfaction and appreciation from one's household is a befitting 'remuneration' to executed roles and responsibilities.

Maseny's *Bosadi* hermeneutic calls to life-affirming theologies through re-reading texts from a value perspective. She opines that 'there is no value-free interpretation of the Bible', and such are the values that we ought to be keen on to enable us to tease out demeaning and affirming traits that can complement biblical reading, interpretation and understanding of phenomena. In her re-reading of Proverbs 31:10–31, she appraises the household managerial role and the industrious nature of the woman portrayed in the text (Maseny 2001). Maseny argues that the noblewoman in the text, like an African woman, in our case, the NC woman, is a family woman. She adorns the values and postures of selflessness, hard work, generosity and concern for others, which she argues are not reserved for women but for all: African men, the whites who sit at high tables raining orders, as well as middle-class African women who hire the services of the low-class women for meagre pay.

Proverbs 31:10–31 woman's nobility, thus stands out as a training of work values that all ought to embrace, not for exploitative thought frame as has been socially fuelled but for a complementing role that is anticipated in the society. The family framework evidenced in the text replicates our contemporary societies, especially in Africa. The collective and communal posture stands out, with the woman extending her earnings to her family, servants and community. The purchase of land in contemporary times, especially in Kenya, touches on a human rights component, where women are now able to own land (Laws of Kenya 2013). Such a development trumps the patriarchal ordering, where women were the property of men and could not inherit or even own ancestral land. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, women's nobility continued, not because of their nurturing traits but because they responded to God's duty to work. Oduyoye (1994) affirms women's hard work and questions the burden that they endure with men who are mandated to complement the relationship in the family order. She observes: 'a woman is a symbol of bountifulness, tenderness, and severity. She is a symbol of protection, charm, and fidelity in love' (Oduyoye 1994:105). She then asks a significant question: 'What then becomes of the humanity of a man who does not participate in his "womanbeingness"?' (Oduyoye 1994:105).

The exploitative attitude springs from reading the text from a socio-cultural perspective, which, like the Bible, is patriarchal. God-given orderliness in work embraces complementarity, fair pay, justice, equity, mutuality and hard work. Service to earth communities is a complementing and mutual characteristic of the stewardship we are called to pursue by God, our employer. All men and women should fully participate in sharing with others and sustaining families and communities. Thus, repression occurs when one party absconds this God-given duty and crafts descending principles that exploit the other. The text highlights four components that fuel women's exploitation: (1) husbands draw honour and respect from hard-working wives, (2) beauty is fleeting, (3) lack of sleep or rest is equated to hard work and (4) flattery praises. A family's economic stability, most often equated to success in the contemporary Nairobi community, is not a sole achievement but a complementary effort. Both husband and wife must partner and complement each other to build wealth. Honour and respect are not to be pegged on materialism but on the eternal value of complementarity in marriage. Besides, the inalienable intrinsic worth of human persons bestows respect upon all humanity.

The concept of physical beauty, especially on the part of women, is shunned in the text. A premeditated push towards fearing God is advanced as though God does not treasure beauty. Everything God created was good, orderly and beautiful in itself. Being created in God's image and likeness accrues beauty that God expects to see from us. However, the text presents beauty as immoral and hence avoided. It is, however, given that African men admire beautiful women, thus embracing a laid-back approach to oneself would cost one's marriage. Men are easily attracted to beautiful women, leading them astray and into extra-marital relations. God embraces beauty and so women should maintain themselves for God's glory. The ideology of beauty being fleeting is a repressive strategy purported to destabilise women's self-esteem. Nomiya Church women reported their husbands leaving their families in the urban centres when they could not provide as expected of them, as it hurt their esteem as providers. Praise and honour from one's hard work should flow from satisfaction and reward. As a result, flattering voices often lead to exploitative trends that drain women. Finally, rest is Godly. God worked and rested, and women should also rest. Working through the night is not to be equated to hard work; it is overly draining. The realisation that overworking is not hard work has brought in a concept of self-care among contemporary women, which is also demeaning. Self-care is an individualistic concept that ought to be shunned, as care is drawn and attained from the community. Communities of care are to be forged as self-care is only attainable within caring communities and relations. Thus, complementing postures of work among all, husbands and wives, masters and servants, men and women, represents God's will for rewarding work for all earth communities. Remuneration and reward are to be expected from work, as replicated in the parable of the talents as an advance to social and gender justice.

## Conclusion

Proverbs 31:10–31 passage on a woman of worth or noblewoman, while acknowledged as a wisdom poem, has been literarily interpreted in contemporary churches to glorify charity work that burdens women. Using life-affirming theologies drawn from *Bosadi*/womanhood hermeneutic, built upon women's experiences, the article has argued that the text teases out the values and qualities of hardworking persons, not just women. While engaging with NC women's life experiences during COVID-19, internalised socio-cultural traditions that follow the passage on noble woman stood out. An internalisation that breeds violence among other challenges, highlighting the need for women's socio-economic empowerment. The article affirms a transforming theology of work, where fair remuneration for work is called for. The parable of the talents taught by Jesus was engaged to amplify the accumulation of property as a human right and an expectation of stewardship for all earth communities. Charity work is a stewardship framework that all earth communities must engage in for replenishment and sustenance. The noblewoman passage invites all to embrace communities of care and shun the self-care ideology perpetrated in contemporary settings. Self-care is only possible in the community. Embracing values of hard work, generosity, resilience, care and concern for others are values that deconstruct the peddling of glorifying charity work in these challenging economic times.

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T.K.M. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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