

Naomi's and Ruth's Effective Use of Feminine Insights and Wisdom for Survival and the Challenges of Nigerian Women in the Contemporary Churches

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Abstract: The life of Naomi and Ruth, calls for a re-thinking in feminine studies. At a stage in their lives, there was no breadwinner. They both lost their husbands as mother-in-law and wife respectively but have to keep up with life activities. Life almost became worthless to them as they had zilch to live on. To salvage the situation and survive however they both used their natural feminine propensities, and acumen. This paper attempts to examine how operative their insight and inclination were. It relates it to Albert Banduras theory on 'self-efficacy' and as interpreted by different scholars as regards women on career choice and activities in relation to situations around and expected successes. It traces out implications of their actions for survival of women; most especially African career women in the contemporary churches. It interviews Christian women of different careers from the northern, south-south, south-eastern and south-western part of Nigeria to gather information on their career pursuit which helps to determine the relevance of the propensity of the duo.

Keywords: Feminine, Wisdom, Survival, African

Introduction

Food, clothing and shelter are the three indispensable needs of life yet of the three; food is seen as the most essential. To human beings generally, quality food matters more than what you wear and where you live. This is because food is for the inner part of the body which supports the other while others are for the outer part of the body. This was implied by French proverb which says 'better a good dinner than a fine coat'. Energy and strength derived from food may later be used to get other things. Famine caused Elimelech and his family members to leave Bethlehem for Moab. Unfortunately, he

and the two sons Mahlon and Chilion could not achieve their goal of getting permanent greener pasture for their families, rather they died. Naomi the eldest widow sorted out the horrible situation by persuading her daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah to return to their mothers' house while she would return to Bethlehem. Orpah consented and bade farewell to her mother-in-law while Ruth probably out of loyalty to the old woman refused to return to her mother. Thus, they got to Bethlehem without hope; looking sorrowful, feeling bitter and appalled. In spite, they realised the need to stay alive with or without a man so, they used some tactics at their disposal as described in chapter two of the book of Ruth.

The career adventure of the two especially Ruth is analysed using Albert Bandura's self efficacy theory which was postulated first in 1977 in his work *Self-efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioural Change*. It stated that:

Expectations of personal efficacy determine whether coping behaviour will be initiated, how much effort will be expended, and how long it will be sustained in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences. Persistence in activities that are subjectively threatening but in fact relatively safe produced through experiences of mastery, further enhancement of self-efficacy and corresponding reductions in defensive behaviour. In the proposed model, expectations of personal efficacy are derived from 4 principal sources of information: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states.¹

It was later developed in different perspectives severally from then till above the first decade of the twenty-first century. The first postulation coupled with other development on self-efficacy by him and other scholars will be applied where necessary in this article and so will be critically used to examine the career activities and see how it has worked for them and whether it can work for women in our contemporary African society.

Self-efficacy is defined as an individual's level of confidence in and beliefs about his/her capability to successfully carry out courses of action, perform given behaviors, accomplish given tasks, and attain desired performance outcomes. Self-efficacy can ultimately determine whether an individual will choose to perform or refrain from performing a task: is therefore an important factor in understanding how people develop confidence and perceive their abilities. Self-efficacy beliefs influence how people feel, think,

¹ A. Bandura, "Self-efficacy: Toward A Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change," *Psychological Review* 84, no. 2 (1977): 191-215.

motivate themselves, and behave.² Self-efficacy in human being according to Bandura could be high or low negative or positive. People who have high self-efficacy are more likely to attempt and successfully execute tasks, whereas those with low self-efficacy find it difficult to achieve them because they are often fighting self doubt. It gives also negative and positive self-efficacy which of course affects perceptions and participation in activities³ Naomi and Ruth as indicated earlier were grief-stricken due to their affliction of becoming a widow narrated in chapter one. This was expected to have affected their instance of industry described in chapter two either positively or negatively. It must have informed their level of confidence and competence of hard-work, conscientiousness and productivity to make ends meet.

Naomi and Ruth Insights and Wisdom for Survival and Implications

The immediate need of Ruth and Naomi after settling down at Bethlehem was food. D. A Carson and his colleague expressed that it was as humiliating to be reduced to such poverty.⁴ Ruth took the initiative to support the family. She rose up to fill the gap of her late husband who supposed to take care of her as a wife and the aged mother thus became the breadwinner of the family. She was proactive by showing her willingness to work and not to beg, borrow or be redundant. She showed an example of industry.⁵ Ruth possibly could have heard or read about the law of the land as a poor proselyte.⁶ She knew her Petite right in the constitution of the land

² Ibid. See also, N.E. Betz and G. Hackett, "The Relationship Of Career-Related Self-Efficacy Expectations To Perceive Career Options In College Women And Men," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 28, no. 5 (1981): 399-410. See also, A. Bandura, "Perceived Self-Efficacy in Cognitive Development and Functioning," *Educational Psychologist* 28, no. 2 (1993): 117-48.

³ Ibid.

⁴ D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition* (U.S.A: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 290-92.

⁵ "Matthew Henry," Rick Miyer E-sword, www.e-sword.net.

⁶ Proselytes were persons of non-Jewish origin who chose to become practicing Jews as adult. It is a Greek term *προσήλυτος/proselytos*, with the meaning "stranger", "newcomer to Israel" and a "sojourner in the land." They were two types: righteous proselyte and gate proselyte. A righteous proselyte was a gentile converted to Judaism bound to all the doctrines and precepts of the Jewish economy, and considered a full member of the Jewish people. They were to be circumcised and immersed in a mikvah should they wish to eat of the Passover sacrifice. A gate proselyte was a "resident alien"

in Lev. 19:9-10. The tenet explained that Israelite farmers should not reap the harvest of their fields to the very border, gather the gleanings after harvest; strip their vineyard bars or gather the fallen grapes of their vineyards. They were to leave them for the poor and the sojourners, which was the situation of Ruth and her mother-in-law. Naomi though could not follow Ruth, agreed and consented to her assiduousness. Herbert Alleman and Elemer Flack explained that this action shows that she voluntarily entered into a servant hood.⁷ This indicates the first stage of Bandura's theory on self-efficacy which was 'an initiation of a coping behaviour' to be the main source of income for the house. She confidently and motivated herself towards the vacancy of gleaning available though very humiliating to be reduced to such.⁸

Tokunboh Adeyemo in *Africa Bible Commentary* construed that Ruth was a typical of many rural African women who spend most of their time looking for food to feed their families and that they do not 'just stay at home as house wives,'⁹ in fact some of them do become the breadwinner of the family like Ruth. In the urban, currently in Nigerian society, many women believed that women should work and not be a sit-at-home person. In fact Mrs Eronini, to cook, clean the house and care for the children is a work, although they are not paid.¹⁰ Nonetheless, careers that will bring income at the end of the day and probably month should not be out of the arrangement and agreement for typical African women just that they should not be the main source of income for the family as it is inapt for a woman.¹¹ To Daulad Abigal, a woman who is a breadwinner of the house is not submissive to the husband and so may get herself into unnecessary snag at home.¹² On the other

who lived in the land of Israel and followed some of the customs. They were not required to be circumcised or comply with the whole of the Torah. They were bound only to conform to the seven precepts of Noah.

⁷ Herbert C. Alleman and Elemer E Flack, *Old Testament Commentary* (Pennsylvanian: The Muhlenberg Press, 1948), 347.

⁸ D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary 21st Century Edition*, 291.

⁹ Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars* (Nairobi: World Alive Publishers, 2006), 322.

¹⁰ Mary Jane Eronini, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

Daulad Abigail Awak, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

¹¹ A. O. Tiyamiyu, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

¹² Daulad Abigail Awak, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

hand, many women opined that situation may call for this when extraordinary things happened to the man of the family. If a man loses his job a woman may have no alternative.¹³ Also, sickness and accident could possibly make a man handicapped and so function below expectation; as a result, the woman may have no choice.¹⁴ A woman may become the breadwinner of the house as well if the husband is irresponsible either as a drunkard, womanizer or into gambling.¹⁵ For men who are not salary earners but into business, the table could turn around if occasionally for a long time they are bankrupt.¹⁶ Then in some situations, some women may be favoured to earn more than their husband and so may indirectly become the main source of income in the family although with a kind of agreement between the couple.¹⁷ All the situations explained above are not farfetched in African families. An African proverb says 'It is the work of one's hands that decides what one eats for dinner - for some it is pounded yam, for others it is pounded plantain or nothing.' This means that it is not strange to see people especially women with coping initiatives in their career endeavours and to the extent of becoming financial load carriers at home, although for different reasons. This implies that Christian women can follow Ruth's assiduousness to make life smooth, better and ends meet at home. However, it is not impossible to see some sit-at-home women due to ill health, or extreme ego or protection of their husbands in allowing them work, despite if given a chance they may be zealous at industry.

Ruth toiled without any rest behind the harvesters. In verse seven, the servant in charge of the reapers commended her tireless effort. He said, "she came and hath continued even from the morning till now." The time of the 'now' used by the servant was not specified, despite, it implies many hours of the day, counting from early in the morning. The direct translation of the Hebrew words *מַעַט הַבַּיִת שְׁבַתָּה* 'to-seen-of-her-the house little' reflects that she rested for just a while. This shows more of her sedulousness as it is noteworthy that gleaning is difficult enterprise. It involves all the

¹³ Funmilayo Ajayi, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

¹⁴ Ohis Precious, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

¹⁵ Adeniji Temitope, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

¹⁶ Adebisi Taiwo, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

¹⁷ Balogun Fademeki, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

body joints and bones. She must bend down to pick grains which involves her neck (trunk), back (vertebrae column) knee, waist (pelvic bone), shoulders (clavicle and scapula), chest (ribs), elbow and bones of her hands (tarsal, metatarsal and phalanges). Ruth's work as elucidated was very rigorous and fast tiring. Some contemporary women believed that women should not engage in hard career in accordance with their level of strength in relation to men's. To them it is better to avoid hard work, suffer a bit than being involved in hard work and get old and possibly die prematurely.¹⁸ This could be examined in the development given to the theory of self-efficacy by Betz and Hackett on vocational behaviour that 'women demonstrate more career self-efficacy in relation to jobs that are traditionally female and men were more efficacious in relation to traditionally male jobs.'¹⁹

Generally, in African society, some professions like agriculture, mining, commercial driving, engineering, military force are seen to be more masculine than feminine. Agbamugo and Ohis Precious of expressed that women should avoid hard work because of the nature they possess which to them is very fragile and weaker than men.²⁰ However the motivation towards a particular career whether herculean or not, fit for their gender or not may not be applicable in some African countries where there is high rate of unemployment and poverty. Famine and poverty did not let the theory postulated by Betz and Hackett work in the case of Ruth. This must have informed some Nigerian women interviewed to be indifferent about the choice of job either feminine of masculine, in

¹⁸ Funmi Adepoju, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

Oladapo Oluwakemi, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

Iheme Geraldine, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

Amadi S. Ngozi, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

Elizabeth Olubiyi, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

Funmilayo Ajayi, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

Ademola Alonge, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, March 2021.

¹⁹ N. E. Betz and G. Hackett, "The Relationship of Career-Related Self-Efficacy Expectations to Perceive Career Options in College Women and Men," 399-410.

²⁰ Agbamugo Edward Bathlomew, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, March 2021.

as much as there are no alternatives, it fetches money and there is correspondent strength.²¹ On the exception, some women preferred masculine job naturally and desired such greatly and as so convinced to go ahead.²² Also, cultural ideas in some places inform the choice of job especially in many remote-urban areas. Native jobs like hunting, mining and agriculture are taboo for women even if they are willing, interested or capable. This reflects till the modern time as some women were denied access to agricultural loans provided by the government. For instance, Ayu in online Nigeria daily news cites the 1987 research work of Nema Ngur which shows that in a study of 40 women and men in Pella village in Gombia Local Government Area of the former Gongola State, in spite of the high level of awareness of the benefits of adopting agricultural innovations, only men benefited from government loans and were members of co-operatives. A separate investigation carried out by Ayu in 1992 amongst the Berom women of Plateau State, shows that all of the 600 women interviewed were aware and desired the benefits of agricultural inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides and tractors but none of them had direct access to it. They had to get such inputs through their husbands who do not get enough of such and must satisfy the needs of their own farms, first. In the same study, it was discovered that none of the women had benefited from government loans because their husbands would not approve in line with tradition or when they do or that the land tenure system

²¹ Okeke Ngozi, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, March 2021.

Edidiong Umoh, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, January 2021.

Nyene Umoh Abasi, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, January 2021.

Okeke Ngozi, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, March 1, 2021.

Edidiong Umoh, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, March 2021.

Nyene Umoh Abasi, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, January 2021.

²² Ubochi Oluchi, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

Elizabeth Nwachukwu, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, February 2021.

Okeke Ngozi, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, March 2021.

Cyprian Ubah, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, January 2021.

permits women only limited (sometimes none at all) access to land ownership. Ruth primed herself both physically and psychologically to face the job probably out of having it as the only option or of the zeal to cater for her family. 'Masculine' jobs that will cause frequent pains and ill health are likely to be avoided by a typical African woman with the exception of some who are naturally masculine if there are alternatives, if not they embrace it and continue to endure or relish it.

Ruth according to Bandura's theory was able to *persist in activities that are subjectively threatening but in fact relatively safe*. She *produced through experiences of mastery, further enhancement of self-efficacy and corresponding reductions in defensive behaviour*. The owner of the farm was favourable enough in verses 8-9 of the chapter to protect Ruth having learnt of her royalty (by following and working for the family) to Naomi the wife of his kinsman. He showed concern and permitted her to eat and drink at the farm as she works and gave order that the young men were to respect her. Above all he advised her not glean in another man's field as he has ordered his men not to harm her.²⁴ Boaz must have probably advised Ruth out of experience that farm servant usually harm gleaners especially females both physically and emotionally through actions like abuse, assault, rape beating and molestation which was subjectively threatening in her choice of career but of which she was lucky to find safety. This gave her a kind of peace of mind and control over her situation the more thus enhance more self-efficacy and corresponding reduction in defensive behaviour which was shown through her courteous and meek character. She was never uncouth on Boaz field. At the initial stage, she was aware of her right to glean notwithstanding she took permission before gleaning. His servant reported that Ruth took permission before working. She pleaded "I pray you let me glean and gather after the reapers among the sheaves."²⁵ She was not rude at gaining access to the field. Also, when the owner of the farm came, she was so polite. She greeted Boaz with her face bowed to the ground. This signifies reverence, humility and appreciation. Out of self-effacement she showed her gratitude, she spoke the more, gentle and comforting words to Boaz for his kind gesture of admitting her into his farm in verse 13. Then she said, "You are most gracious to me my lord (Boaz) for you have comforted me and spoken so kindly to your maidservant though I am not one of your maidservants..."²⁶ at meal, as well she was reserved and of good manners. Employers

²⁵ Bible RSVP Ruth 2: 7.

²⁶ Bible RSVP Ruth 2: 13.

are to ensure the safety of their employees. They are to encourage them and not predispose them to any form of danger. The high level of unemployment in Africa-Nigeria should not make them overlook this. An African adage says; when a fowl gets to a new town, it stands on one leg until it knows that it is a town where people stand on their two legs. Many people feel unsecured thus ineffective until they are assured of their safety in terms of remuneration, environmental security and job security. Nonetheless employees on the other hand should be very couth, cultured and be of good manners at work. ‘When the labourer is praised, his cutlass begins to cut more keenly.’ Reports on *curriculum vitae* may not be enough; we ought to confirm it through our actions while working in civil, public or private businesses. Civility was a virtue expressed by Ruth at work, and it fetches her more security, encouragement and comfort.

Ruth generated more self-efficacy through personal achievement, verbal persuasions and psychological state. For personal achievement, after the day’s job Ruth was diligent enough to remember to weigh her garnered grains at the end of the day before going home. She weighed up her work at the end of the day. It is crucial for Christian women to evaluate their income at the end of probably day, week, month or year. According to some Nigerian women, Jobs without remuneration or improper wages could make woman medically and psychologically imbalance. She would feel unhappy, bad, cheated and inferior.²⁷ As a result stress, fatigue, depression, emotional breakdown and frustration will set in as her morale would have been very low or possibly killed.²⁸ In fact, she would react irrationally. Ailments like hypertension, stroke and other deadly diseases would make her unhealthy. In return, she would look stressed, and older.²⁹ Ultimately, untimely death may be the end result. Contemporary women therefore should have something tangible to take home as income. Tokunboh adeyemo expressed that despite that African women toiled greatly they are under paid.³⁰ Private, employers, government should not withhold people’s wages as this may have bad effect on employees especially female. Even if a woman is into her private business, it should be lucrative enough to avoid waste of time, energy and cause all the

²⁷ Tahila James, “Interview Respondent,” interview by Yetunde Akinawo, January 2021.

²⁸ Naomi Saleh, “Interview Respondent,” interview by Yetunde Akinawo, January 2021.

²⁹ Tukir Raliya, “Interview Respondent,” interview by Yetunde Akinawo, January 2021.

³⁰ Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary*, 322.

bad things listed above in their lives. In line with the point above, Christian women are to utilize judiciously their wages. When Ruth was fed on the field, she had leftovers which she did not throw away but kept for her mother-in-law. Geraldine, Ajayi, Fadekemi believed that women from her income should take care of herself first because they do hard work, and that they need to be both mentally and physically okay to be able to care for the family and in fact though to her, they are not created to be breadwinner.³¹ However, many others interviewed opined that we should take care first our husband and indirectly our home. This is because as when we take care of our family members, we will definitely take care of ourselves and get blessings from them. In line with Ruth's actions, woman should balance their care. Some prefer to feed well, look gorgeous and beautiful without caring for their families while some stress themselves and work without extra care for their health and life in entirety. Care on both sides should be balanced. Whether they take care of themselves first or not hard working African women should not look haggard, sickly and are to have things of great value to show for it. In Mathew Henry's Bible commentary it was expressed that 'it encourages industry that in all labour, even that of gleaning, there is profit. Ruth was pleased with what she gained by her own industry, and was careful to secure it. Let us thus take care that we lose not those things which we have wrought, which we have gained for our souls good.

Verbal persuasions of Albert Bandura's theory reflected when Ruth got home and she showed her mother-in-law the gains and gave to her what she kept for her from the left over. Naomi encouraged and comforted Ruth by asking good questions and making beautiful comment about her and her work; In fact, she revered God for Ruth's achievements. "And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!"³² This cheered Ruth and mitigated her pains; so she reported the more her day, to Naomi. Furthermore, Ruth the Moabitess said, "Besides, he said to me, 'You shall keep close by my servants, till they have finished all my harvest.'³³ Naomi in return was able to give necessary information advice and warnings needed for success in her newly found job. "The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin." And Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, "It is well, my daughter, that you go

³¹ Abolade Oluwatosin, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinnawo, January 2021.

³² Bible RSVP Ruth 2: 21

³³ Bible RSVP Ruth 2: 22.

out with his maidens, lest in another field you be molested."³⁴ Therefore, Ruth took to the advice and continued to work the end of barley and wheat harvest. Following Ruth and Naomi's example, work experience should not be made private at all time. Women should create enough time to discuss at home either daily or on any basis their work experience. Caroline believed that this is good because by so doing, you get encouragement and this possibly may make the job easier and faster.³⁵ To buttress the point, Daulad Abigal expressed that; a Christian woman will carry along her family members and get from them prayers that will sustain her at work. Besides, this type of discussion keeps the family informed about the latest development about her career.³⁶ It is a good question for us to ask ourselves every night, where have I gleaned to-day? What improvement have I made in knowledge and grace? What have I done that will turn to a good account? Nevertheless, a woman may not need to carry 'all' the household members along; as some might be too young or old to understand the concept of her job and career experience. In spite, some women are of the opinion that the husband should be the first person as he should be the confident who deserves to hear everything. Where there is no husband, a woman can choose any other elderly person as Ruth and Naomi went into this rapport which bred advice, suggestions, warning and prayers. However, Saleh warned that women should watch the timing and the mood of the person to share her mind with as this could bring unwanted expressions and results. Reports that will have negative results and influence on the household should be totally avoided according to Okeke Ngozi. Not only these, only vital and necessary points should be discussed; in fact, women should pick their words to avoid problems. We should pray to God for direction peradventure there are some we could not share and are burdensome.

Conclusion

Naomi and Ruth's career and survival has been critically examined so far had served as paradigm for African Christian women in their career pursuit. To some Naomi seems to have done nothing.

³⁴ Caroline Amos, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinlawo, January 2021.

³⁵ Daulad Abigail Awak, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinlawo, January 2021.

³⁶ Daulad Abigail Awak, "Interview Respondent," interview by Yetunde Akinlawo, January 2021.

However, her support was not in the physical but psychological and spiritual. This served as back up for Ruth who physically manifested necessary skills to make ends meet. Despite all odds in Africa women can survive if they are willing they should tap into good opportunities available to make ends meet. Everybody no matter how little except for the extremely sick has energy to do one thing or the other; just that you decide what you use it for whether good or bad. Ruth did a work that has integrity and honour. She could have chosen to be prostitute, as there was no husband or involved in stealing. In addition, she coated her diligence with silent prayers, good behaviours insight and astuteness and never allow inferiority complex as a foreigner in Israel. This made her to survive the stage of poverty without being at the mercy of the entire family or city. African; Nigeria, women should develop positive and high level of self efficacy to be able to move from poverty to buoyancy and survive the odds of life.

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