

Gender-based violence in South Africa: A narrative reflection

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The pervasiveness of gender-based violence (GBV) against women and children constitutes the most severe expression of discrimination and dehumanisation of women and children in South Africa. Even before the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic came, domestic violence was already one of the greatest human rights violations. Women for centuries suffered different forms of violation and continue to struggle in subtle forms in the 21st century. This article investigates the sociocultural theories, narrative reflections and COVID-19 pandemic challenges associated with the prevalence of GBV in South Africa. The article argues that patriarchal culture, religion, gender norms, lockdown and violence in South Africa perpetuate gender-based abuse. Therefore, the article unfolds this research through a literature review and narrative approach which is used to allow the co-researchers to share their stories. The article embarks on sociocultural experiences, the scourge of GBV in South Africa, the impact of COVID-19 pandemic, qualitative interviews and theological reflections and concludes by suggesting future possibilities to fight GBV.

Contribution: This article contributes to an understanding that *abafazi nabantwana baphefumla ngenxeba* [women and children are breathing through the wound] amid the global COVID-19 pandemic. It discusses the prevalence of GBV, the intersection of religious cultural effects, social sciences, gender inequality and the continued oppression of women and children.

Keywords: gender-based violence; narrative; violence; sociocultural; COVID-19 pandemic; qualitative interviews; practical theology; South Africa.

Introduction

I have been reading and reflecting on social critical matters affecting 'women and children in South Africa'. Also, listening narratives of violence and sociocultural aspects that probably escalate the gender-based violence (GBV) during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. I observed the theme of the conference, *Discerning Times, Doing Practical Theology in a Post-Pandemic World*.¹ The topic has been a challenging one concerning questions that can be presented in the post-pandemic world: where we have been, where we are and where we are going? Is COVID-19 gone for now or gone for good or in remission? This article is driven by the gross killings of women and children in South Africa under lockdown regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ward (2017:5) defines 'Practical Theology as any way of thinking that takes both practices and theology seriously'. In this regard, practical theology responds to the contextual needs of the church and society. The article attempts to respond to this national crisis and the ramification of the pandemic through a literature review, narrative inquiry and a practical theological reflection. In this article, we shall listen to the co-researcher's narratives and interpretations concerning GBV during COVID-19. This will be done using narrative research and qualitative interviews. Literature studies reveal that 'gender abuse, domestic violence and sexual assault affect anyone, regardless of race, age, gender, religion, culture, social class or sexuality' (Boonzaier & De la Rey 2004:444; Ratele 2008). The methodology of the study follows the qualitative research design grounded in the narrative theoretical framework. Narratives have been accepted as a particularly instructive method of studying the human drive for meaning (Moro et al. 2008:9), and through narration, co-researchers construct meaning (Chase 2005:2).

This article aims to discover the meaning, social constructs and experiences that probably led to this gross perpetual violation of the rights of women and children during the COVID-19 pandemic. The National Police Minister Bheki Cele (Comins 2021:1) 'released the latest crime statistics between July and September 2021 that 9556 people, most of whom were women, were raped'. In addition to that (Vellai 2021:1), 'Over 9500 gender-based violence cases were reported,

1. This article was presented at the Society for Practical Theology in Southern Africa (SPTSA) conference, hosted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics from 17 to 19 February 2021.

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13000 cases of domestic violence and during the quarter 897 women were murdered'. Vellai (2021) states that 'sexual offence cases increased by 4.7%, with 9556 rapes between July and September up to 7.1% from the previous year's second quarter 8922'. President Cyril Ramaphosa expressed that 'these statistics are shameful, we are in the grip of a relentless war, being waged on the bodies of women and children, despite our best efforts, there are no signs of abating' (Desk of the President, 22 November 2021).

A sociocultural theory

This study contends that sociocultural factors such as language use, customs, belief systems and 'gender inequality exacerbate gender-based abuse' (Ratele 2008:10). The use of male-dominant language in households and African cultural practices, such as *lobola* and *ulwaluko*,² 'indirect reinforces abuse against women' (Frieslaar & Masango 2021:4). Various factors, including 'individual characteristics, family dynamics and socio-economic contexts interact with each other to form particular constructs that dehumanise women and children' (Matebeni 2014:22; Msibi 2013:109). For example, 'cultural practices that consider men as sole economic providers for women and children aggravate gender abuse'. Additionally, researchers contend that (Frieslaar & Masango 2021:4); 'when men are seen in this way, they are mainly perceived as providers and women as receivers of financial benefits even in intimate relationships'. According to Crowell and Burgess (eds. 1996:32), 'GBV is a complex phenomenon, a result of various factors operating at different levels'. Heise adds that (1998:262), 'the ecological model conceptualises violence, as a multifaceted phenomenon grounded in the interplay of personal, situational and sociocultural factors, each influencing the likelihood of GBV within a specific setting'. Lastly, Heise (2011:vii) says that one of the structural factors that affect this ecology is 'religious institutions and ideology, with its resultant messaging, beliefs and norms'. For example, some religious institutions support patriarchy and teach that divorce is a sin. As a result, some women stay in an abusive marriage relationship in obedience to their partners and God. Kobo (2016) argues vehemently against patriarchy that:

Patriarchy violates the life of a child who is brought up in such disintegrated spaces where she/he has to learn to preserve the status quo. How does it help us in producing responsible men that do not rape, physical abuse and assault women and children? (p. 4)

To affirm this, Bond-Nash (2002) argues that:

[M]any women are socialised to believe women are powerless and have no right to 'own' power and it becomes more painful when women as agents of socialisation drive this harmful trend. (p. 45)

2. *Ulwaluko*, 'when a male gets to a certain age, he is permitted to undergo the rites of passage, such as *ulwaluko* among amaXhosa and *leballo* (Moja) among Basotho' (see Ratele 2008). This circumcision initiation rite is intended to prepare boys to enter into manhood. However, the outcome is negative at times as some men claim to have authority over the women and children. They demand certain respect, tend to abuse alcohol and attend elderly meetings in the community such as *imbizo* or *legatla*, while young women of their age do not attend. *Lobola* is a bride price which is given by the groom through negotiations arranged by the elders and the aim is to unite the families. Unfortunately, '*lobola* is one of the reasons for violence against black women since it reduces women to the property of men' (Kobo 2016:4).

In support, Bond-Nash (2002) alluded to, Rahma, Sili and Wati (2017) argue that:

These stereotypes are the wrong impression for women to gain a place in a public position. Even the challenge against women gaining position is not only opposed by the men but also by their sex which is women. (pp. 14-15)

The experiences related to the 'oppression faced by women necessitate a rational response' (Kobo 2018:3). How women at times articulate God concerning who he is blocks that rational response or at times women themselves perceive God as a male and that makes them inferior to men (Kobo 2018). The persistence of 'sociocultural norms, traditional beliefs and gender stereotypes is the most frequently cited obstacle', which perpetuates GBV (Kobo 2018). Msibi (2013:104) articulates that 'different treatment of boys and girls are strengthened by the culture, social norms and historical traditions of gender inequality'. In agreement with Msibi, in some African homes, boys are taught, disciplined and socialised differently from girls. Boys are taught to be strong, brave and leaders, hence the term *indoda ayikhali* [man does not shed tears, it is considered weakness] emerged. On the other hand, girls are socialised to behave well, cook and do house chores as future mothers.

Abafazi nabantwana baphefumla ngenxeba

The above sub-heading derived originally from the Xhosa³ term *Siphefumla ngenxeba*⁴ which was a reverberating term in every corner of the global community towards the end of 2019. *Siphefumla ngenxeba* is a term which was used on television by Outsurance vehicle insurance as an advert, in the same year 2019, the brutal murder of Ms Uyinene Mkrwetyana, the 19-year-old student at the University of Cape Town (Lyster 2019:1; cf. Rasool 2020) shattered everyone in South Africa. Ms Uyinene Mkrwetyana was strangled to death by a man working in the post office while she went to collect her parcel in the afternoon. The South African crisis concerning GBV prompted the president of South Africa, President Cyril Ramaphosa, to address the nation on 05 September 2019 and declare GBV as a national crisis. The rise of the slogan 'Am I next movement?' was co-opted by *abafazi nabantwana baphefumla ngenxeba* in South Africa (Lyster 2019:1). The notion was that *amadoda abulala abafazi nabantwana* [men are killing women and children], as there were other incidences where women and children were grossly killed in South Africa. It is stated that (Lyster 2019:1), 'a twenty-five-year-old boxing champion, Leighandre Jegels was shot dead by her ex-boyfriend in East London, a policeman, while she was driving'.

The *Star* (2018) newspaper reported that 'half of the women killed were murdered by someone with whom they had an

3. Xhosa is one of the 11 official languages and the second spoken language in the country. It is dominant in the southern part of South Africa in Eastern Cape and Western Cape provinces.

4. *Siphefumla ngenxeba* is the term that was popularised by Bakhepi on Outsurance advert 'switch and save' in November 2019. The term means 'breathing through the wound', and is used to refer to being in a heavily uncomfortable situation. The term became more popular in May 2020 during the incident of George Perry Floyd who was apprehended and strangled by a white policeman.

intimate relationship'. The phrase *andikwazi ukuphefumla* [I cannot breathe] became popular all over the world in 2020 when George Perry Floyd was suffocated to death by a white policeman in the United States of America (CNN 2020). The phrases: 'I can't breathe, Am I next, Black lives matter and *Siphefumla ngenxeba*', became slogans at awareness campaigns and protests in South Africa and worldwide against the brutal killing of women and children, racism, oppression and marginalisation. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) declares that 'violation and killing of women have become a global threat' (p. 1). The WHO (2020) states the following aspect:

Violence against women is highly prevalent. Intimate partner violence is the most common form of violence. Globally, 1 in 3 women worldwide has experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence by any perpetrator in their lifetime. Most of this is intimate partner violence. (p. 1)

The 'political instability, social ills, economic stress and the impact of COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing toxic social norms and gender inequality' (Dlamini 2020:3). The increased psychological stress, fears of contracting a virus and financial challenges aggravated the level of GBV (UN Women 2020):

[T]he possibility of job loss and restricted movement, which requires victims and perpetrators to remain close and constant contact with one another, are just some of the more obvious factors which spike GBV during the global lockdown. (p. 3)

Dlamini (2020:4) articulates that, 'restriction of visits during COVID-19 lockdowns meant that fewer people, especially, family members, can spot abuse and neglect including GBV against women and girls in households'. The limitation on movement allowed the culprits to isolate the victims from social support and protective networks by using a virus as a manipulation tool to trap them in houses (Dlamini 2020; UN Women 2020):

[A]t the time when half of the world population was in lockdown, due to COVID-19, the number of women and girls between the ages of 15 and 49, who had been subjected to sexual and/or physical violence perpetrated by an intimate partner (GBV) was no less than 243 million. (n.p.)

President Ramaphosa (Ellis 2020:1) described femicide and the scourge of GBV that, 'one woman is killed every 3 hours in South Africa'. According to Mile (2020):

[A] woman dies at the hands of a partner, and as of June 2020, 51% of South African women had faced violence from their male partners; accounting for more than 14 million women. (p. 1)

Rasool (2020:65) espouses that 'some women may be reaching out for help, while others have less access to support and protection because of lockdown conditions. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the increasing number of GBV worsens the situation in South Africa. At least, '21 women and children were murdered in South Africa, during level-5 lockdown, five women killed in June alone' (June 2020, Catholic Bishops Conference). Ramaphosa called GBV 'second pandemic' in a

country where 'COVID-19 infected over 97,000 people and killed 1,930' (Agenzia 2020:2). Germanos (2020:5) states that, 'the nature of violence and, in particular, gender-based violence (and even more particularly, during this pandemic) is indicative of a very disturbed societal psyche, with very serious social issues'.

The methodological approach

In this article, the narrative methodological approach is used. In her reflections, Moen (2006) places narrative research within the framework of sociocultural theory:

[W]here the challenge of this article is to examine and understand how human actions are related to the social context in which they occur and how and where they occur through growth. (p. 56)

It is described (Dlamini 2020:2; WHO 2021) that 'the most common narratives of GBV occur in the family, but it also takes place in other areas of society, private and public'. Muller (2009) states that:

[T]he narrative or social constructionist forces us to first listen to the stories of people struggling in real situations, not merely to a description of a general context, but to be confronted with a specific and concrete situation. (p. 295)

- *Narrative research*: It is increasingly used in various studies, practices and experiences, chiefly because 'human beings are storytellers who individually and socially lead storied lives' (Connelly & Clandinin 1990:7). Narrative research is a study of how 'human beings experience the world, and narrative researchers collect these stories and write them' (Gudmundsdottir 2001:56). It has been shown in previous studies that the dominating narrative of patriarchy in South Africa (Davis & Meerkotter 2017:18) remains the key driver in the perpetration of GBV. This study endeavours to take the above issues further, exploring sociocultural narratives of GBV in a South African context, simultaneously attempting to address the research by listening to stories of the co-researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic:

[...] Our lives are multistoried, many stories are occurring at the same time and different stories can be told about the same events. No single story can be free of ambiguity or contradiction and no single story can encapsulate or handle all the contingencies of life[...]. (Morgan 2000:8; cf. White & Epston 1990:11)

- *Qualitative research*: According to Rubin and Rubin 1995, 'qualitative interviewing is a way of finding out what others feel and think about their worlds'. Schurink (2003:3) states that 'qualitative research is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, produced or experienced – it focuses on discovery, description and meaning'. While narrative theory views human beings as social actors who, through linguistic and cultural scripts, continuously make meaning of themselves and their interactions with other people (Crossley 2007:138), qualitative research takes place within what has been described as an interpretative paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

- *Co-researchers*: This qualitative study will comprise two co-researchers, a black man from Alexandra Gender-Based Violence Walking Support Centre and a coloured⁵ woman who is a clinical psychologist from a Pretoria suburb. The co-researchers were selected because of their intense involvement in work related to violence, abuse, gender, sexual assault and counselling. They are Christians coming from different races, cultures, gender and class. Alexandra is a black underprivileged community township in Johannesburg separated by a highway from the highly affluent suburb of Sandton, and these cities are in Gauteng province. The co-researchers are aged between 30 and 40 years.
- *Consent and interviewing method*: A consent for the study was obtained at multiple levels. In order to maintain the co-researchers' anonymity and confidentiality, names are removed from the article. The interviews were conducted on the zoom platform with the co-researcher from Alexandra and in person with the clinical psychologist. In each interview, it was explained that the researcher is interested in hearing the narratives that lead to the perverseness of GBV in South Africa particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a narrative interview, 'the agenda is flexible, open to change and only partially guided by the researcher's meaning frame' (Hollway & Jefferson 2000:34). The unstructured interview was guided by a broad open-ended question, aimed at eliciting the co-researchers' stories of their experience and understanding of GBV. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.
- *Narrative interpretations*: The co-researchers' accounts were interpreted using a narrative approach. Therefore, 'a narrative research process can only be "understood and evaluated" in the light of narrative discourses' (Muller & Schoeman 2004:8). An understanding and interpretation of GBV stories, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, should be part of the research process.

A narrative interpretation interview process involved a repeated reading of the interview transcripts, to acquire a sense of an entire narrative. The transcripts were read by the researcher and sent to the co-researchers for verification and confirmation. Subsequent readings, which involved a more detailed interpretation, elicited general themes that are followed throughout the narratives. The narrative interviews were conducted in English. The narratives experienced by the co-researchers are 'informed by the society and culture in which they are situated' (Atkinson & Delmont 2006:167).

Themes emerged, integration of interviews and literature reflection

In the following section, the article focuses on the themes that emerged from the narratives, integration of interviews and literature reflection. The findings are illustrated using

5. 'Coloured' is a legal classification as per the *Apartheid Population Registration Act of 1950*. This term is still in use. Academically, the term can be used in a critical manner (like people of mixed ancestry in South Africa). In countries such as the United States of America, they are classified as black people, while in some other countries, they refer to people of mixed race.

excerpts from the interview transcripts. The two co-researchers' excerpts have some commonalities, differences, critical arguments and convergences in their narratives. Moreover, Boonzaier and De la Rey (2004:449) state that; 'narrative and discursive researchers are less concerned about the "truth value" of participants' stories and more concerned with subjectivity, language and meaning'. Congruent with Rubin and Rubin (1995:3), 'qualitative research listens to people, describe how they understand the worlds, in which they live and work'. Qualitative research focuses on co-researchers, experiences and the context. Meaning is constructed and finds its expression in stories (Muller 2009). The illustrations of excerpts from both the male (M) and female (F) co-researchers are marked with (M) and (F) and attached numbers for clear discussion purposes. Due to the small sample size, participant information has been limited to protect anonymity.

Patriarchy and family

The literature states that the root cause of GBV is contributed by patriarchy and family construction. According to Klaasen (2018:2), 'centuries of hierarchy and patriarchy, in all facets of the identity of women and men, have made negative normative for girls and women'. In the following paragraph by the male co-researcher:

'Gender-based violence is broad and it is contributed by different factors, patriarchy and culture are one of the contributing factors, as we grew up, we knew back home that a man is the head of the family and gender-based violence is happening inside the families and in relationships, but not recognised. During the COVID-19 pandemic other men lost their jobs so these men grew up knowing that they had to support their families. These men started to have a problem with violence, and mental health challenges so these are the problems that came into effect during this time. You know that we come from different cultures and beliefs, so patriarchy is the culture and practice that we believe in.' (M)

The male co-researcher explains that although he is in an urban environment, GBV in men is precipitated by their home cultural and traditional family backgrounds. He says that, 'man is a head of the family and GBV is not easily recognised in family relationships'. The patriarchal culture of the Bible and our culture subscribe to same kind of socialisation that 'teaches that boys and men are to be leaders, authority figures, independent, strong and aggressive while girls and women are to be followers, obedient and dependent' (Maluleke & Nadar 2002:14–15). The aforementioned sentences are a saturated catastrophe in South Africa that *abafazi nabantwana baphefumla ngenxeba ngenxa yamadoda* [women and children are breathing through the wounds because of the evilness perpetuated by men]. The festering of GBV challenges the South African common phrase derived from the women of 1956 that *wathinta abafazi, wathinta imbokodo uzofa*⁶ [you tampered with women, you struck a rock and you shall die].

6. *Wathinta abafazi, wathinta imbokodo uzofa* meaning, 'you strike women, you strike a rock, and you will die'. This phrase comes from the famous resistance song symbolising a courage and strength expressed at Women's March of 1956 when 'South African women refused to give into increasing oppression without some form of protest' (Clark, Mafokoane & Nyathi 2019). Women marched into Union buildings against the pass laws.

The excerpt from a female co-researcher reflects:

'I think it is probably problems in people's backgrounds, the way they grew up in their family homes, and difficulties that could cause gender-based violence in their relationships. It could also be caused by childhood trauma that can affect your future relationship, it could carry you through your childhood until you are an adult, and your relationship will face problems. I think modelling the behaviour of parents is very important, like if you had a mother and father growing up and your father used to physically abuse your mother or verbally or sexually, you can get that behaviour. The children look up to their parents, they reciprocate that behaviour in their relationships and if the behaviour is negative, then they can take it with them into their relationships. However, some will dislike that behaviour and never do it and others could go with positive depending on the experience.' (F)

The female co-researcher shares the same views with the male co-researcher on patriarchy and home family backgrounds. She refers to childhood trauma and family modelling behaviour as critical factors that could lead to GBV. The psychologist, Albert Bandura (1925–2021) explains 'the link between violence exposure, a recurrence of violence; violence is considered a learned behaviour, acquired through modelling and reinforcement of the same behaviour by others' (Moffitt & Caspi 2003:113).

Masculinities

Men are expected to adhere to traditional and cultural norms which exist within a certain social construct. Ratele (2008:520) says 'men are not by nature men, they are imbued with ideas about male practices'. Men take pride in working, having money and providing for the family. In the paragraph below, the man argues about some traditional roles that are embedded in men in their families, and when men are unable to fulfil these roles, they feel emasculated. However, I differ with his interpretation of the African wedding song mentioned in the paragraph that the song is rather entrenching domestication than violence.

'When you get married, there is a traditional wedding song perpetrating violence, the one that says *UMAKOTINGOWETHU UZOSIPHEKELA ASIWASHELE*, which means the bride is ours, she is going to clean, cook for the family of the man. So, if that is not happening that is where the violence starts firing up. The man is regarded as the financial provider, if the man is unemployed and does the house chores wholeheartedly and looks after the children by the belief of patriarchy he is considered a man *EDLISIWEYO* (bewitched through traditional medicine).' (M1)

The man gives an argument that GBV is indirectly entrenched by boys' parents. He mentions in the following statement that men and boys can become victims of GBV by being expected to comply with masculinity and gender traditional norms:

'The parents also perpetrate violence when saying to a boy child, you can't be beaten by a girl. By saying that, they do not understand that they are perpetuating violence, they expect a boy child to be strong and use masculinity.' (M2)

The female co-researcher presents her argument as follows:

'We grew up, learning from the Word and learning from our Christian grandparents, who believed in the Word, the scripture also says that GOD created Adam and also created Eve who came from Adam's rib. This comes from many centuries, that is how we grew up and that is possibly why males would have picked the concept of gender-based violence because we grow up with stronger male figures and it is only changing now. But, it has not changed enough, women are still submissive and they are meant to be quiet, but it will possibly change with our kids if they see the behaviour of our generation.' (F1)

The female co-researcher argues that the historical concept of the scripture has been used to justify oppression against women. She argues the religious hegemony of women's submission to their husbands with a principle for change in this generation and generation to come. She attests that GBV is also driven by the submission of women to men. However, nowadays women seem to have changed more than women in the past. According to Klaasen (2018:18), 'theologians seek to transcend, the present reality and seek the authenticity of humanity, beyond the distorted notion of the image of God'.

Violence

South Africa is regarded a violent, angry country in the world and 'it has dropped in the latest index, with an index score of 57, and is now ranked the fifth most dangerous country out of the 144 countries covered' (Gullup 2020). Some people argue that 'the history of violence is traced to colonialism, apartheid and post-apartheid' (Gupta & William 2010:2). However, this does not justify GBV towards women and children. The female co-researcher's paragraph notes that violence can be the result of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and if that is not dealt with it can cause violence in a man's relationship:

'I would say that violence and anger come from the issues you have not dealt with, and what you have been through in your life, for example, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and apartheid abuse. A lot of people stay with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder with them. For example, losing a job would be a trigger, having communication problems in a relationship, having a child with an illness, a lot of things trigger certain things in a person's mind, it could lead to a fight or flight situation and then you just fight physically.' (F2)

In the excerpt below, the man shares his experience as one of the leaders of the GBV community forums. Men do not find it easy to report abuse; they are reluctant to come to the police station or social support group. They find it hard to express emotional abuse or any form of abuse perpetrated by a woman because of the embedded masculinity syndrome. Men have a term that says *indoda ayikhali, ikhalela ngaphakathi* [Men do not cry, only sob and die inside]. The narrative below reflects that men and boys could be subjected to GBV but become silent because of the stigma of being harassed by other men and law enforcement officers:

'I can tell you what I see, the man starts being violent because when he goes to the police station he becomes a laughing stock.'

After all, they know that men are masculine, when he opens a case saying that his woman beats him they laugh at him. Because they grew up knowing the man is the head of the family and a man can use his masculinity in any way. If a woman is harassed by a man, she can report it easily to the police, but a man cannot report that freely.' (M3)

For instance (Sida 2015):

[M]en and boys could feel ashamed and teased for not being 'real' men, by not complying with social expectations on manhood and masculinity norms, like gay, trans, bisexual and/or being identified as belonging to a low-status masculinity identity. (p. 6)

Theological reflection

According to Klaasen (2018:4), 'theology is about imagination characterised by willingness and beyond, we are agents of God's creation and we must practice vulnerability'. Therefore, this article avers that women and children 'are human beings created in the image and likeness of God, *imago Dei*', Genesis 1:27. Berman (2015) says:

[O]ne does not mean to argue that femaleness is perfect as opposed to maleness, but holds an equally shared participation in humanity and the God-image, which lead to a healthier state of God's creation. (p. 131)

Sadly, patriarchy defines 'women as inferior to men, perpetuating the oppression of women by religion and culture' (Frieslaar & Masango 2021:6). The women under some church leaders remain vulnerable and deplorable and the Bible is a tool being misused. In support of this, Magezi and Manzanga (2021) assert that:

The notion of women's inferiority by Christian men in church emanates from the belief that women were 'created inferior to men'. This view springs from and is sustained in churches through invalid interpretations of certain biblical passages. For example, one of the interpretations is that Eve was created from the man's rib and was named by Adam. (p. 1)

In light of the above, research reveals misinterpretation of the scriptures as well by some churchwomen. For example, Nason-Clark (2000) states that churchwomen could sacrifice their lives for the sake of marriage relationships:

Religious women tend to think that marriage vows are forever, that they promised God, families, as well as their partners that they would love their husbands until death, do them apart – the biblical admonition (Mat. 18:21–22) to forgive 70 times seven means a perpetual cycle of hope and humiliation, or that women's cross to bear may be abuse in the family (Luk. 14:26–27). Women often blame themselves and cling endlessly to the hope that the relationship will improve and the violence will stop. (pp. 364–365)

Violence and oppression towards women have the potential to disguise the divine creation embedded in both men and women, which is the *Imago Dei*. It is the responsibility of both 'women and men to transcend the violent culture prevalent in South Africa, embedded in patriarchy and hierarchy' (Klaasen

2018:4). Theologically speaking, 'whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women, must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine' (Ruether 1983:19). What does practical theology allow us to understand concerning GBV and the pandemic? For example, Genesis 3:16b says, 'God said to the woman your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you'. This text is misused to justify the control of men over women. However, Bond-Nash (2002:45) describes this passage 'as the result of sin entering the world and is a description of fallen humanity, rather than a prescription of what God had intended'.

Moreover, GBV is an ancient problem, the biblical text that pulls together various dimensions of women's exploitation by men, 2 Samuel 13:19–23, 'the narrative of Tamar who was tricked and raped by her half-brother Amnon' and Judges 19:22–30, 'the narrative of the unnamed woman who was raped, abused and killed'. The aforementioned biblical passages show how women have been often subjected to gross oppression and their inability to defend themselves in a patriarchal-dominated society. Magezi and Manzanga (2019:6) propose that 'Practical Theology should engage everyday concerns, issues of GBV which entails intentional focus, on making the church, interface with non-ecclesial communities'. The church should engage the community to fight GBV against women. In this regard, practical theology is expected to respond to the needs of the Christian communities and globally. There is a notion that 'the church is certainly involved, sadly, more from the point of burial of the victims of GBV than from remedial interventions' (Banda 2020:2). Therefore, the church is challenged to change in the way of doing the ministry, with the hope of a society of peace, in which GBV will come to an end. Lastly, the church must model the leadership of Jesus. There is nowhere in the Bible where Jesus mocked or oppressed women. I concur with Borland (2017:n.p.) when he emphasises that 'Jesus demonstrated the highest regard for women, in both his life and teaching, He honoured women, taught women, and ministered to women in thoughtful ways'.

Future possibilities

In a narrative approach, nothing is ever finished and completed because the stories are being storied. In response to the challenge of GBV, interventions should target multiple social levels, including public policy and government officials. Additionally, individual men, women and families, community leaders, schools and faith-based organisations such as churches should work together in the fight against GBV. Churches are significant in communities and in social institutions, which could play a pivotal role in addressing GBV, both traditional and cultural stereotypes. The GBV should be taken seriously by South Africans as a dreadful pandemic. Civil society should contribute to building strong advocacy and awareness about the scourge of GBV. Preventative measures should be the focus of a long-term solution to reduce violence. Harmful behaviours, distorted

beliefs, negative attitudes, and bad social and cultural practices must be unlearned and corrected (Sida 2015):

[P]revention strategies, entail a shift from 'victims' to 'survivors' with a focus on women and girls, efforts to increase women's political, economic empowerment, sexual and reproductive rights and to incorporate men and boys into work. (p. 4)

The male co-researcher mentioned the following in one of his excerpts:

'There is a saying take a girl child to work, to reverse the past situation and working opportunities are for women, what about the boys? If you look at empowerment programmes, they focus on women and girls, what about the boys and men who are left out of the system? They are talking about women's empowerment to address the imbalances of the past that were there before in the 60s and 70s and those are the people who grew up without equality. Nowadays when the government equalises they do it extremely, they hire more women than men in projects.' (M4)

The study assertion is that there is no justification for GBV or the killing of women and children; everyone has a right to life. Men and women should play their roles to solve their intimate relationship problems. The boy and girl children should model proper behaviour from their parents to stop the scourge of GBV. Community structures and local community projects should assist the people, and the men's forum should be actively involved in every community in South Africa to complete the end of the GBV. As Kobo (2016:3) suggests, 'this will somehow reduce the way men view women as sexual objects and eradicate the belief by some men that women are property to be owned'. The study demonstrated the significance of qualitative and narrative research through the findings from the co-researchers which were attested to the literature. This article found through narratives that men and boys feel neglected by the democratic government system in terms of empowerment. The article argued, on the other hand, that cultural norms such as gender roles, social construct, COVID-19 impact and misinterpretation of the scriptures contribute to GBV. The issue that remains a problem for the researcher and future challenge is how the government can create a space where men and women could engage in dialogue together on issues of GBV without excusing men's violent behaviour.

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The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

W.B. is the sole author of this article.

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