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**Theological Reflections**The Book of Ruth

Hawa Sannoh is a young woman in a small village called Sorbeh Grima, Pujehun District, in the south of Sierra Leone. She didn’t always live there; she started life in Malen Chiefdom where her parents lived.

However, in 2011, a large multinational company won the right from the Sierra Leone government to lease for 50 years thousands of hectares of land in the Malen Chiefdom. Palm oil is a valuable commodity, traded across the world, and finds itself in thousands of products from food to cosmetics and biodiesel. At first, there was hope that local people would benefit from jobs and be properly compensated for the leasing of their farmland.

However, many in Malen immediately denounced the agreement as illegitimate, due to a lack of consultation, denying they had consented to the leasing of their land, others even saying they’d been pressured and intimidated into leasing. Most agreed that people were not being paid a fair price and also that many farmers did not know the correct size of their land.

There were protests and violence, and some left the area due to a loss of income and opportunity.

Hawa was one of those people. Her father died, which Hawa directly links to his land being taken away from him unfairly and without his consent. She says:

*“I left Malen because the chief took my father’s farmland. His land was sold without his consent. He used to have lots of land which he would grow palm oil, fruit and vegetables. He was left with nothing.”*

Hawa said the loss of the land was a devastating blow to her father. *“He ended up getting sick from high blood pressure and had a heart attack. He lost his life due to the stress. After that my mother decided to go back to her family’s village.”*

So, Hawa and her husband left Malen and went to Sorbeh Grima where his family are from. Unfortunately, later on, Hawa’s husband left her to bring up their three children alone. Meaning she was living in the home-land of her husband, without him.

When I met Hawa I immediately thought of another woman who left what she knew to travel to her husband’s homeland – also without him. Having to start again. Having to make her own way in a new place. Ruth from the Old Testament, due to the death of her husband, travelled to Judah with her mother-in-law, Naomi:

***6****When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.****7****With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. (Ruth 1:6-7)*

When Naomi tried to encourage Ruth to go back to Moab, where she was from, she said:

***..****“Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.****17****Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”****18****When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. (Ruth 1:16-18)*

The situation looked bleak for Ruth and Naomi – widows and Ruth a foreigner – in a time and place where much of your security, provision and status came from the men in your family.

However, we know that Ruth showed grit and tenacity, as well as faithfulness – working hard to provide for Naomi and herself:

***17****So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah.[*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ruth%202&version=NIV#fen-NIV-7167a)*]****18****She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough. (Ruth 2:17-18)*

She worked in the field of a man called Boaz who showed great kindness and went on to marry Ruth, due to the principle of ‘kinsman-redeemer’ where a male relative would step in and marry a widow so that she would be provided for despite the death of her previous husband. Not every man wanted to do this, seeing it as a potential burden on resources, but Boaz was willing.

In the end, Ruth’s situation was completely transformed – having a son who was in the line of David, the future King of Israel.

I see more parallels with Hawa. Just as Ruth showed grit and hard work – so did Hawa. She found out that a Village Savings & Loans Association was operating in her new village – a group that allows local women access to cash they need to set up businesses but also to pay for essential costs during emergencies.

Hawa didn’t have enough money to pay the initial fee to join (the equivalent of 50 cents) but she was determined. She knew some people who were processing palm fruits – so she decided to follow along behind them and pick up what they were discarding. She could then process this further and have a product to sell.

This meant she could make enough money to join the savings group, contributing each week, and taking loans to help her at hard times and to enable her to pay for what her three children need.

Funding from the Presbyterian Church World Development Appeal will be used to support over 300 displaced women and their families through these Village Savings and loans groups, giving them the opportunity to access financial resources, training in their chosen livelihood, business plan development support, and financial literacy training as they begin record keeping.

Following their training, women like Hawa will use their loans in a variety of ways – some will purchase land, seedlings, and equipment to produce fruit and vegetables, or breed small livestock such as pigs, goats, and chickens. Others will use their loans to construct ponds and develop a fish keeping enterprise. By engaging in business opportunities these women will continue to grow their businesses and confidence, empowering them and their households towards self-reliance now and into the future.

Back to the book of Ruth! We know that Ruth’s life didn’t just turn around because of her hard work and Boaz’s kindness. It was also because of two laws that God had set out for Israel – the law of gleaning which allowed those who were poor and vulnerable to take what had been dropped by those harvesting, and the law of kinsman-redeemer as mentioned above.

I love this! We serve a God who has His eye on those who are poor, knowing their poverty also increases their vulnerability. We see this love and compassion all through God’s word.

Psalm 68:5tells us:

Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.

[Isaiah 1:17](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+1%3A17&version=ESV) says:

Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

It is this same compassion, and understanding of poverty, that motivates Christian Aid, Tearfund and our partners today. It’s what motivates the World Development Appeal to keep highlighting global issues each year, to keep coming back to Presbyterian Churches throughout Ireland and asking for your help and compassion as well.

Let’s thank God that He is compassionate and loving toward all He has made – and ask Him what that means for us? What is our response to the poverty and vulnerability in the world, and to our God of compassion and justice?

Do we see those who are poor and vulnerable in our world as our responsibility? Just as God put in place laws for His people to protect people like Ruth, He likewise expects His people today to protect and provide for the vulnerable in our day.

Pray with us:

O God, you used Naomi and Ruth

Simple women who thought they were nobodies,

To build your nation.

You, who chose a simple village maiden

To be the mother of your son – use me, Lord.

You, who can put down the arrogant of heart and mins,

And raise the humble and weak – use us, Lord.

Help us to be ready when your call comes

And to commit ourselves to your service.

(Sri Lanka:Fellowship of the Least Coin)[[1]](#footnote-1)

A person carrying a bowl on her head

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*Caption: Hawa Sannoh left Malenl after the death of her father, following his loss of access to his land after the arrival of the Socfin palm oil plantation. Hawa is being supported through a savings and loan project funded through donations to the PCI World Development Appeal. Credit: Chris Nelson/Presbyterian Church in Ireland*

A group of people outside

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*Caption: Hawa Sannoh cooking with her three young children outside their home in Sorbeh Grima, Pujehun District, Sierra Leone. Credit: Chris Nelson/Presbyterian Church in Ireland*

A person holding a book

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*Caption: The Village Savings & Loans Association meeting in Sorbeh Grima, Pujehun District. A chairperson keeps a careful note of all the contributions from members, as well as loans taken. Women are able to grow businesses and empower their families. Credit: Chris Nelson/Presbyterian Church in Ireland*

*A aerial view of a plantation

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*Caption: Rows and rows of palm trees on the Socfin palm oil plantation in Malen chiefdom, Pujehun, Sierra Leone. Credit: Chris Nelson/Presbyterian Church in Ireland.*

1. Found in the compilation ‘A procession of Prayers’ by John Carden, 1998 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)