


Gender-based violence as a pandemic: Sociocultural and religious factors perpetuating violence against women in South Africa

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Dates:

Received: 31 Oct. 2024

Accepted: 17 Feb. 2025

Published: 30 Apr. 2025

How to cite this article:

Naicker, L.W., 2025,
'Gender-based violence as a
pandemic: Sociocultural and
religious factors perpetuating
violence against women in
South Africa', *HTS Teologiese
Studies/Theological Studies*
81(1), a10358. [https://doi.
org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10358](https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10358)

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Gender-based violence (GBV) is a global pandemic, with South Africa experiencing some of the highest rates in the world. Structural and systemic issues underpin the pervasive nature of violence against women (VAW) and intimate partner violence (IPV) in the country, leading to the widespread disenfranchisement of women across economic, social, religious, political and cultural spheres. While globally, 27% of women and girls aged 15 years and older have faced physical or sexual IPV, in South Africa, this figure soars to between one-third and 50%. The patriarchal construction of South African society, coupled with the fact that over 86% of the population identifies as Christian, raises critical questions about the interface between socioreligious and sociocultural factors that sustain GBV, VAW and IPV.

Contribution: This article explores these issues through a qualitative research design, employing the lens of African Women's Theology. The article aims to examine the sociocultural environment that allows GBV, VAW and IPV to thrive, interrogate the complicity of the Church and society in perpetuating such an environment and analyse what the Christian Church and society can do to combat these pervasive forms of violence.

Keywords: GBV; IPV; VAW; pandemic; gender-based violence; violence against women; intimate partner violence; African Women's Theology.

Introduction

The pandemic of gender-based violence (GBV), violence against women (VAW) and intimate partner violence (IPV) in South Africa is not merely a crisis but a widespread phenomenon, deeply woven into the sociocultural and religious fabric of the nation. South Africa's staggering rates of VAW, GBV and IPV have reached pandemic proportions, making this an enduring public health and human rights emergency that disproportionately affects women. According to a 2023–2024 report by the Commission for Gender Equality, a shocking 21% of women have suffered physical violence from a partner, and a staggering 51% have encountered some form of GBV (Commission on Gender Equality 2024). These figures reflect the depth and scale of a pandemic that has permeated all levels of society, demanding urgent and sustained intervention.

At the heart of this pandemic is the intersection of religion and sociocultural norms, which form the foundation of societal structures that enable and perpetuate GBV, VAW and IPV. African Women's Theology provides the critical lens through which this article explores how these elements intersect to create environments conducive to pandemic levels of VAW. Traditional religious practices and entrenched cultural beliefs are often instrumental in reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics, which in turn normalise and even justify VAW. This analysis underscores the gravity of the situation and the need for a transformative response. The pandemic of GBV, VAW and IPV extends into the realm of religious institutions, with the Christian Church, a central social institution in South Africa, facing scrutiny for its historical complicity in perpetuating these forms of violence (Owusu-Ansah 2016; Tonono 2018). The Church's influence, while vast, has not always been wielded in ways that combat this pandemic. Instead, its passive stance and complicity in reinforcing patriarchal norms calls for a critical reassessment of its current role in addressing this widespread epidemic. By engaging both historical and contemporary perspectives, this article interrogates how religious doctrines and practices have either fuelled or challenged the conditions that allow this pandemic to thrive.

In addition to the Church, the pandemic nature of GBV, VAW and IPV is rooted in the broader sociopolitical and cultural structures that sustain it. Political, cultural and religious institutions

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collectively contribute to environments where violence flourishes, further entrenching this pandemic within the fabric of South African society. This article aims to offer critical insights for policymakers, religious leaders and advocates as they work to confront and dismantle the systemic forces that allow this violence to persist. Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to the understanding of GBV, VAW and IPV as a pandemic requiring a coordinated, multifaceted and transformative response for all South Africans, irrespective of gender or biology.

Methodology

This article employs a theoretical approach grounded in African Women's Theology to explore the interconnected issues of GBV, VAW and IPV in South Africa. African Women's Theology serves as a critical framework for analysing the sociocultural and socioreligious factors that underpin these pervasive issues. By engaging with a body of scholarly literature – including academic articles, reports and books – this study seeks to elucidate the systemic and ideological underpinnings of GBV.

The use of African Women's Theology as a theoretical lens allows for an in-depth exploration of how patriarchal structures, religious institutions and traditional gender roles contribute to the normalisation of violence. This theological framework prioritises the reinterpretation of religious texts and doctrines, critically examining the narratives that often perpetuate patriarchal values (Oduyoye 2021:10–12). Key themes identified through this analysis include the complicity of religious institutions, the influence of traditional gender roles on societal attitudes towards women and the systemic nature of patriarchal violence.

This theoretical approach is further enriched by a critical hermeneutic approach, which emphasises the reinterpretation of socioreligious narratives in ways that challenge oppressive ideologies. The study's reliance on African Women's Theology positions it as a theoretical inquiry that highlights the intricate interplay of sociocultural and socioreligious factors shaping GBV, VAW and IPV. By adopting this approach, the research provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the historical and contemporary dynamics of gender violence, offering a foundation for advocating interventions that promote justice, gender equality and holistic community healing.

The pandemic of violence against women, gender-based violence and intimate partner violence in South Africa

The levels of VAW in South Africa are a grim reminder of the relentless pandemic of GBV. In South Africa, a woman is raped every 3 h, highlighting the stark reality that the country is often referred to as the 'rape capital of the world'. According to official statistics, 10818 rape cases were reported in the

first quarter of 2022 alone. This violence extends far beyond rape; the rate of intimate partner femicide in South Africa is five times higher than the global average, underscoring the severe crisis that disproportionately impacts women. The entrenched nature of VAW, IPV and GBV in South Africa's social fabric – from homes to workplaces, from culture to tradition – demonstrates how deeply this issue runs (Govender 2023). Research further indicates that 24.6% of women in South Africa have experienced physical assault from their partners, and intimate femicide is the most lethal form of domestic violence, with 8.8 per 100 000 women aged 14 and older killed by partners – the highest rate reported globally. It is also reported that an average of seven women were murdered daily, with at least half of these killings perpetrated by intimate partners (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation 2016:7). Globally, nearly one-third of women are reported to have experienced IPV in their lifetime, with the Southern African region reporting nearly 30% of women being exposed to such violence (World Health Organization [WHO] 2021). In the South African context, the 2017 Statistics South Africa report reveals that one in five adult women has experienced violence at the hands of a partner. Statistics South Africa's report also corroborates the report of the Commission for Gender Equality, stating that one in five women experienced physical violence at the hands of a partner (Statistics South Africa 2017). Furthermore, the South African Demographic and Health Survey (SADHS) reveals that there is a 21.9% prevalence of IPV in South Africa (SADHS 2016).

Violence against women in South Africa manifests in multiple forms, including physical, emotional, psychological, financial and structural harm. While intimate partners are the primary perpetrators, this violence is also inflicted by colleagues, strangers and institutions. The underlying driver of VAW is the pervasive gender power imbalance, which is deeply entrenched in patriarchal structures. More than a mere surge in criminal activity, VAW constitutes a significant public health crisis, as recognised by the WHO. Women not only experience direct physical harm, including injury, illness and death, but also endure indirect consequences such as unintended pregnancies, mental health issues, sexually transmitted infections and enduring psychological trauma (Govender 2023).

Violence against women thrives within the power structures of society, which perpetuate economic, social and cultural inequalities that keep women in subordinate roles. These structures deny them the ability to protect themselves, make decisions or meet their basic needs. Although South Africa's Constitution promises freedom and security for all, gender inequalities, cultural norms and patriarchal traditions continue to undermine these rights, reinforcing the notion that women are possessions (Govender 2023). The South African government, despite having laws in place, often fails to adequately address VAW because of entrenched gender power relations. Public attitudes sustain this inaction, with many viewing VAW as part of the status quo. Despite 16 Days of Activism and public statements against VAW from

South Africa's president, more action is required (Govender 2023). Community and religious leaders, especially leaders within the Christian Church in South Africa, must play a pivotal role in addressing this pandemic by advocating for better training, community awareness programmes and incorporating GBV programmes in their services as the South African population is predominantly Christian. The Christian Church in South Africa, as a moral authority, must lead the charge in advancing a radical agenda for gender transformation and equality that will stem the tide of VAW.

Cultural and religious norms: Enablers of the pandemic of violence against women

Patriarchy perpetuates the notion that girls and women are of lesser value, contributing to the normalisation of VAW, IPV and GBV in many societies. Facio (2013:2) defines patriarchy as a system of social, economic, spiritual and political organisation that institutionalises sex-based power relations, reinforcing the subordination of women through interconnected institutions. These institutions collaborate to maintain male dominance, devaluing women's roles and rights while intersecting with other forms of exclusion and oppression. This arrangement prioritises the interests of males, particularly, powerful male elites, marginalising the needs of women and other oppressed groups. Within patriarchal structures, VAW, IPV and GBV are often widely accepted, with societal norms reinforcing the subjugation of women and other suppressed groups.

Javed and Chattu (2020) note that development of policies, laws and legislation that explicitly recognise VAW, IPV and GBV is critical. They argue that what is unnamed or invisible tends to be ignored, which is why naming and addressing the issue directly is essential for creating meaningful interventions. Commonly used measures of gender equality – such as female labour force participation or the number of women holding seats in national parliaments – do not significantly influence society's acceptance or rejection of VAW, GBV and IPV. This suggests that economic and political 'empowerment' initiatives alone are insufficient to dismantle the deep-seated gender inequalities that sustain VAW. Addressing this requires a holistic approach that goes beyond traditional markers of empowerment and includes targeted interventions that challenge patriarchal norms at their core.

In the context of the pandemic of VAW, patriarchal religious systems and ideologies exacerbate existing gender disparities, adversely impacting women's health, safety and overall well-being. In South Africa, religious beliefs and practices play a pivotal role in shaping societal norms and values. However, these religious frameworks can sometimes hinder efforts to address GBV when patriarchal interpretations of religious texts are employed to rationalise or excuse VAW. Such interpretations not only perpetuate harmful gender norms but also legitimise the domination of men over women, thereby reinforcing the systemic nature of GBV

(Javed & Chuttu 2020). To effectively combat this pervasive issue, it is crucial to understand both secular and religious narratives that influence societal attitudes towards gender and violence. Engaging with religious communities, leaders, and faith-based organisations can foster a more supportive environment for survivors and challenge the harmful ideologies embedded in these patriarchal structures.

A critical examination of how biblical and other religious texts are interpreted can reveal problematic narratives that contribute to the normalisation of VAW. By addressing these interpretations and advocating for more equitable readings of sacred texts, we can begin to dismantle the systemic barriers that uphold GBV as a pandemic. As noted by Naicker (2024), this multifaceted approach is essential for fostering a more just and equitable society. Incorporating faith-based support systems into GBV interventions can provide survivors and their families with critical resources during times of crises. Religious institutions, such as churches, mosques, temples or synagogues, can serve as pillars of support, offering counselling, spiritual guidance and community aid to those affected by violence. These spaces, when sensitised to the issue of GBV, can help shift harmful patriarchal norms and promote gender justice within communities (Javed & Chuttu 2020). Efforts to address VAW must focus on challenging the underlying social structures and norms that perpetuate patriarchy. Beyond improving systems to respond to VAW, there is a pressing need to engage men and boys in conversations about gender stereotypes and unequal gender roles. By tailoring educational messages to challenge these harmful norms, societies can work towards overcoming patriarchal ideologies that sustain GBV. Long-term solutions to GBV require not only legal reforms but also a cultural shift that dismantles patriarchy and promotes gender equality at every level of society (Chitando & Chirongoma 2012:6).

Church complicity in the gender-based violence pandemic

Religious and cultural perceptions of women held within some Christian circles significantly impact the scourge of VAW, GBV and IPV in the Church and society. Scholars note that while women constitute 80% of membership in African churches, there is significant gender inequality within the Church. This in turn results in women being relegated to subordinate positions in the home and in society at large. Women are often placed in inferior positions, in all spheres of life, by patriarchal systems that have its roots in ecclesia, leading to abusive situations where they are at the mercy of male power and domination. The notion of women's inferiority, they argue, stems from the misinterpretation of biblical texts (Chisale 2020:1; eds. Chitando & Chirongoma 2013:9; Magezi & Manzanga 2021:2).

Mercy Amba Oduyoye, founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, argues that historical forces such as culture, religion and colonialism shape the current realities of African women. She identifies both Western

patriarchy and Christianity as central to exacerbating women's subjugation, reinforcing a cultural and religious system that promotes compliance, submission and the dehumanisation of women. As a result, the Church in Africa has become a vehicle for patriarchal domination, leaving African women more vulnerable than their precolonial ancestors (Gunda 2024:3; Oduyoye 1995). Oduyoye poignantly observes the tragic shift in African women's roles and self-perception: 'It is painful to observe African women whose female ancestors were dynamically involved in every aspect of human life define themselves now in terms of irrelevance and impotence' (Oduyoye 1995:175). For Oduyoye, it is colonialism and Christianity that has intensified gender inequality and oppression in African societies (Gunda 2024:3; Oduyoye 1995:175), leading to VAW and other systems of oppression. Gunda (2024:4) asserts that the Church in Africa is complicit in the perpetuation of patriarchal violence and must advocate for and work towards a theology that centres the lived experiences of African women. This advocacy must be intensified particularly in the fight against VAW, GBV and IPV. Religious institutions must be challenged to address the harmful patriarchal interpretations of texts that have long justified women's subordinate roles and perpetuated cycles of violence.

African Women's Theology offers a critical framework for analysing how religious institutions contribute to the marginalisation of women. This theological perspective emphasises the lived experiences of African women, recognising their struggles and resilience in the face of systemic oppression. It highlights the necessity of examining biblical texts and church teachings that have historically been manipulated to justify women's subordination. For instance, interpretations of Genesis, which frame women as 'helpers' or 'subordinates', not only distort the intention of the creation narrative but also reinforce harmful gender norms. African Women's Theology challenges these interpretations, advocating for a reading that affirms the equality and dignity of women as essential to God's creation (Magezi & Manzanga 2021:2). Undoubtedly, patriarchal ecclesial ideologies prevalent in many churches create environments where abusive behaviours are sometimes tolerated, justified and defended. In many instances, women are chastised to remain in abusive relationships, be submissive wives and caregivers, placing them at the mercy of male power, domination and violence in their own homes. In such situations, women are unable to advocate for their own rights because they are bound by the patriarchal value system of their church, creating spaces where women's concerns and issues are invalidated and trampled on (Magezi & Manzanga 2021:3). Many women who experience violence face significant barriers when attempting to seek help, often encountering disbelief, shame or the expectation to forgive their abusers. The church's emphasis on reconciliation and forgiveness, while valuable in many contexts, can sometimes overshadow the importance of justice and accountability. This approach can further entrench cycles of abuse, where victims are encouraged to remain in harmful relationships because of religious obligations or fear of judgement.

African Women's Theology highlights the importance of community and collective healing. It recognises that women's liberation cannot be achieved in isolation but requires a concerted effort from both men and women within the church. Engaging men in conversations about GBV and challenging harmful gender stereotypes are essential for transforming church culture. Men must be invited to participate actively in the work of dismantling patriarchal systems that perpetuate VAW. This includes reinterpreting theological concepts that have traditionally favoured male dominance, such as leadership and authority, in ways that promote shared power and mutual respect. To combat the complicity of the Church in the GBV pandemic, a shift in theological discourse is necessary. African Women's Theology advocates for an inclusive and equitable interpretation of scripture that affirms women's inherent worth and agency. By embracing narratives that highlight women's contributions and experiences, the Church can foster an environment that supports survivors and challenges harmful ideologies. This involves re-examining the teachings and practices that have historically marginalised women and creating space for their voices to be heard in ecclesial leadership and decision-making processes (Buqa 2022; eds. Chitando & Chirongoma 2013; Naicker 2024). The Church in South Africa must prioritise the development of support systems for women trapped in pockets of abuse in their homes, churches, workplaces and communities. By engaging with the lived experiences of women and acknowledging the complexities of their realities, the Church can offer meaningful support that addresses both the spiritual and practical dimensions of liberation from GBV, VAW and IPV. Addressing the complicity of the Church in the fight against GBV, IPV and VAW through the lens of African Women's Theology calls for a transformative approach to gender relations within ecclesial contexts. By critically re-examining biblical interpretations, challenging patriarchal norms and actively supporting women's empowerment, the Church can play a vital role in eradicating this scourge and fostering a culture of justice, respect and equality. It is only through a commitment to these principles that the Church can fulfil its mission as a space of healing and hope for all, particularly for the marginalised and oppressed. Ultimately, African Women's Theology invites the Church to embody a transformative witness that stands against the violence of patriarchy and advocates for the flourishing of all individuals in the divine image.

Faith, culture and gender justice: Reimagining solutions to end violence against women

The examination of GBV, IPV and VAW in South Africa reveals a significant contradiction within Church and society where there is a claim to principles of justice and equality as enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa and in specific biblical interpretations. As demonstrated, women in South Africa are not safe, experiencing multiple layers of abuse in their lifetime. Clearly, in South Africa, the predominant form

of masculinity is heterosexual patriarchy where men position themselves as superior to women and is in contradiction of the ideals of the Constitution which promotes equality and justice for all. In South Africa, the complex interplay between sociocultural and religious factors plays a significant role in the perpetuation of VAW. Embedded structures of patriarchy, often justified through traditional cultural norms and conservative religious teachings, create environments where IPV, GBV and VAW are normalised and in some instances, even sanctioned. To combat the systemic nature of the abuse of women in South Africa, deliberate, transformative strategies must emerge from within religious communities and broader societal structures. African Women's Theology offers crucial insights for dismantling patriarchal frameworks that sustain gender injustice (Dube 1999, 2000, 2001; Oduyoye 1995, 2001, 2004). Dube's work emphasises the need to decolonise biblical interpretations, recognising that the imposition of Western patriarchal Christianity has often exacerbated gender inequality in African contexts. Her approach calls for a rereading of religious texts in ways that prioritise African women's experiences and reject interpretations that legitimise violence (Dube 2001). In this light, progressive religious interpretations can challenge the deeply ingrained patriarchal readings of scripture that often justify male dominance and the subjugation of women (Dube 1999). Oduyoye's contribution foregrounds the importance of African cultural contexts in understanding the roots of GBV, IPV and VAW. She highlights how African women's spirituality is deeply connected to community, emphasising Ubuntu – the interconnectedness of all people – as a framework for justice and healing. Oduyoye's theology critiques not only the oppressive structures within religion but also within African culture, which can often be complicit in maintaining patriarchal norms (Oduyoye 2004). By integrating cultural values that promote human dignity and equality, African Women's Theology becomes a powerful tool for advocacy and transformation.

A very important path forward for faith communities lies in fostering more inclusive and egalitarian theological interpretations. As Dube (2016:2) argues, a theological examination of gendered oppression must recognise the ways in which patriarchy has established men's assertions of power and dominance over women. Tonono (2018) expounds that the subtle complicity of the Church in the oppression of women should be understood through the lens of its interpretations of biblical texts, which can foster distorted gender imbalances. Consequently, what is necessary is the training of clergy and lay leaders in gender-sensitive hermeneutics and encouraging religious leaders to speak out against GBV, IPV, and VAW, not just as a social issue but as a profound theological concern (Dube 2012), so that faith communities can become spaces of refuge and empowerment for women in the context of various forms of abuse, offering not only spiritual support but practical intervention. This must be done in an effort to combat what Magezi and Manzanga (2021:2) refer to as the perception of women as inferior to men. They go on to say that many Christian men hold the entrenched belief that women are inherently

subservient and incapable of making independent decisions. Tracing the notion of female inferiority to its historical roots, they make reference to Aristotle's conception of women as 'naturally deformed' or incomplete males, suggesting that they are deficient in comparison to men. This perspective, they argue, has contributed to a long-standing narrative that diminishes women's significance and reinforces their subservient status. Addressing the issue of women's status being equal to men through biblical interpretation as a form of intervention, will serve as a critical foundation for decisively addressing GBV, IPV and VAW within religious institutions and may also act as a guiding principle for men in society at large. Clearly, it is such views within the Church and broader cultural contexts that create environments where GBV, IPV and VAW can flourish, as harmful gender hierarchies are maintained, undermining women's dignity, worth and agency.

Cultural institutions, too, must engage in this transformative work. Traditional customs and practices that perpetuate GBV, IPV and VAW such as lobola (bride price) and dowry (marriage wealth transfer) or harmful initiation rites, need to be re-examined through a gender-justice lens. Advocacy efforts led by African women's groups, drawing on both theological and cultural frameworks, can play a vital role in challenging these harmful practices (Oduyoye 2001). For instance, community dialogues that involve both men and women can help shift mindsets and cultivate a collective responsibility for preventing violence. African womanist theologian, Madipoane Masenya formulated the Bosadi Hermeneutic as a sophisticated framework for understanding African cultures as they pertain to the roles of women in Church and society (Masenya 2005). Rather than simply juxtaposing cultural practices with traditional narratives, the Bosadi perspective engages critically with both domains, focusing on issues of race, gender, class and the marginalisation of African women. This critique highlights both cultural norms and practices that contribute to women's subordination. Furthermore, it examines how certain cultural interpretations have historically been used to justify oppressive practices and the marginalisation of African women, and by extension, VAW, GBV and IPV. This critical viewpoint distinguishes the Bosadi approach from conventional South African male theological discourses, which often overlook the lived experiences and perspectives of African women.

Policymakers too have a critical role to play in creating a legal and social environment that supports gender equality. Laws that criminalise GBV, VAW and IPV must be rigorously enforced, but legal measures alone are insufficient. Policies must also address the underlying economic and social inequalities that exacerbate vulnerability to violence (Dube 2009). Collaboration between governments, Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), religious organisations and community leaders can foster a holistic approach to tackling these issues. African Women's Theology provides a unique and powerful framework for addressing the

pandemic of GBV, VAW and IPV in South Africa. Through a combination of progressive religious interpretations, community advocacy and policy interventions, faith communities and cultural institutions can work together to dismantle patriarchal structures and promote gender justice. These efforts must be sustained and amplified to ensure that the vision of an equal and just society becomes a reality for all women.

Conclusion

This article has sought to illuminate the complex and intertwined issues of GBV, VAW and IPV in South Africa, framing these pervasive problems as a pandemic deeply rooted in sociocultural and socioreligious factors. The qualitative research design, guided by African Women's Theology, has provided a critical lens through which to analyse how societal norms and religious interpretations perpetuate these forms of violence, effectively marginalising women's voices and experiences. My examination has revealed that the sociocultural environment in South Africa is rife with patriarchal values that not only tolerate but often normalise violence against women. Traditional gender roles and the prevailing narratives surrounding masculinity and femininity reinforce harmful stereotypes that contribute to the cycle of violence. These sociocultural factors are often compounded by the complicity of religious institutions, which, through their teachings and practices, may inadvertently uphold patriarchal structures rather than challenge them. The intersection of culture and religion plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes towards gender roles, often leading to the trivialisation of women's experiences and the silencing of their voices in matters related to GBV, VAW and IPV. Moreover, the article has highlighted the urgent need for transformative approaches within faith communities and cultural institutions. It is essential to recognise that religious narratives can be reinterpreted to promote gender equality and justice. Engaging faith leaders and communities in discussions about the role of religion in perpetuating or combating violence is vital. By promoting progressive interpretations of religious texts that advocate for women's rights and dignity, faith communities can become pivotal in addressing and reducing GBV, VAW and IPV. The role of policymakers also cannot be overlooked. Effective legislation and policies aimed at protecting women and promoting gender equality must be supported by comprehensive awareness campaigns that challenge and change harmful cultural attitudes. It is crucial to develop strategies that actively involve men in conversations about gender justice, promoting healthy masculinities and accountability. Furthermore, as we update the statistics surrounding GBV, VAW and IPV, it is essential to acknowledge the ongoing nature of this crisis. The alarming prevalence of these issues demands continuous advocacy, research and action. By fostering partnerships among civil society, government and religious organisations, we can create a more integrated approach to combating GBV, VAW and IPV, ensuring that resources are allocated to support survivors and prevent future violence. Ultimately, the fight against GBV, VAW and

IPV in South Africa is a multifaceted struggle that requires a holistic approach. By integrating African Women's Theology with community advocacy and progressive religious interpretations, we can work towards dismantling the patriarchal structures that perpetuate these forms of violence. This framework will not only address the immediate needs of survivors but also foster a broader cultural shift towards gender equality. In doing so, we can aspire to create a society where all individuals, regardless of gender, can live free from violence and discrimination, fully realising their potential as valued members of their communities.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

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

Author's contribution

L.W.N. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa's College of Human Sciences_ CREC on 25 October 2024 (No. Rec-240816-052).

Funding information

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability

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

Disclaimer

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