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Deconstructing Gendered *vumilia* (perseverance) Theology in times of the Gender-based Violence Pandemic

By Esther Mombo¹ and Heleen Joziassse²

Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, cases of gender-based violence (GBV) dramatically increased. While the Kenyan governmental bodies are held responsible for their inadequate response to this “national disaster of GBV”, the role of the Kenyan churches is hardly criticized. The churches neither spoke out against this prevalent injustice, nor did they openly support the victims of GBV. Furthermore, it could be argued that churches, through their patriarchal structures and cultural and doctrinal teachings, have contributed to this disaster. This article is written from a woman’s perspective and focused on the notion of *vumilia*, or perseverance, an important notion in the lived faith of women. *Vumilia* is the Kiswahili word for “persevere” or “endure.” It appears that a gendered *vumilia* theology applied to gender relations, prevents churches from adequately addressing gender-based violence. Unless and until this *vumilia* theology is deconstructed and balanced with a liberation theology, the church’s response to gender-based violence will be superficial and insufficient. In this article, the narrative method is used to bring about the ideas and experiences of women in two Kenyan churches, the Reformed Church of East Africa (RCEA) and the African Israel Nineveh Church (AINC), related to *vumilia* and its cultural and theological underpinnings. The article discusses the teachings of *vumilia* theology in these churches and their effects on women who suffer from gender-based violence. The paper also traces the resistance of church women, indicating the contours of a woman-affirming Christ-centered theology and spirituality.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, *vumilia* or perseverance, *vumilia* theology, gender, AINC, RCEA

Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) has been identified as a burning issue in Kenyan society long before the COVID-19 pandemic occurred.¹ However, gender-based violence increased during this pandemic due to curfews and other restrictions on mobility, which left families locked up in their homes, presuming the homes to be safe places for women and children. The response of the Kenyan government to this violence has been judged as too little, too late.² It appears that the same can be argued concerning the churches’ response. During the COVID-19 pandemic, mainline churches in towns took recourse to online programs, while churches elsewhere suspended their life-services and resorted to broadcast services (on radio or television). The regular churchwomen’s gatherings as places of shelter

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and encouragement were postponed as well. Although church leaders did support the official law enforcement policies regarding the protection of women and children, they did not take actual measures to protect women and children. They neither raised any awareness, nor did they identify the role of churches, their teachings, and theologies regarding what is called “the national disaster of GBV.”³ An example of the lip service of a church leader stands out in the following newspaper report:

Pastor Chris Nzau from Murera African Inland Church in Kiambu, talking to Kenya News Agency from the church yesterday after the midweek prayers, said: “The church was also at liberty to deal with cases concerning gender-based violence if the vice was reported by anybody experiencing it”, and, “the church influences the masses through family life teachings and acting as a role model.” He further noted that most religious leaders and marriage counsellors were influential in family guidance, marriage, and couple reconciliation, thus making the men of the cloth, key players in the fight against gender-based violence.⁴

Why did churches and their leaders hardly speak out against the spike in domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence accompanying the COVID-19 pandemic and why did they not adequately protect the most vulnerable?⁵ Furthermore, it appears that churches, through teaching, preaching, and counselling, contributed to this disaster. Through patriarchal structures, cultural and doctrinal teachings, violence against women and girls is perpetuated, silencing the voices of women. Kenyan women theologians have raised this issue repeatedly.⁶ Often, in publications about gender-based violence, attention is paid to the different types of GBV and the causes of such violence. In particular, the churches’ failure to address the causes of GBV is highlighted in the present article, pointing to its rootedness in culture, a particular interpretation of Biblical texts, and the lack of training of clergy to address GBV.⁷

This article is written from a woman’s perspective and based on an analysis of the lived experiences of women concerning gender-based violence. In their lived experiences, the notion of *vumilia* recurs. It appears that this notion of *vumilia* applied to gender relations, in conjunction with a gendered *vumilia* theology, prevents churches from adequately addressing gender-based violence. *Vumilia* is the Kiswahili word for “persevere” or “endure” and appears to be a key notion in the culture and religion of Kenya, contributing to what Esther Mombo has coined as a “*vumilia* theology.”⁸ It is a gendered religious construct that legitimizes and promotes women’s passive suffering in marital relationships while suppressing resilience and resistance. In African oral traditions, in songs and proverbs, as well as in the Christian theology and Scripture, especially in the Psalms and the letters of Paul, perseverance is a virtue, particularly applied to and forced upon women. Generally, “perseverance” denotes an effort to do something despite difficulties, to withstand all the challenges. The Christian teaching on perseverance is about prayer and steadfastness. The different people in the Bible who persevered include Hannah, the mother of Samuel; she trusted steadfastly in God as a barren woman (I Samuel 1:15). Perseverance involves enduring trials and tribulations. Christian teaching on perseverance is about preparation for and not being surprised by trials and suffering (Peter 4:12-14). The notion of *vumilia*, when applied to marital relations, implies that women can’t separate nor divorce in marital relationships. Unless this *vumilia* theology is deconstructed and balanced with a theology of liberation, the churches’ response to gender-based violence will be superficial and inadequate.

In this article, the narrative method is used to bring about the ideas and experiences of women related to *vumilia* and its cultural and theological underpinnings. In African women’s theologies, the actual or lived (faith) experiences of African women (e.g., the voices of

churchwomen) are an important source for theologizing, and so a narrative approach is foregrounded to theologically reflect on the lived experiences of women. The South African feminist theologian Sarojini Nadar refers to Brene Brown, who states that “stories may simply be data with a soul.”⁹ Nadar argues that the method of storytelling and the use of narrative research are instrumental in engendering suspicion of master-narratives and as a tool of knowledge gathering as well as knowledge sharing.¹⁰

We applied the narrative method to present and discuss the *vumilia* theology as voiced and demonstrated in the lived experiences of two groups of churchwomen. Apart from the two songs, the presented narratives and quotes were collected between 2011 and 2015 (hence before the COVID-19 pandemic) during extensive cooperative research amongst women in two locations in the Reformed Church of East Africa (RCEA) and the African Israel Nineveh Church (AINC), carried out by Heleen Joziase and Esther Mombo.¹¹ The focus of this research was on the lives and faith of women in these churches. The case studies were designed as a gradual process of knowledge finding executed by groups of researchers and consisted of questionnaires, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, narratives in the form of life story interviews, participatory observations, and hymns. The participants were “churchwomen”¹² of our respective congregations.¹³ With all the women who participated in individual interviews and questionnaires, a form of consent was read aloud in the vernacular of the women; the aims of the research and the guarantee of anonymity were discussed, and women signed the form prior to the interview.¹⁴ The focus of this broad research into the lives and faith of churchwomen was on the lived Christologies of these women and the transformation of gender relations. The researchers came across many references to “*vumilia* theology,” while gender-based violence was often mentioned by the interviewees as one of the main problems women experienced in their communities.¹⁵

In the following paragraphs, we first introduce the notion of *vumilia* as presented in two popular songs, showing the cultural and religious embeddedness of the notion, and presenting forms of acceptance and resistance. Secondly, through a life-story of lived experiences with the concept of *vumilia* of a woman in the AINC, the cultural and theological underpinnings of this notion are presented. Thereafter, different cultural and religious underpinnings of *vumilia* theology, as a key notion in culture and religion, are identified through analyzing teachings at weddings and funerals. Thereafter, the church teachings of a *vumilia* theology and its effects on women who suffer from gender-based violence are discussed. In the last paragraph, traces of critique and resistance by churchwomen are identified, drawing the contours of a woman-affirming Christ-centred theology and spirituality.

***Vumilia*: Endorsed and Rejected in Songs**

Gendered perseverance causes women to suffer and ultimately die in violent relations. This notion of perseverance arises from both African religion and the reading and interpretation of Biblical texts. Proverbs, songs, sermons, and speeches are used to justify perseverance and endurance. The following songs, one religious and the other secular, exemplify how *vumilia* is justified and critiqued. Both songs are sung by women and bring out the ideas of passive suffering on the one hand and resistance on the other. The first song, entitled “God Give Me Perseverance,” is by a gospel artist called Rose Muhando.¹⁶

I am seeking refuge in you Lord
 You're my only fortress
 I am depending on you
 Father God, I come unto you
 I am surrendering all to you

I need your intervention

Many issues have made me suffer
Jesus give me perseverance
I have many problems
Father give me perseverance

My children are suffering
Jesus give me perseverance
The father to my children has abandoned us
Father give me perseverance
I'm at the verge of death
Father give me perseverance

Father, Father God give me perseverance
Give me Lord Father God give me perseverance
Lord, Lord Jesus give me perseverance
My siblings have rejected me
I need you to rescue me
They've rejected me
I come unto you

My life is full of problems
You're my only hope
You're the husband to the widows
Jesus give me perseverance
You're the father to the orphans

The video accompanying this song shows the singer being in violent situations, praying to God/Jesus to give her perseverance. There is no sign of resistance. The song brings to light a mixture of emotions for many women, and it seems to emanate from the oral teachings on the importance of endurance. It is critical to remain in the marriage even when there is violence. Perseverance, patience, and endurance are parts of the Christian language that glorifies suffering. The next song, "Moses I have persevered enough," is by a secular artist, Daudi Kabaka¹⁷:

Moses I have persevered for long
You battering me like a donkey
My skin is full of scars
Because of your daily fists
Misery, Misery, Misery

When we got married, I had no scars
I was very healthy; I was fat like an exotic goat
Oh! Oh! Please Moses
Look for another wife
Who will persevere your habits?
Drinking alcohol just to batter and hut
Sorry Sorry Sorry.

The gospel artist prays for perseverance in the context of violence, invoking the help of God. Together with the violence in the video, these words incorporate a clear message to women to endure violence. The secular artist's song depicts the battered woman as leaving her "Moses." The woman seems to reject the notion of *vumilia* and chooses resistance. It appears that both in Christian and secular songs, women are told to hold the tensions between challenging violence and persevering through it.

Life Story: Go Back and Persevere in this Polygamous Marriage¹⁸

The following fragments from a life-story of a member of the African Israel Nineveh Church (AINC) show how the notion of *vumilia* is culturally and religiously embedded and lived out by women:

I am a mother of one child, a member of the AINC, and I weave baskets and ropes. I dropped out of school in standard eight because my father had spent all his wealth educating boys. He said that girls are *og'wang* [wild cats]¹⁹ who will not sustain their own home. Only two of my sisters went up to form four.

My marriage was arranged at 15 years old by my aunt and my co-wife, who saw me as a beautiful and hardworking girl. My mom refused because she had other possible suitors in mind for me. Everyone expected me to give birth, but it took me two years before I got pregnant. My co-wife expected me to be her maid just like Sarah and Hagar, but unfortunately things changed when I delivered my son; my child has become a threat and my co-wife complains that she does not have enough land for us. This has made me not to have another baby. Apart from that, my husband has left my house. At times, I experienced violence from her side.

After being married for three years, I developed a small problem, and I did not know that I was HIV positive. My husband frustrated me. We separated and I went back to my parents, who welcomed me as their child. I was told to go for a medical test, and I was so afraid; I lost hope to the extent that I told my parents to give out all my belongings and my money to my sisters to share amongst them. When the second test revealed I was HIV positive, I was put on drugs. I thought of committing suicide, but my parents understood and encouraged me. My son is also positive. He has been counselled and is on drugs too. I was so bitter and asked myself many questions, because since my youth I did not have a 'step out' and I did not have a boyfriend. I only had my husband and so I asked myself where the disease had come from. The doctor asked me whether I am a second wife. I am not sure who brought me the disease [...].

When my husband saw that my life had improved, he asked me to come back. My parents encouraged me, like all parents do, to go back and persevere in this polygamous marriage. He took me back, and up to now, I am still on drugs because of the Word of God. My joy is that even though I live in this polygamous marriage it does not bother me, because the Word of God has kept me and humbled me to such an extent that even when I am wronged, I feel happy because the Kingdom belongs to the weak. God has delivered me. We do not fight with our hands, but we use the Word of God, which is the strongest weapon. My challenge is that, as a second wife, my husband spends most of his time with my co-wife. He sleeps there and does not come to my home, but this does not bother me. Instead, it has given me the courage to

remain in that home. I am happy and will keep going on because of God, who performed miracles on Mount Sinai and made water come out of a stone.²⁰

In this story, Mary²¹ narrates her experiences of living out perseverance and some of the prevailing cultural and religious arguments for perseverance. The story also shows the entanglement of the various gendered cultural and religious norms concerning *vumilia*. When specifically asked about domestic violence, Mary explains:

I know of one of my mothers-in-law whose husband battered her seriously, until she had to sleep outside. All her teeth were broken, but she still came back because of her children. Such violence often happens when a husband is a drunkard or when he has inherited another man's wife. Good parents normally encourage their daughters to persevere, but many bad parents would advise their children to leave.

Violence is not good, but people should just persevere to the point of death. In this Christ gives us hope, because he was crucified, but he persevered until death. Women have to persevere because of uncertainties and also to secure a place for her burial. A girl should not be taken to be buried at her parents' home in case misfortune befalls her.²²

In relation to culture, Mary mentions that she is uneducated and was married-off as a teenager into a polygynous marriage for the sake of giving a child to a childless couple. She emphasizes that once married; you belong to the home of the husband and should stay with him until death. A married woman depends on her husband and her in-laws for survival, and she secures her grave with her in-laws. Hence, socially and economically, divorce is simply not an option for most women.

Her Christian faith encourages Mary to stay in the marriage and to persevere, "till death do us part"; marriage is a life-time union instituted by Jesus Christ. Moreover, she refers to the empowering Word of God, which keeps her and humbles her "to such an extent that even when I am wronged, I feel happy because the Kingdom belongs to the weak". She also mentions the call to imitate Christ, who suffered and persevered till death.

It appears that performing perseverance is a means of survival (economic, physical, and procreation) for Mary. Hence, she accepts and indirectly sanctions violence, e.g., the unfaithfulness of her husband, the transmission of HIV, being beaten, being emotionally disregarded, having more than one child, etc., through adhering to a *vumilia* theology—a construct that offers her cultural respect, and gives her courage and hope in the spiritual realm. *Vumilia* appears to be a theologically and normatively sanctioned construct, which is lived out by women in their struggle to seek life amidst life denying forces.

***Vumilia* is inculcated in the Rites of Passage: Marriage and Funerals**

During vital occasions in life, such as bridal showers, weddings, and funerals, gender roles and relations are inculcated and reinforced. Similar teachings about "proper" roles and relations seem to be endorsed across different peoples and churches in Kenya. The women in our research hold that the normative or "proper" gender roles for men and women in marital relations are hierarchical: The man is the head, the leader, the provider, respected and responsible; he takes the decisions. The woman cares, bears children, helps, and is hard-working and loving. Within this hierarchical framework, the main message during weddings, according to a young and married RCEA-woman, is:

[...] you don't, you should not go back home. A woman should persevere even when you are beaten. Don't go back home, take care of your children, take care of your family, and take care of your husband. You should cook.²³

Marriage culturally implies that a woman moves from her home to the home of her in-laws. Her identity changes from being a daughter (of her father) to being the wife of her husband. The power over the woman is passed down from one man to the next. The gender hierarchy and the subordination of women are reinforced by the practice that women move homes when marrying. A woman is always an outsider or, in the words of Jane, a member of the RCEA:

In wedding ceremonies women are told that we should respect our husband as we respect Jesus as the head of the church. It means that, although we are saying he is the head, we find ourselves being the managers of the house. Although we respect our men, we remember that he is the one who brought us here, because this house belongs to him. So me, I came here as a visitor, although I have the permission to be here, but still the husband is the head of the house. The woman is the helper.²⁴

According to our interviewees, this hierarchical construction of gender relations stems from and is in line with both culture and Christian teachings, derived from the Bible and taught in church. Married women should remain in their new homes for the sake of keeping the honour of both families, as well as their own—to be good women. She should fulfil her gendered roles of being a mother, a wife, a caregiver, and a hard-working woman for the sake of the family. Hierarchy in gender relations is particularly traced back to (and sanctioned by) the Creation stories from the Old Testament. The indication of the woman as “helper”, as mentioned by Jane, seems directly derived from the Creation story in Genesis 2:18. Moreover, hierarchy in gender relations is perceived to mirror the headship of Jesus in relation to the church.²⁵ Perseverance is the key to remaining in this hierarchical structure. Perseverance seems to be the key driving force for a mother to be able to stay with the children and to have a place to be buried. Mary. Male observes that headship implies women lacking equal power to decide, to be responsible, and to negotiate sex, which leaves women vulnerable to sexual violence even within marriage.

Funerals and Perseverance through Jesus as Husband

Particularly within the RCEA, “*vumilia*” is part of the common theological vocabulary, employed during burials and mostly targeting widows: “At a funeral, widows are reminded to *vumilia* and to rely on God, as He is the husband of the widows” (Isaiah 54:5). “Having Jesus as husband”²⁶, that means that *only* Jesus provides for and takes care of widows. Hence, widows are strongly advised not to look for another relationship. Sheila, who is a widow herself, shows that widows are not asked about their needs. Instead, they are told to stay away from new sexual relationships with men, no matter how old they are:

When you become a widow, people in the community and in our church tell you, “From now on let Jesus be your husband.” I think they mean that you now have to rely on Jesus. It was difficult for me because I was young, but I told God to help me so that I would not think of anything bad. For the first three years after the death of my husband, life was very difficult but now I can cope. I now know how to organize myself and my future is bright.²⁷

Culturally, widows are perceived by the community as potential husband-snatchers and a danger to marriages.²⁸ But, while this phrase “from now on Jesus is your husband” endeavours to control women’s sexuality, it facilitates men in their perception of widows as “available.” Widows are “without a head” and therefore free to provide sexual services to men. Widows simultaneously embody the notions of control of women’s sexuality and the accessibility of female sexuality. Speaking about the gendered practice of the RCEA regarding widows and widowers, this earlier cited RCEA-widow criticizes the practice of prescribing Jesus as husband:

From now on, widows are told that Christ is their husband, but men are not told the same. The men are allowed to participate in church activities and their lives can continue well. Widowers can relate and share their problems with the pastor and other elders. Widowers are told to look for another life, and life becomes normal for them. But for a widow, life becomes so difficult. She cannot freely relate to other men inside and outside the church, and in most cases, women are not released to marry another, like men are; they have to stay alone.²⁹

In this quotation, gender justice seems to be framed as “having a life”; widows are denied the right to live and have a (social) life. Through the imagery of Jesus as husband, widows, as embodied problems, and threats, are confined to the space of Christ: The teaching of Jesus, who becomes a husband to the widows, forces them to abstain from intimate (sexual) relations, hampers social interaction and makes it very difficult to survive, except for economically empowered widows. This is what a *vumilia* theology entails for RCEA-widows: it is a gendered gospel.

Widows in the AINC use the notion of Christ becoming your husband to negotiate inheritance. The AINC is rooted in Luo culture,³⁰ where the practice of widow inheritance is widespread.³¹ Before being inherited, a Luo woman needs to be “cleansed” by a professional cleanser who has had unprotected sexual intercourse with the widow. Through cleansing, the widow, who is “contagious” because of the death of her husband, is symbolically separated from the deceased and “purified.”³²

Compared to RCEA-women, for AINC-women, the notion of Jesus as husband is apparently more positive; when a widow has Jesus as her husband, cultural practices of widow cleansing and inheritance can be rejected. So, AINC-Widows says that Jesus protects people from violence and inheritance, but that Jesus’ protection needs to be paired with the protection and support of the local church community.

The Voice of the Church: Gender-based Violence and Perseverance

In cases of violence, unfaithfulness, and irresponsibility of men, the notion of *vumilia*-perseverance and endurance - is part of the gendered pastoral theological vocabulary and an analogue to the metaphor of Jesus who becomes a husband to widows.³³ Faith in Jesus strengthens women in their endeavor to respect and to submit to their husbands as the heads of marriage, irrespective of their experiences here and now. The Malawian feminist theologian Nyagondwe Fiedler notices that to grassroots women in Malawi, Jesus offers hope of future rewards, and they find refuge in him.³⁴ The gift of hope in the future functions as the “fuel” of *vumilia*; hope enables women to persevere. This is reflected in several songs about Jesus, which RCEA-women mention as important in their lives: Jesus is the bridge to a better life, to eternal life, and to a sweet life. During suffering and bitterness, women long for sweetness in Jesus.³⁵

Similarly, in the faith practice of AINC-women, the importance and impact of the spiritual realm on daily life and the struggle to survive is emphasized, knowing that

transformation of life ultimately takes shape in the hereafter. In heaven, evil is defeated, and all will be well. This helps AINC-women keep going as they struggle every day to provide for their children.³⁶ Churchwomen are ambivalent regarding the church's role as a safe space for violated women. An AINC woman comments:

In church, when somebody experiences violence, some people pray for you while others ridicule you. Women do not speak openly about it, but you can hear them speaking about violence in testimonies or when people make prayer requests. Most women do not speak openly because they fear that their problems will be turned “upside down” or “inside out.”³⁷

Yet, women in the AINC advise those who are violated to come to church and pray, to share the pain with fellow women in the church, and to find refuge and peace.³⁸ However, the structural character of the hierarchy and the subordinate position of women in marriage, family, society, and church, aggravates the suffering of women. Similarly, RCEA-women voice concern that in a male-dominated church, they look for comfort in vain:

You will find that the people who are there as elders and pastors are all men, so sometimes when you go and tell them the problems you are facing with your husband at home, they do not take it seriously. Because those people who are in the church are the same people who are doing the same things to their wives at home. But if you narrate your story to a woman, she feels it, because she is also like me.³⁹

This, as well as the next quotation, suggests that churchwomen seem to experience the comfort of Jesus through their women's communities, their fellowships.

[...] We women carry a lot of burdens concerning our home, so because we know Jesus is the only comfort and we know when we associate with other friends, at least you can forget things that are happening back home, whether you were tortured yesterday. So, we look for comfort.⁴⁰

Emulation of Jesus' Suffering

By adopting an attitude of perseverance and endurance, women argue that they emulate the suffering of Jesus, who also persevered: “The story of Christ who died for me is most important; if Christ underwent suffering, I should also undergo the same”⁴¹ RCEA-women identify with Jesus' suffering and giving his life “for others”, while the questions “why only women?” and “to what extent should women persevere?” are not addressed. Neither is the accompanying idea questioned that women have a soft heart and can humble themselves more easily compared to men. RCEA-women hold that women have a soft heart; they easily repent, whereas men have a hard heart.

The identification with Jesus, his suffering and perseverance, and the conviction that women are spiritually closer to Jesus than men, is an even more pronounced theme in the faith of AINC-women.

We as women are told *vumilia*, don't give up but be like Jesus who did not bother but at long last joined his father in heaven. Women really suffer like Jesus. Women suffer a lot and others end up dying because of injuries.⁴²

Some AINC-women frame violence as the result of ignorance—due to illiteracy—on the part of women. Other women, however, perceive violence as a result of sin caused by women

themselves. In their perception, beatings are a result of their sinful life; while Jesus can help women overcome their suffering: He died for their sins. Therefore, often the community blames the woman for the violence: "In the church you [as a woman, HJ] seek God's forgiveness because you did wrong for being beaten."⁴³ Victimized women attend church to repent of their sins, "to seek Jesus",⁴⁴ "to know God"⁴⁵ and his forgiveness, and to find encouragement and hope, because Jesus "fights for them."⁴⁶

Several AINC-women argue – just like their sisters in the RCEA - that while men have a "hard" or a "wild heart", women are "soft hearted" and humble.⁴⁷ Overall, AINC-women are convinced that compared to men, they are "deeper in the feeling of Jesus."⁴⁸ This feeling of Jesus is framed as suffering, feeling the pain of each other, e.g. being compassionate, and being humble.⁴⁹ As a saved man, humbled by God, shares in the pain of women:

[...] God made him not consider his maleness like many men do. He did things with a good motive. For example, he was made to suffer to show the weakness and helplessness of women. He fed people and also washed his disciples' feet.⁵⁰

When it comes to domestic violence, a woman holds: "Jesus died for us because of the love he had for us. Likewise, women persevere despite the beatings, insults, and the discrimination because of the love they have for their children."⁵¹ Moreover, AINC-women argue that because of this shared pain, Jesus is near to them, and he can solve their problems.⁵²

The Ghanaian theologians Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Elisabeth Amoah proposed the imagery of a wounded healer to express the compassion of Jesus.⁵³ At the same time, Oduyoye and Amoah make an important restriction when they write that "the Christ for us is the Jesus of Nazareth who agreed to be God's "Sacrificial Lamb," thus teaching that true and living sacrifice is that which is freely and consciously made."⁵⁴ Even though AINC-women don't use the term "wounded healer," it seems to help these churchwomen stay strong and survive in a world where violence and subordination are based on gender.⁵⁵

Women emphasize that the Word of God humbles them and when they are wronged, it is a source of strength.⁵⁶ Jesus stands by women in their perseverance, just as women stood by Jesus. Repentance and confession bring them closer to Jesus and his suffering. This is paradoxically interpreted as being closer to life. Mombo, in her article "Resisting *vumilia* theology: The Church and Violence against Women in Kenya" comments:

This kind of understanding has led most women to interpret violence against them as "walking in the footsteps of Christ" or "bearing the cross." Much time is spent by the women praying for themselves and their molesters to "change" or "repent."⁵⁷

The identification with Jesus does not seem to lead to escape from abusive situations. AINC-women explain that they depend on Jesus for their survival—or salvation—because of a lack of power in marital relations, the family, and the community.⁵⁸ This power imbalance makes churchwomen vulnerable: "If we women cannot humble ourselves, we face a very harsh life, violation, and discrimination that may result in separation or divorce, and children suffer more."⁵⁹ Hence, whereas perseverance is part of the struggle to survive, it results in a theology that legitimizes the suffering of women and the perpetuation of women's oppression.

Traces of a Deconstruction of *vumilia* Theology in the Light of GBV

In our extensive research amongst women in the AINC and the RCEA, women hardly articulate that Jesus protects or liberates from violence, nor do they testify that Jesus protects

against violence. Instead, women say that Jesus gives them strength and endurance when dealing with an abusive husband or when facing other instances of domestic or sexual violence.⁶⁰ Churchwomen seem to identify with Jesus as the one who suffered and who knows their suffering. Faith gives women the strength to stay with men who are unfaithful or violent instead of holding them accountable.

However, in both churches, women show resilience. They have, for instance, conversations about how long they should stay in a violent relationship. A few AINC-women implicitly critique the *vumilia* dogma and argue that “women are not fully liberated because the Bible says that a woman should not divorce her husband even if she is discriminated against and violated.”⁶¹ Hence, this appears to imply a critique and a demand for a reinterpretation of Scripture.

Some churchwomen in our case-studies hint at being set free or being liberated by Jesus from hierarchical gender relations. An RCEA-woman explicitly voices:

I can give an example in our church. You see, sometimes you are told you are not supposed to cross this boundary because you are a woman, but in a real sense Jesus liberates people, he doesn't segregate. He does not say: you are a man, and you are a woman. If it is saving, he saves them if it is liberation, he liberates them without measure.⁶²

For some women, Jesus embodies an implicit critique of hegemonic masculinities. Their lived Christology's inform and transform gender roles, as suggested in the quote:

God made him not consider his maleness like many men do. He did things with a good motive. For example, he was made to suffer to show the weakness and helplessness of women. He fed people and also washed his disciples' feet.⁶³

When asked about right gender relations as proclaimed by Jesus, most churchwomen mention the law of love and emphasize that Jesus is the embodiment of loving relations, mutuality, and humility, which should be applied to both women and men. In affirming the equal dignity of women and enabling them to take equal responsibility, Jesus affirms this. This supposedly “liberative” interpretation of Jesus' promotion of mutual love and respect is at the same time questioned. Some women think that the law of love ultimately does not change the power relations between men and women, probably because they also realize that this law of “loving relations” is predominantly targeting women: “If we love, respect, persevere, and be humble, as the Bible says, it gives us courage that what God has promised will be fulfilled, but we remain unfree and without strength.”⁶⁴

Moreover, a number of AINC-women connect gender-based violence to a lack of education on the part of women, and to the ignorance of men, who are not going to church and hence, are not taught about the liberating praxis of Jesus⁶⁵:

When we know Jesus, we are set free from the traditions that make us captives, traditions such as marriage, inheritance, decision-making, and so forth. Jesus said: “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” It's our men who are still not free from these bondages. For this reason, women who are educated and informed are free. But illiteracy of women has really left most women desperate and violated.⁶⁶

Conclusion

The gendered teaching of *vumilia* is rooted in African patriarchal culture, in a literal reading of Scriptural passages, and in clerical hermeneutics, resulting in a gendered *vumilia*

theology. Culturally, it is the virtue of a woman to persevere in a marital relationship till death. Unless women are economically and socially empowered and supported, they cannot survive outside of marital relationships. Christian teachings support this status quo.

Women in the AINC and the RCEA interpret violence against them as “walking in the footsteps of Jesus” or “bearing the cross.” To emulate Jesus’ suffering implies that women are called to endure and to persevere. Hence, the case studies show that women in the RCEA and the AINC have internalized this gendered *vumilia* theology in their lived faith. Churchwomen apply this theology of perseverance to navigate gender roles and relations in their efforts to survive with their children. At the same time, women implicitly voice that this *vumilia* theology does not work if the virtue of perseverance is only applied to women and is forced upon women.

To come to a deconstruction of this gendered *vumilia* theology, churchwomen should get the opportunity to speak about their concerns, their experiences, and their views. If churchwomen lack the power to raise their voice, men keep the privilege of interpreting the salvation of Jesus at the expense of women.

Our interviewees plead for gender equality in society and the church, for mutual respect and responsibility in marital relations. Although these churchwomen confess that Jesus has set them free, they also argue that men prevent them from living a liberated and dignified life. Hence, only when a *vumilia* theology is balanced by a theology of protest and liberation, will women have access to this freedom in Christ. Women should be equally entitled to interpret the words of Jesus: “I have come to give them life and life in abundance”; life which is materialized, embodied, and dignified in the here and now.

Not only in suffering but also in protesting, women can find Jesus on their side. The Biblical stories of resistance and Jesus offering women life can counterbalance *vumilia* theology: Jesus who offered life to the violated woman in John 8: 1-11, the ostracized Samaritan woman (John 4: 1-42), the socially and physically isolated bleeding woman (Luke 8:43-48). In the context of gender-based violence, being liberated or being set free by Jesus means that violence is named, and that women are enabled to speak out, to seek help, and to end their violent marriages, which are already “dead.” Most of all, when the church community is seen as a family, it is very important that women who have been abused are supported by the church and not shunned.

Female clergy have an important task of interpreting Scripture from the perspective of women, listening to the lived experiences of churchwomen of oppression and violation. A cultural hermeneutics⁶⁷ is required in which the equal rights and dignity of women are affirmed. When the deconstruction of gendered *vumilia* theology is facilitated on these different levels, Jesus’ gospel message of offering all people life and life abundantly,⁶⁸ will become truly inclusive of women.

Notes

[1] See for instance, information about gender-based violence in: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, “Kenya Demographic and Health Survey 2008-09” (Nairobi, Kenya, June 2010), pp. 245–64. Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, “Kenya Demographic and Health Survey 2014” (Nairobi, December 2015), pp. 291–326. ECA-WIDNET. Eastern and Central Africa Women in Development Network, *Violence Against Women: Trainers’ Manual* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997). Ministry of Devolution and Planning, “National Policy of Prevention and Response to Gender Based Violence,” November 2014. <http://psyg.go.ke/docs/National%20Policy%20on%20prevention%20and%20Response%20to%20Gender%20Based%20Violence.pdf>

[2] See the report by Human Rights Watch entitled “I had nowhere to go”: violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya”, which was released on September 21st, 2021. Due to economic hardships related to the pandemic, particularly the curfews when women lost their ability to earn money, and the pressure on the already weak health systems, survivors of GBV didn’t get health assistance. More so, fear of the

corrupt police and law-enforcement systems prevented women from seeking help. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/09/21/i-had-nowhere-go/violence-against-women-and-girls-during-covid-19-pandemic-kenya> (accessed 21-10-2021).

[3] In an official statement, the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA-Kenya) asked the Kenyan President in mid-October 2021 to declare Gender-Based Violence (GBV) a national disaster. In: <https://www.kenyans.co.ke/news/69438-declare-gender-based-violence-national-disaster-uhuru-told> (accessed 28-2-2022).

[4] Report of a meeting of the Kiambu County Development Implementation Coordination Committee (CDICC) 18-3-2021, <https://www.kenyanews.go.ke/fight-against-gender-based-violence/> (accessed 21-10-2021). See also the contributions of Retired Anglican Church Bishop Benjamin Nzimbi in a meeting with the clergy and cultural elders on gender-based violence, organized by the Centre for Rights Education and Awareness (CREAW) 5th April 2021 in Kitui: <https://www.kenyanews.go.ke/kitui-elders-to-mediate-incest-and-gender-based-violence-cases/> (accessed 21-10-2021).

[5] Over 130 people, led by some of East Africa's most prominent faith leaders, attended World Vision East Africa's online dialogue on the role of faith leaders in the campaign against gender-based violence (GBV) in the region on November 25, 2020. In: <https://www.wvi.org/stories/faith-leaders-east-africa-denounce-gender-based-violence-and-call-stronger-partnerships> (accessed 21-10-2021).

[6] Grace Wamue and Mary N. Getui, *Violence Against Women: Reflections by Kenyan Women Theologians* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1996); Esther Mombo, "Resisting Vumilia Theology. The Church and Violence against Women in Kenya," in *Anglicanism: A Global Communion*, ed. Andrew Wingate et al. (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 1998), pp. 219–24; Emily Onyango, "Mission Theology In The Anglican Communion-The Challenge of Gender-Based Violence in Kenya and the Response of the Church," *Mission Theology in the Anglican Community*, Summer 2017, <http://www.missiontheologyanglican.org/article/the-challenge-of-gender-based-violence-in-kenya-and-the-response-of-the-church/>; Philomena Mwaura, "Gender Based Violence: A Pastoral Challenge for the Church in Africa," *Journal of Constructive Theology* 16(1) (2010): pp. 102–19; T. M. Hinga, "Violence Against Women: A Challenge To the Church," in *Pastoral Care in African Christianity: Challenging Essays in Pastoral Theology*, ed. Douglas W. Waruta and Hannah W. Kinoti (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1994), pp. 117–33.

[7] An important manual for pastors, lay leaders and Bible study groups is: Fred Nyabera and Taryn Montgomery, eds., *Contextual Bible Study Manual on Gender-Based Violence* (Nairobi: FECCLAHA, 2007).

[8] Esther Mombo, "Resisting Vumilia Theology. The Church and Violence against Women in Kenya," in *Anglicanism: A Global Communion*, eds. Andrew Wingate et al. (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 1998), pp. 219–24.

[9] Sarojini Nadar, "'Stories Are Data with Soul' - Lessons from Black Feminist Epistemology," *Agenda* 28, no. 1 (2014): p. 22.

[10] Nadar, p. 23.

[11] The research methodology is further explained in: Heleen Joziase, "Women's Faith Seeking Life. Lived Christologies and the Transformation of Gender Relations in Two Kenyan Churches" (Utrecht, Utrecht University, 2020), pp. 49-85. About the RCEA as a semi-mission church, see Joziase, 89–91. The AINC is characterized as a second generation *Roho* or spiritual church. See: Timothy John Padwick, "Spirit, Desire and the World: Roho Churches of Western Kenya in the Era of Globalization" (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2003), pp. 7, 89.

[12] We opted to use the more neutral notion of "churchwomen" instead of the rather demeaning terms "ordinary women" or "grassroots women."

[13] The RCEA in Cheptiret and Tebeson and the AINC in Ruiru and Kendu Bay.

[14] Joziase, "Women's Faith Seeking Life. Lived Christologies and the Transformation of Gender Relations in Two Kenyan Churches," p. 56.

[15] Joziase, pp. 115–16, 216-219.

[16] *Rose Muhando* (b. January 1976) is a Tanzanian Gospel singer, songwriter, and choreographer.

[17] Daudi Kabaka (1939-2001) was a Kenyan singer-songwriter and musician.

[18] Fragments from AINC Interview 2 Mary, Kendu Bay: 13-4-2014, in: Joziase, "Women's Faith Seeking Life. Lived Christologies and the Transformation of Gender Relations in Two Kenyan Churches," pp. 47–48. All quotations in this article are documented in the research "Women's Faith Seeking Life."

[19] This traditional Luo expression denotes girls as outsiders who do not belong to the home. They will get married and become members of another family and offer support there. The children that she will give birth to will belong to the other family.

[20] This is part of the foundational history of the AINC in which the leaders of the AINC went up the hill of Mount Sinai, near the headquarters of this church in "Nineveh", Western Kenya.

[21] In this article we quote women from the RCEA and AINC, belonging to Luo, Abaluya, and Keyo ethnic communities. All the names of the interviewees are pseudonyms.

- [22] AINC Interview 2 Mary, Kendu Bay: 13-4-2014.
- [23] Interview 11 Elseba, Cheptiret: 20-5-2013.
- [24] RCEA Interview 12 Jane, Cheptiret: 19-5-2013.
- [25] Ephesians 5:21-33; I Corinthians 11:1-3; I Peter 3: 1-6.
- [26] RCEA Interview 12 Jane, Cheptiret: 19-5-2013. In this case study, we didn't come across any widows who inherited. Already in 1976, Oboler noticed that amongst the Nandi "levirate arrangements are rare." A widow continues to live on her deceased husband's land, and the property of a woman inside the house is inherited only by her own son or sons. Regina Smith Oboler, *Women, Power, and Economic Change: The Nandi of Kenya* (Stanford University Press, 1985), p. 129.
- [27] RCEA Interview 6 Sheila, Cheptiret: 20-5-2013.
- [28] "Husband-snatchers" is used in the life story of Hellena (RCEA interview 4). The cultural perception is that because a widow first had a husband and now is without, she most likely will go about looking for one.
- [29] RCEA Interview 6 Sheila, Cheptiret: 20-5-2013.
- [30] The AINC is also strong in Luhya culture, where widow inheritance is not practiced.
- [31] Inheritance is a socio-cultural practice and is common in the Luo community. Mildred Ndeda, "Nomiya Luo Church: A Gender Analysis of the Dynamics of an African Independent Church among the Luo of Siaya District in the Twentieth Century and Beyond." August 2003, p. 261.
- [32] See: Constance Ambasa-Shisanya, "Widowhood and HIV Transmission in Siaya District, Kenya," in *Compassionate Circles: African Women Theologians Facing HIV*, eds. Ezra Chitando and Nontando Hadebe (Geneva: WCC Publ., 2009), p. 56. In the past, the cleanser used to be a relative, but nowadays, cleansers are professionals and unknown to the family. An account of the practice of widow cleansing is given in: Elisabeth Asewe Oluoch and Wesonga Justus Nyongesa, "Perception of the Rural Luo Community on Widow Inheritance and HIV/AIDs in Kenya: Towards Developing Risk Communication Messages," *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 4(1) (January 2013): p. 215.
- [33] Perseverance does not apply to men; cases of unfaithfulness by wives are in no way tolerated.
- [34] NyaGondwe Fiedler, *African Feminist Hermeneutics*, p. 140.
- [35] Joziassie, "Women's Faith Seeking Life. Lived Christologies and the Transformation of Gender Relations in Two Kenyan Churches," p. 146.
- [36] Research assistants comment that this focus is not adequately empowering women to make changes in their everyday lives.
- [37] Mary interview 2 AINC
- [38] AINC Jesus17,6b. Also in: AINC Jesus8,6c, AINC Jesus13,6c.
- [39] RCEA Interview 9 Maryanne, Eldoret: 30-8-2013.
- [40] RCEA Interview 9 Maryanne, Eldoret: 30-8-2013.
- [41] RCEA Jesus 20,1c.
- [42] AINC Interview 6 Charity, Kendu Bay: 13-4-2014.
- [43] AINC Jesus3,10+c.
- [44] AINC Jesus2,10+.
- [45] AINC Jesus5,10+.
- [46] AINC Jesus2,6c, AINC Jesus3,6c. See AINC Interview 3 Anita, Kendu Bay: 26-5-2014. Also AINC Jesus16,6c.
- [47] AINC Jesus14,6a See also Jesus AINC13,6b: Women argue that men are difficult to convince, even of going to church. Also: AINC Jesus16,6b.
- [48] AINC Jesus1,6a.
- [49] Pain symbolizes threatened life, while both Christ and women are givers of life and caring.
- [50] AINC Jesus7,7a.
- [51] AINC Interview 3 Anita, Kendu Bay: 26-5-2014.
- [52] AINC Jesus13,6a. Also: AINC Jesus6,6b.
- [53] In Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Jezus de Gezalfe," in *De Gewonde Genezer. Christologie Vanuit Het Perspectief van Vrouwen in Verschillende Culturen*, eds. Manuela Kalsky and Theo Witvliet (Baarn: Ten Have, 1991), p. 13.
- [54] Oduyoye and Amoah, "The Christ for African Women," p. 44.
- [55] AINC Jesus7,7a;15,7a;9,7b.
- [56] This is also uttered by a widow in the research conducted by Maseno: "Her strength came from humbling herself and praying to God to add her strength." Loreen Iminza Maseno-Ouma, *How Abanyole African Widows Understand Christ: Explaining Redemption Through the Propagation of Lineage* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2014), p. 201.
- [57] Mombo, "Resisting Vumilia Theology. The Church and Violence against Women in Kenya," p. 222.
- [58] AINC gender question 10.

- [59] AINC Gender15,7. Here humbleness and the idea of women having a weak heart seem to be part of a survival strategy, instead of reflecting “a state of being” or a capacity exclusive for women.
- [60] In the group discussion in the RCEA in Cheptiret (13-5-2015), the possible attitudes of women in violent relationships were discussed, and the dictum was that women should persevere.
- [61] AINC Jesus16,12a.
- [62] RCEA Interview 9 Maryanne, Eldoret: 30-8-2013.
- [63] AINC Jesus7,7a.
- [64] AINC Gender16, 15 a. See also AINC Gender15, 15a.
- [65] “Since we are together in this church, we are taught.” The husband understands the teachings and we have left the widow an inheritance and no beating now. They teach you should be obedient, to be at peace as wives and husbands.” AINC Gender15,4a.
- [66] AINC Interview 3 Anita, Kendu Bay: 26-5-2014.
- [67] See this biblical hermeneutics: Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (Sheffield: Continuum, 2002).
- [68] John 10:10 reads: “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

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