In die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi
ISSN: (Online) 2305-0853, (Print) 1018-6441

Leveraging practical theology in combating gender-based violence in South Africa

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Dates:
Received: 12 Sept. 2025
Accepted: 17 Nov. 2025
Published: 19 Jan. 2026

How to cite this article:
Khosa-Nkatini, H.P. & Muthivhi M.E., 2026, 'Leveraging practical theology in combating gender-based violence in South Africa', *In die Skriflig* 60(1), a3258. https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v60i1.3258

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South Africa's pandemic level violence against women, particularly female interpersonal violence, profoundly marks Gender Based Violence (GBV) as a public health and human rights emergency. This crisis depicts a complex phenomenon that obligates a practical theological engagement to dismantle the socio-cultural, theological, and structural drivers underpinning GBV in South Africa. Framed in the biblical allegory of 'healing bitter waters', the study critically surveys how theological praxis, based on ecclesial involvement and contextual hermeneutics, may be deployed as an offset to ingrained patriarchal beliefs that underlie GBV. The study employs a desktop-based qualitative methodology to analyse contemporary literature, theological narratives, ecclesial practices, and policy frameworks. The Church is highlighted as a place of culpability and a potential location of transformative healing. The study argues that the Church needs to abandon its pastoral passivity and assume the lead in combating GBV, not as a docile actor, but a critical advocate for sociopolitical advocacy, liturgical reform, and life-affirming solutions to gendered oppression. Ultimately, it makes the case for a rearticulation of theological practice, a reimagined restorative practical theological paradigm that fosters dignity, healing, and accountability. Predicated on prophetic witness that contests detrimental gender norms, the study adds to the continuing effort to develop a Practical Theology that adeptly addresses androcentric interpretations of the Bible, contradicts narratives that spiritualise the repression of cries by victims, and defies GBV in all its manifestations.

Contribution: It proffers the Church's ethical responsibility to be sensitive to the lived realities of survivors and embodies solidarity with the oppressed.

Keywords: gender-based violence; South African; femicide; Practical Theology; interdisciplinary.

Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a heavy burden on the social fabric of South Africa. Femicide is a particularly troubling issue in South Africa, where the rate is five times the global rate. In 2024 alone, more than 9300 instances of rape were documented (Tshoane 2025:148). The dilemma continues due to persistent systemic failings despite laws being enacted to address the issue. These systemic deficiencies stem from roots that not only exceed cultural constructs, but also the deeply rooted problems of economic disparities. Practical Theology, as a discipline that links faith and practice, presents opportunities for addressing GBV through engaging faith communities, altering narratives, and ensuring justice-oriented engagements. This article examines the use of Practical Theology as a means to respond to moral disengagement, community efforts to work together, and educational approaches that cross disciplinary boundaries.

Gender-based violence is a serious issue that calls for a highly ethical approach in South Africa. Practical Theology offers a praxis which, because of its restorative aspect, is life-affirming in its prophetic nature. Accordingly, among other things, a reformed church model would imply changing liturgical practices to ensure that real and symbolic enactment of gender justice is ritually supported by new pastoral practices that are survivor-empowering and accessible to them. Oppressive community norms that prevail must be changed; therefore, community engagement programmes have to be restructured for this purpose. By publicly addressing GBV as a Gospel imperative, the Church would be embodying the theology of solidarity, thereby not only as a mere moral issue. This article emphasises the integration of reflective action as the main theological interpretative point where pastoral care and social justice advocacy meet, resulting in a potent ethical model that can be used for the transformational engagement in any given local environment. It is and should always be a robust ethical model for driving change in the local community through the involvement of the context.

Faith-based initiatives can challenge systemic oppression and foster a culture of dignity and justice through community empowerment, advocacy, and interdisciplinary collaboration as the country grapples with intersecting crises, from unemployment to xenophobia. The moral authority of the Church positions it as a catalyst for transformative change. Globally, one-third of women are confronted with GBV (Amusa, Bengesai & Khan 2020:1). Gender Based Violence is a growing concern in South Africa, and in the news almost daily. When the President of the Republic of South Africa, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa, announced the national lockdown in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, concerns about the escalation of GBV quickly emerged. According to the National Development Plan (NDP) of the Republic of South Africa, GBV is intolerably high in the country. The country has the highest rate of violence against women and young girls (VAWG) in the world (Yamile 2020:2).

Understanding gender-based violence in South Africa

South Africa's GBV epidemic is rooted in historical inequality, toxic masculinity, and socio-economic instability. For many years, apartheid deeply entrenched systemic racial and gendered inequalities that, as a result, left communities disproportionately exposed to different forms of violence (The Conversation 2025). On the one hand, patriarchal norms that, among others, promote the dominance of and control by males, and on the other hand, poverty, unemployment, and limited access to education, which are all negative factors, have together intensified the risk of GBV. Economic factors exacerbate the crisis: 62.6% of children live in severe food poverty, increasing vulnerability to exploitation. Cultural norms, such as patriarchal interpretations of tradition, further normalise violence. Key statistics include: femicide, 881 women murdered in 2024, sexual violence, 9516 rape cases reported between April and June 2024, and structural barriers, Poor access to justice for rural women and LGBTQ+ individuals. While the government enacted the *National Council on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide Act (2024)*, implementation remains sluggish, highlighting the need for grassroots interventions (Meltwater 2025).

To really understand GBV, we cannot only consider binary categories or biologically deterministic discussions about sex and gendered violence. It is necessary to thoroughly examine how and why social constructs of gender, particularly hegemonic masculinity and subordinated femininity, affect the structures of violence, power, and resistance. Gender Based Violence is not just an amalgam of different kinds of violations that happen sporadically and independently. It is a means that engenders the gendered hierarchy of violence, power, and resistance (Jakobsen 2014:55). Gender Based Violence depicts the most fundamental structural manifestation of the oldest and socially constructed power imbalances.

In such a milieu, violence is a tool to dominate and control, most probably a method of male chauvinism and female oppression. A viewpoint like this one refutes, first of all, the idea of reductionism, which solely concentrates on the gender of individual offenders, subordination, instead of the social, cultural, and political dimensions of GBV. The occurrences of GBV are different for women and men, and these differences are also influenced by the intersection of factors like culture, class, religion, and previous experience of trauma (Peretz & Vidmar 2021:2). Therefore, GBV is not only a male-on-female violence scenario. It is, however, positioned within the larger systems of dominance and submission where the male is considered the source of power, authority, and control, and the female is attributed to being subservient.

Religious organisations, particularly the Christian Church, have been the major contributors to the establishment of social norms and dynamics of community life (Sule 2023:22). Their power extends to the formation of gender roles as well as how these are monitored, frequently leading to different results. For example, the teachings and ceremonies of the church may be used as a significant auxiliary silver bullet against patriarchal ideologies that impel GBV to that which is barely visible. On the contrary, by taking such discourses as a foundation of their culture, they acquire the function of reinforcement to patriarchal structures that empower the existence of GBV in their culture. Moreover, the tendency of *spiritualising* violence in churches is a serious issue (Koepping 2011:64). By viewing urgent social and personal crises mainly through the lenses of prayer, faith, or divine intervention, churches risk becoming disconnected from the real, material realities of violence. Although such faith-based initiatives aim to alleviate suffering, they may still generate not only theological but also pastoral problems (Marques Zamberlan 2025:7). These challenges contribute, among other factors, to the systemic nature of GBV, the absence of pastoral care, and an environment where the violence continues. This tension highlights the ongoing traditions in theological education and the institutional discourse that not only counters women's right to be wholeheartedly part of the body of Christ but also places women in the periphery through selected or patriarchal interpretations of Scripture and doctrinal affirmations. Furthermore, these relational imbalances were born in women, positioning them in undesirable situations where they are subjected to sexual violence, femicide, and far-reaching systemic injustices. While it is important to understand that female-perpetrated violence exists, the staggering toll of systemic and structural violence against women necessitates action, addressing theological injustices and institutional complicity toward females as a priority (Bordie 2020).

Reframing ecclesial power

The Church, as a major socio-cultural and moral institution, is a significant factor in the formation of social norms, especially those dealing with gender relations. The impact of this power is not neutral; in fact, it possesses the ability to either uphold or dismantle systemic inequalities. Acknowledging the Church's authority has, both historically

and theologically, significantly influenced the patriarchal structures that support GBV and may be the first step towards changing the Church's power (Msibi 2023:102). In many different environments, church teachings, interpretative bias of the Scripture, and institutional practices have been used to dominate women and to restrict their agency, thus producing settings in which violence is normalised, minimised, or even ignored.

This article sees the issue of VAWG as an event that does serious harm to the social and spiritual fabrics of the community that requires a purposeful and transformative intervention. It is the biblical allegory of 'healing bitter waters' that provides the frame for this research. Just as GBV impacts communities in times of moral crisis and social brokenness, the bitter waters serve as a symbol of pain, impurity, and disruption in the biblical text. Addressing these waters requires practical theological engagement that is restorative, prophetic, and contextually grounded (Miles-Tribble 2017:367). Such engagement prioritises the Church's ethical obligations and creates safe environments for survivors to oppose harmful cultural and religious practices, and to provide effective spiritual, emotional, and social healing solutions. Participation in a faith community inherently influences perceptions of the self, others, and social responsibility, in concerning gender expectations.

There is a danger that the Church, when it treats suffering mainly as a spiritual problem, and thus emphasises prayer, endurance, or submission, without investigating the social, cultural, and structural causes, may be at risk of spiritualising violence and obscuring the impact that it has in the world. Some ways of doing things in the Church may, without the intention, facilitate the continuation of the abuse cycle, dissuade victims from seeking justice or getting practical help, and give opportunities for the continuation of systemic oppression. Women, in particular, may find themselves in situations where the qualities of obedience and piety are more important than advocacy and protection. In these environments, silence is often considered a spiritual virtue rather than a response to coercion or fear.

It is imperative to closely look at and understand these factors to reframe the power held by the Church. The process involves the removal of patriarchal norms from theological authority, as those norms have not always been robustly questioned. It is therefore important to advance the facilitation of justice, equality, and accountability. It is about returning to the Bible and examining the teachings that have been interpreted in a way that subordinates women and changing the Church to be more of a community with shared and participatory leadership, thus allowing previously silenced and marginalised voices to have the opportunity to speak.

After redefining power in relational and ethical terms, the Church can move away from being a partner in GBV to being an agent of resistance; therefore, by implication, challenging gendered hierarchies instead of reinforcing them. Gendered violence is not only a matter of the private sphere or individuals, but also thoroughly interwoven in social hierarchies, structural inequalities, and economic dependencies (True & Tanyag 2017:57).

Considering the extent of its influence and the moral authority it carries, the Church is obliged to perform both at the symbolic and the practical levels. The charge, among others, entails:

- Educating congregations on issues of GBV.
- Advocating for victims and survivors.
- Establishing protective measures within church communities.
- Promoting leadership models that reflect equality and mutual accountability.
- Recognising the complexity of GBV.

It is important to acknowledge that women can also be perpetrators of violence and that men can be victims of GBV. It is crucial not only to explore how institutionalised religion has depended on gendered hierarchies but also to actively confront those structures (Avishai 2016:262). Within this understanding, shifting the Church authority beyond power structures is by far more than a theological exercise; it is a practical step towards changing societal structures. This move connects the Church's moral authority to the core values of justice, equality, and human dignity, thus confronting the patriarchal structures that have been dominant in society and making possible the emergence of communities in which no individual suffers any kind of violence.

A critical and reflective Church stance is a necessary starting point for the institution to embark on the journey of righting the wrongs caused by systemic violence. The moral imperative for the Church to redefine its power structures is the reframing of ecclesial power. It comes as a practical move, which in turn invites the Church to not only reconcile but also harmonise its institutional authority with the moral obligation, theological fidelity, and the experiences of those who suffer gender-based oppression (Van Wyk 2023:25). The situation is similar to when God told Moses to turn his rod into a cup so that the water could be changed from something bitter to life-giving (Ex 15:22–25). The case is alike to that of the Church's practice in need of a reflection, change, and action process that is intentional and aimed at healing the pain which comes from GBV. Through a restorative and practical theological framework, the Church is better able to liberate itself from the grip of patriarchal ideology and keep on exercising the power of holding the offenders responsible, at the same time facilitating a communal process which is in accordance with the dignity and the rights of women (Mazantsana & Dames 2024). The emphasis here is on individual actions; however, it also urges one to delve into the past, the structures, and the theological themes to understand in which different contexts the occurrence of violence is. It finally evolves comprehensive methods of intervention that spiritually connect and socially empower.

Practical Theology: A framework for social transformation

Practical Theology is an interdisciplinary field that interprets religious beliefs through action, emphasising justice, community, and holistic healing. Its key principles include hermeneutical engagement, critically analysing cultural and scriptural narratives that perpetuate GBV, and, for example, misinterpretations of male dominance in religious texts (Klaasen 2023). Liberative praxis prioritises the agency of marginalised groups, such as survivors of GBV, through participatory methodologies. Decoloniality challenges colonial and patriarchal power structures embedded in theological education and church practices (Mazatsana & Dames 2024). Interdisciplinary collaboration partners with secular institutions to address systemic inequities. This framework aligns with South Africa's need for culturally sensitive, faith-based solutions to GBV.

Gender-based violence in South Africa is not just a pressing social issue on the periphery of the life of the church; it is a lived reality situated within the church itself. To insist otherwise is to deny the seriousness of the crisis. Practical theological reflection that does not critically engage with and deconstruct the ways in which theology, churches as organisations, and their institutional practices have normalised and legitimated violence is inadequate (Naidoo 2023:438). At best, such a theology is a form of palliative care that soothes symptoms but does not address the disease; at worst, it has become complicit in upholding the pattern of violence and oppression. The church must therefore act prophetically in confronting this lived reality theologically and honestly as institutions (Nkansah-Obrempong 2017:284). The healing of the church's *bitter waters* demands at least the theological application of prophetic truth–an unequivocal affirmation of equality, with structural changes in the ecclesial environment. The neglect of this work adulterates the ecclesial waters and amounts to spiritual bankruptcy and a contradictory witness to the God of justice and liberation.

For the sake of this article, the notion of Practical Theology compels us to articulate practice in a way that advocates for accountability, healing, and solidarity for victims of violence. It challenges the biblical historicism that was used against women in justifying their subjugation and denounces the spiritualisation of suffering that silences the victims' cries for justice. Instead, it envisions a restorative paradigm that makes visible the ways academic research on GBV intersects with the realities of gender, history, culture, and power. With these intersections, Practical Theology is a critically needed discipline that connects doctrine and practice, theology and living experience, faith and social change (Miller-McLemore 2016:2). Moreover, Practical Theology will assist the church in both explicating the theological parameters of gender oppression and addressing the material realities of survivors. The church has an ethical responsibility to be sensitised to women and the lived realities of victims, and advocate for their safety while manifesting acts of solidarity with the oppressed.

Contributions of Practical Theology in addressing gender based violence

Community engagement and empowerment

Practical Theology is instrumental in connecting the process of theological reflection with real-life actions in the communities; thus, it provides churches with the structures by which they can make a significant and authentic response to social problems like GBV. As trusted community institutions, churches can mobilise congregations to establish safe spaces for survivors such as counselling centres. Train lay leaders to identify and report abuse. Promote male allyship programmes to dismantle toxic masculinity (Nanthambwe 2024). For example, the Amalinda Methodist Church in East London launched a soup kitchen initiative that doubled as a support network for GBV survivors, demonstrating how faith communities can address material and emotional needs.

Advocacy and policy influence

Practical theologians may present the case for policy changes, for example the Domestic Violence Amendment Act, which requires stricter enforcement. Collaboration with human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch is, however, very important in the process of giving more power to the voices of minorities (Human Rights Watch 2023; 2024). Such partnerships have the potential to not only give these silenced voices of the oppressed more power but also to go deeper and root out the problem of discrimination, as well as make sure that the concerns of those who are most vulnerable are the ones that get priority.

It is of great importance that one uproots the xenophobic rhetoric that unfairly blames GBV on immigrant communities, as was the case with the violent campaigns related to Operation Dudula, in which the perpetrators were predominantly identified as xenophobic groups. When we deny these narratives in effect, we assist in the making of a more hospitable and equitable atmosphere for all. The single most influential demonstrative example outlining the role of religion-based advocacy as a source of change in society is the Confession of Belhar, a theological statement that opposed apartheid (Knoetze 2022:1). The declaration reflects the potential that religious institutions have in becoming the agents of change for the social justice cause.

Incorporating legal expertise is a critical component in efforts to address GBV. Advocacy efforts are often strengthened by individuals with judicial knowledge, particularly lawyers, who can provide valuable support to victims. Legal professionals are well-positioned to inform women of their constitutional rights and judicial protections, as established by human rights activism and enshrined in the South African Constitution. These victims need to know 'how the South African Constitution and the law can be used to advance the ethics of the common good' (Sekhaulelo 2022:2).

Education and awareness campaigns

Practical Theology has a role in stopping the misuse of power against women sexually, by making it possible for the leaders and the communities of faith to turn their theological reflection into far-reaching educational and sensitisation programmes. The inclusion of gender studies in the religious curricula definitely guarantees that the ministers are well-equipped in pastoral care, given that this is a mentally healthy approach; thus, they will be able to care for the survivors' sensitivity. Platforms such as TikTok (76.9% of South Africans are active users) may be used to disseminate anti-GBV content.

Recommendations

To equip the faith communities to effectively fight GBV, one of the prominent ways is to organise training workshops on gender sensitivity, targeting clergy. A team of gender specialists, one or two theologians, social workers, and legal practitioners form an ideal team of trainers to conduct these sessions because their combined expertise will prepare the clergy with both correct and practice-ready methods of pastoral care. The training should be provided at church regional centres and theological institutions so that it will be within reach of pastors from different areas.

Policy integration is the process through which these programmes get recognised by the formal church as well as community structures. The procedure of getting the local police and church authorities on board should start with recommendations for collaboration between the theologians, the GBV task force, church leadership, and local authorities to develop policies that:

- Clearly state that violence should not be considered normal within communities and should not be tolerated as part of social or religious life.
- Encourage peacebuilding and ethical social involvement as the primary elements of a just society.
- Set out the duties of priests and lay community members in terms of gender-sensitive activities as well as in the active disallowance of GBV.

These guidelines are supported by scriptural norms that point to the prime importance of making a clear difference between just and unjust, harmful and beneficial deeds. For example, 1 Kings 5:17 illustrates the use of 'good stones' in the construction of the Temple, thus referring to the idea of setting a firm and ethical groundwork (Dames 2013). The metaphor in Practical Theology implies the necessity of recognising the longstanding practice of violence in the community and, at the same time, not losing sight of the historical and social context of it. Awareness campaigns should inform the public not only on the local but also on the universal history of the prevalence of violence, its adverse effects, and methods of recovery, so that congregations can engage actively in the works of peace and restorative justice.

Innovations in communication, such as the use of WhatsApp (93.8% penetration) to enable anonymous reporting, can be the next step to complement the community-based initiatives, and in assisting those who find it difficult to report abusive situations in person while securing their privacy. When the practical application of theology is carried out in faith communities by a systematic programme, which comprises training that is well-coordinated, policy integration, and community engagement, it acts as a means for these communities not only to be tested but also to take action with the help of this instrument in the creation of safer and just social environments and possess the capacity to bring about social change.

Conclusion

Gender-based violence is a societally ingrained problem that has penetrated even religious institutions and the church. A balanced approach that combines theology and practicality is needed to solve such a problem. This study indicates the following: gender-based violence in South African local communities is inextricably tied to the inequalities that are deeply embedded in patriarchal norms and socio-cultural practices. The above-mentioned factors, on the one hand, are interwoven with elements of the religion and church teachings and, on the other hand, they make it very difficult to find the right solution to the problem.

Practical Theology serves as a vehicle for issues that require action; thus, it is a guide to faith communities when the need arises to develop interventions, educational programmes, and awareness campaigns for the empowerment of women and the promotion of the establishment of just social structures. The core of this approach is the dialogue between churches and communities – it enables both parties to understand the contextualised nature of GBV, provides support to survivors, and facilitates the development of collaborative strategies for prevention and healing. Hence, by combining theological reflection with community engagement, as well as culturally informed action, faith communities become a powerful agent for change in the elimination of GBV, the promotion of freedom, and the facilitation of women's empowerment and active participation in both church and society life.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

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

CRediT authorship contribution

Hundzukani P. Khosa-Nkatini: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Data curation, Resources, Writing – review & editing. Mashudu E. Muthivhi: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original

draft, Project administration, Data curation, Resources, Writing – review & editing. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

All data available from the corresponding author, Hundzukani Khosa-Nkatini, upon request.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's findings, and content.

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