



Siphefumula Ngenxeba in our own homes: Gender-based violence during COVID-19 pandemic



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Gender-based violence (GBV) has become a major problem in South Africa, making headlines on a regular basis. When the president of the Republic of South Africa, Mr. Cyril Ramaphosa, declared the lockdown in reaction to the worldwide pandemic: COVID-19 one of the expectations was that families would spend more time together in harmony. However, the number of recorded domestic violence instances increased as a result of the lockdown. Women have historically been subjected to GBV in their communities, businesses, streets, marketplaces and even churches; recently, their homes have proven to be unsafe as well. There have been a number of marches of women around the country to call for justice for women who are victims of GBV. The lives of women were endangered, what was supposed to be a place of solace became a dungeon to them. They were essentially breathing through the wound in their own homes: *Baphefumula ngenxeba*. This article, through a literature review, will highlight how the lives of women were endangered during the lockdown in response to the global pandemic in South Africa. This article aims to call missionary churches to practice the theology of *missio Dei* within this context.

Contribution: In the light of the above challenges of GBV, the missionary churches are called to practice the theology of *missio Dei* within the context of gender-based violence that took place in private homes during COVID-19. 'Siphefumula Ngenxeba' is a Zulu phrase that means [we are breathing through the wound]. The church is therefore called to play a significant role in response to GBV in South Africa.

Keywords: women; gender; violence; COVID-19; mission; church; theology; lockdown.

Introduction

This article focuses on stories reported about the women who lost their lives to gender-based violence (GBV) during lockdown. It also analyses the domestic violence (DV) in South Africa as well as highlighting the five cases of women who lost their lives. This article is a call to missionary churches to practice the theology of *missio Dei* within the context of GBV during COVID-19. Some women were breathing through the wounds during the lockdown. The term wound or wounds is associated with pain. In essence, being locked with your abuser is a painful experience for anyone regardless of their gender. The fight against GBV also encompasses the fact that there are men who are victims of GBV. This article will, however, focus on the experiences of women during the 2020 lockdown.

Among the human rights abuses, GBV remains the most pervasive human rights violation globally (World Health Organization [WHO] 2013). There have been proven reports that there was an increase in DV cases in South Africa when President Cyril Ramaphosa announced lockdown at Level 5 in March 2020. This increase was a concern for the government as well as the society. The South African Police Service (SAPS) implemented domestic measures in order to decrease the spread of COVID-19 in South Africa, and these measures included restriction of movement. Tisane (2020) posits that for many women this meant being stuck in a house with an abusive partner. The impact of COVID-19 was drastic to women and girls who could not escape the harsh reality of violence, albeit other socioeconomic issues that were at play. The authors of this manuscript also witnessed a lot of webinars advertised by different churches as a response to GBV. This article provides insight regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on GBV victims particularly women as there is inadequate established literature on this topic. The authors of this article are of the view that this article is also useful to inform policy and practice towards the development of prevention and response guidelines for missionary churches, particularly in the context of high level of violence against women (VAW) and violence against children (VAC) in South Africa. Thus, the findings of this article will go a long way towards propelling the

activities of missionary churches to practice the theology of *missio Dei* within this context.

Contextual definition of *missio Dei*

Missio Dei is a Latin Christian theological term that can be translated as the [mission of God] or the [sending of God]. The mission of God is for us to live in peace and without fear. This is only a dream for many women in South Africa; each day women are reminded that they might get killed in their own homes. This is contributed by the daily news of victimisation of women being assaulted in their own homes by their own partners. Mahlangu et al. (2022:2) posit that there remains limited research about the impact of hard lockdown restrictions, such as South Africa's Alert Level 5 – on families, specifically how these restrictions impact on DV, which is violence that occurs in the home, including intimate partner violence (IPV) and child abuse, or maltreatment. Mofokeng and Tlou (2022:264) posit that the lack of categorisation of GBV phenomenon by the SAPS leads to the misunderstanding of it, as it is perceived differently by many. Vetten (2021) concurs with the above that an attempt by researchers to collect secondary data in order to indicate the impact of lockdown on victims of GBV, as well as the extent of the problem through the use of statistics, are:

[T]hus limited in their ability to illuminate the problem of violence during the lockdown ... any errors that may have been made in the categorisation and analysis of the original data ... These confirmed the addends to be correct but the sums wrong. (p. 2)

It is important to note that although GBV, DV and IPV are often used interchangeably, there are subtle differences between them (Uzobo & Ayinmoro 2021). The United Nations (UN 2022) defines GBV as:

Any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.

Domestic violence is termed as:

Any incident of threatening behaviour, violence (psychological, physical, sexual, financial, emotional), or abuse between adults who are or have been an intimate partner or family member, regardless of gender or sexuality. (Karystianis et al. 2019:2)

Against their will, impacting their daily functioning, psychological health and identity (Mazars et al. 2013). Moreover, IPV is termed as 'abuse or aggression that occurs in a romantic relationship' (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2021). Domestic violence remains one of the global public health concerns (Sabri et al. 2020) and priority, given the prevalence and incidence of violence in several countries (WHO 2013).

Emerging evidence globally and in South Africa suggests that vulnerability to DV was exacerbated during the COVID-19 lockdown (John et al. 2020; Ndlovu et al. 2022;

Nobanda, Nkosi & Sibanyoni 2021; Usher et al. 2020; Uzobo & Ayinmoro 2021), and that pandemics more generally exacerbate VAW and VAC (John et al. 2020; Peterman et al. 2020). Mahlangu et al. (2022:2) posit that in South Africa, there is limited evidence about the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on women and children's experiences of violence in the home although there is evidence emerging about impact on livelihoods.

The study by Nobanda et al. (2021) provided with a glimpse of the statistics reported during South Africa's Alert 5. These authors made reference to African News Agency (2020), that during the first 7 days of the lockdown, the SAPS received more than 2333 calls regarding cases of GBV (African News Agency 2020 cited in Nobanda et al. 2021:18). More than 120000 cases of GBV were recorded by the government-run GBV Command Centre in the first 3 weeks of the national lockdown (SA Government News Agency 2021). In Gauteng alone, 1426 GBV cases were reported to the SAPS during alert Level 5 of the South African COVID-19 lockdown (Seleka 2020 cited in Nobanda et al. 2021:18). Murray et al. (2022) are of the view that to make a causal association between the increase in GBV with the COVID-19 crisis is not only simplistic but dangerous. The landscape of GBV in COVID is complex, and the success of policy and practice responses to GBV in a post-COVID world depends on acknowledging this. However, this data though not reliable based on accuracy because of under reporting would still be useful to inform the development of prevention and response guidelines to implement in future pandemics, particularly in the context of high level of VAW and VAC in South Africa (Republic of South Africa 2020).

Prior research conducted prior to South Africa's Alert Level 5 highlighted that half of women (51.3%) who participated in a population-based study on DV in Gauteng Province in South Africa have experienced DV in their lifetime. Most women (43.7%) had experienced emotional violence, and 37.7% have experienced physical and/or sexual IPV (Machisa et al. 2011). It is argued that in South Africa, a national prevalence study estimated that one in three children has been a victim of sexual violence and physical abuse before she/he reaches the age of 18 years, 12% experienced neglect and 16% reported emotional abuse (Artz et al. 2016 cited in Mahlangu et al. 2022:2). Machisa et al. (2011) and Brodie (2020) (cited in Mahlangu et al. 2022:2) are of the view that one in four adult women in the general population in South Africa has experienced GBV.

According to Flett (2014:69), *missio Dei* has a particular force, the fight against GBV should also have a particular force. The assertion that God is missionary has often permitted an unqualified drawing of missionary ideas into ecclesiology. Flett (2014:69) argues that mission should include speaking the gospel in a way that it can be heard in different contexts, and insofar as the church itself speaks the gospel, missionary freedom is basic to the structuring of the church.

While mission is what God does, mission consists of activities that the church does in the community where it is found in obedience to God, the founder of mission (Bosch 1991:390;

Dulles 2005:28–391). Bosch (1991:405) argues that the *missio Dei* is more than evangelistic work; it is for believers to become involved in social responsibilities in the society. Therefore, *missio Dei* should also be involved with regard to GBV not only in theory but also in practice. Wright (2006:62) argues that in *mission Dei* the emphasis is not so much on the fact that God tasks the church for his mission, but that he owns the church for his mission to reach the world. According to Daugherty (2007:165), the church's mission is to extend the *missio Dei*, then it can be nothing short of continuing that embodiment of God in Christ among the people of the world. Some of these GBV acts are a result of misinterpretation of biblical texts that led to the oppression of women at home and at church.

Gender-based violence in South Africa

Domestic violence is a global problem (WHO 2013); victims of DV, regardless of geographical and cultural differences, are mostly children and women rather than men (Simister & Kowalewska 2016:1624). According to Berman (2015:123), whereas the home is supposed to be a safe place for women, their homes have become a place of insecurity and uncertainty. COVID-19 has changed the way of doing things for many if not for all, before the lockdown many spent less time at home and more time at work. During the lockdown, many South Africans had to spend most of their time at home, whether it was working from home, self-isolation or as a result of loss of employment. The COVID-19 pandemic has reconfigured mobile space, and this is critical in making sense of the surge in domestic abuse during lockdowns in every nation of the UK and throughout the world (UN Women 2020).

Gender-based violence and femicide are widespread problems in South Africa, and this has resulted in many women living in fear in their own homes. Many women in this country are affected directly by GBV and femicide. The majority of women in South Africa have also been part of the '#AmINext' movement as an attempt to be heard that they live in fear in this country, regardless of where they are. Domestic violence is, however, a global problem as 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical or sexual intimate violence. Simister and Kowalewska (2016:1625) posit that GBV occurs most often at home and may be because of the uneven relations between family members: a man uses GBV to make his partner afraid by using physical and/or emotional harm.

Research indicates that GBV can happen anywhere (Murray et al. 2022), and there are also manifests in various patterns, as most rape takes place in the home (CSEW 2018), stalking takes place online (Suzor et al. 2018) and harassment takes place within institutional settings, namely workplaces, universities and prisons. There is evidence that COVID-19 itself is being used itself as a tactic for perpetrators to coercively control their victims (Murray et al. 2022). Within institutional settings such as workplaces, it has also been

observed that more women are taking up executive positions in their workplaces. There have also been so many attempts to create gender equality in this country, especially within the workplace. According to Anderson (1997:657), some researchers found that GBV occurs more often if a woman's occupation status is higher than her husband's status. There have been many men's conferences in the church, which could have been used to educate men about changes in the families in the 21st century. Culturally, men are often placed in a powerful position in relation to women because of cultural beliefs and practices.

The COVID-19 lockdown was therefore essentially a trigger for unemployed South African men. It is important to note that despite the lockdown, families still had to ensure that they had enough resources to survive. This was not possible for some families as they had lost their jobs. This created a sense of frustration that affected the dynamics of relationships in the home. They then became more violent as an outlet from their frustrations. South African women were therefore victims of what was beyond their control.

A brief statistics of gender-based violence in South Africa

According to Minister Nkoana-Mashabane, during her parliament briefing that took place during the National Assembly women's day, she said that over 30 women were killed by their partners in August 2020. This was just for the month of August, there have been related cases also reported to GBV since the beginning of lockdown. According to the 2019–2020 crime statistics released on Friday 31 July 2020, a person is more likely to get raped in a private residence, be it your own home, a friend's, a relative's, the perpetrator's home or that of a neighbour. This also implies that a woman can be raped by her own husband; some have used biblical scriptures to argue that a woman cannot be raped by her own husband because the two are considered to be one biblically. Scriptures such as 1 Corinthians 7:4:

The wife does not have authority over her body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.

According to the 2019–2020 crime statistics released on Friday 31 July 2020, 18231 cases were reported from private residences, with the highest number in Limpopo, while Western Cape reported slightly more rape cases in public areas. The statistics for IPV are not clear, the report showed that 22864 cases of common assault by boyfriend and/or girlfriend, ex-partner or a spouse were reported, 14 420 cases of assault with intent to inflict grievous bodily harm were recorded, while 817 cases of murder by the aforementioned perpetrators were documented.

It is also reported that the use of guns remains a significant cause of violence in South Africa. It is estimated that about 18 gun-related deaths are recorded in South Africa daily. According to Mathews (2013), women are more likely to be

victims of gun violence in intimate relationships. It is also estimated that two out of three women are at risk of being killed by their intimate male partners who own a gun. This creates a greater risk for women who are married or in an intimate relationship with men in the South African Police Service (SAPS), South African National Defence Force (SANDF) and industrial security. Evangelical churches as part of society are not exempt from the social problem of GBV. There are two areas that the authors of this article consider fundamental regarding this issue in communities of faith. On the one hand, victims are not exempt because congregants could suffer this type of violence at home, in their jobs, and through different situations of daily life (Murray et al. 2022). But, on the other hand, this problem is also present in the discourse of those who lead the faith communities. Thus, women in this country have also been victimised by their own pastors, fathers and children; there is no place for women to hide. This is an urgent call to the mission church to respond.

It is important to note that the functionality of Christianity is heavily dependent supporting the patriarchy. Women are essentially not expected to have a say in their own lives and are supposed to be led by the men. This creates a platform that allows men to be abusive towards the women in their lives. The feedback that the church gives in such matters is often not constructive as divorce is considered as taboo. This creates situations where women are abused with no one to help them out of their problems. In most instances, the women are also unemployed and dependent on their male counterparts. This creates a power relation that forces women to put up with abusive behaviour. The 2020 lockdown merely heightened the problems that were already present in the society at the time.

Siphefumula ngenxiba in the comfort of our own homes

Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, women are dying in even higher numbers than before; it is not the virus that left children motherless, but it is the father of their children that did. Women were breathing through the wounds until they stopped breathing, at the hands of abusive partners with whom they were locked down at home in South Africa. Simister and Kowalewska (2016:1625) argue that it is likely that DV occurred for thousands of years, but we had limited data for research. In many African communities, abuse is still considered to be Western, that when a man beats his wife it is not considered to be abuse but rather a man putting his wife in her place. Anyone who would consider that as abuse might be labelled and accused of being badly raised. This creates a problem in the statistics given on GBV in this country, as those statistics do not reflect a true reflection of the number of women affected by GBV.

Millions of women have lost their lives to GBV-related cases; the authors will only highlight the death of five women in this article, as a flection of GBV, a cry to the missionary church

and to individuals to join the fight against GBV. The following stories have been reported in a number of newspapers, social media and news on the radio and television. The stories the authors have used for this article are as follows:

- May 2020: A 39-year-old woman, Tebogo Mabunda, was brutally murdered, the family of Tebogo Mabunda was reported by newspapers to have been a great shock to her family, especially her children, after she was allegedly murdered by her husband in their marital home. He allegedly shot her a few times before turning the gun on himself but he did not die. (013 News Mpumalanga 27 May 2020).
- 12 June 2020: A 27-year-old woman named Altecia Kortjie and her 7-year-old daughter Raynecia were found dead at a house in Cape Town. A 28-year-old man known to the victim was arrested in relation to the murder. Altecia Kortjie left behind two children. Kortjie and her daughter were found with multiple stab wounds at a home in Commerce Way in Belhar after missing since the 09 June 2020. (News24, 15 June 2020).
- June 2020: 27-year-old Ntwanano Shisana during June 2020 was allegedly shot and murdered by her boyfriend in Bungeni, Limpopo, who is reported to also have shot and killed himself. It was reported that she was last seen alive when she and her boyfriend left his home in his car on a Saturday evening. A few minutes later, their bullet-ridden bodies were found inside the car on the side of the main road at Bungeni Village in Limpopo. (SABC News, 15 June 2020).
- 03 August 2020: A 29-year-old mother of two, Hlengiwe Msimango, was brutally shot by her husband on the 03 August 2020 in Birchleigh, Ekurhuleni. She was allegedly shot by her partner who thought she was an intruder. She left behind her two children, a 3-year-old daughter and an 8-month-old son at the time of her death. (News24, 18 August 2020).
- An Eastern Cape woman was shot dead inside the Madeira police station allegedly by her husband while she was reporting a case of domestic violence, the police confirmed on Monday. Police spokesperson Brigadier Thembinkosi Kinana said the gunman had allegedly attempted to escape after committing the crime, but was chased and arrested by the police. (News24, 07 September 2020).

These women are few of the many women who were allegedly murdered by their partners during lockdown. The church is not called to just bury women when they are killed by their spouse but to be the voice against the killing of women and children. To educate both men and women about GBV and family relations.

Hermeneutical challenges in the context of women abuse

When Bible texts are used to promote DV, then the church should explore exegesis, hermeneutical questions and theological implications. Biblical scriptures are often used

out of context to justice abuse and oppression of women. Magezi and Manzanga (2019:5) affirmed this when they highlighted four factors that might have contributed to GBV:

- Inappropriate interpretation of certain biblical passages.
- Zimbabwean men are brought up in a patriarchal society and the patriarchy practices find their way into the church. This is also common among in other African countries such as South Africa.
- Cultural practices that perceive and treat women as weak and unable to stand on their own, fuel GBV in the church.
- The inability of some clergy and laity to identify and address GBV within the church results in the church being vicariously complicit in perpetuating GBV.

Churches and theological institutions need to address the importance of liberating cultures, beliefs, theologies and interpretations of scripture. The central concepts must also be examined, including the need to view violence as a public, not a private issue; to explore the root causes, not symptoms of violence only and to develop action strategies with all stakeholders to avoid duplication of efforts and resources. Many women in abusive relationships did not speak out because they hold the belief that marital problems should not be put out in the public.

Christian women are taught to pray about their marital problems and tell God about them (Chisela 2018:5). Christian married women often silence themselves in an effort to protect their husband's dignity as well as their own (Haddad 2003). African theologians call on the church to engage perpetrators to change. In some parts of Africa, the reputation of a man is more important than a woman's life. Scripture readings such as Eph 5:22–23:

[W]ives submit yourselves to your own husbands, as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the saviour.

Often, this scripture reading is used to remind women who is in power between men and women. Kapuma in Chisela (2018:1) state that in cases where women spoke out about their experience of DV, the only advice they got from the church was to return home and sort out their family problems. Kapuma (2015:264) further argues that women are told by the church that they themselves were the cause of the abuse and that they needed to respect their husbands and what was expected of them as women.

The *DV Act* makes the following provisions to protect victims of DV:

- Right to apply and receive protection order.
- The police officer has a duty to assist the victim of DV.
- The police officer has a duty to arrest the perpetrator of the DV.
- The victim has a right to receive psychological and medical help.

These rights are meant to protect all victims of DV regardless of their religious affiliation.

The ideologies of the church contribute significantly to how society functions. It is believed that the woman must be submissive to the father and the man must provide for his family. In this regard, if the position of the man is challenged in the home, it results in a violent response from the man in an attempt to defend their honour. Women in the church are expected to respect their husbands regardless of their financial standpoint. The lockdown therefore resulted in most women experiencing violent behaviour from their partners. The church does not offer tangible solutions to problems; rather, they just encourage people to pray as a way to pacify them.

Mission Dei: The church's mission in response to gender-based violence

Mati (2013) is of the view that churches as social institution have not been scientifically studied to be meaningful. However, Magezi (2007) argues that over the years, churches have played a significant role in the social development and transformation of people's lives. According to Bosch (1991:391), the church has to be engaged in God's fight over the reign of evil. Patriarchy is evil, GBV is evil and the mission church should go out there and do more research on what practical role it can play the fact against GBV. One of the approaches the church can take is the approach described by Osmer (2008:4) to help develop theories and practices as a response to GBV:

- The descriptive-empirical task that seeks to gather information that helps discern patterns and dynamics in particular episodes, situations or contexts.
- The interpretive task that draws on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring.
- The normative task that uses theological concerns to interpret particular episodes, situations, or contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses and learning from 'the good practice'.
- The pragmatic task that determines strategies of action that will influence situations in ways that are desirable and entering into a reflective conversation with the 'talk back' emerging when they are enacted.

The church has a responsibility not only to its members but to the community. The church should have a prophetic voice against GBV, not only through webinars but even beyond lockdown. The church's preaching should also be clear that it is against GBV regardless of who the victims are. According to Soares, Lotter and Van der Merwe (2017:6), the church has the responsibility to participate in what God is doing in the world, such participation includes social responsibility. Gender-based violence is considered by many researchers as a patriarchy issue; however, for Fox (2002) patriarchy maybe have begun even before Christianity, perhaps thousands of years ago. Gender-based violence is also a church issue; anything that deprives anyone from their freedom and happiness contradicts Jesus' promise of abundant life for all.

Berman (2015:122) assumes that it is safe to assume that the strong presence of a religion such as Christianity can have a bearing on a society's psychological make-up and way of life. Berman (2015:122–123) argues that a Christian mindset can be expected to permeate domestic, political, education, economic and other institutions of the country. According to Naidoo (2014:3), in the Christian tradition, spirituality is not just seen as human wellbeing or meaning. It is a deeply lived experience of the person and nature of God in every aspect of life as a primary orientation.

The church does not essentially offer viable solutions to solve the issue of GBV. The general rule is to pray as God will heal you and you will find a way. They leave the heavy burden of solving GBV on the victims instead of offering constructive advice. This results in some women in the congregations still suffering from the ills of GBV without saying anything as they know the church will not assist in any manner. Religion alone is not enough to solve GBV; they must offer solid advice. The perceptions that are presented in the Bible are patriarchal in nature. This is why problems that affect women directly such as GBV do not have any known solution. It is also important to note the changing of times as the Bible does not relate to women who are also providers in the family. The women in the Bible are all docile and dependant on the men. This leaves most church leaders having to offer practical advice on such matter without essentially making use of the Bible.

Recommendation

Klein in Baloyi (2013:14) invites every local church to become a centre of healing and transformation through holistic counselling services. Kelcourse (2002:146) says that pastoral counselling can be understood as a form of prayer: talking to God through faith and feeling God's hearing another attend to the presence presence through praying of God in them. Therefore, the church needs to have a strategic role to play to address GBV because this does not only happen outside the church but also inside the church. According to Magezi and Manzanga (2019:6). The church's teachings and practices on gender issues must constantly be in dialogue with communities with the aim of seeking better gender relations between men and women. Chisela (2018:3) notes that the increase in femicide in South Africa challenges everybody to participate in finding solid solutions to ending this scourge. Authors agree with Chisela (2018:3) that in order to do justice to women and children who have directly or indirectly experienced DV, theologians should be at the forefront of interventions and research because in certain communities religion is used to promote and defend violence as a perpetuated by religion.

Moreover, churches and societies must do away with unjust structures that perpetuate inequality and oppression of women at all levels. They need to lobby for policy and legislation changes as imperative components for concrete actions. Thus, a collaborative effort between social institutions is imperative to effect change in attitudes that violate the integrity and dignity of women. More

importantly, we need to reclaim the paradise lost through violence. The church has an imperative and prophetic role in breaking the silence on the issue of violence. Breaking the silence means to speak openly about violence, naming it for what it is and naming it as a sin before God (Fortune 1980:204).

Conclusion

Religious communities must make it known that violence of any form is violating the body of Christ. It is also violating the image of Christ in each one of us. In addition to responding to individual crises, congregations have the responsibility to shape community norms for family life that would preclude control, coercion and violence (Faith Trust Institute, Domestic Violence Study Guide 2002).

The role of the church in the light of the biblical stories in which violence is in mid-March, the South African government (2021) declared GBV as a state of disaster amid the global coronavirus pandemic and shortly after imposed strict lockdown rules. South Africans were only allowed to go outside to buy food, collect social grants or seek medical care. The sale of alcohol and cigarettes was prohibited. Banning the sale of alcohol in particular was intended to limit DV in the country while families were forced to stay at home. All these restrictions did not stop the killing of men and women; maybe the solution is within the church. Its mission should include grooming young boys to become better men and to encourage women to speak out about GBV. The church must be the extension of God's presence to those who are experiencing abuse.

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All authors contributed equally to the article.

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