

Rocking the boat of hope, or tipping it over? Vulnerability, gender ethics, and hope during a 21st century global pandemic¹

Manitza Kotzé

North-West University South Africa
manitza.kotze@nwu.ac.za

Carike Noeth

Stellenbosch University, South Africa
carike@sun.ac.za

Orchid ID: 0000-0002-0787-3109

Abstract

SARS-CoV-2 has had a major impact on global humanity and is still a reality that we live with. While there are rays of hope that things may return to a new normal with less restrictions and a better understanding of the coronavirus (albeit still limited) and how to prepare for any new mutations or strains of the virus, or infectious waves due to new mutations, the pandemic has also brought several underlying issues to the fore. One of these is gender equality, with women in many instances being hit the hardest by some of the challenges brought about by Covid-19, such as the closing of schools and resulting childcare. In this article we will examine the vulnerability of women and girls before and during a global pandemic, including a theological perspective on the notions of vulnerability, dependence and relationality in this regard. The question we seek to address is whether the little boat carrying the hope for change in terms of gender equality has been only rocked, or whether it has been completely tipped over? We conclude with a theological reflection on hope as one of the pillars on which to build human life.

Keywords

Covid-19; hope; vulnerability; dependence; relationality; gender equality; feminist theology

1 This article was originally a plenary paper presented at the annual meeting of the Theological Society of Southern Africa (TSSA), 29 June–2 July 2022 held at the University of the Free State. The conference theme was “Hope beyond the Pandemic, Pandemonium and Pandora: Emerging horizons for doing theology in Africa”.

Introduction

SARS-CoV-2, also known as Covid-19, has had a major impact not only on the environment, healthcare, and the economy at large, but also affected global humanity through illness, death, lockdowns, unemployment, socio-economic struggles, mental health, and a list of more problems that need not be described, because it is still the very reality that we live in.

There are rays of hope that things may return to a new normal with less restrictions and a better understanding of the coronavirus (albeit still limited) and how to prepare for any new mutations or strains of the virus, or infectious waves due to new mutations. We are better equipped and prepared in terms of our health care facilities and dealing with people who need urgent medical care. We now also have access to vaccines that has been proven to put less strain on healthcare facilities and fewer deaths due to a Covid-19 infection.

While these are all valid reasons to have a great deal of hope for the future and some form of a new normal to be established, Covid-19 has also brought several underlying issues to the fore. Issues that need to be addressed, because it affects the way that we live together in society as Christians and as human beings. It needs to be established whether there is space for hope when it comes to these issues, considering the global pandemic. One of these underlying issues that has almost gone unseen or pushed to the side due to it being considered not a life-threatening issue, is gender equality. While gender-based violence (GBV) was positioned in South Africa as a twin pandemic to Covid-19 by President Cyril Ramaphosa (Gennrich 2021:13), in practice, very little changed. The focus was also on GBV and not gender equality in general. Gennrich also indicates that while the President affirmed GBV as a dual pandemic with Covid-19, “he and his government have exacerbated women’s vulnerability to GBV by instituting structural response mechanisms that have ignored the needs of the majority of materially poor women” (2021:17).

Gender equality has been an issue since the beginning of human life. Yet, it has only been addressed as a more serious matter in the last few decades. In fact, gender inequality and the problems that come with it, like, gendered labour in the home, has been getting some more attention. It is also one

of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals at number 5² to “Achieve gender equality and empower women and girls” (Guterres 2021:10) by 2030. These goals were adopted in 2015 by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations.

In 2015, the inclusion of gender equality and the empowerment of girls, as part of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals was long overdue and brought with it the commitment of 193 Member States, including South Africa. The commitment was a glimmer of hope for the future for those who are considered to be among the most vulnerable in our country and the world: women and girls. Of course, nobody had thought in 2015 that only five years later, the world would be plunged into the midst of a global pandemic and thereby changing everything considered to be normal in the daily lives of people.

It is during this pandemic that gender inequalities unfortunately saw concerning reversals in some instances. Shortly after the outbreak of the pandemic, UN Secretary-General António Guterres remarked that “COVID-19 could reverse the limited progress that has been made on gender equality and women’s rights” (Burki 2020:904). To some extent and in some contexts, it may even have been seen as though it is considered that during a time of crisis, the ideal or norm was simply to return to that which is known: gendered labour.

Vulnerability of women and girls before and during a global pandemic

Some of the most vulnerable people in patriarchal civil society are women and children. This has not only been true throughout history, but also in contemporary society. Before Covid-19 became a reality and global pandemic, the problem of gender inequality was still very much a reality. Women were still being paid less than men for doing the same work. Women were still not regarded as fully equal human beings to men when it comes to leadership, rationality, and justice. Throughout history, women have often been regarded as the ones who must stay home to be the

2 This goal can also be grouped with number 10 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to reduce Inequality.

cleaner and organiser of the house, caretaker of children and the elderly, and the cook preparing meals. Young, underaged girls are still forced into arranged marriages. Girls in developing countries also face many other challenges including access to basic education, equal opportunities, and skills development. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, some strides were made towards a more equal society, albeit not nearly enough. According to Bosch and Barit (2020:1), even before the Covid-19 pandemic hit, there was still an existing wage gap between men and women in South Africa in terms of equal pay for equal work provided. According to their findings, in South Africa, there existed a “stagnant median gender pay gap of between 23% and 35%” (Bosch & Barit 2020:1), with women being paid less than men. A further worrying statement that was made by the World Economic Forum states that it may take up to 202 years to approach the gender equality mark with regards to equal work for equal pay (Bosch & Barit 2020:6).

As Covid-19 hit, everything people were doing, working towards, hoping for, and the way people did these things were halted in its tracks. In response to the pandemic, South Africa was regarded as one of the leading nations in the world with our initial response to the pandemic by declaring a State of Disaster, and implementing strict lockdown rules that left all people, excluding essential workers, restricted to their homes for what was originally three weeks, which was later extended to five. This was done for hospitals and healthcare workers to have time to prepare for the influx of patients by obtaining enough personal protective equipment, ventilators, and other essential supplies.

While people respected and responded well to the call to stay at home during this time, there were negative repercussions for a lot of people. Not only were a lot of people without an income or a means to provide food and healthcare to their families, but further underlying issues started to surface including GBV, women often having to bear the brunt of households where people were often limited to very confined space, and/or where alcohol was available for consumption, which in many instances contributed to GBV. Furthermore, in a lot of households, women were forced to give up their income to take care of household duties like taking care of the children during the day, preparing meals, and cleaning the house. Elements that could have contributed to this include men often earning more money than women, as well as the intersecting factor that it could have been easier to

fall back into traditional gender roles when disaster struck. Not only in South Africa, but globally, this became a reality for women. It showed that when people go into panic-mode, they often tend to give up their newly adopted beliefs and ethics in order to do what they used to do in the days when women did not have the right of being treated as an equal human being to a man.

In an April 2020 UN policy brief, it was stated that the pandemic “is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which are in turn amplifying the impacts of the pandemic” (Burki 2020:904). “Across the globe,” the brief continued, “women earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs, are more likely to be employed in the informal sector. They have less access to social protections and are the majority of single parent households. Their capacity to absorb economic shocks is therefore less than that of men” (Burki 2020:904). In the UK, the Institute of Fiscal Studies indicated that mothers were 5 times more likely than fathers to have quit or lost their job during lockdown (Burki 2020:904). Worldwide, it is estimated that “740 million women are employed in the informal economy”, while in developing nations such as South Africa, “such work constitutes more than two-thirds of female employment” (Burki 2020:904). These are the jobs that primarily disappeared with lockdown restrictions.

It is, however, not only economically that the pandemic disproportionately affected women. Lockdown restrictions trapped women with abusers and the Lancet Infectious Diseases Report of August 2020 found that “[s]ome 243 million women are thought to have experienced sexual or physical abuse at the hands of an intimate partners at some point over the last 12 months” (Burki 2020:904). In France, reports of domestic abuse increased by 30% during the first week of lockdown (Burki 2020:904).

The pandemic also influenced gender inequality in academia. While there is plentiful evidence on, for example, the gendered pay gap in academia (Shalaby et al. 2021:661; Myers et al. 2020:881) pre-pandemic, as well as prejudice in teaching assessments and disproportionate service loads (Shalaby *et al.* 2021:662), more data is emerging about the effect the pandemic had on scholarly productivity, especially that of women and in particular, women with young children. What the long-term effects

on women's academic productivity and careers might be, remain to be seen. What is clear, however, is that "although both men and women with children experienced an increase in time dedicated to childcare, women reported disproportionately larger increases in childcare and decreases in time dedicated to research" (Shalaby *et al.* 2021:661). Even prior to the pandemic, research on academia and motherhood indicated that female academics were responsible for more housework and childcare than their male counterparts (Shalaby *et al.* 2021:662), but in an empirical study conducted by Shalaby *et al.* on the childcare responsibilities of academics during the pandemic, approximately half of female participants related spending 40 hours or more on childcare, a percentage more than double than that of male respondents (2021:663). Parents of young children appeared to be especially affected by less time available for research and a reduced ability to submit work for publication, with women being particularly disadvantaged in this regard (Shalaby *et al.* 2021:664; Myers *et al.* 2020:882). This was also the case for women in jobs outside of academia, where many women were not only responsible for all household and childrearing tasks while working fulltime from home, but also worked from home in inferior spaces than their male partners (Craig 2020:688). One respondent remarked that "the feminist cause has been set back 10 years by this pandemic and the conditioning of our society (both for males and females) makes it blatantly obvious that gender equality is far from a reality" (Craig 2020:688).

Rocking the boat of hope or tipping it over?

It is not only surprising, but also disappointing that a global pandemic could cause years of building towards a more equal society to come crashing down. In South Africa some efforts were made to address GBV during almost every broadcast of the president addressing the nation about Covid-19.³ While this is a very noble and inspiring thing to do, words are very often just that, and did not (and still does not) lead to practical change. A number of high-level steps were taken on GBV during the

3 Big corporations like the Spar-group supermarkets in South Africa joined in voicing their concern about GBV by trying to remind people that action is needed by rebranding their shopping bags with messages against GBV.

Covid-19 pandemic, including the Presidential plan and task force, but the implementation thereof was often lacking. There were also visible steps taken on GBV, but not so much on other forms of gender inequality such as gendered labour. The laws and policies for the protection of women and children in South Africa are not enough and do not ensure that sufficient punishment is given when a person is found by the courts of the country to have been involved in GBV in any way. While South Africa has good laws and policies in this regard, the implementation thereof remains a challenge. To some extent, many women and children are now more vulnerable and dependent upon others than pre-pandemic times. The very little hope for an imminent change in terms of gender equality leaves the question whether the little boat carrying the hope for change that woman so dearly need and yearn for, has only been rocked during this pandemic, or whether it has been completely tipped over? Within the South African context, for many, the church remains the location of hope. Katongole (2017:21) remarks that active conversation about hope in Africa is absent, which is surprising because of the intersection of challenges and the vibrant expressions of Christianity. In the following section, we therefore reflect on hope, vulnerability and dependence from a theological perspective. The acknowledgement of our vulnerability as human beings has in many instances been brought to the fore more prominently by the Covid-19 pandemic and necessitates further theological consideration.

A theological perspective on vulnerability and dependence?

Vulnerability is a complex notion to define or even describe as one unique concept to grasp. In a broad understanding, all human beings are vulnerable. Vulnerability deeply conveys the human condition as being universally limited and finite. From a narrower perspective, however, vulnerability also refers to particular individuals or groups being more susceptible to risks or to harm than others. Quite often those who are considered to be most vulnerable are women and children. In the context of this article, it is important to take a closer look at vulnerability, what that constitutes, and whether it should be regarded as gendered at all?

All human beings have their own understanding of what it means to be vulnerable. Not only does vulnerability imply a possible position of

physical harm but can also include emotional danger. The understanding of vulnerability within the theological context is also not a unique one. In the New Testament, Jesus (a man), for instance, is in a constant vulnerable position, while also maintaining gendered power that a woman would not have had. This does not, however, mean that Christians must strive to live as martyrs or purposefully put themselves in positions of vulnerability. Jesus' vulnerability was a divine vulnerability "intimately connected with an engaging, caring, and essentially passionate posture" (Thomas 2017:373). This is the kind of vulnerability that Christians, both men and women alike, should seek. This is the kind of vulnerability that is part of human nature as creatures created in the image of God. Human beings who are aware of their connectedness, their interdependence, and their own vulnerabilities at times.

Koopman (2008:245) highlights the importance of the role of the church in the understanding of and involvement in vulnerability by calling the church a "vulnerable church" (Koopman 2008:245) in a world that is more often than not vulnerable itself. He continues to say that it is not only the people that are in the church that are vulnerable human beings, but that "vulnerability is part of the essence of the church" (Koopman 2008:245). This could be no more seen and felt than when the pandemic hit, lockdowns were implemented, and the physical doors of the church building had to close for months. This meant that the church was vulnerable in that it no longer had the freedom of falling back on how things were always done but had to adapt to a new reality and find new and creative ways to be the vulnerable church in the vulnerable Covid-19 pandemic world. The income of some churches was directly affected, and church attendance is still not back to what it was pre-pandemic. Further dangers that the vulnerable church faced during the Covid-19 pandemic was that their platforms to teach people sound theology in a time of crisis were suddenly limited and people started using irresponsible theology to justify their behaviour that would oftentimes be ignorant, against the laws set out by the government, and dangerous. Too many times people would use the words: "God or the blood of Jesus will protect me against Covid-19" when arguing against the strict laws of for instance mask wearing or vaccinations. Furthermore, the vulnerable church also didn't have access to households where GBV continued to rise, since movement was restricted for a very long time and

women would often be trapped in their households without the possibility of getting away to the safer spaces that were created by churches.

A valuable perspective of vulnerability, from a feminist ethic of care perspective, is that it does not shy away from the fact that human beings are “vulnerable and fragile” (Tronto 2013:31). All human beings are, at different times in their lives, dependent upon the care given by someone else and are also providers of care throughout their lives (Tronto 2013:31). “People are both givers and receivers of care all the time” (Tronto 2013:31). Vulnerability and fragility, however, are often perceived as threats to a democratic society where men tend to hold more power and where it also seems to threaten the autonomous lifestyle that is supposed to uphold a democracy.

Vulnerability and fragility are frequently regarded as hindrances and weaknesses in society. It is, however, arguably a natural part of human life and something that affects all people. There is no need, especially during a pandemic, which does not take gender into account when a virus infects a person, to shy away from the fact that all human persons are vulnerable. Tronto (2013:31) explains that people are especially vulnerable and fragile when they are at a younger age, when they get older, or when they fall ill. It is during the Covid-19 pandemic, which brings with it illness, death, and despair, therefore crucial to acknowledge and not fear vulnerability, since it is a reality that Covid-19 does not take recognisance of the gender of a person. All human life ought to be regarded as fragile (Tronto 2013:31), simply confirming that vulnerability should not be associated with women only.

In her research, Gilligan quotes Patricia Papperman, who wrote: “There is nothing exceptional about vulnerable people” (Gilligan 2011:42–43) and in doing so also states that vulnerability is no longer to be understood as a feminine characteristic, but rather as a human characteristic (Gilligan 2011:43). Human beings need not fear vulnerability or try to connect it to a certain gender in order to try to evade the reality of its existence. Gilligan (2011:43), therefore, calls for the different voice, the relational voice that is often exclusively (and thereby wrongfully) associated with women, to be included as an equal voice to justice (often associated with men who are regarded as more rational human beings than women) in the moral

framework in order for democracy to be freed from patriarchy. It is now, during this frightening and uncertain time of the pandemic, that women need to make their voices heard on the injustices that they face in too many ways. Women should not hesitate to stand up and make their voices heard loud and clear about issues like gendered labour, the wage gap, inequality, GBV, women's rights, and the need for the recognition of women as human beings who are equal to their male counterparts, especially considering the enormous setback in terms of women's right during the pandemic. Making their voices heard may be something that feels uncomfortable or unprecedented for a woman to do. This voice, this different voice that Gilligan calls for, is however desperately needed, even more so during the Covid-19 pandemic where many have the experience that the boat bringing in gender equality got completely tipped over.

What has to be kept in mind, however, is that the different voice, the voice of resistance, is an honest voice (Gilligan 2011:63). Given the fact that the resisting voice is an honest voice, it does not always represent a pleasant voice to other people (Gilligan 2011:63). Quite often, this voice can cause disruptions in communities, in schools, among friends, or in families. How many times has this not been noticed during this pandemic where people have had big arguments with serious consequences when faced with the cold, hard, and honest truth surrounding the complexities of a pandemic? Because of this tendency for arguments to break out, women and girls often cover this different voice (Gilligan 2011:63) that so desperately needs to be heard. Regardless of the fact that it causes disruption, it is important to pay attention to this voice, for it is an honest voice within relationships. Joan Tronto explains something of the complexity of this vulnerability by stating:

What begins to emerge is a sense of vulnerability that impedes these women from taking a stand, what George Eliot regards as the girl's "susceptibility" to adverse judgment of others, which stems from her lack of power and consequent inability to do something in the world ... The women's reluctance to judge stems ... from their uncertainty about their right to make moral statements or, perhaps, the price for them that such judgment seems to entail ... When women feel excluded from direct participation in society, they see themselves as subject to a consensus or judgment made and enforced by the

men on whose protection and support, they depend and by whose names they are known ... The conflict between self and other thus constitutes the central moral problem for women ... The conflict between compassion and autonomy, between virtue and power (Tronto 1987:649).

Tronto's statement leads to the expansion of the understanding of vulnerability to a consideration of dependence. Vulnerability cannot be fully understood without some form of an understanding of dependence or interdependence. By being vulnerable and accepting the fact that all human beings are vulnerable, men and women alike, it can no longer be denied that human beings, throughout their lives, are dependent upon each other, regardless of their gender. Sullivan-Dunbar (2009:39) echoes Tronto's reasoning in saying that it should be accepted as a concrete reality that all human beings are dependent beings who rely on each other to tend to their needs. She further explains that dependence is often wrongly seen as something that makes a person unequal to others (Sullivan-Dunbar 2009:39).

Grey (1995:27) explains that feminist theology, instead of separating the self from the other, tries to focus on relationality, the connectedness between people, and the reality of vulnerability that is shared among people. It is within these relationships that people experience and develop their own "personhood" (Grey 1995:27) in relation to other people. Koopman (2004:195), in writing about a theological understanding of dependence and vulnerability, echoes this idea. He believes that it is crucial for people to realise that as human beings they need each other and in need of God in order to live as intended (Koopman 2004:195). People are relational beings from the very start of their existence. To be a human being, according to Koopman (2004:195), is therefore "to live in relationships of dependence" (Koopman 2004:195).

Dependence is, therefore, not something that should be denied, but rather embraced as something that is part of what makes a person a human being. It is not something that can be resisted, and it is not something that anybody should be ashamed of. The Heidelberg Catechism also accentuates the importance of dependence, especially in a relationship between God and human beings (De Lange 2014:163). De Lange (2014:163)

explains that human flourishing, in fact, is dependent on the care that is provided to human beings. When people express that God is their redeemer, they indirectly acknowledge their dependence upon God for justification (De Lange 2014:163). From a Christian point of view, De Lange (2015:476) explains that “finiteness, dependency, neediness, and the search for meaning are not interpreted as tragic characteristics of the human condition only, but they [are] embedded within the hopeful story of God’s creation and salvation” (De Lange 2015:476).

Dependence, according to Gilligan (1988:14), was to be understood in terms of connectedness, but could at the same time both lead to individuality and to segregation. She claimed that it would be problematic to merely oppose dependence to independence, because that would mean that any uncertainty regarding relationship would be illuminated, thereby leaving independence as the norm for power and success, while attachment or relationships are left to be regarded as a hindrance to progress and growth of an individualistic, autonomous person (Gilligan 1988:14). For Gilligan (1988:15), this form of dependence showed something of the recognition of the other, of the interconnectedness between humans, and the ability to take care of each other in such a way that it empowers not only the self, but also the other without the one oppressing the other.

Dependence⁴, however, does not imply constant dependence, but rather that all humans are dependent at some point and can only eventually become independent after a considerable time of being dependent on others (Tronto 1993:162). All people are dependent upon others in some way or another throughout their lives, and therefore cannot claim a fully independent existence (Tronto 1993:162). The argument that everybody is at some point in need of assistance or care and therefore dependent on others to care for

4 Tronto (2013:xv) writes about human beings and their caring needs, caring abilities, and the importance thereof for politics: “Human beings begin and end their lives depending upon others for care; in between those times we never cease being engaged in relationships of care with others, and we never cease needing and providing care for ourselves. As our independence in caring grows greater, we need to rethink how we parse out our time, energy, work, and resources to make certain that we, as well as those around us, are well cared for. We cannot rethink these questions in isolation, we can only do so collectively. And in doing so, we will change how we see ourselves in the world and what should guide our most fundamental political choices” (Tronto 2013:xv).

them, has not been one that has been recognised by political and moral theories, due to the fact that most theories distinguish between a model of independence and a model of dependence (Tronto, 1993:162). This often leads to a sharp distinction between the powerful, independent, rational man in the public sphere, as opposed to the dependent and emotional woman, who is subjected to the private sphere. Within the context of a global pandemic, this can be a dangerous point of view, since being dependent on one another has become non-negotiable, but the weight of dependence during the pandemic seems to have fallen more on the shoulders of women than on those of men, who still sometimes find it challenging to admit to being dependent and thereby also accepting more responsibility where it is needed.

Tronto (1993:163) explained that the reason why dependence is not considered to be a natural part of human life is because political theorists tend to depict it as something that is harmful to the character of humans. The depiction of dependence, they portray, is one where to be dependent means not to be independent, not being able to make sound judgments, and being placed under the responsibility of other people (Tronto 1993:163). She noted, however, that viewing dependence in this way means that political theorists are ignoring the fact that people cannot choose whether they are dependent or not as a result of the fact that all people are born into a state of dependence (Tronto 1993:163).

To be dependent ought not to frighten people into thinking that dependence is a permanent state (Tronto 1993:163). A mere acknowledgement that all people are vulnerable and dependent at certain points throughout life is needed (Tronto 1993:163). Tronto (1993:163) acknowledged that to be too dependent can create problems because of the fact that it paralyses citizens and prevents them from becoming active citizens in society. The reality, however, is that during a global pandemic like Covid-19 it cannot become the new normal to fall back on old habits and patterns with regards to women's rights and gender equality. Dependence, while a reality, should be recognised and considered in order to find solutions that work for both men and women equally. It is not simply the work of the woman to take care of dependence. Instead of blindly staring at the problem, a relational care perspective can help to deal with solving the problem (Tronto 1993:163). This may just be a glimmer of hope during this global pandemic when it comes

to the most vulnerable in society, including, but not limited to women and children. Throughout the Bible, it is noticeable that during human disaster God often intervenes when people are vulnerable and dependent, even to such an extent that Jesus is sent to earth to deal with continues disasters created by humans. Does that mean that amidst everything that is going on in the world today, that there may be hope?

Hope against hope?

There is a quote that is often linked to Friedrich Nietzsche's thought that "hope in reality is the worst of all evils because it prolongs the torments of man".⁵ From a theological point of view, hope, again, is seen as one of the pillars on which to build human life on. Just think of Paul who writes on hope throughout all of his writings in the New Testament. Both understandings of hope can resonate with a human being living during the disaster that is Covid-19. What separates the one from the other, though, can be articulated by referring to Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope. In discussion the notion of hope against hope, Moltmann, writing about Christian hope in the aftermath of the devastation of the Second World War, is a particularly apt and valuable contribution in this regard.

Moltmann offers a reminder that Christian hope is different from optimism, from the hope that things will get better, the hope that it will not rain tomorrow. It is grounded in eschatology, more specifically, the coming of Christ. For Moltmann, this is unlike the Enlightenment view of human potential, where we increasingly move towards the realization of a better world, becoming better people in the progress. Christian hope is shaped by Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead and the implications it holds for history and human existence. This eschatological hope takes as its point of departure a particular historical event, namely the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, and proclaims the future of this reality (Moltmann 1997:17). Rather than a hope based on human progress, it is hope in God.

5 The original quote comes from Friedrich Nietzsche's book, *Human, All Too Human*. "For this purpose, he bestowed hope upon man: it is, in truth, the greatest of all evils for it lengthens the ordeal of man" (Nietzsche 1915:102).

In Moltmann's understanding, the kingdom of God, the resurrection, and the new creation, is present both as the promise and the hope for its future consummation. The presence of the kingdom is established by its contradiction to our present reality, and this results in the detection of its absence. The kingdom of God, in the words of the Reformers, is *tectum sub cruce et sub contrario*; it is here, hidden beneath that which is its opposite (Moltmann 2007:203). There is thus something to be said about the recognition that the world we live in, a world in which gender equality is not only prevalent but has experienced a number of setbacks as a result of the pandemic, is not the world we hope for.

Yet Christian hope perceives the world as containing potential and possibilities, the possibilities of the God of hope. Even the present reality and humanity holds possibilities in the hand of God who calls into history from its end, its consummation, and makes all things new. By hearing the call of God, Christians acquire the freedom to renew life in the present and change the existing world for the better (Moltmann 1997:21).

Writing on hope in the time of Covid-19, South African feminist scholar Palm emphasises the 'choral' nature of hope. Narrowing our hope to only ourselves disengages us from the broader world and isolates our concerns and uncertainties (2021:179). This choral hope can "build solidarity between women that can enable increased safety and empowerment for all women and nurture our imaginations for positive social possibilities including the need to build back more gender just social norms and more resilient GBV prevention practices" (Palm 2021:179).

Changing the existing world for the better, as Moltmann (1997:21) stresses, is more than just a call for action, but an acknowledgement of the profound discontinuity between the kingdom we hope for and the world that we experience while we wait for its consummation. Giving voice to this discontinuity, expressing the at times hopelessness of our experiences, are part of what Katongole perhaps ironically calls hope, but specifically hope born from lament. There are certain things, he states, that can only be seen with eyes that have cried (Katongole 2017:109). For Vosloo, an "adequate theological description of prophetic witness requires an identification or solidarity with the times" (2019:2). This requires identifying with both the hope, but also the crises of our times. One of these crises, as we have

discussed in this contribution, are the reality of gender inequality and the setbacks experienced in this regard as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Is there any hope out there?

When Koopman, who writes in the bigger context of the prophetic work of Adam Small (2012:133) writes about reviving or restoring hope in the future, he is convinced that this revival can only come from amongst those who suffer, since “[H]ope and suffering function in tandem” (Koopman 2012:133). Does that mean that in a perfect world, hope would be redundant, or would we always hope for something more? Is hope simply one of those innate human things that comes pre-installed? If the roots of hope really do lie in suffering, are human beings restricted to the endless cycle of suffering and hope, and if we are, why is God not stopping it?

Recapitulatory remarks

It is intentional that we do not end this contribution with a conclusion. A conclusion would imply that we are able to offer a suggestion for the way forward, a way for the little boat of hope that has been tipped over to be put upright again and sent on its merry way.

At most, we offer a tentative suggestion. By this we do not mean patience as the tolerating of the present in the optimism that things must surely change for the better at some point, but patience as defined by Aquinas. For Aquinas, “a true understanding of our place as creatures must include an insuperable sadness and dejection about our condition. Christ’s suffering on the cross exemplifies the sorrow that must be present in every Christian’s life” (Hauerwas 2001:359). In this understanding, Yearley notes that Christians must “be saddened by their own frailty, by the suffering of the present in the world, and by their inability to change either fundamentally” (1990:137). Aquinas’ understanding of patience is not passivity, but rather an essential element of fortitude and resilience (Hauerwas 2001:360). It is therefore, in such an understanding, appropriate to feel sadness and even anger at the state of the world and as we have examined in this contribution, the way in which the Covid-19 pandemic has set back a great number of strides previously made in terms of gender equality. This virtue of patience

as understood by Aquinas, Hauerwas points out, “makes us capable of being rightly saddened without succumbing to the temptation to give up hope” (2001:360). This understanding of the virtue of patience is therefore not the same as the patience women have theologically been urged to portray in waiting for things to change with time. It is the sadness and anger at the situation where gender equality seems further away than before the pandemic, where gendered labour was reinforced by lockdown conditions, where it appears to many that the boat of hope has not only been rocked, but capsized and will not be turned upright. The acknowledgment of our own vulnerability has also been stressed in this contribution.

“In Moltmann’s view”, Bauckham remarks, “the eschatological hope kindled by the resurrection of Christ may not function as a substitute for action in the present, but rather motivates and directs action in pursuit of righteousness now” (1995:36–37). The virtue of patience is therefore not only sadness and anger at the present circumstances, but an active call to action. How that little boat of hope for righteousness, also when it comes to gender equality, might look at the moment and in the future, remains to be seen.

Bibliography

- Bauckham, R. 1995. *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*. London: T&T Clark.
- Bosch, A. & Barit, S. 2020. Gender Pay Transparency Mechanisms: Future Directions for South Africa. *South African Journal of Science* 116(3/4):1–6.
- Burki, T. 2020. The indirect impact of COVID-19 on women. *Newsdesk: The Lancet* volume 20:904–905.
- Craig, L. 2020. Coronavirus, domestic labour and care: Gendered roles locked down. *Journal of Sociology* 56(4):684–692.
- De Lange, F. 2014. The Heidelberg Catechism: Elements for a Theological Ethics of Care. *Acta Theologica* 34(20):156–173.

- De Lange, F. 2015. Learning by Doing. Being a Public Theologian in the Debate on Ageing. *International Journal of Public Theology* Vol 9:465–476.
- Gennrich, D. 2021. COVID-19, Gender-Based Violence, and the Church: A Church Gender Activist's Reflections. In Hadebe, N., Gennrich, D., Rakoczy, S. & Tom, N. (eds.). *A Time like No Other: Covid-19 in Women's Voices*. Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. 13–30.
- Gilligan, C. 1988. Remapping the Moral Domain: New Images of Self in Relationship. In Gilligan, C., Ward, J.V. & Taylor, J.M. (eds.). *Mapping the Moral Domain*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 3–19.
- Gilligan, C. 2011. *Joining the Resistance*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Grey, M.C. 1995. Women and Europe. In Wiersma, J. (ed.). *Insiders and Outsiders*. Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House.
- Guterres, A.M.D. 2021. *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Report of the Secretary-General*. [Online]. Available: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5> [Accessed: 3 Feb 2022].
- Hauerwas, S. 2001. Practicing Patience. In J. Berkman & M. Cartwright (eds.). *The Hauerwas Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Katongole, E. 2017. *Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.
- Koopman, N.N. 2004. Theological Anthropology and Gender Relations. *Scriptura* Vol. 86:190–200.
- Koopman, N.N. 2008. Vulnerable Church in a Vulnerable World? Towards an Ecclesiology of Vulnerability. *Journal of Reformed Theology* 2(3):240–254.
- Koopman, N.N. 2012. A Prophet for Dignity? A theological Perspective. *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 49(1):131–141.
- Moltmann, J. 2007. *A Broad Place: An Autobiography*. London: SCM Press.

- Moltmann, J. 1997. *Theologie der Hoffnung: Untersuchungen zur Begründung und zu den Konsequenzen einer christlichen Eschatologie*. Munich: Gütersloher Verlagshaus.
- Myers, K.R. et al. 2020. Unusual effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on scientists. *Nature Human Behaviour* Vol. 4:880–883.
- Nietzsche, F. 1915. *Human, All too Human. A Book for Free Spirits*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company.
- Palm, S. 2021. Stories of Hope? Sustaining Hope in COVID-19 Times of Despair and Anxiety. In Hadebe, N., Genrich, D., Rakoczy, S. & Tom, N. (eds.). *A Time like No Other: Covid-19 in Women's Voices*. Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. 178–196.
- Shalaby, M., Allam, N. & Buttorff, G.J. 2021. Leveling the Field: Gender Inequality in Academia During COVID-19. *Political Science & Politics* 54(4):661–667.
- Sullivan-Dunbar, S. 2009. Christian Love, Material Needs, and Dependent Care: A Feminist Critique of the Debate on Agape and “Special Relations”. *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 29(2):39–59.
- Thomas, G. 2017. Divine Disaster Management: Cross and Resurrection as an Event of Creative Vulnerability. *Dialogue: A Journey of Theology* 56(4):373–381.
- Tronto, J.C. 1987. Beyond Gender Difference to a Theory of Care. *Signs* 12(4):644–663.
- Tronto, J.C. 1993. *Moral Boundaries. A Political Argument for the ethics of care*. New York: Routledge.
- Tronto, J.C. 2013. *Caring Democracy. Markets, Equality, and Justice*. New York: New York University Press.
- Vosloo, R., 2019. Prophetic witness in weakness. *In die Skriflig* 53(4):a2400.
- Yearley, L.H. 1990. *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage*. Albany: State University of New York Press.