

The spiritual experiences of women victims of gender-based violence: A case study of Thohoyandou



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This article reports on interviews conducted with 11 women at the Thohoyandou Victim Empowerment Programme (TVEP), a centre located in Sibasa, Thohoyandou, in the Limpopo province of South Africa. The centre provides support and advocacy to female survivors of domestic violence. The participants were victims of gender-based violence and the study aimed at exploring the spiritual experiences of women assaulted by their partners. Interviews were conducted over 4 days and were held on the TVEP premises. This article discusses how women of faith found meaning and support through their religious beliefs when experiencing violence in intimate spaces. Furthermore, the article drew insights from spiritual perceptions held by women that make them feel safer and assist them to find ways to cope with violence in intimate relationships. However, the study found that women prayed for divine intervention and change in their families and for God to help their husbands by removing all evil spirits from their lives. It was found that apart from prayer, the women do not have any other spiritual resources to combat gender-based violence. The authors suggest the deconstruction of harmful religious discourses (such as 'God has made man to rule over woman') towards healing religious discourses (such as 'all people are equal in God's eyes') as a type of 'intervention' in the lives of the interviewees.

Contribution: The article contributes towards understanding the harmful impact of religious discourses on the lives of women who are vulnerable towards domestic violence. Religious discourses that are either harmful or healing are here identified through the stories of women who have been violated in their intimate relationships, thus contributing to the body of knowledge in gender studies and to religious and social sciences in general.

Keywords: religious and/or spiritual causes of gender-based violence; Thohoyandou victim empowerment programme; spirituality and/or religion and violence; rural women in the church; stories of abused women.

Introduction

Aim and background

The aim of this article is to report on the religious experiences of 11 rural women living in villages around Thohoyandou who were the victims of gender-based violence.

Thohoyandou is a town in the far north of South Africa and is the administrative centre of the Vhembe district in the Limpopo province. The inhabitants are mainly (73.8%) Tshivenda-speaking (Alexander 2021). Situated in this town is the Thohoyandou Victim Empowerment Programme (TVEP), which provides prevention, empowerment and support *inter alia* to victims of domestic violence. With their permission and assistance, and after consent had been obtained from the interviewees, 11 domestically violated women were interviewed on their spiritual experiences in abusive situations. These interviews were held during May 2018 on the premises of TVEP.

The focus of this article is on how these abused women saw religion as both the cause of, and the solution to, domestic violence. The interviewees presented prayer as the (only) religious solution to their problem, and all but one of them indicated that the abusing man was not primarily to blame because it was the devil who made him beat her.

In a pre-2010 study, Madu, Ndom and Ramashia (2010:2871–2885) focused on 112 abused women who came to a trauma centre in Thohoyandou for help. It was found that a 'significant number of the physically abused women were suffering from depression ($z = 2.8434, p < 0.05$) compared with

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the general population'. Whilst this may come as no surprise even to non-psychologists, the significance of this study for the present one needs to be observed. The article by Madu et al. (2010:2882) recommended that psychological services be incorporated into intervention programmes for abused women suffering from depression. The present article follows the tenets of the article by Madu et al., recommending that in addition to psychological services, focus should be on intervention programmes for shifting harmful religious discourses to healthy and empowering ones. The present article will make recommendations on how abused women can be guided to shift the religious discourses holding them captive in abusive relationships, such as traditional coupledom discourses and discourses on demonic activity, to places where religion would keep them safe and heal them.

Background

The 2001 census in South Africa – the last census in which religious data were gathered – indicated that South Africa is one of the most religious countries in the world, with 85% of people reporting religious affiliation, of which almost 80% were Christian. At the same time, South Africa is one of the countries in the world with the highest prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV). Statistics South Africa (Stats SA 2020) reported in 2020 that one in five (21%) of partnered women in South Africa have experienced physical violence in their lifetime, and the prevalence of domestic violence is higher amongst less-educated and poor women. Interestingly enough, it has also been found that divorced and separated women experience 40% more violence than women in legally recognised relationships. All this information is important for our research population, who are either married, unmarried or separated from their partners.

The research process

Research questions and objectives

As stated here, in this article we will report on a study conducted with 11 women at the TVEP. This study is conducted to determine how women of faith find meaning and support through their religious beliefs when experiencing violence in intimate spaces. It furthermore reports on whether or how patriarchal religious discourses enhance women's vulnerability in the face of GBV. Finally, the voices of how abused women view a religious space in which they feel safe will be presented and the deconstruction of harmful religious discourses towards healthy and empowering ones will be suggested.

The study problem is captured by the following research questions:

- How does spirituality empower or disempower women to deal with violence in intimate spaces?
- What type of religiosity encourages or condones violence against women?
- What are the healthy religious discourses that empower women against violence?

- What are the forms of violence against women apart from physical violence?
- What are the faces of violence against rural women in particular?
- How do abused women see the way forward spiritually?

The study's objectives are as follows:

- to listen to the stories of women who are victims of gender-based violence and their experiences of religious healing
- to identify the faces of religious healing amongst those interviewed
- to describe the meaning-giving systems in prevalent religions and to determine the effects on the well-being of believers.

Data collection method and procedure

The study employs a qualitative research methodology. Interviews were conducted by means of a half-structured questionnaire according to the procedures and research values of narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry, as described by Clandinin, Pushor and Orr (2007:1–15), rests on three pillars, namely (1) establishing an equal relationship between the researcher and the researched who, as co-researchers, move from the objective to the relational; (2) using words as data to move towards an auto-ethnographical relationship in which the researcher grows by reflection; and (3) acknowledging multiple genres of knowing, with narrative knowing juxtaposed to positivistic knowing.

Research population

Of the 11 women interviewed, the majority are Tshivenda-speaking, with two speaking Sepedi and another Xitsonga. Their ages range from 22 to 52. Nine of the 11 women are unemployed, with the other two earning R4700 and R2500 per month, respectively. When it comes to church affiliation, two are members of the Apostolic Faith Mission, three belong to the Zion Christian Church, the largest African Independent Church in South Africa (ZCC) and the others are members of a variety of African Independent Churches (churches that are formed independently of missionary churches) around Thohoyandou. All these churches are Pentecostal or have roots in Pentecostalism. The interviewees were all given pseudonyms to protect their identities and to maintain confidentiality.

Collection of data

Data were collected by means of one-hour interviews, using semistructured questionnaires to direct the interviews.

The content of the questionnaire was divided into a biographical introduction and four main sections. The introduction collected personal information about the participants in terms of age, gender, income, religious affiliation and race or culture.

The four main sections are as follows:

1. The first section intended to create awareness of the face of the church to which the interviewee belonged. The respondents were asked about their experiences in the church or religion, whether the pastor was a man or a woman and if the pastor preached about women in the church or religion and about women's abuse. They were also asked whether it was God punishing a woman when a man beats her and whether they thought God was in favour of abuse or not. This section also included questions about the safety of women in the church or religion and whether they as women could discuss their domestic problems with the pastor.
2. In the second part, the questions of relevance to this study were: (1) 'do you think a woman who is beaten by a partner deserves it?'; (2) 'does your church or religion treat men and women the same?'; and (3) 'were you ever beaten by your husband or partner and did the church or religion help?'
3. The questions in section three were based on the teachings and practices of the church or religion where the respondent worshipped. The questions were: (1) what does your church or religion teach about being a man or a woman?; and (2) have you experienced where your church assisted an abused woman in a process of healing?
4. The last section was open-ended and invited the interviewees to tell their stories of abuse and healing. They were also asked to share their views on what could be done to stop domestic violence from a religious point of view. As most of the interviewees answered, 'I must pray to God', a next question was incorporated later on, namely 'what should an abused woman pray to God?' to empower the interviewee to formulate their specific needs beyond prayer.

As the first language for most women participating in the study was not English but Venda, Landman was the interviewing researcher in English and Mudimeli the cultural and language interpreter. Interviews were conducted in private at the offices of TVEP. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and how it would be conducted, and aspects of confidentiality and anonymity were explained. Their willingness was established and the relevant consent form was signed. An important part of this project is discussed in an article by Landman (2020:1–6).

Analysis of data

This article (re)tells the stories as told by the interviewees and as prompted by the questions in the questionnaire described here. The interviewees' responses are reported in an unmediated manner, meaning the data are not mediated through set methods of interpretation. The data are summarised under the themes presented by the questions contained in the questionnaire to show the faces of religious discourses that are harmful to abused women and how they can be deconstructed towards healthy and empowering discourses.

The healing process suggested in this study, namely narrative counselling, is based on narrative inquiry. Landman (2020) described this process as follows:

Narrative counselling works on the premise that people's minds and behaviour are directed by the discourses, the grand narratives, of society. By mapping the discourses that hold people captive in their problems, harmful discourses can be deconstructed – that is, re-scoped and rephrased to journey with the counselees from problem saturated stories to alternative stories of healing. (p. 2)

Interviews conducted

A summary of each interview will now be provided with special emphasis on the harmful or healing religious discourses identified.

Interview no. 1

Muofhe (interviewed on 7 May 2018) was 39 years old at the time of the interview. She is Venda-speaking and worships at several churches with a preference for the ZCC, which is also her parents' church. She is employed in a salaried job in sales and earns R4700 per month.

Her problem is that her husband is unemployed, drinks, uses drugs and beats her. He has many girlfriends who come to the house and fight with her.

Muofhe thinks her husband is demon-possessed. He does not go to church and he is angry when she goes. He also did not have a happy and good upbringing.

What does she see as the solution? She knows that the pastors at several churches pray for people with problems. She also knows that the church can drive out her husband's demons. However, she has not yet approached a pastor to assist her with either of these. She does not know a pastor she can trust with this. She does not even know whether involving the church in her problems will be beneficial for her at all. She rather thinks that she may be the problem and that a good woman is one who perseveres, whatever her husband does.

According to her, he will not go to church to undergo exorcism, and if he finds out she has involved the church, he will beat her. Whenever she leaves him, one of his girlfriends moves in. Later on, he comes back to her and apologises. He takes her back home and does not let her get away. Actually, when he is not drunk, he is nice and quiet. Her prayer is that they will be like other families where there is peace and joy.

Interview no. 2

Vhuhwavo (interviewed on 7 May 2018) was 30 years old at the time of the interview. She is an unemployed Venda-speaking woman who worships at the House of the Twelve Apostles.

The problem she is experiencing is that her husband falsely accuses her of infidelity, beats her and damages her possessions. He calls her a whore and a prostitute and her grandmother a witch. She thinks there is a curse on her.

She does not believe that the solution for her problem is to involve the church. He also does not allow her to go to church. She believes that the church can drive out her husband's demons, but he is not willing to seek help. Her hope is on the older women in the church who teach the younger women to care for their husbands.

She prays that she and her husband can discuss their problems in meaningful ways and that God will change his heart. She believes that God is teaching her a lesson through her husband's behaviour, so that she can help other women who have the same problem.

Interview no. 3

Rolivhuwa (interviewed on 7 May 2018) was 52 years old at the time of the interview. She is Venda-speaking, worships at the ZCC and is unemployed.

Her problem is that her husband is unemployed and beats her for no reason at all, sometimes simply because she has her period. She has marks on her face to testify to the beatings. Once she was almost beaten to death. The police had to take her to the hospital. After that, her husband did not allow her to leave the house.

What is her solution? Once she actually went with him to church, but his father is the pastor and the pastor said that a woman must persevere. The pastor said that the church cannot do anything to help her.

After that, her husband has beaten her in front of her mother and demanded the *lobola* (bride price) back. She has to work on farms wherever she gets a job during harvest season to pay him back because her mother has no money.

Interview no. 4

Tshinakaho (interviewed on 8 May 2018) was 38 years old at the time of the interview. This Pedi-speaking woman worships at the Apostolic Faith Mission and is unemployed.

Her husband is unemployed, abuses alcohol, picks fights with her and beats her. He has a girlfriend. Once she was beaten so badly that the police had to take her to the TVEP, which assisted her in getting a protection order against her husband. However, in court she said she did not want him arrested but rather to live in peace with him. Back home, he called her a witch and beat her with a broom on her head. On top of all this, his parents accused her of using *muti* [traditional medicine] on him. She thinks he was not brought up well.

What does she see as the solution? They are separated but she wants him back. She believes there is a devil in him and a

curse on him. She wants him to attend church with her and respect her and the children. Her prayer is that God will help her to reconcile with him. She likes Mary Magdalene in the Bible, who went to the tomb with oil to care for Jesus (Mk 16:1–8). She wants to care for her husband like Mary Magdalene cared for Jesus.

Interview no. 5

Akonaho (interviewed on 8 May 2018) was 35 years old at the time of the interview. She speaks Venda, worships at the ZCC and is unemployed.

Her problem is that her husband lies to her, has girlfriends and beats her. He says she is disobedient and a whore.

Her solution was to go with him to the pastor of his Pentecostal church, who spoke nicely to them. The pastor asked his own wife to be present, but it was to no avail.

She believes that bad spirits make him beat her. She got a protection order against him, not to arrest him but to contain him. She wants to stay with him. They are not legally married, but they have three children. He does not beat the children, but the eldest one left because of the fighting. She believes that God wants her to stay because her husband is not all that bad. He sometimes helps her and fixes things.

Her favourite woman in the Bible is Hagar who cried to God until he heard her (Gn 21:16–19). She prays that God will take away her husband's evil spirits so that there can be peace and joy in the family.

Interview no. 6

Avhappani (interviewed on 8 May 2018) was 34 years old at the time of the interview. She speaks Venda and worships at the Miracle of God Church. She works on contract for R2500 per month.

The problem is that her husband drinks too much, fights with her, beats her and has a girlfriend. She left him, but he told the social worker that she must come back. He works as a security guard.

What does she see as the solution? She believes he still loves her. She acknowledges him as the head of the family who has to solve their problems. She got a protection order against him, but they are now okay. She believes that a good woman is one who obeys her husband and stays with him.

She has attempted to discuss her problems with the pastor in the past, but he prefers that she talk to his wife. However, she prefers to talk to the pastor himself.

She believes in the power of prayer. She has asked God to make her husband the man she wants him to be and believes God has answered her prayers, because her husband no longer drinks.

Interview no. 7

Phophi (interviewed on 9 May 2018) was 59 years old at the time of the interview. She speaks Venda and worships at the International Pentecostal Holiness Church. She is unemployed and illiterate.

Her problem is that her husband beats her. He had even done so the day before the interview. He is a pensioner. He has a girlfriend, but he calls her, his wife, a prostitute who must go back to her (nonexistent) boyfriend. She has lost the functioning of one hand because of the beatings. They are in a civil marriage and have five children. He attends a church that approves of polygamy. He has another wife who enjoys the benefits of his pension. He has a bad temper. She believes the devil is in him.

How does she seek a solution? She has spoken to the pastor of his church about their problems. Her husband has beaten her badly because she consulted the pastor. The pastor tried to talk to him, but it did not help. He left this church and went to another branch. At the time of the interview, her daughter was supporting her financially because he had cut her off completely.

However, she believes God will answer her prayers and that her husband will change and acknowledge her as his (only) wife, although it will take time. Everything will be okay then.

Interview no. 8

Tshifhiwa (interviewed on 9 May 2018) was 41 years old at the time of the interview. Culturally speaking, she is a Shangaan. She is a member of the Apostolic Faith Mission. She has a stall alongside the road selling maize and peanuts to sustain her family financially.

Her problem, she says, is that her husband has a demonic spirit and beats her. However, she said that she was not free to speak and believed that God will help her.

Interview no. 9

Khodani (interviewed on 9 May 2018) was 22 years old at the time of the interview. She speaks Venda, worships at the ZCC and is unemployed.

The problem is that her boyfriend beat her with a brick to the back of her head when he woke up and found her working on Facebook one night. He is employed but also abuses alcohol. She believes there is a bad spirit in him.

As a solution, she got a protection order against him. She also goes the spiritual way and asks God to remove things from her life that are destroying her. God helped her to say no to her boyfriend and she believes God will help her to have a future. She wants to become a lawyer.

Interview no. 10

Vele (interviewed on 9 May 2018) was 29 years old at the time of the interview. She speaks Venda and worships at the Worship Miracle Church. She is unemployed.

The problem is that her husband, a soldier, insults her, drinks and does not provide for her and their 7-year-old son. He says she is rude and stubborn and that he cannot stay with such a person. Her husband does not allow anybody to visit her, not even family. She had a plaiting hair business, but he closed the business. He is not happy when she goes to church.

As a solution, she prays that God will change him, but her husband has now locked her out of the bedroom and she has to sleep in the kitchen. She said she will keep on praying. Her favourite woman in the Bible is Hannah, because Hannah knew that only God could help her, and she never stopped praying until God helped her (1 Sm 1:2–2:21).

Interview no. 11

Phumudzo (interviewed on 9 May 2018) was 32 years old at the time of the interview. Her mother tongue is Venda, and she attends the Twelve Apostles' Church. She is unemployed.

The problem is that her boyfriend beats her and does not support their child. Social workers spoke to him, and he then supported them for some time. She has left him and has nobody to support her. He has several girlfriends and two other children. She believes it is a devil that makes him do these things. During the interview she said, 'I loved him, but one day I said to myself, this is not love'.

As a solution she prayed to God, asking God, 'God, is this the man you gave me? Show me the way out of it'. God heard her prayer. She now prays to God to give her someone that will love her and her child. Sometimes God does not immediately grant our requests. She prays that she can look after herself.

Themes identified

The stories are represented here in terms of our methodology of not mediating the stories by means of a set method of interpretation. The authors are of the view that any interpretation of the participants' stories can be seen as a colonisation of their experiences. From the 'uncolonised' voices of the women, the following themes emerged:

1. Women do not see the church as a safe place to report domestic violence. Some of them were referred to the wife of the pastor when they tried to talk to him.
2. The women revert to private prayer to bring peace and joy to the relationship or to assist them in persevering or getting out of the relationship.

3. Men's violent, abusive behaviour against women is excused as it is perceived or believed that the devil or evil spirits cause it.
4. The women are mostly unwilling to leave, praying that things will change.
5. Verbal abuse usually accompanies physical abuse and the women were called 'whore', 'witch' and 'slut'.
6. The women mostly regard a good woman to be one who is obedient and persevering.

Findings and discussion

This section gives verbatim answers as stated by the women to four key questions of the research.

Question 1: Why does a man beat a woman?

The first question is, 'what makes a man beat a woman? Is God punishing the woman? Is it the devil? Is there a curse on the woman?' This question was deemed relevant because it likely has a bearing on how women perceive gender-based violence and also in establishing their attitudes towards it.

In general, the women interviewed had mixed views, blaming alcohol and bad parenting during childhood to explain why men beat women. The men allegedly were raised by their parents in abusive homes. The phenomenon of parents fighting all the time convinced the women that the men had the same genetic constitution as the parents. The other reason that was given as an excuse for their behaviour was that men were under the influence of evil spirits, the devil himself or demons. When they were possessed, they could no longer control themselves.

This is how the women narrated what happened.

Rolivhuwa said:

'He beats me even before the children. When he finds out that I am in my period, he beats me. He even threw sugar into my eyes. He has also beaten me while I was pregnant. He threw me out naked on the streets. My husband is very jealous. He does not allow me to greet people, even to befriend other people or to speak to anybody. When he comes back home and finds me clean, he becomes very jealous. I am supposed to be always covering my head. I am also not allowed to talk to women who left their husbands. Once I was beaten close to death and was taken to hospital by a police car.'

Responding to the same question, three other women said the following:

'He beats me a lot, and I am not free to talk to you about it now. I am afraid that if he finds out that I was here talking to you about our problems, he will kill me.' (Vhuhwavho)

'My husband removed me from the bedroom; I now sleep in the kitchen. He has locked the TV, fridge and some of the furniture in the bedroom. Even when he is gone to work, the bedroom remains locked. He used to take me to church and waits outside, after church he takes me straight home. During

the time when we were building our house, he did not allow me to be outside because it was only men who were building outside.' (Vele)

'My husband is having a girlfriend. When he comes home, he fights with me, seeing me – his real wife – as nothing. One time I called the police and I got protection order. Police took me to TVEP. When I went to court, the judge asked me if I want him arrested, and I said no.' (Tshinakaho)

Question 2: Does a woman deserve to be beaten?

On the second question, 'do you think a woman who is beaten by her husband deserves it?', the answer was a resounding 'no' from all the respondents.

On the question of whether the husband had ever said or done something to them that really hurt them because it was undeserved, two participants answered as follows:

'My husband told me that I am a whore. He told me that it is a well-known fact in the village that I am a prostitute, even before I got married to him. He even accused my grandmother that she is a witch.' (Vhuhwavho)

'I have a scar on my head. It came about after he hit me with a broom. He insults through my parents. He calls me a witch. His parents accuse me of using *muti* on him. He continues to hurt me through words.' (Tshinakaho)

Question 3: What does the church say or do about GBV?

The third set of questions was based on the teachings of the church where the respondent worships. These questions are as follows: (1) 'what does your church teach on being a man or being a woman?' (2) 'Do you think the church can heal a woman who has been abused?'

Three types of answers were given by the women as stated in a previous study by Landman (2020:6):

1. The church cannot help. The husband does not go to church and will not accept their advice anyway. The victim centre helps, the police help, but the church does not and cannot help – and is also not allowed to help from the side of the perpetrator.
2. Yes, the church can help by driving out demons, and the laying on of hands. However, the pastor's prayers have not helped up to now.
3. The church's point of view is that God expects her to stay with him, even if he abuses her.

This is how some of the participants responded:

'I go to the same church with my husband. I told the pastor, who is a male, about our marriage problems. The pastor said that I will have to persevere in the marriage. The pastor is my father-in-law. My mother too was beaten by her husband in front of me by cane. When I look at all these, I think there is a curse – it is in the bloodline. My mother drinks a lot; I do not drink, but I still get beaten for no reason.' (Rolivhuwa)

'My boyfriend beats me. One night while I was on Facebook, he woke up and was upset and started to beat me. He used a brick

to hit me at the back of my head and I was taken to hospital. From the hospital, I was referred to the trauma centre, and from there I went to the police station for a protection order.' (Khodani)

'My husband warned me not to tell the pastor about our problems. He told me that if I tell the pastor, then I will know him better.' (Vele)

Question 4: What does an abused woman pray for?

The fourth question is: 'What should an abused woman pray to God about?' Three main answers were given as stated by Landman (2020:6):

1. Mostly, the women prayed for divine intervention and change that they might also have joyous, peaceful homes and families and that God would change these men by removing all evil spirits from their lives.
2. A few of the women asked God to change them, the women themselves, so that they would please their husbands and would not be beaten anymore. The women asked God to intervene and help them so that their husbands would love them; they asked God to show them how as women, they could change and what to do not to be subjected to their partners' abuse. God answered their prayers.
3. Finally, some of the women asked God to help them to get out of abusive situations, to eliminate all the elements that were destroying their lives. They begged God to free them from these dire relationships and lives, and their prayers were answered.

Discourses

All the female participants of this study were assisted by the TVEP to obtain protection orders against their abusers. The aim of the study is to argue that harmful religious discourses can leave women vulnerable even when they are protected by law. Although the women interviewed were mainly from churches with a Pentecostal background, the harmful discourses keeping them captive in abusive relationships are not restricted to this tradition.

Some of the discourses that have transpired during the research are:

1. A man who beats his wife or partner is blameless, because he is made to do so by the devil.
2. A good woman perseveres in her marriage or relationship.
3. God does not want a woman to leave her marriage, even when she experiences abuse.
4. Jealousy and isolation are signs of love. This is how God has made men.
5. Private prayers are the only way to get God to change things. The church cannot be expected to intervene in domestic violence.
6. A woman who is domestically violated must remain silent and honour the sanctity of marriage.
7. A woman who is domestically violated is a sexual threat to a male pastor and can only speak to his wife.

Shifting of harmful religious discourses as a form of intervention

The studies of Mudimeli (2021:1–6) and Sande (2019:1–6) are valuable in the shifting of harmful religious discourses that feed gender violence as a type of intervention. Both scholars concentrate on harmful discourses in Pentecostal theologies which, as stated here, are not the only theologies allowing space for violence. However, a majority of the interviewees are exposed to this tradition.

Sande (2019:1) blamed the Pentecostal theology of marriage, which is based on patriarchal discourses, for hiding subtle forms of violence and perpetuating GBV. Sande (2019:4) pointed out that the Bible does not give permission for violence against women, but also 'does not explicitly reject the cultural vices of male supremacy'.

Sande (2019:8) further condemned the Pentecostal theology of marriage, thereby confirming the results of the present study that domestically violated women are told to (only) pray and fast as a solution to their marriage problems and are made to believe that GBV is caused by demons and unclean spirits and that the Holy Spirit will solve their problems on their behalf.

In shifting the discourses that hold women captive and vulnerable to GBV, Sande (2019:9) suggested a public (Pentecostal) theology that undermines the amalgamation of the indigenous culture and the patriarchy of present Pentecostal theology that sustains violence against women.

Mudimeli (2021:4), although focusing on women's leadership in the church, constructs a *vhusadzi* [womanhood] theology based on the experiences of Venda women, which is a theology that will undermine discourses that keep (Venda) women unsafe and disrespected in the church and at home. To shift these harmful discourses, the following is advocated on an ecclesiastical and theological level:

- Critical engagement with patriarchal discourses that perpetuates the status quo in the church vis-à-vis its view on women's position in ecclesiastical and intimate relationships should be considered as non-negotiable and urgent.
- It is crucial to expose the role of African cultures in the marginalisation and non-affirmation of women.
- The role of religion in making women vulnerable, in particular the Christian religion and its sacred texts, has to be challenged and deconstructed on a continuous basis.

The following insights of Mudimeli (2021:4) on the shifting of discourses as an intervention in the lives of domestically violated (Venda) women are important:

- Women have to be empowered by deconstructing the problematic cultural discourses that keep them disempowered against violence.

- Listening to the stories of Muvenda women speaking about their experiences of God and the views of their church on holy matrimony is of vital importance.
- It is necessary to guide people to understand the link between religion, church and culture within a gender focus, with the purpose of creating new knowledge on this relationship in the Venda context.
- Rural Bible readers with no theological training have to be assisted in gaining a better understanding of what the Bible might say about their current situations, by helping them to become aware of what it means to contextualise the Bible.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to relate the religious experiences of 11 women who live in and around Thohoyandou who suffered severe domestic violence. Their stories were presented unmediated and the themes that ensued from their stories and the discourses that supported them were identified.

Space was consequently afforded to ask how the cultural-ecclesiastical discourses that not only caused the violence against them but kept them captured in ineffective solutions could be undermined and shifted to healthy religious solutions and alternative stories.

The shifting of discourses from harmful to healthy as an intervention in their lives should of course be negotiated with the women themselves. The women indicated the aspects listed here as important for healthy and safe intimate relationships:

- When you care for a man, you should be equally cared for.
- When you are faithful to a man, you can count on his faithfulness.
- In a relationship, the drinking of alcohol should be negotiated when one of the partners suffers because of alcohol abuse.
- Respectful behaviour is demonstrated by using words or names of affection and not of sexual licence.
- Pastors and churches should be available and take domestic violence seriously.
- Women not only want peace, but actual joy, in their relationships to which both partners are committed.

Abuse in intimate spaces is rife but remains silent. This study wanted to give voice not only to abused women but also to different ways of thinking of and dealing with physical (and verbal) abuse.

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Competing interests

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

Authors' contributions

Both authors contributed equally towards this article.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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