



Buried alive in the dungeon – Examining the patriarchal language of religion and how acts of faith inform GBV in sacred spaces

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Abstract

The church is still an unsafe terrain that breeds patriarchal ideologies. These ideologies are entrenched through religion and culture, sanctioned within the institution of marriage. In conversation with Denise Ackermann and Mercy Oduyoye's West African Women Theology as a theoretical lens, this article amplifies the voices of African women in the context of the Anglican Church of South Africa (ACSA) on their lived experiences of GBV. This essay seeks to establish the life-denying theologies or acts of faith within ACSA that encourage married women to stay in abusive marriages. Data used in this paper emerged from the semi-structured interviews collected between January 2021 and July 2021 from the Diocese of Natal. Data revealed that teachings on male headship, silence and forgiveness and marriage and divorce play a role in the abuse. Unmasking toxic theologies is fundamental for interventions to be relevant.

Keywords

church; gender; patriarchy; gender-based violence; domestic violence

Background and introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) and femicide is a global concern. In South Africa, Black women's lives are under threat, made vulnerable to abuse and killings. GBV remains a women's health issue and a violation of women's

issue.¹ By virtue of being socially and culturally constructed, women and girl children are primarily suffering. Gender shapes the meaning of violent acts differently for women and men.² The scope of gender is complex and multi-(GBV)layered as it includes the LGBTQI+ persons who are also survivors of violence. However, this article specifically focuses on GBV between a man and a woman. Despite efforts of activism to curb the scourge, women's intimate relationships remain susceptible to domestic violence. Domestic violence refers to any violence occurring between intimate partners (same sex or other sex, married or unmarried) and against children.³ The characterization of domestic violence includes not only physical force, but also sexual violence and threats that cause fear alarm and distress, including stalking.⁴ Nyengele posits that one thorny issue are cultural expectations of marriage and motherhood.⁵ The idea of staying married, no matter how unsafe marriage is, has proven to be problematic. Marriage may be considered sacred; however, it is also characterized by patriarchy which keeps African women in subordinated positions.⁶ Like many faith sector organisations, ACSA is not immune to the patriarchal suffering of women.⁷ Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a big threat and a constraint to a happy healthy marriage. This article sounds alarm to marriage life in Christian homes as tantamount to being “buried alive”, with typical models of slave and master abuse.

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- 1 Sarah Bott, Andrew Morrison, and Mary Ellsberg, “Preventing and responding to gender-based violence in middle and low-income countries: a global review and analysis.” World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3618 (2005), 35.
 - 2 Nancy Felipe Russo and Angela Pirlott, “Gender-based violence: concepts, methods, and findings,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1087, no. 1 (2006), 13.
 - 3 Donald G. Dutton, *Rethinking domestic violence* (Ubc Press, 2011), 179.
 - 4 Sylvia Walby, *The Cost of Domestic Violence* (London: DTI - Women and Equality Unit, DTI, 2004), 10.
 - 5 Mpyana Fulgence Nyengele, *African women's theology, gender relations, and family systems theory: pastoral theological considerations and guidelines for care and counselling*, vol. 229 (Peter Lang, 2004), 3.
 - 6 Isabel Apawo Phiri, Bev Haddad, and Madipoane Joyce Masenya, *African Women, HIV/AIDS, and Faith Communities* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003).
 - 7 Elisabet Le Roux et al., “Getting dirty: Working with faith leaders to prevent and respond to gender-based violence.” *Review of Faith & International Affairs* 14, no. 3 (2016): 22-35.

GBV as an act of violence has negative consequences, which range from stifling growth, diminishing women's worth, dignity and violating justice against humanity. In engaging with work of this nature, it is vital to study the experiences of women such that scholarly interrogation disrupts the status quo and reshapes religion in a manner that affirms and liberates women. Through the lens of epistemological tools and resources embodying hermeneutics, it becomes necessary to trace in faith heritage how texts hold hegemonic supremacies that have been sustained and, in some instances, continue to be upheld and sustained.

This study explores also the theo-religious teachings and the discourse of religious language as a catalyst for gendered abuse, whereby patriarchal language regulates how Christian married women experience marriage. Through narratives, data engaged here reflects the lived experiences of Christian married women. In this article, I submit to discuss toxic theologies that perpetuate patriarchal ideologies reinforced by design.

The church and its patriarchal nature: power and dominance discourse

Christian married women are caught between hard rock and a surface, facing all kinds of dehumanizing acts marking oppression and dominance. Klaasen argues that abused women are degraded, filled with fear, objectified, socially and poor, and overwhelmed by responsibility as their perpetrators play power roles.⁸ Consequently, Christian women find themselves trapped inescapable abusive marriages where GBV is the norm. This is the storyline for married women. Against this demise, questions must be asked, and interventions solicited.

The church in its covert ways is a toxic space, exerting doctrinal cultures and intersecting teachings of gender inequality confining women to stay in toxic marriages. Whilst there could be many co-conspirators perpetuating gender-based violence, Nadar's assertion is that culture and social gender constructions and religion are as potent as powerful alliances. In explicating

8 John Klaasen, "Intersection of personhood and culture : a narrative approach of pastoral care to gender-based violence." *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 117, no. 1 (2018), 14.

this alliance, she uses the term the “unholy trinity”.⁹ Culture, the practice of *ukulobola* (bride wealth) in particular, has rendered women as objects and property to their husbands.¹⁰ This cultural practice potentially increases women’s vulnerability to abuse and decreases their ability to resist and flee abusive marriages.¹¹ I contend that *ukulobola* prepares women for submission (unequal marriage) where they can have no agency. Wood argues that the enforced patriarchy has endorsed an ideology that upholds the view that the male has superior control over women and all others under their care.¹² Across the globe, these binary polarities endorse the prevalence of gender-based abuse of women.

Navigating patriarchy in faith-spaces

The church has a long-lasting legacy of conscientizing Christians with a sense of meaning. However, viewing religion as a player in the equation of oppression and violence against women is impossible.

The Bible continues to be acknowledged as a voice of authority which cannot be questioned and interrogated as it represents “the voice of God”. This hegemonic attitude of patriarchy promotes and perpetuates that males are heads. Hence, this being internalized cultivates an inferior complex where women are conditioned to believe they are dependent on men which make them vulnerable.

9 Tinyiko Sam Maluleke and Sarojini Nadar, “Breaking the covenant of violence against women,” *Journal of theology for Southern Africa*, no. 114 (2002), 17.

10 M. Ruele, “Contextual African theological interpretation of Ilobola as a gender issue in the era of globalisation.” In L. Togarasei & E. Chitando (eds.), *Lobola (Bridewealth) in contemporary Southern Africa* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 329–342.

11 Nontando Jennifer Mesatywa, “Validating the evidence of violence in partner relationships with regard to Xhosa African women.” *Social Work* 50, no. 2 (2014): 235–257.

12 H.J Wood, “Gender inequality: The problem of harmful, patriarchal, traditional and cultural gender practices in the church” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (2019).

Westerberg contends that there is a religious language that subtly cites “the undesirability of divorce, the need to love and honour husbands, and the power of forgiveness and prayer to generate change in the abuser”.¹³

Nash argues that, as a construct, religion shapes a “conservative Christian endorsement of a hierarchical family structure”.¹⁴ Kebanielwe echoes the subordination of women as contained in the story of creation where Gen 1 and Gen 2 continue to perpetuate inequalities.¹⁵ Within ACSA, Pillay makes an apparent observation about the church with its hierarchical and patriarchal nature. She argues that churches are still male-dominated, and patriarchy is “a system that has throughout the ages been posited as a God-ordained holy hierarchy – sanctified by certain bible passages”.¹⁶ The theologies that continue to deny Christian women wellness and fullness of humanity demonstrate “the historic patriarchy of our faith”.¹⁷ A kind of legacy where women endure “the invisible silenced reality of domestic abuse”¹⁸. This lived reality is evident in the church structures that continue to favour males in particular. While women of faith find solace in prayer, Kobo argues that women’s manyano is a site that is arguably meant to liberate these women, yet keeps them in bondage, as a seedbed of patriarchy.¹⁹ To survive, women survivors, engage in different creative languages of resistance as alternative consciousness, as a way of resisting all forms of oppression they face in their abusive marriages.

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- 13 L. Westenberg, “When she calls for help – Domestic violence in Christian families.” *Social Sciences*, 6, 3 (2017): 71–80.
 - 14 Shondrah Tarrezz Nash, “The changing of the gods: Abused Christian wives and their hermeneutic revision of gender, power, and spousal conduct.” *Qualitative Sociology* 29, no. 2 (2006): 195.
 - 15 M.D. Kebanielwe, “The good creation: An eco-womanist reading of Genesis 1–2.” *Old Testament Essays* 28, no. 3 (2015): 694–703.
 - 16 Pillay, Miranda N. “The Anglican Church and Feminism: Challenging the patriarchy of our faith.” *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* Vol. 19 No. 2 (2013), 64.
 - 17 Pillay, Miranda N. “The church, gender and AIDS-what’s wrong with patriarchy?” *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* 43, no. 3 (2015): 568.
 - 18 Hussein, Rima Patricia. “Locked down? Speaking from the shadows and silence for survival.” *Gender, Work & Organization* 30, no. 1 (2023): 302.
 - 19 F.A. Kobo, “A womanist exposition of pseudo-spirituality and the cry of an oppressed African woman.” *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018): 2.

Toxic theology is also evident in places of worship, churches' iconography, sacred texts, religious laws, and customs.²⁰ The religious consciousness of women details the remnant of toxic theology, and this is evident when mourners gather to mourn the passing of a fellow congregant. When sealing the marriage vow, it is standard that each partner vows "till death do us part". Religion has taught women that suffering is central to a life of Christianity. Hence the gospel of "till death do us part" is contained in marriage vows and the marriage liturgy of the church and my contention is that has proven to be problematic, making it extremely impossible to break the vows and a covenant made to God.

Chisale argues that the church is a fertile ground for nurturing and protecting patriarchy. Rakoczy and Oduyoye have pointed out the androcentric nature of Christianity.²¹ The Bible mainly depicts women as sustaining organisms for men who are the chief beneficiaries of their androcentric nature.²² In the same vein, Oduyoye criticizes African churches for not being able to redeem "... Christianity from its image as a force that coerces women into accepting roles that hamper the free and full expression of their humanity."²³

Rakoczy states that patriarchy is interwoven in the Christian tradition in various pervasive ways. Hence, the images of God in Scripture and liturgical prayers are overwhelmingly male: Lord, King, Father. She further argues that the oppression of women through patriarchal and social structures increases in the religious context since the presumed "maleness" of God and the male identity of Jesus are used to justify women's subordination.²⁴ This is evident in the prayer languages portrayed in the Anglican Prayer

20 F. Maupa, "Discursive representation of gender based violence in a synod resolution of the Anglican Diocese of Natal of October 2013." Master of Theology University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2015.

21 Sinenhlanhla S Chisale, "Deliver us from patriarchy: A gendered perspective of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa and implications for pastoral care." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 41, no. 1 (2020), 2.

22 S. Rakoczy, *In her name: Women doing theology* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2004).

23 Mercy Oduyoye, "Calling the church to account: African women and liberation." *The Ecumenical Review* 47, no. 4 (1995).1.

24 Susan Rakoczy, "Religion and violence: the suffering of women." *Agenda* 18, no. 61 (2004): 29-35.

Book. The language of submission continues to be perpetuated idealizing male superiority and female obedience.

Pillay alludes to the pervasive structural violence deeply embedded in structures that are meant to be open spaces for responding to GBV but are entrenched in hierarchical and patriarchal models which further entrap women survivors from seeking assistance from a male-centred perspective. This explains why many women remain in abusive and violent relationships and why some women and men defend the system of patriarchy.²⁵

I contend that this abusive setting on its own instils fear and cages women to stay and not recognise that a corrosive marriage bond leads to emotional death. Married women are reminded in faith gathering spaces that they are anchors while males are leaders – this according to scholars who have defined how women are victims of violence. Christian women are taught to hold on dearly to these teachings until the very end of life, a replication of abuse, endorsed as spirituality and used as a symbol of strength. GBV presents complications as a contextual challenge because of constellation factors. Women are the most vulnerable in society. Through the theory of intersectionality, women are more prone to violence because of the many layers from one context to the other. Issues of race, class, age, culture, education and many other factors, women are subjected to abuse. When theorising for the axis point of intersectionality, women become vulnerable to intimate partner violence (IPV). Remnants of toxic theology are recycled, perpetuated and evident over generations. The legacy that is passed down by religion and culture is that the only way to master marriage means succumbing to the script of survival and resisting. Prayer as a language of prayer has been used to numb the pain.²⁶

Systemic injustices have aggravated socio-economic challenges, resulting in poverty and social ills where many remain vulnerable to abuse. Forms of violence common in the margins of society include wife battering, marital rape, and physical and emotional abuse. Sexual, gender-based violence and femicide (SGBVF) is a serious plague against humanity, causing pain

25 Pillay, “The Church, Gender and Aids.”

26 G. Gina, “We pray for the death of God”: *Southern African Women in Prayer.*” *Anglican Theological Review* 98, no. 2 (2016): 341–348.

and harm to the global society. Nowadays, these inequalities depict the dynamics of power at play which clearly distinguishes the oppressor-oppressed duo. The level of GBV has been unforgiving in South Africa, affecting the young and the old across ages, races, and gender.

Whilst more publication contributions have engaged on GBV as a generic subject, there is a paucity of studies on how GBV in the context of the church. Hence, this paper, intentionally zooms in on the lived experiences of Christian married women mainly in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, revealing the socio-cultural language and teachings that create a fertile ground for GBV. Also, reveals how the role of religion sanctions violence. The contention of this paper gives context to GBV as it defines how Christian married women endure suffering and how theo-biblical teachings have shaped their role of being treated as second-class citizens in marriage. This paper exposes how the Anglican church doctrines embody patriarchal values and visions that continue to perpetuate male domination.

Threading theory – African Women’s Theology

In conversation with Denise Ackermann whose contribution anchors the work of the feminist scholars amplifying embodied lived experiences such that flourishing, wholeness and liberation are God’s gift to mankind. Her argument is that to implement change, it is vital to contextualise how gender is understood and lived out in various spaces. It is therefore, becomes important to explore and understand how those impact and affect women to a larger extent. This pursues a methodological model, *see judge act*. Interrogating these toxic theologies has a purpose to serve, rendering the church accountable to humanity. A higher role is to see the change reconfigure its mindset, biblically positioning the institution of marriage that enables women to flourish, a space that affirms women as made in the image of God, where marriage articulates wholeness. This creates levels of accountability for men to be part of the solution in response to GBV. Feminist theology reflects on patriarchal ideologies so that it can reform, bringing equity and transforming the theologies that in the past have diminished the power of women. Mercy Oduyoye and many circle theologians have invested their time in expanding the discourse of African

Women's Theology which according to Oduyoye questions the discrepancy between the Christianity preached and the Christianity lived.²⁷ She advocates for shifting hierarchies and draws inspiration from an egalitarian paradigm.

Methodology

The data shared highlights the results contained in my doctoral thesis.²⁸

Background information

The study targeted women survivors between the ages of 21 and 68 years of age. These women have been married for anything between 1 year and 45 years. The study was interested in examining how across different generations women experienced what they considered intimate partner abuse in their definition and experience. As the researcher, I was intentional that women survivors who partake in the study should not have been in an abusive marriage in two years prior to the study. This ethical requirement was observed to avoid participants from wounding themselves.

Age of marriage

At the time of research the youngest participant was 21 years old. The oldest participants were 68 years old. The longest marriage had been 45 years. It was interesting to note that most abuse experienced by the women married for over 40 years were cases of spiritual, religious, and emotional abuse.

Status of the marriage

Out of 11 participants, 4 women survivors at the time of the interview had been divorced. One participant reported having divorced from her abusive husband and having been remarried. The 3 participants in their 60s reported being Anglicans by marriage and how they see culture and religion being the engine of abuse in their own experiences. The women survivors who reported being married the longest demonstrated how

27 Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Hearing and knowing: Theological reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009)

28 The thesis title reads *Unmasking Christian women survivor voices against gender-based violence – A pursuit for a feminist liberative pastoral care praxis for married women in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa*.

longsuffering was defined as the end goal and a necessary ingredient for an enduring marriage. In my opinion, being exposed to messages in the pulpit would shape your meaning of marriage.

Number of children and causes of abuse

Of the 11 women survivors one woman reported her experience of having girls as another source of abuse. One woman reported that her husband desired to put her in a polygamous setting. Two women reported that infidelity and in-laws were the main cause of abuse.

Level of education and employment

The highest level of education of the women interviewed was a college diploma. The level of study emerged as an area that breeds violence in the home front, evoking layers of insecurity which often resulted in violent episodes. Most women survivors reported being semi-dependent on their husbands to afford a lifestyle where they could have a decent lifestyle with their families.

Data and discussion

The section below presents data that emerged from the semi-structured interviews. In determining the article's focus, I will discuss codes of shame, fear, family values, the theology of silencing, the theology of forgiveness and male headship. The section also provides a discussion thereof, whereby religion as a construct enables women's subjugation, which in this article culminates into GBV in the lives of Christian women survivors from ACSA who participated in the study.

Below are narratives shared by women survivors:

"I don't pray hard enough, and I don't read the Bible and that's why I can't be strong enough when there are marriage challenges"

"You report to God and tell Him, Lord this is where I am, I place everything upon your shoulders because I can no longer carry the load. Everything is beyond me. I am asking you to help me carry this load."

Family values and gender-based violence

People are the products of their milieu. Families are a place and space where people reinscribe the patriarchal discourse. From generation to generation, patriarchal cultures and traditions have impressed upon women functioning under the helm of domination. Hence, socialisation plays a role in society. This fundamental stage of imparting values and attitudes has proved that what has been passed down are teachings and ideologies of gender roles. These are reinforced using the Bible, yet it is accompanied by stereotypical teachings that subjugate its women. In South Africa, patriarchal messages continue to subjugate women. Hidden in the social and cultural context are teachings that shape values and attitudes. For example, the discourse of family values being shaped under restrictive codes and ideological norms of segregation plays a crucial role in affirming a person through teachings that incite gender roles, gender expectations and stereotyping. These shape the moral conduct and the conscience of a growing person. These socio-cultural constructs have a profound impact on gender roles. Most of these socio-cultural constructs are gendered, determining how a male should act and how a girl child is to take care of herself. In numerous contexts, patriarchal teachings with undertones of subjugating women's family values serve as catalysts for GBV. Culture is sustained in churches too, enabling an environment shaping powerlessness. Wood states that prescriptive dress codes keep women invisible; they are restricted in their movements in the private and public spheres and therefore also restricted from holding positions of authority in the church. In a Christian setting, women are thus expected to show reverence in terms of how they know their place. In times of violence against women, it is concerning as women are culturally pushed into a corner of male dominance and become vulnerable to GBV. Rakoczy states that patriarchy is interwoven in the Christian tradition in various pervasive ways.²⁹

29 Rakoczy, "Religion and Violence."

Theology of male headship

“We are taught in Proverbs 14 which explains about a virtuous wife. They teach us about submission. The divorce conversation is not open for discussion. You must resist and build your household amidst marital difficulties.”

“Church teachings insist on submission where you as a wife must submit to your husband. Everything about this marriage is entrusted on the shoulders of a woman.”

The images of God in Scripture and liturgical prayers are overwhelmingly male: Lord, King, Father. Rakoczy further argues that the oppression of women through patriarchal and social structures increases in the religious context since the presumed “maleness” of God and the male identity of Jesus are used to justify women’s subordination.³⁰ If men and women are made in the image of God, it is an expectation that the issue of inclusive language gets addressed. The use of inclusive language is an issue of justice – a central Christian principle.

The Bible continues to be revered as the Book of Life with divine truths. Theologians argue that in the African context, the Bible has always represented a different version of women: who they are and who they ought to be. It was used as an imperial project, for colonisation and conquest. Oduyoye argues that African churches developed the theology of “folk talk” on what God requires of women. Precisely, the church has never attempted to renew and refresh the way women are treated and treat them in a liberating manner; instead, it has always used biblical texts that subject women to norms of tradition and culture. Thus, Proverbs 31 which reads: “The wise woman builds her house; but with her own hands, the foolish one tears hers down” is still poorly interpreted hence it still perpetuates psychological and emotional harm. This scripture has negative connotations, as it entrusts everything to a woman who must build her matrimony alone and should things falter, then she is wicked.

“I can say there is a common belief that a married woman must resist and stay in her marriage because there is no place where it does not smoke.”

30 Rakoczy, “Religion and Violence.”

Marital permanence: marriage is a covenant

“Everybody kept saying marriage is a gift from God and that its death should do us part. I thought death would separate us and I would come out of a coffin.”

Christianity views marriage as a covenant, a spiritual bond that can't be dissolved. In the ACSA language, it is a “sacrament” tied in with the naturalistic perspective of marriage as an institution ordained by God and as a part of the order of creation.³¹ Its notion of permanence and oneness is of prime importance emerges from its sacramental status, rendering it indissoluble.³² Ntuli further adds that according to ACSA the definition of marriage is divinely instituted and lasting unification of a man and a woman. While this definition might have been formulated from believing the biblical teaching about marriage, it raises some problems from a feminist's perspective, particularly when the author says: “According to the standard set out by God.” This is questionable in that nobody knows who determines God's set standards. It is hard to differentiate between the standard set by God and the standard set by males for females in marriage because of the androcentric and patriarchal biases of the scriptural interpretation.

The theology of leaving and cleaving

Till death do us part? The man shall leave his parents and cleave unto his wife. In churches some women have been battered and some have experienced verbal insults which often are characterized by anger, hostility, and bullying, mainly perpetrated by men. These are often unreported and rarely spoken about, as they invoke feelings of despair and shame. It is usually during confession that such are discussed and due to the seal of confession, the clergy exercises confidentiality and may not disclose anything they have learnt from penitents.

31 Y. Dreyer, “Women's spirituality and feminist theology: A hermeneutic of suspicion applied to patriarchal marriage.” *HTS Theological Studies*, 67 (2011): 52–57.

32 G.T. Ntuli, “Poking thorns in a bed of roses: a feminist critique of the premarital & marriage coaching programme (PMCP of the Diocese of Grahamstown).” (Master of Theology University of KwaZulu-Natal 2013).

The code of honour and shame

“My granny told me that they would not allow me to come back home since I was a married woman. She said I must go back to my abusive marriage, pray harder, read the Bible, and build my marriage.”

“In the church and within family circles and relatives, it is taboo that you have failed in your marriage. What people will say, is what scares us.”

In the context of the church, it is imaginable to see the code of honour and shame regulating the behaviour of women. Female sexual purity is central to understandings of honour and shame, but other factors are also relevant. When it comes to the issue of sexuality, shame still clouds how females may hide their stories of abuse and sexual violation in fear of being judged. Having to deal with this emotion of shame and guilt, it becomes difficult to repair the damage.

The code of shaming evokes emotions of guilt and those who find themselves in troubled marriages, are bound by religious teachings that dictate self-silencing. In the context of the church, where there is sexual violence and any abuse, classically what happens is that women survivors self-silence themselves and rely on worship to heal and comfort themselves, which can be attributed to pseudo-spirituality, something which the church struggles to handle. The faith community struggles with shame and the repercussions of GBV have created discomfort, shame, and guilt. This further makes it difficult to break the silence around the subject of gender-based violence. In patriarchal and oppressive systems, one observes toxic patterns of self-silencing where religion is fundamental in fuelling stigma and shame. There is a general culture of silence in faith spaces. This silencing is further endorsed through biblical scriptures and translations that embody African value systems and sadly, the bible in this instance does not bring relief; instead it is used as a tool that further oppresses and silences its women. This is exacerbated by cultural teachings that do allow women to speak about their domestic issues. Mann speaks of internalized disease, typically labelled as shame, which is central in this conversation.³³

33 Alan Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016).

“At home, I was told that no one has ever divorced from the entire family, so I must persevere even if it’s difficult, and the mother’s union women came on Thursday to pray for my marriage. They also told me that divorce is not acceptable when you are a Christian. Perseverance is the way. I must always pray for whatever happens in my house. Of which is true.”³⁴

There is an expectation that a “noble woman” keeps her marital affairs private. This is passed on culturally and biblically, whereby women are not to hang their dirty linen. If the church is not a place of healing, where broken souls are mended, then what purpose does religion serve? How does the gospel demonstrate the love of Christ? The patriarchal nature of marriage perpetuates silence and self-silencing. Women are encouraged to be silent about issues that happen privately in their marital homes. This is premised on protecting the dignity of their own husband’s as well as their own.³⁵ Culture imposes silence and in the context of marital abuse and violence women use both imposed silences. That is voluntary silence for different reasons – particularly fear, agency, conforming and spiritual discipline.³⁶ When HIV/AIDS statistics escalated, the church struggled to open platforms for engaging in sexuality. To date, shame shrouds and clouds the ability to voice anger, confusion, and frustration in the case of domestic and gender-based violence. Hence, spousal rape and battering remain a concern as women hide their emotional scars fearing stigma and fearing being labelled as unable to handle their marital matters. What often compounds this reality is that faith leaders do not “recognize that religious beliefs, texts, and teachings can serve both as roadblocks and as resources for victims of violence.”³⁷ Scholars also further argue that they often lack

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- 34 Nokulunga Zamantshali Portia Dlamini, "Unmasking Christian women survivor voices against gender-based violence: a pursuit for a feminist liberative pastoral care praxis for married women in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa." PhD diss., University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2022.
- 35 Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale, "Domestic abuse in marriage and self-silencing: Pastoral care in a context of self-silencing." HTS Theological Studies 74, no. 2 (2018), 5.
- 36 Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale, "Listening to the voices from below on marital violence and silence: The case of Judges 19, *Religion, gender, and wellbeing in Africa* (2021), 130.
- 37 Fortune, Marie M., and Cindy G. Enger. "Violence against women and the role of religion." In Applied Research Forum national electronic network on violence against women USA: National Resource Centre on Domestic Violence, vol. 5. (2005): 1.

the knowledge, skills and courage to discuss the harm that is caused by these practices or to address the underlying negative social norms.³⁸ Whilst Brené Brown³⁹ has drawn inspiration within the social work fraternity, shame in the context of the church is cancerous when explicating the experiences of survivors who have had first-hand, experience of abuse the church fails to address shame Mann⁴⁰ describes shame as a pollutant which defiles the self, bringing isolation and exclusion. He suggests that healing from shame, therefore, requires opportunities for cleansing, inclusion, social reincorporation, and relational restoration. Salvation is therefore not simply about absolution from guilt but also about the removal of shame. This means that within the context of worship, emphasis must therefore be placed on cleansing, inclusion, social reincorporation, and relational restoration, a relatively straightforward task, given how frequently they occur throughout the Gospels.⁴¹

Theology is meaningless if it does not emerge out of the reality of people's lives, in particular the lives of the poor. The job of the theologian and the church is, therefore, to engage in acts of "solidarity" with the poor in their struggle for liberation. Praxis' as an action that transforms society.

Continuing the liberation theology call for practising a preferential option for the poor. In a way this means that" God is on the side of the poor and oppressed. God is not aloof and neutral"⁴². A call to repent against abuse and oppression is necessary and to those in distress this kind of language may bring hope and healing.

"I can say there is a common belief that a married woman must resist and stay in her marriage because there is no place where it does not smoke."

38 Brenda E. Bartelink, Elisabet le Roux, and Selina Palm. "Sleeping giants: Mobilising faith leaders as agents of change." JLIFLC Policy Brief (2017), 2.

39 Brené Brown, *I thought it was just me: Women reclaiming power and courage in a culture of shame* (Josedavila, 2021).

40 *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 57

41 Tom Wilson, "Honour and shame in a Church of England primary school." *International Journal of Christianity and Education* 18, no. 2 (2014): 155-169.

42 Olehile Buffel, "Bringing the crucified down from the cross-preferential option for the poor in the South African context of poverty." *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies* 43, no. 3 (2015): 353.

Theology of atonement – suffering as a virtue

The theology of sacrifice has been distorted: the cross has been the strongest symbol of Christ's identification as a co-sufferer with the oppressed. This sacrificial lifestyle is normalised as women give more of themselves in their families and communities, in their quest for the acquisition of Christ-like qualities. This is a common scenario in ACSA, as African women are so used to giving up their dreams, passion, and goals to nurture everyone. Religious values and ideals often reinforce and sanction strict adherence to stereotypical gender roles. Female submission and male domination are inscribed in the religious construction of "women or wives" and "men or husbands". Christian teachings emphasize suffering as a virtue for God's love and a demonstration of faith. To Christians, the cross is the image of crucifixion which is a declaration for the public dying for one's faith bearing resemblance to Jesus Christ who died for mankind. To suffer equates to being strengthened and to be drawn closer to God. Believers are taught to preserve, to endure a fight of faith as a demonstration of their salvation. Martyrdom, an extreme form of suffering has held a special place in many Christian circles, and those who are abused see suffering as their cross to bear.⁴³ The biblical interpretations epitomize redemptive suffering. Hence, I alluded to the word "Unqobile" as problematic as it cements a narrative that suffering for the sake of being Christ-like is the ultimate destiny for a practising Christian. This area requires interrogation in the era of gender-based violence where women survive violence and choose to stay in their abusive marriages claiming to be suffering in the name of Christ.

The Book of Job demonstrates resilience, honour, and integrity. Christians hold on to the belief that firmness in one's suffering is a theological motif that grounds one's faith and stance. Just like Job, they are taught to endure. There is martyrdom that exists in the minds of people, as they accept suffering as an honour.⁴⁴ These authors speak of "feminine suffering" as women have internalized suffering as part of their calling, which speaks to the normalization that has created a culture of violence but somehow

43 Catherine Clark Kroeger and James R Beck, *Women, abuse, and the Bible: How scripture can be used to hurt or heal* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2019).

44 Kroeger & Beck, *Women, abuse, and the Bible*.

women freely accept this plight without questioning it. Women endure so much; this is even further perpetuated through cultural values that prescribes “ukubekezela” as the badge of honour. Abusers, otherwise, they are not Christian enough. God is used to instil fear and the glorification of suffering as part of redemption. And yet, there is never a conversation on what harm is caused because of the suffering.

Conclusion

This article has interrogated the intersection of religion as pivotal in the subject of abuse, which I find problematic. Theologies on the sanctity of marriage and the use of scripture as they cultivate family values that give structure and order require rethinking. The article has deliberated on religion as a sponsor in informing GBV. It has through women’s voices, revealed that the church is entrenched in conservative teachings that places male’s supremacy as the God-given hierarchy. Advocating for marriage permanence where a woman must cleave unto her spouse, the question to be asked amidst GBV is: what does it mean to cleave when marriage is a warzone? Raising consciousness is critical for the church as it looks inward and is made aware of its oppression and the oppression by others. Sisterhood provides a community of emancipatory solidarity for those who are oppressed and on the way to liberation. Consciousness-raising not only makes women and men aware of their situation in a sexist society and church but also leads them to a new praxis insofar as it reveals to us our possibilities and resources.⁴⁵ Fiorenza argue that the church needs to reflect on its toxic expressions that renders theologies toxic and instead create a new consciousness where inclusivity, where both men and women internalise the image of Christ. Most importantly, the church needs to raise its prophetic voice and show grace to those who have suffered abuse. The signs of the time call for justice and call for the flourishing of women that can be achieved by engaging men, as we intentionally heal the wounds of patriarchal privilege. This is a call for the church to imagine and reimagine

45 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Feminist theology as a critical theology of liberation.” *Theological studies* 36, no. 4 (1975): 605–26.

theologies such that they are rooted in emancipatory praxis, justice, and solidarity which means disrupting what has been normalized in society.

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