



# Zelophehad's Daughters in Kenya

An Adventist theologian shows how the Book of Numbers challenges the status of women in 20th-century Kenya.

by Mary Getui

CHRISTIANS COMPRISE 80 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION of Kenya, and the Bible is one of the most widely distributed books in the country. It remains a foreign book, far from Kenyans in time and context. One important part of the contemporary Kenyan context is that in this largely Christian country, women suffer injustices.

- In a funeral of a father of seven daughters, speaker after speaker lamented that it was most unfortunate that the man had left behind “no children.”

- A woman car owner and her two male passengers had just parked the car and were walking away. A passerby who arrived soon after inquired from a group of children as to who had come out of the car and the response was “two people and a woman.”

- During a wedding reception, the hall was

getting crowded and the master of ceremonies requested that the women and children vacate the space for the men.

- On being asked what their wives do, many men describe the housewife as “one who does nothing.”

- A group of church women who had been invited for a women’s day in a neighboring church were accompanied by a man. On arrival, the hosts asked the man to play the key role and sidelined the women.

- In a marketplace, a Catholic sister ordered a man to stop flogging his wife. The nun was ridiculed by other men and other women for being ignorant of the culture.

This article is an attempt to analyze the situation of women in Kenya in light of the story of Zelophehad’s five daughters found in Numbers 27:1 to 11 and 36.

## Demanding Their Land

The Book of Numbers reflects the stress and uncertainty similar to life in Kenya

---

*Mary Getui is a lecturer in the department of religious studies at Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya. She has authored numerous articles and contributed to a previous volume in a series on African Christianity. She is actively involved in the development of the Kenya chapter of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians.*

today: both peoples are in exodus. In Kenya, the exodus is manifested in wars, unemployment, disease, and environmental degradation. In the unstable conditions prevailing during the Exodus and in the contemporary world, women are hit even harder. In the Israelite culture, women were not treated as equals.

The place of ancient Hebrew women is well expressed in the words of Evans: "In the Old Testament as a whole, woman after the fall is seen as secondary."<sup>1</sup> Zelophehad's daughters are victims of this situation, as is clearly seen in Numbers 26. A census takes place, land is divided, but these women do not figure simply because their father is dead and they have no brothers. No mention is made of their mother. What are the implications of being left out of a census today? A census is taken in order to know the size of the population; those who are left out are non-existent. The needs of the section of the population that is left out cannot be addressed, and like Zelophehad's daughters, they cannot be given any land.

Although they are left out of the census, Zelophehad's daughters are introduced by name: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. The meanings of their names are not of consequence, but the fact that they are named is. The identity of these daughters challenges us to realize that we are discussing real people and real issues that require and deserve attention. The daughters raise this issue themselves before the dignitaries of the land and a full congregation. They have no fear, but are bold and confident. They explain their cause clearly and without apologies. They are concerned that their father's name should not be done away from among his family simply because he had no son. These women stress that they may not be sons, but they are children of their father. They again state clearly what they would like done for them: to be given a possession of land that is distinctly theirs.

According to the Israelite norm, this possession should go to the brothers of their father. By making this request, the daughters are questioning culture, and are trying the patience of their father's brethren, who well know that daughters do not inherit land.

From the African perspective, land is also significant. Among the Kikuyu of Kenya, Kenyatta<sup>2</sup> has outlined the general attitude to land as being thus: Land is sacred. Out of it crops grow and the people are nurtured. Land is the burial place. Therein lie the ancestors whose spirits influence the lives of the living. People swear by the earth; hence it is a binding force. Land was used in an orderly and organized manner in a move to protect it. There were laws that governed the ownership of land. These sentiments on land are shared by other communities like the Maasai,<sup>3</sup> the Nandi,<sup>4</sup> Akamba,<sup>5</sup> and Abagusii.<sup>6</sup> Women, however, had no ownership rights over land. The case of the Maasai sums it up. Ole Sankan<sup>7</sup> says:

Ideally as soon as an old man realizes that he is about to die, he bequeaths his property among his sons . . . the eldest son inherits all his father's property . . . Therefore he divided the property . . . among his young brothers and step brothers. The youngest son inherits all his mother's property . . . (mainly gourds). Daughters do not inherit property.

Despite changes brought about by Christianity, education, and exposure to other cultures where women are downgraded less, ownership of land in Kenya has remained the domain of men. Daughters can hardly inherit. A single woman who would like to purchase land is treated with suspicion and can easily lose the deal to a less competitive male buyer. Some male landowners quip: "With who does she think she is going to discuss the issue of land? How can she be capable of purchasing land when she does not have a husband? She

had better ask her father or brother to strike the deal for her. Since when did women start owning land?" The few single women who have managed to purchase land are seen as odd. Their property draws comments: "You see that land? It belongs to a woman." The owners are described as "that woman owns land," implying that land ownership among women is something unusual.

If land is so significant, yet daughters cannot inherit it, let alone purchase it, then their full realization as persons is hindered. In many of the communities in Kenya, women have cultivation rights, but often only for subsistence purposes. Most of the commercial cultivation, such as cash crops like tea, coffee, or pyre-

thrum, remains in the hands of men. Women usually provide the labor, but men earn—and of course spend—the money. Women enjoy little, if any, of the fruits of their labor. Zelophehad's daughters also suffered as non-entities and non-inheritors of land, in line with the Hebrew culture of their time. The daughters of Africa suffer injustice in many other aspects of life. Limited or no education; career and employment opportunities; little or no representation in politics and policy-making forums; hurdles even in church and family; victims of female circumcision, early marriage, teenage pregnancy, numerous births, polygamy, wife inheritance, wife beating, and general poverty.

---

## Addressing the American Academy of Religion

The faces that stared back at us from the speakers' platform were different from those we usually encountered at professional meetings. The American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature had seen to that. We were in Philadelphia for their annual convention. We heard papers from many of the scholars whose works we had long been studying: Marvin Pope, Martin Marty, Cornell West, Walter Brueggemann. We heard from contemporary artists whose work addressed the spiritual dimension of the arts. Toni Morrison described the challenge of depicting Paradise in a suffering community. All that was business as usual. The surprise was that we were about to hear some new voices.

In a bold move to ensure more inclusivity at the meetings, the Society of Biblical Literature had brought in 12 scholars from around the world to address the topic, "Reading the Bible as Women in Africa, Asia, and Latin America." These scholars were women. They were women of color. They were women of the two-thirds world. They had come to read the

Bible to us and tell us what they heard in its pages. We came to learn from them. Imagine our delight that one of these scholars was an Adventist.

Actually, we had met her the night before. We had been waiting for a meeting to begin, our name-tags with Walla Walla College prominently displayed on our coats, when she came up to us. "Are you Adventists?" she asked. To which we gave a startled, "Yes." "I am too," she replied. Our eyes did a quick dance between her face and her name tag. Mary Getui—Kenyatta University—Kenya, it said. We wondered what she was doing here. We didn't recognize the name. A student, perhaps? A new addition to the small but growing circle of Adventist women scholars in religion?

She introduced herself to us. She was on the faculty of Kenyatta University in the religious studies department, an established scholar with published articles to her credit. She was here as a guest of the society with an invitation to present a paper yet this week. We stood there staring at her and at one another. Why

had we never heard of her? Was it possible that an Adventist woman from Africa could attract the attention of an international scholarly society but remain invisible to her own church? Why did it take the Society of Biblical Literature to bring us together? "When are you presenting your paper?" we asked. We would be there. We wouldn't miss it.

We were there waiting when she got up to speak about the daughters of Zelophehad and the daughters of Africa. But before searching the text, in Numbers 27, for its meaning and applicability, Mary Getui told us of Kenya. We listened as she explained that 80 percent of the people are Christian, most of its leaders the products of mission schools. She traced the rich inheritance the missionaries had bequeathed to Kenya: a hope for the future, the Bible as a guide, a populace responsive to Christian principles.

Mary Getui then turned her gaze on the situation of women in her nation. She recounted their actual lived experience: few economic options, fewer rights, little educa-

The situation in Africa is even more disconcerting when many women accept their situation and hence contribute to the status quo. Culture has trained the women to accept what is. They do not question, they do not reflect critically on their experiences; indeed, many of them frown on anybody who suggests change.

The following episode may give a glimpse of how many of the women consider their situation. In a marketplace, a husband was flogging his wife. Many of the people went about their business as if nothing was happening. A few people commented that the woman ought to be taught a lesson, and others watched

with bemusement. It appears the flogging had been going on for a long time, and that it was a common, usual, and accepted occurrence. A Catholic sister arrived at the scene and was shocked at what was going on. She immediately ordered the man to stop. The reaction drew more attention than the flogging. A crowd gathered and as soon as they realized that the sister was implying that what the man was doing was wrong. Most of the women sneered at her, saying she was only a sister and therefore ignorant of the complexities of family life. She had no authority to interfere in a simple domestic dispute. She could probably not stand being a wife and a mother, and that is why she had escaped to a convent. She was

tion, and little respect. She told of husbands publicly beating their wives with no threat of community indignation or censure.

But she didn't stop there. She spoke of the church. She traced the ways in which the church supports the ongoing oppression and dehumanization of women in Kenya. She cited the benign neglect of church policies and told of church leaders who looked the other way while women suffered. She outlined ways in which the treatment of women is exempted from Christian relational mandates. Domestic affairs are treated as a cultural issue. The church chooses not to interfere. Mary Getui did not ask if Christianity was relevant to the people of Kenya. She maintained that it was foundational to their society. Her challenge was to the incomplete preaching of the gospel. Why, she asked, has she never heard the story of Zelophehad's daughters preached?

We sat and we listened as Mary Getui spoke, and we wondered, what kind of Christianity have we exported? Why hasn't the story of Zelophehad's daughters been preached? What has been omitted in the preaching of the Word? What

kind of Christianity excludes the treatment of women from its basic relational teachings? Where is the fullness of the gospel for women? Where is the radical transformation of all human relationships that the gospel ignites? Where is the gospel that turned the world upside down?

We reflected further on the relationship between our community lives in North America and the Christianity received in the rest of the world. What is the relationship between our own lack of integrity, our own failure to live fundamentally transformed lives, and the Christianity that turns a blind eye to the suffering of the women of Kenya? What needs to be set right in our own house, in our own space, to clarify the inclusive nature of the gospel? What needs to be changed so that we in North America do not continue to communicate a gospel that stops short of its full expression and power? How can we live a message that women, too, have a share in Israel? A message that clearly states that women, too, are our neighbors?

Mary Getui did not ask for us in North America to shape Christianity in Kenya. She is there, and she and her

brothers and sisters are working on that. But she does leave us with the challenge to examine the expression of Christianity in our local communities. We may need to examine our own fidelity to telling the full gospel story. We may need to pull away from comfortable and safe traditions that conform to our own culture. We may need to courageously declare to our own society that all our relationships, our structures, and our processes are informed by the gospel, whatever changes this may require.

We went to Philadelphia in November 1995, for professional enrichment, to advance our scholarship, and to network with other scholars. We had attended this meeting to hear the Bible from an international perspective and to support an Adventist colleague. All this was business as usual. The surprise was that when Mary Getui spoke, we heard the gospel.

Beverly Beem, Chair  
English Department  
Walla Walla College

Ginger Hanks-Harwood  
School of Theology  
La Sierra University

accused of being ignorant of her culture. It was further said that even if the flogging stopped, due to her intervention, she could not always be there to stop it. Besides, how could she stop such a common and accepted practice? The men made similar remarks and even advised the women to "educate" the sister on the norm. This story shows that both men and women contribute to the poor image of African woman. In many cases, the woman is not heard. She maintains silence, and hence continues to suffer in silence.

## Sisters Acting Together

It is in such a situation that Zelophehad's five daughters arise and say "No!" The reaction of the Hebrew women to injustice poses a challenge to the African woman. It is time that women raised their issues themselves, without waiting for men or looking for intermediaries. The collective and unified approach of Zelophehad's daughters is commendable. This echoes the adage "united we stand, divided we fall." Although women may not share similar concerns due to their social status, urban or rural background, ethnicity, culture, age, lifestyles, or marital status, they ought to support each other's cause. If it is one woman's



concern, it should be taken as all women's concern. These concerns should be raised at the highest level, because the redress often comes from or is sanctioned by those in authority and power.

Zelophehad's daughters summon women to serve as the voice of the people, as voices challenging injustice. There are many Zelophehad's daughters in the world, and indeed in Africa, who suffer injustice. They suffer from unemployment, genocide, child abuse, amassment of wealth by a few, corruption in high places, soaring prices, and lack of basic amenities, such as health services, decent shelter, and clean water. Indeed, women need to assert that they too are children in their own right, not simply children of their fathers, or wives of their husbands, or sisters of their brothers. Zelophehad's daughters indicate that women deserve to possess that which is distinctly theirs. African women do own personal effects, but they ought to be able to possess and own items of significance and value.

Today, formal education seems to be the key to better status in society. Women, therefore, ought to be accorded equal opportunities in learning institutions, in provision of facilities, in career openings, and in job opportunities. It is the practice in many African families to give priority to the male child even when the girl is older or performing better. Women should address this issue at a national level such that governments and other concerned bodies cater for the education of all in a free and fair atmosphere, and perhaps even make up for the persistent sidelining of women.

Zelophehad's brothers could not be expected to take up their nieces' request for possession. It would defy tradition (this comes up in Numbers 36) and deny them more inheritance. This, however, did not deter the women from making their desire known, and from asking for what they considered to be their right. This episode therefore could help

the African woman get out of her disadvantaged status.

The dignitaries and the congregation listened to Zelophehad's daughters. We need to listen to one another, and we need to listen to others, even when what they are saying is not in line with what we generally hold. The Catholic sister should have been listened to, despite the fact that what she was saying was contrary to popular belief. All those people who have issues to raise about women, and about injustice, should be listened to. It was Moses's willingness to listen that brought the women's cause before God.

God's reaction, "The daughters of Zelophehad speak right," is an indication that God harkens to His people. He supports that which is not in line with culture. God is therefore opposed to cultural inhibition that may hinder the growth of His people. The women's reaction made a national impact, for God commanded Moses to speak to all the children of Israel and explain the new policy. Once again, it is a challenge to governments and policy makers to give ear and emphasis to issues of concern. God spelled out the new policy clearly. There were no loopholes or room for misinterpretation. We have not overlooked the fact that there were conditions with regard to daughters inheriting—that it can only come about if there are no sons. In a way, this can be taken to mean that God does not totally disregard culture. From the above analysis it can be said that despite the difficulties of life for the Israelites and for women in particular, the message of Numbers 27:1 to 11 is that such a situation can and ought to be reversed; God favors such a reversal.

Zelophehad's daughters surface again in Numbers 36. But this time they are passive. It is Zelophehad's brethren who revisit the issue. As indicated earlier in the analysis of Numbers 27:4 and 7, the women wanted to share

possession of the land with their father's brothers and God granted their request. The brothers must have found it difficult to implement or adjust to this policy. It would reduce the brothers' share of the inheritance. It was against tradition for daughters to inherit land, and perhaps the reaction of the conservative community would intensify the brothers' sense of awkwardness. The brothers would also worry about what happens to the land when their nieces get married. It is important to note that the women feature only as background information. The major issue is that if the women marry, the possession may be passed on to others outside the "tribe." In this context, then, the land is much more valuable than the women.

The idea of subjugating women for selfish gain is a common occurrence in Kenya.

- A young husband dies and the brothers make life hard for the young widow. She is forced to leave in order that they may inherit their brother's land and other possessions. Sometimes the women's parents-in-law are party to the scheme.

- Among the Luo of Kenya, when a man dies, the community—especially the relatives—"invade" the house and make away with most, if not all of the property. The widow has to start from scratch. Often, the widow is part of



the inherited property. Widow inheritance has been defended for the reason that it provides the widow and her children with security, but why should people help themselves to property they have not worked for to the detriment of a widow?

- Many people consider that a couple's property is the man's. Indeed, a woman has come home from work to find the husband's young cousin reclining on the marital bed, and the woman's displeasure is interpreted as being too possessive of her husband's property. Among the Abagusii, regardless of the woman's social status and contribution to the material and general welfare of her immediate family, she is seen as "one who is fed by the man."

In a move to safeguard possession, Zelophehad's daughters are to marry within the family of their father. The Israelites had not been practicing this type of marriage. From the African perspective, this can be interpreted as incest—even marrying within the clan is forbidden. This biblical directive would not be acceptable in many of the African communities. Due to migration and urbanization, there are cases where cousins and other close relatives have married without the knowledge of parents. Some parents have had to insist that such marriages break up. Sometimes traditional cleansing rituals are employed to prevent evil from befalling the couple, the children, the clan, and the wider community.

Moses directs that Zelophehad's daughters are to marry whom they think best. That the women have freedom of choice may be taken as positive, but might this not be a way of making a bad situation appear not so bad after all? There are instances where women have taken government appointments and have been told that their situation has improved. Only 32 years after independence, Kenya has appointed its first woman minister to the

cabinet. The implication is that before this time, although women formed half of the population, only men have been making decisions on women's issues. There are few women who stand for elections, mainly because most communities believe that women should not hold positions of authority.

It is peculiar that in Numbers 36 the voices of Zelophehad's daughters remain silent. The boldness displayed in Numbers 27:1 to 11 does not persist. Did Zelophehad's brothers not allow them a say, or could it be that once they overcame the possession saga, the sisters relaxed and became content? It may happen that contentment cuts one away from further action. Women should not be content, nor should they allow themselves to be silenced. They have an obligation constantly and persistently say "No" to injustice. When they do so, their voices should be broadcast for all to hear. This will set minds thinking, and perhaps even cause disturbance. Gradually, a change of attitude toward women may occur.

In Numbers 36, God's voice is also silent. It is through his servant Moses that messages are passed. Could it be that Moses spoke on behalf of God and so God could have given a different answer, an answer more favorable to the sisters if he himself had responded?

It is intriguing that the issue of women seems to feature so prominently in the Exodus story. It is unfortunate that, since biblical times, women have so often been subjugated. Not only they have been hurt, but their families and society as a whole. Once the mistreatment of women is remedied, not only will they benefit, but society in general. Women's issues should be raised in an attempt to make the world a better place for all creation. Women should raise issues that touch on the rights of others, that is men and children, and these others should also raise women's issues. In short, all should be concerned about the good of all.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Mary J. Evans, *Women in the Bible* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 32.
  2. Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1978), pp. 20-53.
  3. S. S. Ole Sankan, *The Maasai* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1971).
  4. G. S. Snell, *Nandi Customary Law* (Nairobi: Kenyatta Literature Bureau, 1954).
  5. J. S. Mbiti, ed., *Akamba Stories* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1983).
  6. Edmund Alojzy Wilemski, "African Traditional Subsistence Economy in Change: A Field Study for a Planned Development of the Traditional Subsistence Agricultural and Household Economy of the Ababassi People in Kenya," (Cologne, 1975).
  7. Ole Sankan, *The Maasai*, p. 7.
- OTHER RELEVANT WORKS:
- Association of Theological Institutions in Eastern Africa (A.T.I.E.A.) "Women and Theological Education in Africa" (Staff Institute: Mukono, Uganda, 1991).
- Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Women in the Church* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Biblical Perspectives, 1987).
- Silvana Bottignole, *Kikuyu Traditional Culture and Christianity* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1984).
- Daughters of St. Paul, *Women of the Bible* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1970), p. 32.
- Frank Furedi, "The Kikuyu Squatter in the Rift Valley 1918-1929" (Historical Association of Kenya: Annual Conference, 1970).
- Nici Nelson, ed., *African Women in the Development Process* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1981).
- Ofelia Ortega, ed., *Women's Visions* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1995).
- A. I. Salim, "Land Alienation: The Arab-Swahili Experience 1895-1935" (Historical Association of Kenya: Annual Conference, 1972).
- Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publ. Assn., 1978).
- Lloyd Timberlake, *Africa in Crisis* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1985).