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18 HIV, Transactional Sex, and #Blessed in the Context of Neo-liberal Christianity

A Challenge to African Women's Theologies¹

Beverley Haddad

Abstract

There are at least 1300 new HIV infections amongst young women between the ages of 15 and 24 in South Africa each week. Research over the past two decades has shown that transactional sex with older men, traditionally known as “sugar daddies”, is a key driver in this vulnerability. These older men have more recently been termed “blessers” on social media sites with a community of young urban women, #Blessed, seeking lifestyles that embrace the commodified goods of neoliberal capitalism. The article discusses the notion of “transactional sex” and positions young women as both victim and agent in the South African context of unemployment and poverty. By naming these relationships #Blessed, young women choose to harness the tools of prosperity theology and link their desire for material wealth and consumer lifestyles with the unmediated power of God who intervenes. African women's theologies must, the article contends, address women's agency that does not destabilise the unequal gender relations of econo-patriarchy by engaging the intersections of economics, gender, and sexuality in the current South African context.

Keywords: HIV, transactional sex; #Blessed, “blesser” phenomenon, prosperity gospel, econo-patriarchy, African women's theologies

Introduction

The first publications by Ezra Chitando that I read were, *Living with Hope: African Churches and HIV/AIDS Vols 1 & 2* (Chitando 2007). These texts

¹ This essay is a revised version of an article that was first published in the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (2018), ““Taking the Wanting Out of Waiting”: HIV, Transactional Sex, and #Blessed in the Context of Neo-liberal Christianity” 161, 5-17.

introduced me to a male colleague that was deeply embedded in the concerns I shared - HIV, gender, and the role of the church in contextual issues. So began a journey over a number of years in which we collaborated on numerous projects addressing HIV and the church. This was at a time when HIV & AIDS was ravaging our continent. In 2007, the Pan-African Conference of the Circle for Concerned African Women Theologians invited a select few male theologians to the conference. Ezra Chitando was one of the invited delegates. My respect grew as I came to know him as a male colleague who was prepared, not only to address theological concerns shared by women theologians, but was also willing to challenge his male peers about their role and culpability in spreading the HIV virus and openly discuss the nature of destructive masculinities. This is evidenced in a number of publications he wrote or co-edited with women colleagues such as, *Troubled but Not Destroyed* (Chitando 2009); “Even When There Is No Rooster, the Morning Will Start”: Men, HIV, and African Theologies” (Chitando 2012), “Masculinities, Religion, and Sexualities” (Chitando 2020), *Redemptive Masculinities: Men, HIV and Religion* (Chitando & Chirongoma 2012), *Justice Not Silence: Churches facing Sexual and Gender-based Violence* (Chitando & Chirongoma 2013), “‘Faithful Men of a Faithful God’? Masculinities in the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa” (Chitando & Biri 2013).

In honouring the activist and academic endeavours of Ezra Chitando, this essay addresses our shared concerns regarding the vulnerability and agency of women in the HIV context. While not attempting to address the issue of destructive masculinities directly, it highlights the way in which patriarchy is at the centre of the #Blessed movement in South Africa. The role of neo-liberal Christianity in enabling greater economic agency amongst women is explored but, as I suggest, it fosters a more destructive form of patriarchy and leads to greater HIV infections amongst young women rendering them even more vulnerable. As the COVID pandemic brought about even greater insecurity amongst women, so transactional sex has grown. While not exploring the #Blessed movement in the changed COVID environment, the article suggests that there is an even greater need to address issues of patriarchy, neo-liberal Christianity, and the need for appropriate women’s agency that is life affirming.

HIV, gender inequality, and #Blessed

UNAIDS (2022), in a report titled, “Dangerous Inequalities: World AIDS Day Report 2022”, has called the world’s attention to the reality that dangerous inequalities, including gender inequalities and destructive masculinities, are undermining the AIDS response of countries around the world, including sub-Saharan Africa. This reality is jeopardising health security across populations. The report indicates that adolescent girls and young women (aged 15 to 24 years) are three times more likely to acquire HIV than adolescent boys and young men of the same age group in sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS 2022:17). “Every two minutes, an adolescent girl or young woman (aged 15 to 24 years) acquired HIV in 2021” (UNAIDS 2022:8). Although transmission of HIV among this group is the driving force of many national epidemics in sub-Saharan Africa, dedicated combination prevention programmes for adolescent girls and young women are operating in only 40% of high HIV incidence locations (UNAIDS 2022:17). A lack of policy reform and investment within and beyond the health sector continues to make it difficult for adolescent girls and young women to access essential HIV services (UNAIDS 2022:17).

The report also shows that “harmful masculinities” are discouraging men from seeking care (UNAIDS 2022:4). Men and boys are less likely to test for HIV, to initiate antiretroviral therapy, and to remain engaged in care, and are therefore dying of AIDS-related illnesses and many other diseases at higher rates than their female counterparts (UNAIDS 2022:21). Barriers to the uptake of services by men and boys include harmful gender norms such as equating illness with “weakness” and perceiving clinical settings as “female spaces” (UNAIDS 2022:21). “Gender norms about manhood that encourage men to take excessive risks and be overcontrolling further amplify the unequal power relations, fueling violence against women and girls in all their diversity” (UNAIDS 2022:21). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the need for gender-sensitive social protection systems in situations where women’s access to employment and financial resources is exacerbated (Peck 2021:1). When economic shocks or other emergencies increase the economic vulnerability of women, their vulnerability to HIV is also increased.

These gender concerns are particularly relevant to South Africa, the home to the largest HIV epidemic in the world with 8.45 million people living with the virus (Stats SA 2023). While anti-retroviral therapy has extended the lifespan of many South Africans with a decline of AIDS-related deaths

post-2006, the COVID-19 pandemic hampered access to and supply of these medicines (Stats SA 2023). Gender inequalities resulting in higher numbers of women than men being infected continues unabated. “In 2021... new infections in women were close to double that in men – 124 400 in women compared to 63 500 in men” (Louw 2022). While HIV incidence still seems to be declining in the general population, the rate of new infections remains high among young women aged 15-24 years. In September 2021, the Department of Basic Education reported that about 1 300 adolescent girls and young women were infected with HIV in South Africa every week (Macupe 2021). They account for the majority of new infections.

Elsewhere I have detailed the ongoing research over the last fifteen years showing that a prime driver fuelling these high rates of infection, is the fact that young women in this age group are having sex with older men (see Haddad 2021; West & Haddad 2016). Age disparate sex has been discussed extensively in social science literature for the past two decades, with a particular emphasis on “sugar daddy” relationships. However, the turn to the “blesser” phenomenon as a form of transactional sex is more recent. A trajectory of analytical work on this phenomenon has begun to be evident within the field of social science (see Thobejane 2017; Varjavandi 2017; Mampane 2018; Palfreman 2020; Singata 2020; Zawu 2020) and within the theological terrain (see West & Haddad 2016; Masenya 2017; Jonas 2019; Frieslaar & Masango 2021; Haddad 2021).

The term, “Blesser”, emerged in 2015 on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter when young women “claimed to be beneficiaries of a ‘blesser’ who has ‘blessed’ them with luxurious gifts” using the hashtag #Blessed (Varjavandi 2017; Garsd & Crossan 2017). By May 2016 an online service that links women with “blessers” was started by 35-year-old Ditshego (who chooses to remain anonymous) prompted by, he claims, the fact that “a 22-year-old was shamed on social media for dating an older businessman” (Makhoba 2016). High profile “blessers” themselves began to popularise their lifestyle through popular media such as television, most notably extremely wealthy Congolese, Serge Cabonge, who appeared in the documentary, “MTV Shuga: In Real Life” in June 2017 (Garsd & Crossan 2017). Cabonge “flaunts the fact that he’s a blesser – on TV, in newspapers and on social media” and openly declares that “he has ten or twelve girlfriends at a time”. Cabonge was one of the first to name the woman he “blesses”, a “blessee”, as well as the one to develop the idea that there are different levels of blessing (Garsd & Crossan 2017).

“Blessing” at Level 1 includes airtime and data, and as the levels increase, so does the amount of blessing, from clothes and luxurious goods (Level 2), to cars and iPads (Level 3), to overseas trips (Level 4). This idea that “blessers” offered “levels” of blessing is picked up on the BlesserFinder site with a post, “We are looking for blessers on all levels to appear in our reality TV show” (BlesserFinder 2016).

What is significant to this research is the question as to why a theological notion such as “blessing” has been popularised to symbolise financial and material blessing acquired through transactional sex. To my knowledge, no systematic work has been carried out on the subject despite the fact that the theological connotation of the “blessee”/ “blesser” relationship is obvious. Yet the church has been strangely silent on the matter. There has been little consternation in the public realm let alone prophetic witness and action by the church. Feminist African women scholars of religion and theology are not surprised. The church has shown little interest in addressing gender concerns within its own patriarchal practice and has been mostly quiet in the South African context of high rates of intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and links between gender violence and HIV, an issue I addressed more than twenty years ago (Haddad 2002). Little has changed since then. The church remains one of the most patriarchal institutions in society with a reluctance to transform its structures to reflect gender inclusive leadership and practice (Pillay 2017; Chisale 2020). Wider society too continues to portray women as helpless and subservient while men are active agents. This is evident in the public “blesser-blessee” discourse. Elsewhere, I have argued that in order to address these relationships, there needs to be a much more nuanced understanding of the agentive nature of the actions of the women involved (Haddad 2021). Studies have increasingly highlighted the fact that the nature of transactional sex is contested. If theological discourse is to address the implications of the “blesser” phenomenon and the subsequent implications for the church’s involvement with the HIV epidemic, the contested nature of transactional sex must be explored and understood.

Transactional Sex Contested

Kirsten Stoebenau and her colleagues, in a study “Revisiting the Understanding of “Transactional Sex’ in sub-Saharan Africa: A Review and Synthesis of the Literature”, explore ways in which transactional sex has been

defined and understood over the past two decades (Stoebenau *et al.* 2016). Anthropological studies, they argue, reveal the role of sexual exchange in relationships from the pre-colonial period onwards, and in-depth studies have increasingly drawn attention to how gendered social and economic inequalities have structured sexual exchange, rather than focussing on “African sexuality”, the focus of earlier work on this debate (Stoebenau *et al.* 2016:187). In attempting to synthesise the findings of studies, Stoebenau *et al.* (2016:188-191) have identified three broad paradigms: the vulnerable victim and sex for basic needs; the powerful agent and sex for social status; and sex and material expressions of love.

The “vulnerable victim and sex for basic needs” paradigm “stresses the importance of gendered poverty as constraining women’s options and forcing many to rely on transactional sex for their survival... [while emphasising] “women’s lack of power in intimate, heterosexual relationships and describes women as victims of men’s privileged status (Stoebenau *et al.* 2016:189).”

Studies within the “sex for improved social status” paradigm critique the “vulnerable victim” approach to transactional sex. In this body of work, it is argued that transactional sex is “not limited to the destitute and the substance of exchange often extends beyond basic needs”, highlighting the agency of women in many instances who also use transactional sex to gain social status (Stoebenau *et al.* 2016:189). Thus, transactional sex is not just to gain economic, but also social capital (Stoebenau *et al.* 2016:189). It is “growing economic inequality and the increasing importance placed on the ownership of material goods for social mobility [that] motivate women’s engagement in transactional sex (Stoebenau *et al.* 2016:190)”, proponents of this paradigm argue.

However, suggest Stoebenau *et al.* (2016:190), the above two paradigms “fail to address the extent to which transactions occur within emotionally intimate relationships”. Some studies, they argue, show how transactional sex is often “rooted in the gendered expectation that men provide material and financial support...[and] such provision is seen as being associated with, and/or deepening, emotional intimacy (Stoebenau *et al.* 2016:191)”. This body of work is conceptualised as the “sex and material expression of love” paradigm.

Stoebenau *et al.* (2016) indicate that while these three broad paradigms are apparent in the literature, a closer analysis suggests that the boundaries of each are fluid. Therefore, they argue, “[t]he nuances and complexity

of transactional sexual relationships and the myriad motivations for its practice may be better represented as continua – of Deprivation, Agency and Instrumentality – rather than discrete paradigms (Stoebenau *et al.* 2016:192”).

The work of Mark Hunter (2002; 2010) is crucial to this debate. Hunter conducted extensive ethnographic research over a number of years in Mandeni, Northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa during a period when HIV was spreading rapidly in the area. The significance of this work is that it is conducted in a rural area within two types of housing, an established township and an informal settlement. Studies conducted in rural areas have tended to argue for “survival sex”, positioning young women as victims. Hunter (2002:100), however, shows that while the privileged economic position of men and the cultural masculine discourses that place a high value on men having multiple partnerships are both crucial to transactional sex, a third factor that needs to be recognised is the agency of young women in this community.

For Hunter (2002:100), “women approach transactional relations not as passive victims, but in order to access power and resources in ways that can both challenge and reproduce patriarchal structures.” “Women in the township invoke discourses of ‘rights’ to justify their freedom of movement, thus facilitating relations with men that include sugar daddies” who are able to provide consumption goods such as cell phones (Hunter 2002:100). He argues that with the rise of the urban economy in this area, marriage has become unaffordable and so men’s gifts to multiple women has become acceptable (Hunter 2002:108). This has led to a situation where “it is virtually taken for granted that sexual relationships will be cemented with gifts from men” (Hunter 2002:108). All too often, Hunter suggests, young men are ridiculed for proposing love (*shela*) when they have little material goods to offer (Hunter 2002:108). Women, it seems, see multiple boyfriends “as a means to gaining control of their lives, rather than simply acts of desperation” (Hunter 2002:112). But the two are linked.

While sex is essential to survival for “structurally marginalised” women, it “coexists with sex linked to consumption” (Hunter 2002:112). What is important in this patriarchal cultural context of material inequality and acceptance of men having multiple sexual partners, Hunter argues, is the fact that women actively choose (*qoma*) men and “rarely see themselves as ‘victims’” (2002:116). Studies throughout Southern Africa reveal how women assert agency in their transactional sexual relations. These studies

document how women describe their ability to extract resources from their male partners such as “milking the cow” (Mozambique), “de-tooth-ing” (Uganda), “skinning the goat” (Tanzania), “tearing open the pocket” (Madagascar), and “plucking the chicken” [*uyamcutha*] (South Africa) (Stoebenau *et al.* 2016:190).

It is this agency of young women and girls and their desire for consumer goods that leads to sex for consumption within contexts of survival. While “survival sex” hovers as part of their reality, access to consumer goods also brings social status amongst their peers. Deevia Bhana & Rob Pattman (2015) have carried out qualitative research amongst peri-urban high school students in Inanda, a township outside Durban, South Africa. They argue similarly that young girl’s aspirations for love are tied to their aspirations towards middle-class consumerism. “Fashion and desire for consumption sustain ideologies of sexuality that reinscribe patterns of [gender] inequality, but girls do so through their own agency, against the backdrop of poverty...” (Bhana & Pattman 2015:965).

Hunter’s (2010) later and more comprehensive work, further demonstrates the fluidity of the paradigms outlined above by Stoebenau *et al* (2016). Here he argues that while transactional sex is tied to the economic, political and gendered economy and involves women’s agency, it is also not devoid of love and intimacy. Bhana & Pattman (2015:962) argue similarly that research has downplayed the role of love in the aspirations of young people. For Bhana & Pattman (2015:962), while material conditions are important, they “jostle” with ideologies of love that are “complexly related to power and resources in ways that both challenge and reproduce gender inequalities”. Ideologies of love have longstanding cultural antecedents, including age disparate sexual relationships, as Leclerc-Madlala (2008) reminds us. She argues that in older accounts of courtship in Kwa-Zulu-Natal, South Africa, young girls are encouraged to seek out older men for greater marital stability and thus same age marital relationships are discouraged (Leclerc-Madlala 2008:S22). Furthermore, Leclerc-Madlala (2008:S23) argues, age disparate sex has always assumed a “reciprocal/transactional” element maintained by two interlinked enduring cultural prescriptions. “One prescribes for men to redistribute wealth on a scale appropriate to their standing and demonstrate love, commitment or appreciation for sex through material giving. The other prescribes for women to expect and receive a material compensation for sexual favours as a validation of their worth and as a sign of a partner’s love, commitment or appreciation (Leclerc-Madlala 2008:S23)”.

Given this, Brouard & Crewe (2012) suggest that with modernity taking hold in the post-*apartheid* context of economic inequality in South Africa, it is not surprising that younger women “will seek to imbue their relationships with older men with some form of material gain”. What the “blesser” phenomenon alerts us to, is the fact that this “material gain” is largely focused on the commodities of modern life. There is now a blurring between “survival needs” and the “need” for consumer goods. As early as 2003, Leclerc-Madlala (2003) argued that young urban women were representing in their discourse the “need” for designer clothes, cell phones, and being taken to beachfront hotels in a similar way to their need for food and shelter. She termed these the “new needs” of modernity.

Two decades later, young urban women have begun to see the gaining of these “new needs” – the commodities of modernity – as a “blessing” as they seek out one or more “blessers” who will provide these “needs”. The most obvious question raised by this reality and posed in the opening pages of this essay, relates to the use of the theological term “blessing” to symbolise financial and material blessing acquired through transactional sex.

Shifting Theological Terrain

While not attempting to undertake a hermeneutical exploration of the notion of “blessing” in the biblical text, suffice it to say for purposes of this paper, texts such as Genesis 12:2 illustrate that while there is a material dimension to God’s blessing, such blessing comes so that the individual *can be a blessing to others*. “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:2). Blessing comes to the individual for the primary purpose of being able to reach out to other people with whom we are in relationship and so bless them. Material blessing from God is thus communal rather than individual. In prosperity theology, however, the antithesis holds true. Material blessing comes to the individual as a reward for faith and (in many cases) financial donations to individual leaders and churches. This form of blessing, emphasised in prosperity theology, is offered to the individual without responsibility to the wider community.

Prosperity theology emerged and was popularised in the United States of America from the 1950s onwards through the media of mass communication in which poverty was de-spiritualised and “mammon” re-signified into “financial blessing” (Heuser 2016). Heuser (2016:3) argues that the

rise of the prosperity gospel in large parts of Africa, including South Africa, from the 1970s-1990s tended to depend on the stature of individuals such as Benson Idahosa in Nigeria and Ray McCauly in South Africa. The increase in this teaching and the rise of mega-churches, particularly in large cities, continues unabated in post-*apartheid* South Africa where there has been “a sudden infusion of commodities, an explosion of new forms of wealth, and a simultaneous shrinking of the labor market” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000:299). John and Jean Comaroff (2000:279) refer to this phenomenon in our neoliberal context as “millennium capitalism” which has a strong focus on consumption rather than production. With the demise of the stable labour market, this form of capitalism elicits both “hope and hopelessness” as the world becomes a place “simultaneously of possibility and impossibility” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000:306). As the unemployed look on from the outside, prosperity theology “praises the immediacy of desire”, making material gain synonymous with the unmediated power of God. This impulse towards the accumulation of wealth represents an act of “sacral consumption” (Heuser 2016:4). This sacral consumption takes place in the context of neoliberalism where there is an erasure of family and community, a loss of human integrity, and growing commodification of persons and their bodies (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000:306).

Much of the popular literature on “blesser” relationships allude to the fact that the spiritual connotations are obvious. Stephan de Beer, in a popular piece in the *Mail and Guardian* during the early stages of the “blesser” phenomenon in 2016, stated that the similarities between the financial blessing of the prosperity gospel and the “blessing” enjoyed by women “blessees” was obvious. He suggested that “[i]n both cases relationships are reduced to transactions, in which integrity and morality are traded for instant blessing with success and gratification” (de Beer 2016). However, it is important to acknowledge that the trading of “integrity and morality” in the case of transactional sex is usually within a context of unemployment and survival. What is particularly significant in the “blesser/blessee” relationship, however, is the fact that survival sex for basic necessities has shifted into commodified sex for the instant gratification of the desire for luxury goods and opulent lifestyles, the “new needs” of modernity. The extent to which commodified sex – sex for consumption – has a direct link with the rise of the prosperity gospel requires further exploration but is beyond the scope of this essay.

In my early work during the 1990s, I argued that poor and marginalised women of faith adopted resistance strategies that were not necessarily overt in the public realm (Haddad 2000). These women were constantly under the surveillance of patriarchy, *apartheid*, and culture, yet despite this, they were agentive in their resistance. Their resistance, however, was covert and less obvious than overt feminist action in the public realm. I further argued that for these marginalised women, their faith in God – their blessing from God – came through their daily struggles for survival that enabled them to live day by day. Their working theologies of struggle were “theologies of survival” which were liberative in the sense that they were theologies of resistance as God “taught them to make a way where there was no way” (Williams 1993).

The women that participated in this work were middle aged, mothers and wives, and lived through times of extreme political violence in their community outside Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa during 1980s and early 1990s. Their theologies were forged in the dark days of *apartheid*. They would have had little experience of the globalised world and not yet been affected by neoliberalism that grew exponentially in South Africa during the mid-late 1990s. This early work did not explore the working theologies of younger women who were not yet married. Perhaps if it had, the notion of “survival” would have been less obvious in their expressions of faith, even though it was a part of their lived reality in the home. Since then, the work of Hunter (2002; 2010) and that of Leclerc-Madlala (2003; 2008) working with young women in KwaZulu-Natal, discussed above, demonstrates that literal “survival” for younger women remains a reality in post-*apartheid* South Africa. In many ways, literal survival is now even more pronounced given the havoc wreaked by the HIV epidemic in the province, the growing disparity between the rich and poor, and the shrinking labour market leading to high rates of unemployment that have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Unemployed young women observe the accumulation of wealth by a select few with despair and little hope that they too will benefit from the “explosion of new forms of wealth”. Given their situation, the increase in age disparate sex – young women having sex with older men – is understandable.

As the work of both Hunter and Leclerc-Madlala has shown, these relationships are often infused with the agency of the young women as they seek to take control of their lives through their sexual bodies. Their research has indicated how young rural women move beyond “survival sex” to using their bodies to obtain “the new needs of modernity” such as cell

phones and designer clothes. However, it seems that the agency of the #Blessed community of young urban women that has emerged more recently is exercised to seek a lifestyle that epitomises values of neoliberal capitalism in its extreme form. Young women of the #Blessed community have chosen to assert their agency with the explicit aim of satisfying their immediate desire for lifestyles of consumption. They choose to harness the potential of their commodified body to fulfil the immediacy of their desire and embrace patriarchal structures of inequality in order to gain these material ends. Employing a by-product of neoliberal capitalism, social media, they demonstrate a new form of sacral consumption that seems to embrace gender inequality and ignore potential vulnerability to HIV. By naming these relationships #Blessed, they choose to harness the tools of prosperity theology and link their desire for material wealth and consumer lifestyles with the unmediated power of a God who intervenes. In so doing, they cover their actions with spiritual sanction.

Ordinary women of faith in their struggle for survival during *apartheid* South Africa revered a God who “makes a way where there is no way”. The survival struggle depended on their relationships with, and responsibilities to, one another. Women looked after each other. In the post-*apartheid*, neo-liberal context of consumption, young urban #Blessed women rather look after themselves, as they seek to gratify their material desires. Theologies of survival, which in the past were acts of solidarity and resistance to forms of oppression, have given way to individual material gratification and been replaced with theologies of consumption. This new theological terrain poses particular challenges to African women’s theology.

#Blessed and African Women’s Theologies

African women’s theologies have been at the forefront of critiquing patriarchy, culture and the intersections of these systems in fuelling the HIV epidemic (Dube 2009). They have asserted women’s agency and called for solidarity from male theologians in formulating alternative masculinities in order to renew culture and mitigate HIV infection (Chitando & Chirongoma 2012). At the heart of this body of work lies three assumptions.²

² For a fuller argument of the discussion in this section and the following section, see Haddad (2021).

The first assumption focuses on the importance of egalitarian relationships with men that bring women dignity and respect. Mercy Oduyoye (1997) argues that language used to describe women both within tradition and society clearly indicates the oppression of women. She supports her arguments showing how the Bible has been interpreted, cultural proverbs and practices used, and laws implemented to subjugate women in church and society. Oduyoye (1997:188-207) continues by urging women to act and insist on their right to be in leadership in the church, to re-read the Bible through the lived experience of women, and doggedly ensure that women use self-affirming language at all times. This early work of Oduyoye has laid the foundations for the theologising of countless other African women theologians over the last three decades.

The second assumption is that women assert their agency to achieve this egalitarian goal. In so doing, they bring healing and wholeness to both women and men who are transformed through the process. A particular focus has been on addressing both gender-based violence and the HIV epidemic in bringing wholeness and healing. My own early work on the link between gender-based violence and the HIV epidemic was an attempt to call the church to address the intersections of patriarchy, culture and church practice to ensure the well-being of women (Haddad 2002). It was also a call to women to take greater responsibility for breaking the silence of their oppression, abuse, and disenfranchisement within the church. Since then, there have been a number of essays published that address the cultural practices that perpetrate violence against women and are often linked to HIV vulnerability, even amongst church women (Hinga *et al.* 2008; Ambasa-Shisana 2009; Owusu-Ansah 2016; Mombo & Joziassie 2022).

The third assumption, evident from the inception of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (hereafter referred to as the Circle), is that agency must be carried out in solidarity with other women as they build alternative egalitarian communities. Oduyoye (1997:198-202) has argued strongly that all resistance to oppression must be forged within bonds of sisterhood across the continent. Recognising divisions of race and class, she asserts that “oppressors and oppressed” exist between women themselves and Circle theologians need to always transcend/trans-act across these stratifications. The very notion of a “circle” is testimony to the agentive work that must be carried out by women theologians in consultation and solidarity with one another.

However, the #Blessed community of young women calls into question these three assumptions. Their assertion of a particular form of agency does not seek to destabilise unequal gender relations, as I have already suggested. Their orientation is individualistic and opportunist and shows little concern for other women. Furthermore, as studies on “sugar daddy” relationships have ascertained, women feel that the benefits far outweigh the risks of HIV infection (Leclerc-Madlala 2008; Beauclair & Delva 2013). This seems to be the case for the #Blessed community, although this still needs to be corroborated through primary research. These women use their agency to find economic emancipation and adopt lifestyles that would otherwise be unattainable. Women’s agency is used to go beyond meeting their daily survival needs to encompass a lifestyle that demonstrates materialistic values of individualism through the commodification of their bodies.

This form of women’s agency continues to offer a new challenge for African women theologians. The #Blessed community of young women are agents, yet they embrace non-liberative ideology, practice and discourse, choosing not to unseat the dominant ideologies of hetero- and econo-patriarchy.³ African women theologians have yet to respond to this challenge with sustained analysis leading to liberative theologising that addresses the issues raised by the choices these young women make.⁴ For African women theologians to begin to address the challenge posed by a group of young women using agency over and against the values of the Circle, there needs to be an ideological and theoretical break with dominant ideologies, practices, and discourses, for true liberative theology to emerge (Mosala quoted in Maluleke 2000).

³ This term emerged in discussion with Gerald West as together we sought to find a phrase that would reflect aspects of ‘patriarchy as economic power’. Both of us have coined the term ‘econo-patriarchy’ in our work, riffing off the more familiar ‘hetero-patriarchy’ (Haddad 2021; see West’s essay in this volume).

⁴ There is also evidence that wealthy older women are embracing the “blesser” phenomenon as they themselves become “female blesser” or “sugar-mammas” to young men (Masenya 2017). These women add a further dimension to the complexity of women’s agency in the context of econo-patriarchy.

Econo-Patriarchy and African Women's Theologies

A survey of the Circle literature on women's agency demonstrates little emphasis on the economic dimensions of patriarchy and culture (Haddad 2021). There has been almost no engagement with the forces of globalization and its impact on women of Africa. The one exception is the Circle scholar Musa Dube (2000; 2006). She mounts a scathing critique of the forces of globalization and their impact on the poor and suggests that for former colonized nations, globalization is a "new form of imperialism" (Dube 2006:183). Dube (2006:181) argues that religions participate in globalization both as a force of collaboration and as a force of resistance. This assertion is premised on the fact that in the first instance Christianity colluded with the imperial forces indicating that Christian religious organisations are not exempt from the forces of globalization. Collusion with this second wave of imperialism is best expressed in the "selling of American Christian fundamentalism" where "young people in particular align themselves with the glamour...of the prosperity gospel" (Dube 2006:182). It is not insignificant that the #Blessed community of young women understand that their "blessing" comes through consumer sex which meets their individual material need and fulfils the "immediacy of desire" as argued above. These are the hallmarks of the prosperity gospel preached so prevalently in South Africa today.

On the other hand, says Dube (2006:181-182), there is also a resistance to imperial forces. During the colonial period, the emergence of African Independent Churches was a form of resistance where communities hold tightly to culture and tradition and rework colonial forms of Christianity into indigenous expressions. However, it could be argued that the #Blessed community demonstrates quite the opposite. Not only do these young women collude with the imperial forces of globalization and hetero/econo-patriarchy, but they use sex as their gateway to self-gratification. Of course, "sex" is notoriously taboo within most theologising, particularly within the African continent. Circle theologians have been slow to theologise sex even though it is central to HIV vulnerability, an important concern in their work for the past twenty years. While there has been a recognition that theologizing sex is necessary (Dube, 2009; Haddad, 2013), one of the few theologians to celebrate women's sexuality in her writings in a sustained way is Fulata Moyo (2004; 2005).

But there has been little intersection of sexuality with econo-patriarchy. The #Blessed community of young women poses new challenges to "the

re-discovery of agency” that Maluleke (2000) so whole-heartedly celebrated more than twenty years ago. Clearly, in contexts severely impacted by globalised neoliberal capitalism and where there are systems in place that perpetuate structural economic inequality, such as South African society, African women’s theologies cannot ignore these economic dimensions in their theological reflection. While African women’s theologies have made an enormous contribution over the past three decades in critiquing patriarchy and culture, systematic reflection on how globalised neoliberal capitalism intersects with these oppressive systems has been less forthcoming. In the South African context, our work has not had much to say about the prosperity gospel or its impact on the values and ideologies of young women. We have perhaps not been bold enough in speaking out against false prophets who commodify Christianity and thus provide a conduit for “sacral consumption”.

Conclusion

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there is even greater disparities between the rich and poor, higher rates of unemployment and poverty throughout sub-Saharan Africa, and ever-increasing numbers of HIV incidence in young women and girls. In a world order that celebrates commodified sex and hetero/ econo-patriarchy the challenge to African women theologians looms large where the #Blessed community of young women live in a globalized world of commodified sex. Here, women’s agency is evident, yet being co-opted by both hetero- and econo-patriarchy. Given the dearth of a sustained economic and sexual ethic in this body of work, responding to these new challenges requires a “break” with dominant ways of theologising culture, patriarchy and class.

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