




Is there a balm in religion for the Triple Threat wounds of Mother Africa? -Exploring How the Circle¹ is utilizing religious resources in promoting SRHR²

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Abstract

The 'Triple Threat problem' of -teenage pregnancy, new HIV infection, and gender and sexual-based violence among adolescents and young people still persist today as a septic wound for mother Africa. Intervention strategies such as provision of good quality services and timely as well as balanced information regarding sexual and reproductive health and rights have met a myriad of challenges. This is because such interventions come in the backdrop of religious and cultural rhetoric of taboo and stigma that masquerade as morality imperatives. While the opposition against Adolescents' and young people's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (referred to henceforth as AYSRHR) issues is very diverse, in many societies, religious rhetoric and beliefs are a frequently recurring barrier to acceptability and accessibility of essential AYSRH information and services. In Kenya, recent studies have suggested intentional involvement of religious leaders in discourses around AYSRHR in general as an intervention strategy. However, the role of religion in destigmatization and demythologization of anti-SRHR discourses have remained undertheorized. By utilizing *Talitha cum* hermeneutics of the Circle as a rhetorical criticism framework, this paper shall explore how Circle- Kenya is framing, producing, and disseminating religious public discourses and pedagogies that support the provision of AYSRHR essential services and information. It is hoped that this kind of study will contribute significantly to the body of knowledge on the role of religion in addressing the triple threat challenge of teenage pregnancy, new HIV infection, and gender and sexual-based violence among adolescents, as well as suggesting valuable localized pathways in attainment of Kenya's Vision 2030 and the global Sustainable Development Goals 3- Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

Keywords: *anti-SRHR discourses, destigmatization, demythologization, Talitha cum hermeneutic, triple threat challenge*

The Triple Threat Challenge and anti-SRHR Rhetoric

In this paper, I glean from the work of Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians- Kenya chapter, referred henceforth as Circle-Kenya in producing everyday theologies of life in abundance in reference to global Sustainable Development Goals 3- Ensure healthy lives and

¹ Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, referred henceforth as Circle

² Adolescents' and young people's Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, referred henceforth as AYSRHR



promote well-being for all at all ages (UN: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015). I specifically draw from the Circle-Kenya's Intersectional, See, Judge and Act (ISJA) tool for lobby and advocacy for access to sexual and reproductive health information and services for adolescents in Kenya. This task is premised on the fact that religion in general as a social institution plays a critical role in framing, producing, and disseminating public discourses and pedagogies (Kaoma, 2018:48). In relation to issues around sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR), religion significantly provides the language and scripts for engagements (Kaoma, 2018:48). I situate the Circle- Kenya tool for lobby and advocacy as 'against the grain' in a context where religion and religious narratives are regarded as a barrier to promotion of adolescents sexual and reproductive health and rights. In order to underscore this unique role of religious entity like Circle-Kenya, it is necessary to first delineating the nuanced relationship between what has been popularly referred to as "the triple threat" challenge and anti-SRHR rhetoric in Kenya (National AIDS Control Council April, 2022).

In line with Sustainable Development Goals, the government of Kenya has committed to "end HIV and AIDS as a public health threat and teenage pregnancies by 2030, and gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual violence, by 2026" (ICPD 25, Nairobi Kenya). In 2023, an increase in the "overlapping challenge of new HIV infections among adolescents, growing cases of teenage pregnancies, and rampant sexual and gender-based violence among young people, is undoubtedly impeding progress towards achievement of the goals," (The National Syndemic Diseases Control Council, February 2023). These challenges do not only highlight a complex web of vulnerabilities to adolescents and young people, they also profoundly impact health, population, and development, including education, economic opportunities, and the overall well-being of individuals. It is for this reason that the National Syndemic Diseases Control Council (NSDCC), a State Corporation that is mandated to lead and coordinate multi- sectoral partnerships in HIV response and other syndemic diseases come up with the term 'triple threat' (The National Syndemic Diseases Control Council, February 2023).

Triple threat is therefore a term used in the Kenyan context to capture how HIV infection, Sexual and Gender based violence (SGBV), and teenage pregnancy cluster together and affect one another among adolescents and young people. The term syndemic refers to the "clustering of two or more health problems within a population that contributes to, and results from, persistent social and economic inequalities," (Singer, 2009:28). In the Kenyan context, 'triple threat' as a syndemic concept focuses on instances in which HIV infection, SGBV and teenage pregnancies as multiple health problems interact with each other and the sociocultural, economic, and physical environment. Therefore, strategies towards addressing these has brought to the fore 'end the triple threat campaign' as an intervention strategy in many governmental multiagency consultations as a whole government approach to ending the three health problems (Jervin, 2022:1).

Specifically, The National AIDS Control Council (NACC) and National Council for Population and Development (NCPD) have partnered with National Government Administration Officers (NGAO), other government entities, and implementing partners to develop strategies of addressing the drivers of risk and vulnerability in this population as a way of eliminating the triple threat (National AIDS Control Council April 2022). One such drivers of risk that has been identified are cultural and religious barriers that underpin anti-SRHR rhetoric. Several studies have demonstrated that "Many religious dogmas as well as other traditional cultural values related to gender and sexuality are, in many more or less subtle ways, at odds with the idea of sexual rights for all and complicate efforts to improve sexual and reproductive health," (Marianne, 2018; Bradley, 2001; Nagel, 2003). Owing to this fact of the influential role of religion and culture in shaping attitudes and behaviors concerning sexual and reproductive health, Circle- Kenya is utilizing religious resources to identify



and analyse SRHR issues with the aim of addressing religious and cultural barriers to accessing SRHR.³

Specifically, the Circle-Kenya has developed the Intersectional, See, Judge and Act as a tool for engagement (Chemei and Mombo, 2023). The tool intentionally highlights the potential of religion (through a focus on religious texts which are considered authoritative) to develop positive narratives (advocacy messages) that promote SRHR for all (Chemei and Mombo, 2023). Since (SRHR) is a broad concept that encompasses the different human rights related to sexuality and reproduction, such as sexual health, sexual rights, reproductive health, and reproductive rights (ICPD) 25, Nairobi Kenya) I shall limit my study to how the Circle-Kenya ICJA tool engages religious and cultural barriers in engaging the triple threat problem- HIV infection, SGBV and teenage pregnancies. I shall use the Circle *Talitha Cum* hermeneutical framework to analyze how such a religious and cultural SRHR lobby and advocacy tool is significant in producing SRHR related knowledge that can facilitate personal, social and systemic transformation towards achieving the SDG Goals 3- Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

Talitha Cum Hermeneutical framework in promoting AYSRHTR

When African women academics in Religion and Theology formed the Circle of Concerned African Women theologians (henceforth as circle) in 1989 in Ghana, their primary locus of engagement was on the little girl in gospel of Mark 5:21-43. Nyambura Njoroge (2001) notes that 'their wake up call was the story of the twelve-year-old girl presumed dead in Mark 5:21-43 (2001:247). Mercy Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro (1990) further reiterate that like African Jairus' daughter, African women theologies came to life after centuries of (African) theological scholarship presuming it was not existing (1990:7). She was rising as that missing voice that was concerned deeply about the erosion and destruction of human dignity and life, all life, in Africa (Njoroge, 1997: 80). Ever since, Talitha has become the African women's portraiture of not only that twelve years old girl, she is also that woman who has been haemorrhaging for twelve years, she is one and she is many, she is young and old, naïve and experienced (Tshehla, 2019:3). In this study, I revisit these foundational and ongoing portraitures of Talitha, and her rising (cum) for hermeneutical considerations in explicating diakonia Christologies of African women today.

Although only the gospel of Mark's account in Mark 5:21-43 uses the phrase, similar story line can also be found in Matthew 9:18-26 and Luke 8:40-56. In Mark's account, the Aramaic phrase "*Talitha koum*" transliterated into Greek as $\tau\alpha\lambda\iota\theta\alpha\ \kappa\omicron\upsilon\mu$ and reportedly meaning, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!" is attributed to Jesus as seen in Mark 5:41 (Donahue & Harrington, 2005). Tshehla (2019) notes that the very literary context from where *Talitha* comes, the word does not simply mean 'little girl' (Mark 5:41) but also gives *thugatēr* (daughter) as yet another loving way by which both Jairus (Mark 5:23) and Jesus (Mark 5:34) assume affirming roles over the females in their charge (2019:3). It is on such accounts of women's situation, women's agency, and active participation with Jesus in affirming life that *Talitha, cum* has emerged as an important refrain within gendered African theological scholarship (Tshehla, 2019:5).

Talitha cum hermeneutics is "an African women strategy of justice-seeking and life affirming reading of both written and oral canons," (Dube, 2012:29). It has also been called as "the hermeneutics of life because of its goal of wholesome wellbeing for all people in Africa," (Okure:1995:53). Talitha Cum hermeneutics therefore refers to "the art of living in the resurrection space: the art of continually rising against the powers of death—the powers of patriarchy, the powers of colonial oppression and exploitation, the powers that produce and perpetuate poverty, disease and all forms of exclusion and dehumanization," (Dube, 2012:18). This concept was

³ Circle of Concerned African Women Theologian- Kenya Chapter, www.circlekenya.org



coined by Musa Dube in her reflection and recapitulation of the works, struggles, quests, aspirations, milestones, and the future of African women engagement with structural systems of injustice as undergirded by Eurocentric, androcentric and patriarchal rendering of religious texts, contexts, and practices.

This hermeneutical framework comes from Jesus own words within a literary context of two tangled stories in the Gospel of Mark 5- “the healing of a woman with a flow of blood, and the raising of Jairus’ daughter,” (Tshehla, 2019:4). As used by African women theologians, a discursive stretching of the literal meaning ‘*little girl arise*’ is done to encamp the agency of the little girl in ‘rising’ against death, and that of the bleeding woman (whose identity changes to ‘daughter’) in ‘rising’ against invisibility and appear in public against the norms of the day, and claiming her healing without permission by touching the hem of Jesus garment (Tshehla, 2019:5). Jesus in these two stories is identifies as one who engages women as women, and as a person with valid existential concerns (Tshehla, 2019:6).

The African women Talitha cum hermeneutics is therefore a methodological resource that makes African people lived realities in their religious and social cultural contexts the subject of interpretation. In so doing, the task of this methodology is three-fold. First, it is used to “name forces, and systemic structures of oppression that vandalize human dignity and subvert flourishing of life,” (Dube, 2012:18). Secondly is to highlight the agency of ordinary people in rising against these forces and structures by “promoting a culture of naming and affirming the contributions of women (and other oppressed) people in shaping new epistemologies,” (Tshehla, 2019:7). Thirdly is to formulation “a hermeneutic that is liberative, transformational and which reappraises biblical tradition and African world-views, cultures and lived experiences, with the purpose of correcting the effect of the religious, cultural, and ideological conditioning that have invisibilized, excluded and minoritized other children of God,” (Kanyoro, 2001:104)

As utilized for my study, Talitha cum hermeneutics will be utilized in theorizing the Circle approach through the ICJA tool in curating religious and cultural narrative that promote access to sexual and reproductive health information and services for adolescents in Kenya, and in turn enabling flourishing of lives in the context of the triple threat challenge. I specifically offer a case study from my observations, participation, and follow ups as a facilitator during the Nakuru Lodon Social hall community study on 28th June 2023 with teenage mothers who live in London slums in Nakuru county of Kenya. Firstly, I pay attention to how the circle’s ICJA tool names and confronts religious and cultural norms, perceptions, and structures that subvert flourishing of life by enabling the triple threat challenge. Secondly, I pay attention to how the circle’s ICJA tool centers the voices, agency, and subjectivities of teens, women, and men who use religious and cultural scripts, texts and practices to produce and disseminate alternative and counter narratives that promote flourishing of life in the context of the triple threat challenge. Thirdly, I pay attention to how the circle’s ICJA tool is shifting religious and cultural norms and perspectives that have been a barrier in engaging the triple threat problem- HIV infection, SGBV, and teenage pregnancies.

The Circle’s ICJA Tool for AYSRHTR Advocacy: A case Study

The Intersectionalised See-Judge-Act (ISJA) tool is “an action-focused and interactive community study and analysis of religious and cultural issues and narratives with the aim of facilitating personal and social transformation,” (Chemei and Mombo, 2023). This community study which is designed from topic/theme/issue of concern in a particular context/community, a relevant religious text, and a cultural narrative/norms is composed of three parts. These are: “structured questions which help to identify and name the issues (*See*), an analysis of their impact from the perspective of those affected (*Judge*), and an action plan for intervention led by those affected (*Act*) in order to achieve the intended change (Chemei and Mombo, 2023). Although this tool is developed by



the Circe office in Kenya,⁴ it was adapted from a Contextual Bible Study (CBS) model proposed by Gerald West of the Ujamaa Centre at the University of Kwa Zulu Natal in South Africa (West 2013). The primary aim of the Ujamaa Centre's CBS model is to address oppressive structures which trap people and keep them oppressed and minoritised (West 2013, 160). In the Kenyan context, the circle's ICJA tool is being used to look at traditional and emerging Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) issues from a religious perspective in the Make Way program. This program aims "to break down barriers to AYSRHR by promoting the use of an intersectional lens," (Chemei and Mombo, 2023).

Overall, the study begins with a social analysis of the participants' context and moves towards social transformation of the same context. The social analysis (designated as *see* in the tool) involves identification of the AYSRHR issues of concern in the context that are affecting the community of the participants; identification of an appropriate religious text that align with the community's situation, and community conversations to provide religious and cultural perspective (Chemei and Mombo, 2023). This level of social analysis utilized an intersectional framework. Teens and youths with compounded vulnerabilities are prioritized as participants in this particular community study. This is done in recognition that all people in their diversity have the right to embrace, express and celebrate their dignity – and sexual well-being (Chemei and Mombo, 2023). In the case of the Nakuru London social hall community study with teenage mothers from the London slums of Nakuru, three AYSRHR were identified. These are teenage pregnancy, sexual and gender based violence, and HIV infections, and the text identified for the study was the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13. During this community study, several AYSRHR related issues also emerged. These include inaccessibility, misconceptions, and negative perceptions about contraceptives, sexual abuse/rape/non-consensual sex, unsafe abortions, and sex work among teenage girls in the slums.⁵

The second aspect of the study is analysis of the impact of the identified topics/issue. This is designated as '*Judge*' in the tool. This is a careful process of 'judging' how individuals and the community are affected, by thinking carefully about the topic(s) identified (Chemei and Mombo, 2023). The community (participants) lead this process by indicating what effect it has on them, and a parallel with the religious text that was chosen (Chemei and Mombo, 2023). In the case of the Nakuru London social hall community study with teenage mothers from the London slums of Nakuru, participants identified impacts on health, population, and development, including education, economic opportunities, and the overall well-being of individuals.⁶ This phase enabled a dialogue on the social concerns in the contemporary context compared to the context of the religious text. In the study participants looked at the ways in which religion, culture, patriarchy, class, gender, and sexuality forms a layered identity and systemic aspects that determined and shaped the impact of the identified challenges thereby compounding their vulnerability. This stage ended with the teens mothers in identifying and planning suitable action that will give them access to sexual and reproductive health information and services. Some of the actions that this cohort discussed include formation of a psychosocial support group, participating in community sensitization drives in local chief meeting and churches, and advocating for stocking of the youth friendly centers with relevant sexual health supplies.⁷

The final aspect of the study is social transformation. This is designated in the tool as '*act*.' This is an intentional process of 'acting', by outlining actions that need to be taken so that the desired change can be realized at individual, community and systemic levels (Chemei and Mombo,

⁴ Circle of Concerned African Women Theologian- Kenya Chapter, www.circlekenya.org

⁵ Field work Notes, "Nakuru Lodon Social hall community study."

⁶ Field work Notes, "Nakuru Lodon Social hall community study."

⁷ Field work Notes, "Nakuru Lodon Social hall community study."



2023). In this level, the tool is used to facilitate inclusion, by analyzing AYSRHR issues and exploring actions that need to be implemented so that no one is left behind in accessing everything they need for sexual well-being (Chemei and Mombo, 2023). The focus at this final stage is on developing an action plan that will lead to change. Therefore, participants explore what needs to be done differently, and the resources (capacities) available in the community to facilitate the desired change (Chemei and Mombo, 2023). In the case of the Nakuru London social hall community study with teenage mothers from the London slums of Nakuru, participants took some time to develop an action plan in smaller groups, wrote on flipcharts, and then we conducted a gallery walk to jointly discuss the action plans.⁸ They identified individual, communal, and systemic changes that they wanted to see, the actions they needed to achieve these changes, and the time in which the action needed to be done. They also identified people who could help to achieve the desired change such as community health volunteers, chiefs, pastors, educators/teachers, parents, politicians, policy makers, and other community leaders.

Conclusion - from Gate keeping to Gate Opening

This paper has argued that as long as religion as a social institution still plays a critical role in framing, producing, and disseminating public discourses and pedagogies on issues around reproductive health and rights, advocates of AYSRHR cannot ignore it. The paper has further acknowledged that while religious rhetoric and beliefs are a frequently recurring barrier to acceptability and accessibility of essential AYSRH information and services, the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians- Kenya chapter is demonstrating that religion can be more than just a foe; it can be a friend too. Through the Intersectionalised See Judge and Act (ISJA) tool, the Circle is presenting an AYSRH religious advocacy tool which is action-focused and interactive community study for personal and social transformation. Although the tool is largely based on a Christian tradition of contextual bible study and reading, it is also versatile and flexible. The tool's approach can also be adopted in other religious traditions for use in AYSRHR advocacy. A comparative study, in which religious texts from different traditions are read simultaneously alongside contemporary AYSRHR is a possibility.

In sum, this ICJA tool achieves three goals. First, it names and exposes tendency to use religious texts, cultural narratives, and other sources of knowledge as barriers in accessing AYSRHR services and information. Secondly, it highlights the agency of ordinary people and marginalized people in rising against these narratives, forces, and structures by promoting a culture of naming and affirming their contributions not only is social analysis, but also social transformation. Thirdly, it formulates a hermeneutic that is liberative, transformational and which reappraises biblical tradition and African world-views, cultures and lived experiences, with the purpose of correcting the effect of the religious, cultural, and ideological conditioning that deny teens and young people abundant life in the context of the syndemic of the triple threat- teenage pregnancy, HIV infection, and Sexual and Gender based violence. Such kind of a tool becomes critical in opening gates and pathways for flourishing of life, and attainment of Kenya's Vision 2030 which aligns with the global Sustainable Development Goals 3- "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages."

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⁸ Field work Notes, "Nakuru London Social hall community study."



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