



## AN INVESTIGATION TO ESTABLISH HOW THE BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE OF DEVOTION TO VIRGIN MARY ENHANCES WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN MWINGI SUB-COUNTY, KITUI DIOCESE, KENYA

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### ABSTRACT

The study sought to establish how the biblical principle of devotion to Virgin Mary enhances women empowerment in Mwingi Sub- County, Kitui diocese, Kenya. The study was guided by William, Delores (1937) theory which applies a womanist view point to the convectional theologies, beliefs, texts and devotion associated to Mary. The study used a descriptive research design. The target population was 3000 women from Mwingi sub-county Kitui Diocese. A sample size of 309 respondents: nine (9) priests and (300) three hundred women who were active in various church programs, was selected, through simple random and purposive sampling. Both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection were used. The qualitative data was collected using interviews. Quantitative data was collected using closed-ended questionnaires. The qualitative data was analyzed thematically following the objectives of the study, while quantitative data was analyzed using statistical package for the social science version 28 for windows and presented using tables. The study revealed some ways through which church leaders can through emphasis on devotion to Virgin Mary build on women empowerment such as building programs on self-awareness and worth, spiritual maturity, confidence and self-esteem. The study recommends the importance of encouraging devotion to Virgin Mary to all women in order to promote their empowerment in the Roman Catholic Church.

**Key Words:** Bible; Biblical Principle; Blessed Virgin Mary; Roman Catholic Church; Women Empowerment;

### BACKGROUND

The purpose of the study is to analyze the influence of the devotion to Virgin Mary on enhancing women empowerment in the context of Mwingi Sub-County, Kitui Diocese, Kenya. Mary, in Christianity, is the mother of Jesus Christ and an important figure of symbolic and religious value in many countries. In biblical narratives, her character is that of a strong, faithful and resilient woman and this has been seen in other aspects of culture and society just as the social nurturing role of Deborah.

The study focused on Mwingi Sub-County in the Kitui Diocese of Kenya. Although the region has made some progress in achieving gender parity, education employment and leadership

gaps remain as persisting issues for many women. This research aims at finding out how the devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary, based on the biblical teachings and hermeneutics, can be used to contest these barriers and foster the emancipation of women.

The study focuses on investigating the everyday life interpretative culture of Mary's life and virtues in the context of religious teachings and cultural beliefs within Mwingi Sub-County in order to reveal the social attitudes towards women's roles and women's empowerment. These dynamics can be useful in knowing how approaches to encouraging gender equality and women's rights programs fit within religious and cultural parameters of local communities.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The Blessed Virgin Mary is prominently featured in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Additionally, some scholars have interpreted Old Testament passages such as Genesis 3:15 and Isaiah 7:14 as symbolic references to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Depictions of the Blessed Virgin Mary symbolize ways in which women can participate in personal and societal liberation, thereby achieving full empowerment.

It has been suggested by Richard (2002) that the Blessed Virgin Mary is one of the women in the Jewish Bible and Apocrypha who serve as human agents in God's deliverance of his people from their oppressors. Others are Shiphra and Pua (Exodus 2:15-21) Deborah (Judges 4-5) Jael (Judges 4:17-22, 5:24-27) Hannah (1 Samuel 1-2) Esther, Judith and the mother of the Maccabean martyrs. Their male counterparts include Moses, Joshua, Gideon, and David, who were all powerful and revolutionary in their own right.

In the gospel of Mark, Blessed Virgin Mary is not explicitly named but she is portrayed as a Jewish woman concerned with her son. Together with the family of Jesus, she makes a unique decision and judgement which often come out distinctly. She seems to conflict with Jesus' views and stands out as a woman worth of her decision. For example, in Mark 3:20-21, 3:31-35, his family including Mary sent for him because the crowd had denied him time to eat and rest.

The African women's lives are deeply rooted in a culture that values and celebrates hardship. In addition to that, it is a concept that is deeply ingrained in the iconography of Mary. The Christian tradition has become more reverent toward Mary's seven sufferings as well as her compassion throughout the years. Seven of Her Sorrows have garnered the most attention, particularly among Catholic women. They include the account recorded in Luke 2:7, where the heavily pregnant Blessed Virgin Mary in the company of her husband Joseph, was ready to give birth to the son of God, but discovers that there is no room for them in the inn. In Luke 2:34-35, Simon gives a prophecy of sorrowful heart to Mary about the child Jesus. In Matthew 2:13-18, the massacre of the innocent and the flight to Egypt was recorded. Luke 2: 41-50 accounts for the three days loss of Jesus. In Luke 23:27-31, Mary meets Jesus on the way to Calvary before his Jesus death on the cross (John 19:25-27) and his burial in the tomb (Matthew 27:57-61).

Mary was present in the public ministry of her son, which at the outset was radical and revolutionary. It was about liberation of the captives, freedom for the oppressed and good news to the poor (Luke 4:18). She is seen at the foot of the cross with the disciple loved by Jesus (John 19:25-27) and among the first Christian community after the ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:14). This indicates that she supports and shares in the liberation spirit of her son. Therefore, Blessed Virgin Mary stands out as symbol of women empowerment against the oppressive culture of Old Testament where women had no status of recognition.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The research was based on the theory by William, Delores (1937). The early feminist theology of European feminists, which ignored the predicament of African women, has been replaced by womanist theology. They contend that black women should recognize, support, and believe in the significance of their experiences in defining the essence of Christianity. All repressive factors threatening black women's fight for survival and advancement are opposed by womanist theology. It rejects all forms of discrimination based on caste, sexual orientation, race, sex, and other factors. They apply a womanist viewpoint to the conventional theologies, beliefs, texts, and devotions associated to Mary. They challenge conventional Mariology's treatment of women as property and work to re-discover Marian symbolisms that uplift women. They claim motherhood as important but with emphasis on its interpretation and liberation from masculine limiting definition (Chigumira 2012).

Marian doctrines like divine motherhood, virginity, Immaculate Conception and assumption are given liberating interpretation. For example, virginity is given a liberating interpretation to mean strength, force or skill. It means woman who is one –in – herself. It means sexual independence, female autonomy and not defined in relation to man (Townes 2006). This perception of Virgin Mary will be a foundation for the empowerment of Roman Catholic women. Marian symbols signify autonomy and relationship, strength and tenderness, struggle and victory, God's power and agency. It encourages authentic liberation to women; her consecrated virginity and willing maternity manifest her surrender to the divine will. It signifies her radical independence with identity conferred not on her relationship to man but God. Her perpetual virginity, motherhood, Immaculate Conception and assumption to heaven body and soul continue to manifest her true freedom.

Womanist is central to women's identity and self-definition; it is centered on Motherism, where women are essentially mothers. Motherism is used as framework to investigate African women's unique experience as contrasted with feminism of euro-American cultural experience (Acholonu 1985). African community invests on motherhood with no greater public institution than motherhood. Maternal love is the deepest and most fundamental of all African actions. Therefore, this study, guided with Marian symbolism and womanist theology elevated women to a level of autonomy and independence.

### **Research Design**

This study was conducted using descriptive survey design to establish the view of women on devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary on enhancing their empowerment.

### **Target Population**

Kitui County has approximately 9000 fully registered Roman Catholic women in the diocese (CWA annual meeting 2016), and this survey will be conducted with catholic women in Mwingi sub-county as target population comprising of a third (1/3) of the population of fully registered Roman Catholic women in the diocese of Kitui County giving a sample size of three hundred (300) women.

### **Sampling Procedures and Sample Size**

According to Borg & Gall (1989), the sample size for every study should be determined by the researcher based on what they deem to be statistically significant and doable. 10% or more of the available population is required for descriptive studies to be completed (Mugenda & Mugenda, 1999). In this investigation, 10% of the sample size was utilized (Mugenda & Mugenda 2003).

The respondents were chosen using a simple random selection method. The sampled women from the parish constituted 10% of women in the region, giving a total of 300 women. The researcher randomly selected women from nine parishes in the deanery. 34 women were randomly selected in 3 parishes and 33 in 6 parishes making it 300.

### **Research Instruments**

This study had two categories of questionnaires, for the leaders and members. The questionnaires focused mainly on the views, opinions, perceptions, attitudes and beliefs on devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary as an inspiration for women empowerment. The research tools were created to be compatible with the study design and the strategy for data analysis, enabling the collection of data to help answer the research questions. The researcher utilized questionnaires because they are easy to create, devoid of bias since they are written by the respondents, and give them enough opportunity to reply as they see fit. The use of questionnaires made it easier to gather data quickly. They were appropriate for this investigation since the target audience was sizable and the information required could be readily expressed in writing (Gay 1992).

Interviews also were conducted with selected participants to delve deeper into their experiences and insights regarding devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and its implications for women's empowerment. Interviews provided a qualitative dimension to complement the quantitative data gathered through questionnaires, offering nuanced perspectives and enriching the study's findings.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

After the surveys were collected, they were examined to make sure they were accurate and comprehensive. The data was then placed into the computer for analysis once they had been coded. Quantitative analysis was applied throughout the data processing process. Descriptive statistics, which used percentages and frequencies, were used to analyze quantitative data collected from the questionnaires' demographic sections. The data were analyzed using the SPSS statistical software for social sciences.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Response Rate**

This section outlines the response rate of the participants issued with questionnaires. The data is as displayed in table 1.

**Table 1: Response Rate**

	<b>Sample size</b>	<b>Responded</b>	<b>Not responded</b>
Number	<b>300</b>	<b>256</b>	<b>44</b>
Percentage	100%	85%	15%

Random sampling was applied to select three hundred (300) women of the catholic churches who were active in the church programs. Table 1 indicates that out of the three hundred (300) questionnaires administered, two hundred and fifty-six (256), which is eighty five percent (85%), were filled and returned on time. Forty-four (44) questionnaires that is, fifteen percent (15%) were not responded to.

### **Biblical principle on devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary on enhancing women empowerment**

The first objective sought to establish the Biblical principle on devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary in enhancing women empowerment. The findings are as tabulated in Table 2 below. The first aspect put to test was the Bible presents Mary as a symbol of empowerment. A total frequency of two hundred and fifty-six (256) responses were received. Out of the total responses, twenty-one (21) strongly disagreed, fifty-seven (57) disagreed while eleven (11) were not sure. Eighty-eight (88) of the respondents agreed that the Bible presents Mary as a symbol of empowerment while seventy-nine (79) strongly agreed. The average of the response stood at 3.6 on a scale of 1 to five. This means that, the respondents agreed that the Bible presents devotion to Mary as a symbol of empowerment. This finding agrees with several verses in the Bible such as Mathew 1:16, where Mary plays a significance role in the genealogy and mentioned at the line of ancestors: “Mary of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah”. Four women are mentioned before Mary in the genealogy, Tamar (Genesis 38:24) Rahab (Joshua 2:1) Ruth (Ruth 3:1-18) and the wife of Uriah, Bathsheba (2Samuel 11). These women though distinguished in the Old Testament for their irregular marital union, they stand out against patriarchal background of Old Testament.

One of the interviewed priests from one of the parishes described women as instruments of God’s messianic plan with Mary representing feminine character in a masculine dominated society. He further notes that, throughout the gospels, Mary stood out as an independent woman, right from her response to God’s call to be the mother of God, to the way she participated faithfully in the life and ministry of her son Jesus Christ. She manifests a character of liberated woman from the Jewish cultural and traditional beliefs about women. His opinion agrees with the establishment that Mary bears courageously the public shame where her son is out rightly rejected (Mathew 13:54-58), the identification of Jesus with her mother by the crowd is diminutive both to Jesus and Mary. The findings also point at the scene of annunciation in Luke 1:28, where the angel does not address Mary by her earthly name “Mary” but calls her by divine name “full of grace” this name is equivalent to divinity. The second interviewed priest agreed with the assertion that, the title “full of grace” raises Mary beyond her woman hood to a level of divinity. He opinions that, if women can embrace fully the symbol of Blessed Virgin Mary, it is an empowering tool which can help them to rise above limiting definition of their woman hood and elevate their status as daughters of God.

The findings agree with Luke 1:38, “Behold I am the handmaid of the lord, may it be done to me according to your word” as being the most celebrated decision of a woman in the history of human kind. Her decision to say “yes” to the will of God manifest Mary as an open human being, who has surrendered herself completely in the hands of God. She does not fear about her fate, but dangerously consents to a path that transforms the world history. She exercises autonomy in her consent, characterized by independence and freedom that surpasses the culture of the day. She stands out as a symbol of women’s autonomy, independence and freedom of choice. Her consent places her in line with celebrated Jewish patriarchs like Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and Moses. From Luke 1:46-55, it can be deduced that, Mary grew up in a Jewish patriarchal society which is oppressive to women. In her song of praise, she strongly condemns this power which oppresses the poor and the powerless. She is a symbol for women to challenge the oppressive structures in the society.

The second aspect was made to establish Mary is a symbol of devotion as presented in the Bible. Out of the total response eight (8) strongly disagreed while twelve (12) disagreed and fifty-one (51) were not sure. One hundred and thirty-one (131) agreed while fifty-four (54) strongly agreed. The mean of the findings on this aspect was 3.82 showing that Mary is a symbol of devotion. Mary as a symbol of devotion is explicit in church’s doctrines, especially where she is

emphasized as mother of God and given honor higher than that of saints. Her decision to accept the will of God places her higher than other created beings. Her character and choice make her a symbol of devotion. As a symbol of devotion and because of her blessedness she accords those devoted to her spiritual benefits.

**Table 2: Biblical principle on devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary on enhancing women empowerment.**

Aspect	SD 1	D 2	NS 3	A 4	SA 5	$\sum f_i$	$\sum f_i$ wi	$\frac{\sum f_i w_i}{\sum f_i}$
The bible present Mary as a symbol of empowerment	21	57	11	88	79	256	915	<b>3.6</b>
Mary is a symbol of devotion as presented in the bible	8	12	51	131	54	256	979	<b>3.82</b>
Biblical teaching on Blessed Virgin Mary has inspired my empowerment	1	5	18	31	201	256	1194	<b>4.66</b>

According to one of the interviewed women, the blessed virgin is extraordinary in her character. She attracts admiration of believers both socially and spirituality. She is both a symbol of devotion and empowerment. She is a symbol of empowerment as a woman and a symbol of devotion as a mother of God. He further notes that, women should emulate Mary as a model of both empowerment and devotion. He agreed with Chigumira (2012)’s assertion that, Mary stands out as a symbol of women’s autonomy, independence and freedom of choice.

**CONCLUSION**

The conclusion drawn from this study is that, the Bible fully presents Blessed Virgin Mary as a symbol of women empowerment and symbol of devotion. The Roman Catholic doctrine also presents the person of the Blessed Virgin Mary as a symbol of women empowerment and a devotional symbol. However, the aspect of Mary as symbol of women empowerment was not given full emphasis. Their devotion to Mary has not translated into their empowerment against poverty and oppressive cultural practices. The catholic women in Kitui, despite their devotion to blessed virgin still experience poverty, gender inequality, domestic violence and retrogressive cultural practices.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Principally, the church leadership has a major role to play to use the symbol of Mary as a tool for women empowerment. It is prudent for church leaders to start putting more emphasis on Marian human aspects which present Mary as an empowered woman within Jewish culture which was

oppressive to women, in order to influence women empowerment. The basis for this suggestion is on the Roman Catholic teachings on Blessed Virgin Mary as expressed in the four pronouncements about her: Divine motherhood, her perpetual virginity, her immaculate conception and her assumption to heaven.

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