

The book of Ruth in the Old Testament tells the story of two women who love and care for each other. The courage, love and initiative of Ruth and Naomi are inspiring. However, the story also raises many issues and questions. When we look more closely at the story, we can identify harmful and violent attitudes and practices. In this pack the story of Ruth is included as a Bible study. It is also a tool to identify and analyse violence within our own societies.

Introducing the Bible study:

- *Explain that there are positive parts of the story, but violent attitudes and practices can also be identified in it.*
- *Use the 'Background to the Passage' sections to introduce each passage.*
- *Ask the group to discuss the Bible passages and the questions that relate to them.*
- *After the discussion, if the people have divided into smaller groups, each group can share their ideas with the rest.*

1. WOMEN TOGETHER

Background to the passage

Naomi lived in Moab with her two sons and two Moabite daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, after her husband died. Then both her sons died too. The three widows set off to return to Naomi's homeland, Judah. At first the two younger women insisted on remaining with Naomi. But Naomi was concerned for their welfare and explained that she could not offer the younger women any security or hope for the future. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and went on her way, but Ruth still clung to Naomi. Ruth was a Moabite. The Moabites are cursed in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word used in the Bible to mean 'widow' is 'almanâ'. 'Almanâ' means the leftover piece of someone else's life.

Ruth 1.15-18

'Look', said Naomi, 'your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her god. Go follow her.' Ruth answered, 'Do not urge me to go back and desert you. Where you go, I shall go, and where you stay, I shall stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I shall die, and there be buried. I solemnly declare before the Lord that nothing but death will part me from you.' When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said no more.

Points to discuss

- What do we learn about the relationship between Ruth and Naomi?
- What is Ruth leaving behind in Moab?
- As a young woman, a widow and a foreigner, what might life be like if she goes with Naomi?
- What would life be like for someone like Ruth if she came to live in our community?

2. RUTH CLAIMS HER RIGHTS, PROVIDES FOR HER MOTHER-IN-LAW AND GAINS RESPECT AND RECOGNITION

Background to the passage

Gleaning was one of the few ways it was possible for widows to make a living. By Jewish law, those who owned the land and their workers were not supposed to reap every last grain or

reap right to the edges of their fields. (see Leviticus 19.9-10) The leftover grain was food for the poor. In going to the fields to pick up the leftovers, Ruth is seeking justice rather than special treatment.

Ruth 2.1-3, 5-12

Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a prominent and well-to-do member of Elimelech's family; his name was Boaz. One day Ruth the Moabite asked Naomi, 'May I go to the harvest fields and glean behind anyone who will allow me?' 'Yes, go, my daughter,' she replied. So

Ruth went gleaning in the fields behind the reapers. As it happened, she was in that strip of the fields which belonged to Boaz... 'Whose girl is this?' Boaz asked the servant in charge of the reapers. The servant answered, 'She is a Moabite girl who has come back with Naomi from Moab. She asked if she might glean, gathering among the sheaves behind the reapers. She came and has been on her feet from morning till now; she has hardly had a moment's rest in the shelter.' Boaz said to

Ruth, 'Listen, my daughter: do not go to glean in any other field. Do not look any farther, but stay close to my servant-girls. Watch where the men reap, and follow the gleaners; I have told the men not to molest you. Any time you are thirsty, go and drink from the jars they have filled.' She bowed to the ground and said, 'Why are you so kind as to take notice of me, when I am just a foreigner? Boaz answered, 'I have been told the whole story of what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband, how you left father and mother and homeland and came among a people you did not know before. The Lord reward you for what you have done; may you be richly repaid by the Lord the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge.'

Points to discuss

- How does Ruth claim her own and Naomi's rights?
- Why and how does Boaz show respect towards Ruth?
- How might the other men in the fields be different from Boaz?
- Are women able to earn an income in our communities?
- Are places of work safe for women in our communities?
- In our communities, how do women claim their rights? What are the results?

3. THE THRESHING FLOOR

Background to the passage

In Israel, there was a system of Levirate marriage. If a woman's husband died and she was left with no children to care for her, her husband's brother (or possibly a near male relative) would be obliged to offer her marriage and a home. The first child would be considered to be the child of the first husband, and in that way the dead man's name would not die out.

Levirate marriage is still practised today in many communities. This practice is linked with attitudes towards women. It often occurs in

societies where women are not economically independent. They may be considered to be the

property of men. Ruth and Naomi also lived in a society dominated and run by men. As a foreigner, it would have been very difficult for Ruth to challenge a system that was male dominated. In many countries today where Levirate marriage is still practised, there are

now new laws. These laws give women equal rights to own property. Women are becoming more aware of these rights. They are helping each other to claim them. When widows today are forced (physically, or through poverty or lack of legal rights) to marry or have intercourse with their dead husband's relatives, this is a situation of violence.

Ruth 3.1-6, 8-13

One day Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, said to her, 'My daughter, I want to see you settled happily. Now there is our kinsman Boaz, whose girls you have been with. Tonight he will be winnowing barley at the threshing floor. Bathe and anoint yourself with perfumed oil, then get dressed and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down make sure you know the place where he is. Then go in, turn back the covering at his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.' 'I will do everything you say,' replied

Ruth. She went down to the threshing-floor and did exactly as her mother-in-law had told her... About midnight the man woke with a start; he turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! 'Who are you?' he said. 'Sir, it is I, Ruth,' she replied. 'Spread the shirt of your cloak over me, for you are my next of kin. Boaz said, 'The Lord bless you, my daughter! You are proving yourself more devoted to the family than ever by not running after any young man, whether rich or poor. Set

your mind at rest, my daughter: I shall do all you ask, for the whole town knows what a fine woman you are. Yes, it is true that I am a near kinsman; but there is one even closer than I am. Stay tonight, and then in the morning, if he is willing to act as your next of kin, well and good; but if he is not, then as sure as the Lord lives, I shall do so...'

Points to discuss

- How and why does Naomi take steps to secure Ruth's future?
- What attitudes and ideas about women might have limited the options open to Ruth and Naomi?
- What are the attitudes and ideas in our own communities about women?
- Do we have any traditions, customs or practices about widows?
- Which ideas, attitudes, and expectations are helpful? Which are harmful?
- Are there any attitudes we would like to change?
- What might be a first step?

4. WOMEN MISSING FROM THE GATES

Background to the passage

The 'gate' of the town or city was the normal place for public business to be conducted. The elders of the town would have much power and authority. They would all have been male.

Ruth 4.1-6, 9-10

Boaz meanwhile, had gone up to the town gate and was sitting there when the next-of-kin of whom he had spoken came past. Calling him by name, Boaz cried, 'Come over here and sit down.' Boaz also stopped ten of the town's elders and asked them to sit there. When they were seated he addressed the next-of-kin: 'You will remember the strip of field that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. Naomi is selling it, now that she has returned from Moab. I promised to open the matter with you, to ask you to acquire it in the presence of

those sitting here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you are going to do your duty as next-of-kin, then do so; but if not, someone must do it. So tell me, and then I shall know, for I come after you as next-of-kin.' He answered, 'I shall act as next of kin.' Boaz continued: 'On the day you take over the field from Naomi, I* take over the widow, Ruth the Moabite, so as to perpetuate the name of the dead man on his holding.' 'Then I cannot act,' said the next-of-kin, 'lest it should be detrimental to my own holding; and as I cannot act, you yourself must take over my duty as next-of-kin.' ...Then Boaz addressed the elders and all the other people there: 'You are witnesses this day that I have taken over from Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon; and further, that I have taken over Mahlon's widow, Ruth the Moabite, to be my wife...'

Points to discuss

- Who was present at the gates and involved in deciding Ruth's future?
- Who was missing?
- Who is involved in decision-making in our communities? Who is not?
- How involved are women? Children? Disabled people? Displaced people and refugees?
- Who can, and who cannot, own and inherit property in our communities?

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*You in some translations.