

The Bible, HIV and AIDS, and Violence in Botswana: Analysing Scriptural Interpretations and Pastoral Responses to LGBTIQ+ Marginalisation

Tshenolo Jennifer Madigele

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1044-9760>

- Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology, College of Human Sciences, UNISA, Pretoria, South Africa
 - Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana
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Abstract

This article explores the multifaceted experience of violence faced by Botswana's LGBTIQ+ people. It particularly focuses on how scriptures have been interpreted in the context of HIV and AIDS. The internal conflict experienced by LGBTIQ+ individuals is often intensified by societal culture, religious beliefs and laws that permit discrimination and marginalisation. This study examines the efficacy of a comprehensive pastoral theological framework designed to help Botswana's LGBTIQ+ community reconcile their sexual orientation with cultural norms and scriptural teachings. The central research questions revolve around how Christian caregivers can foster safe spaces for dialogue, reflection and healing for LGBTIQ+ individuals affected by and implicated in the realities of HIV and AIDS. The methodology utilises the Bible, theological narratives and ethical frameworks to stimulate discussions aimed at dismantling Gender and Sexuality Exclusion and Sexual and Social Conformity, while simultaneously promoting acceptance and encouraging diversity. This includes a critical biblical analysis to identify how certain interpretations have perpetuated violence and exclusion, especially against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) individuals. Through advocacy, this article appeals for justice, equality and compassion within religious institutions. It urges that undue prejudice should be addressed and transformed within religious communities to ensure equal respect and opportunities for Botswana's LGBTIQ+ population. Proposed measures include raising awareness among religious leaders about the harmful effects of certain biblical interpretations, particularly on the gay and lesbian community and advocating for an accepting health model of care. Consequently, this article calls for continued advocacy, education and the fostering of tolerance for these affected groups, as well as the promotion of equal acceptance for all humanity, irrespective of perceived differences.

Keywords: Botswana; Violence; Discrimination; HIV and AIDS; LGBTIQ+; Pastoral care; Religious beliefs; Societal norms

Introduction

This article investigates how the Bible has been historically used to justify violence against the LGBTIQ+ community in Botswana. It focuses specifically on contexts involving HIV and AIDS. The aim is to illustrate how particular scriptural interpretations have fuelled discrimination and violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and related identities (LGBTIQ+) in Botswana. This significantly exacerbates their challenges within a society characterised by complex legal, cultural and religious dynamics. Various scholars have extensively explored how African biblical hermeneutics intersects with sexuality and power. They offer critical insights into contextual readings that challenge exclusionary interpretations.

For instance, Robertson and van Klinken (2025), in their work *Queer and Trans African Theologies*, argue that despite common portrayals of Africa as queer- and transphobic due to its religious cultures, religion has been a vital force for activism for queer and trans rights and inclusion across the continent. They explain that religious belonging and national or ethnic identity are often deeply intertwined. This makes queer and trans theological reflections central to political struggles. Similarly, Gerald O. West strongly advocates for contextual Bible study. This approach empowers communities, particularly those affected by HIV and AIDS, to engage with scripture in ways that lead to liberation. In his 2014 work, he helps locate this method within biblical liberation hermeneutics and intercultural biblical hermeneutics. Furthermore, in 2017, he highlighted how the tradition of lament, particularly from people living with HIV, offers profound challenges to traditional biblical scholarship. His work thus provides a framework for re-reading biblical texts through the lens of lived experience and social justice.

Moving to another regional perspective, Chitando and Machingura, in their 2022 work *Religion and Sexuality in Zimbabwe: A Socio-historical Analysis*, critically examines how biblical texts have been used to shape public discourse around homosexuality in Zimbabwe. He unpacks these interpretations, linking them to local social norms and concepts of masculinity. This scholarship helps to deconstruct the ways religious arguments are mobilised to justify exclusion and offers insights into alternative, more inclusive readings.

Finally, Kapyia John Kaoma delve into the intricate influence of global Christian movements on homophobia in Africa. He shows how these external forces contribute to anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiments and practices. His 2017 book, *Christianity, Globalization, and Protective Homophobia*, is critical for understanding this dynamic. He also highlights how faith, while often a source of violence, can be channelled into constructive engagement. Kaoma's work thus highlights the need to analyse both the harmful and potentially redemptive roles of religion in the discourse surrounding sexuality.

Together, these scholars offer diverse and powerful ways to understand and actively challenge harmful biblical interpretations. They reveal the socio-historical political, and cultural layers influencing how scripture is read and applied, especially concerning sexuality and human dignity in Africa.

For this article, violence is broadly understood. It encompasses physical, psychological, and spiritual harm inflicted upon individuals through actions, words, or policies. This harm is particularly scrutinised when sanctioned or supported by religious

texts or interpretations. Physical violence, for instance, involves direct harm or injury, such as assault or abuse. Psychological violence, conversely, includes actions or words that induce emotional distress, mental suffering or trauma. This includes verbal abuse, threats and manipulation (Herman, 1992). Furthermore, spiritual violence refers to harm directed at an individual's spiritual well-being, often manifested through practices or beliefs that lead to spiritual exclusion or condemnation (Warren, 2004).

It is important to note that the meaning of violence, as articulated by Mlambo and Chitando (2024), is expansive. It encompasses not only physical acts but also structural inequalities, cultural narratives, technological impacts, gender dynamics, environmental concerns, political contexts, memory processes and digital influences. This multifaceted understanding emphasises that violence cannot be confined to a singular definition or context.

In this specific context, the Bible has unfortunately been employed to legitimise violence against LGBTIQ+ individuals. This occurs through the endorsement of harmful interpretations and practices. Specific biblical passages, for example, have been interpreted in ways that perpetuate exclusion and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ communities. These interpretations often lead to the endorsement of policies and behaviours that exacerbate the marginalisation and suffering of LGBTIQ+ individuals (Brownson, 2011).

This article reflects on the writer's positionality as a theologian and a scholar of religion. It integrates insider cultural insights with an academic approach to critically assess the role of biblical interpretations in perpetuating violence. The writer's commitment to mobilising the faith community to respond effectively to HIV and AIDS and to embrace sexual diversity equally informs the approach adopted herein.

A critical analysis of biblical passages, often interpreted to support anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiments, provides the foundation for this exploration. By examining how these interpretations have been employed to justify harmful practices, the article seeks to highlight the Bible's potential for violence. Concurrently, it offers alternative readings that affirm the dignity and rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals. Case studies from Botswana, including landmark legal cases such as the decriminalisation of same-sex relationships in 2019 and the recognition of the Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals in Botswana Association, highlight the inherent tension between legal advancements and ongoing religiously justified violence.

The article also incorporates findings from recent phenomenological research on mental health challenges within the LGBTIQ+ community in Gaborone. These findings reveal the persistent impact of stigma and discrimination, even in the wake of legal progress (Mangwegape et al., 2023). The influence of religious entities, such as the Evangelical Fellowship of Botswana (Magashula, 2021; Dinokopila, 2023), is also critically examined. This article explores these dynamics and their implications for the LGBTIQ+ community. It emphasises the urgent need for a holistic pastoral approach that promotes justice, equality, and compassion.

By addressing how the Bible has been used to justify violence and by advocating for alternative interpretations, this article aims to foster a more inclusive environment within religious communities. Ultimately, it seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the intricate intersection between religion, violence, and LGBTIQ+ rights in Botswana. The concluding section will call for comprehensive efforts to support marginalised

communities and promote inclusivity, thereby working towards mitigating the violence faced by the LGBTIQ+ community in Botswana.

A Holistic Pastoral Approach (HPA)

As a response to the multiple forms of violence and denial of fundamental rights experienced by the LGBTIQ+ community in Botswana, this article proposes the adoption of the Holistic Pastoral Approach (Lartey, 2003; Pattison, 1994). This violence includes physical harm, emotional distress and spiritual exclusion which is often exacerbated by societal stigma and discriminatory laws. Within the HPA, there is a profound acknowledgment of the diversity within the LGBTIQ+ community. It recognises that individuals are holistic beings with interconnected needs (Pattison, 2000). This inclusivity extends to an understanding of intersectionality, considering factors such as sexual orientation, gender identity, mental health and spiritual well-being as interconnected facets that necessitate a nuanced and tailored approach (Lartey, 2006). For example, a young gay Motswana man living with HIV faces unique spiritual, psychological and social challenges that require a pastoral response integrating all these dimensions, rather than addressing them in isolation. Kaoma's work, particularly *Christianity, Globalization, and Protective Homophobia*, highlights how global Christian movements influence anti-LGBTIQ+ sentiments in Africa, often through what he terms "protective homophobia" (Kaoma, 2017). This phenomenon contributes to the exclusion of LGBTIQ+ individuals from human rights protections, framed by postcolonial, cultural and religious tendencies that justify discrimination. Understanding this external influence is vital for pastors to deconstruct ingrained biases within their communities (Kaoma, 2017).

Empowerment is a central theme within the HPA. It emphasises the agency of individuals to address their challenges. This empowerment is not only individual but also extends to fostering inclusive communication and dialogue within pastoral care relationships (Pattison, 1994; Rensburg, 2010). The HPA actively facilitates this through practices like active listening, empathetic affirmation, and creating non-judgmental spaces for shared narratives. This dialogue can lead to increased peace and a positive transformation of attitudes within the community. It can further foster mutual understanding and respect. West, along with Kaoma and van der Walt, reflect on how African Christian faith can become redemptive, rather than violent, when dealing with sexual diversity. This collaborative work also shows how Christian counter-mobilisations can affirm the human rights of LGBTIQ+ people in Africa (West et al., 2016). Such approaches empower marginalised communities to find liberation and challenge the negative framing of LGBTIQ+ issues in churches (Duncan, 2020).

Achieving a sense of balance within oneself and the world through self-awareness and reflective practice is crucial. This fosters harmony in relationships and promotes a holistic understanding of individuals within society. The HPA guides individuals through contemplative practices, guided self-reflection and spiritual discernment exercises to cultivate this self-awareness. However, a potential challenge lies in caregivers viewing their role as problem solvers. This can disempower individuals by offering ready-made solutions rather than facilitating their own path. The HPA emphasises the importance of evaluating the pastoral agents, the client relationship, and the broader societal milieu to avoid this pitfall (Rensburg, 2010). The theological

reflections of Kaoma and West contribute to reimagining pastoral engagement by moving beyond a problem-solving paradigm towards one that affirms and liberates.

To effectively implement the HPA, a thorough examination of the pastor is required. This encompasses problem assessment, the relationship between pastoral agents and clients, and the overall societal context. The assessment aims to investigate whether the situation supports the pastoral care seeker's freedom and participation in decisions improving their well-being. The HPA challenges traditional problem-solving roles. It encourages caregivers to facilitate individuals in navigating their unique paths toward well-being and self-actualisation (Rensburg, 2010). This facilitation involves equipping individuals with spiritual tools and resources, promoting resilience and advocating for their dignity rather than imposing solutions. The approach advocates for a comprehensive evaluation of pastoral care situations, considering the physical, spiritual, psychological and social needs of individuals (Lartey, 2006).

Moreover, the training and preparation of pastoral agents is deemed essential in effectively implementing the HPA. This training focuses on cultivating empathy, developing intersectional awareness and mastering non-directive counselling skills. It ensures that caregivers can create an open, considerate and respectful care environment (McEvoy and Duffy, 2008). A distinctive feature of the HPA is its emphasis on the integration of various dimensions of individuals' lives, including their spiritual and cultural beliefs. It recognises the significance of spirituality in shaping individuals' perspectives and calls for a culturally sensitive approach to pastoral care (Pattison and Woodward, 2000). This means understanding and valuing diverse expressions of faith and cultural identities within the LGBTIQ+ community in Botswana. Kaoma's analysis of how religious leaders' negative public statements influence politics around homosexuality further underscores the need for trained pastoral agents who can navigate and challenge such narratives (Kaoma, 2017).

Within the HPA, there is also a community-focused approach that goes beyond individual care. It strives to empower individuals within the broader societal context (Pattison, 1994). This is achieved by encouraging community dialogue, fostering supportive networks, and advocating for policy changes that reflect inclusivity and human dignity. It explicitly aims to transform societal norms and religious beliefs from within, fostering dialogue, respect, and collective empowerment. This approach recognises the interconnected aspects of individuals' lives within their communities. When applied to the experiences of the LGBTIQ+ community in Botswana, the HPA acknowledges the legal and religious constraints they face. However, by engaging with and reinterpreting these societal and religious frameworks, it presents opportunities for positive change. It promotes holistic well-being and empowerment by identifying and leveraging existing values of compassion and community within cultural and religious traditions.

Applying these reflections to the context of LGBTIQ+ people in Botswana and the Church in Botswana, the HPA can be adapted to address the diverse and interconnected challenges faced by this community. By fostering dialogue, understanding, and empowerment within the societal and religious context, the HPA can contribute to holistic well-being and the promotion of positive attitudes. It respects individuals' diverse identities and needs. The HPA thus provides a constructive framework for addressing these challenges. It recognises the diverse needs of individuals, empowers

them, and fosters inclusive dialogue within the context of legal and religious constraints, ultimately working towards a more affirming environment.

Challenges faced by the LGBTIQ+ community in Botswana

This section explores the challenges encountered by the LGBTIQ+ community within the context of Christianity and the HIV and AIDS epidemic, specifically focusing on the experiences of individuals in Botswana. The findings are derived from *Dipolelo tsa Rona* (2016), a book that has captured personal stories of the LGBTIQ+ community in Botswana LEGABIBO, and the author's Master's dissertation, "Christianity and the Gay Community: A Pastoral Response to Gaborone's Homosexuals" (Madigele, 2015).

The acronym LGBTIQ+ serves as an inclusive umbrella term encompassing a spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities. Each letter within the acronym represents a distinct group, fostering acknowledgment and recognition for diverse experiences. "L" stands for Lesbian, referring to women attracted to women; "G" denotes Gay, representing men attracted to men; "B" represents Bisexual, indicating attraction to both men and women. "T" stands for Transgender, emphasising individuals whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex at birth. "I" represents Intersex, acknowledging individuals with variations in sex characteristics. The letter "Q" stands for Queer or Questioning, acknowledging a range of identities beyond traditional categories (Perger, 2018).

The challenges faced by the LGBTIQ+ community within the church in Botswana include discrimination, humiliation, and exacerbated stigma due to HIV and AIDS. LGBTIQ+ people encounter discrimination and humiliation from peers within the church community. Often, derogatory terms and actions are used, reflecting societal and cultural biases that contribute to a hostile environment. This discrimination is intensified for those living with HIV and AIDS, as the condition is often wrongfully seen as a punishment for their sexual orientation. As a result, LGBTIQ+ people grapple with the perceived incongruity between their emerging sexuality, their health status, and the teachings of the church (Madigele, 2015). LGBTIQ+ individuals in Botswana often experience discrimination and violence, which often lead to barriers in accessing HIV and AIDS services. Effectively, LGBTIQ+ people face multiple forms of violence due to the social construction of acceptable and unacceptable sexual orientation and gender identity, further compounded by the stigma of HIV and AIDS.

The societal perception of homosexuality as "something bad," as reflected in *Dipolelo tsa Rona*, creates internal conflict for individuals, compelling them to navigate the reconciliation of personal identity with religious doctrines. This internal struggle is exacerbated by limited acceptance and understanding within the church community, particularly when it comes to HIV and AIDS. The church, grappling with prejudices and a lack of awareness, struggles to provide a supportive and empathetic environment for individuals exploring non-heteronormative identities and living with HIV and AIDS (Chitando, 2007). Consequently, LGBTIQ+ individuals face challenges of isolation and internal strife. The difficulty of aligning personal identity with religious teachings often leads to isolation, prompting individuals within the church to conceal their identities, intensifying internal struggles and emotional hardships. Sometimes hurtful preaching becomes a form of psychological violence.

The Bible has been used to justify discrimination against LGBTIQ+ individuals and those living with HIV and AIDS. Passages are often interpreted in ways that perpetuate exclusion and discrimination. For instance, the interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 as condemning same-sex relationships has been used to marginalise and stigmatise gay individuals, linking their sexual orientation to the perceived moral failings associated with HIV and AIDS. Additionally, Romans 1:26–27 is often cited to condemn homosexuality and, by extension, those living with HIV and AIDS (Torres and Quero, 2024). These become “texts of terror” for the concerned individuals (Trible, 1984). While the church offers temporary solace, it does not provide a fully accepting and affirming space for LGBTIQ+ individuals and those living with HIV and AIDS, highlighting the need for a more inclusive and understanding environment within religious communities (LEGABIBO, 2016).

There is also a sense of pressure to conform. Societal and religious expectations pressure individuals to conform to heteronormative norms and conceal their HIV positive status. In some instances, individuals attempt to fake interest in opposite-sex relationships, highlighting the pressure to conform to societal and religious expectations. Navigating the intersection of faith, sexual identity, and health status poses complex challenges. The perceived conflict between personal authenticity, religious doctrines, and health realities contributes to the difficulty of self-acceptance and full participation within the church (LEGABIBO, 2016).

Moreover, LGBTIQ+ individuals, especially those in the age group of 18–25, reported social isolation, discrimination and derogatory name-calling within their peer groups, churches, and educational institutions (Madigele, 2015). The study indicates instances of physical and verbal abuse, affecting the mental health and well-being of the community. The research highlights instances of healthcare discrimination, where individuals were denied services based on their sexual orientation and HIV status. This discrimination not only affects their physical health but also creates barriers to accessing essential healthcare. Participants struggled with internalised homophobia and HIV stigma, often attempting to conform to societal expectations and church teachings, leading to internal conflicts and challenges in self-acceptance.

Church discourse on homosexuality and HIV and AIDS is predominantly negative, with limited discussion on the topic. Lack of understanding, empathy, and compassion within the church community contributes to the challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ individuals. LGBTIQ+ individuals reported feeling distant from God and experiencing anger or blame towards God due to perceived insensitivity or rejection by the church. The interpretation of homosexuality as a sin and HIV and AIDS as a divine punishment, and the internalisation of guilt, create spiritual challenges for this community. Instances of bullying and discrimination within educational institutions, leading to poor academic performance and dropouts, further highlight the challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ individuals in pursuing education. The Bible is often used to justify these kinds of abuses (Madigele, 2015).

These challenges resonate with experiences in other African contexts, such as Malawi and Zimbabwe, suggesting common regional patterns. In Malawi, for instance, religious groups have spearheaded national demonstrations against LGBTIQ+ individuals, leading to their exclusion from public life (Chibambo and Divala, 2023). Mawerenga (2018) further highlights that homosexuality in Malawi is a cross-cutting challenge with

theological, socio-cultural, economic, legal, political, and human rights implications, and advocates for mutual tolerance. Churches in Malawi have also been identified as significant sources of stigma for people living with HIV, highlighting a moral exclusion within religious spaces despite their historical role in mitigating the pandemic. Similarly, in Zimbabwe, the intersection of sexuality, gender, and traditional Shona identity reveals ongoing struggles against efforts to naturalise homophobia. Zimbabwean law also presents significant constraints for key populations, including men who have sex with men, in accessing HIV prevention and treatment services (Chikava et al., 2023). These parallels suggest that the challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ individuals in Botswana, particularly within religious and health spheres, are part of a broader regional dynamic shaped by cultural, religious, and legal frameworks.

Given these profound challenges, Gerald West's work on community-based biblical reading offers a vital methodological approach for analysing how pastors and communities in Botswana interpret Scripture. West advocates for "Contextual Bible Study" (West, 2014), a method that empowers marginalised communities to engage with biblical texts in ways that speak to their lived realities and promote liberation. Specifically, his work with people living with HIV demonstrates how their laments can pose new questions to traditional biblical scholarship, prompting a re-evaluation of interpretations that foster stigmatisation (West, 2017). Applying this methodology in Botswana would involve facilitating dialogues where LGBTIQ+ individuals, including those living with HIV and AIDS, can share their experiences and collaboratively re-read biblical passages that have historically been used against them. This approach aims to uncover redemptive interpretations that affirm their dignity and humanity, challenging the "texts of terror" and fostering a theology of acceptance and justice.

As per the above studies, the challenges faced by the LGBTIQ+ community in Botswana, particularly within the church setting, include discrimination, humiliation, pressure to conform to heteronormative norms, isolation, and internal strife, all exacerbated by the context of HIV and AIDS. These challenges stem from societal and cultural biases, limited acceptance within religious communities and conflicting personal identities with religious doctrines. The lack of understanding, empathy and compassion within the church exacerbates the difficulties faced by LGBTIQ+ individuals, leading to feelings of isolation, anger towards God, and spiritual challenges.

As highlighted earlier, the HPA emphasises empowering individuals, considering their physical, spiritual, psychological and social needs, fostering open and honest communication and promoting inclusivity and understanding within the community. By adopting this framework, caregivers can create safe and affirming spaces that address the interconnected dimensions of individuals' lives, provide support for self-acceptance, and navigate the complexities of aligning personal identity and health status with religious teachings. Furthermore, this approach can help address the challenges faced by the LGBTIQ+ community in Botswana by promoting dialogue, self-awareness, and balance within individuals, fostering a supportive and empathetic environment within religious communities, and advocating for inclusivity and understanding. By acknowledging the intricate interplay between religious doctrines, societal norms, health realities and the challenges faced by the LGBTIQ+ community, a holistic pastoral care approach can contribute to promoting mental health, well-being, and empowerment

among individuals navigating their identities and health within the church setting in Botswana.

Biblical Interpretation and Its Implications for HIV and AIDS

Interpretation of the Bible has often contributed to violence and stigma against the LGBTIQ+ community, particularly within the context of HIV and AIDS. Verses from Leviticus, such as Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13, have been cited to condemn homosexuality and by extension to justify discrimination against LGBTIQ+ individuals. Leviticus 18:22 states, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination,” while Leviticus 20:13 adds, “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them” (Madigele, 2015). This approach to biblical interpretation, often termed “texts of terror” (Trible, 1984), stands in contrast to the broader African theological scholarship that critically engages with HIV, Christianity and sexual diversity.

Such interpretations have significant implications for individuals living with HIV and AIDS, perpetuating a culture of blame and shame. By framing HIV and AIDS because of sinful behaviour, these interpretations exacerbate the stigma faced by the LGBTIQ+ community and contribute to their exclusion and marginalisation. This narrative disregards the complex social, economic and medical factors contributing to the spread of HIV and fails to uphold the dignity and humanity of those affected. The narrative thus overlooks the structural violence that increases vulnerability and facilitates the spread of HIV. West, van der Walt, and Kaoma argue that faith-based interpretations often perpetuate violence, calling for reimagined engagement between churches and LGBTIQ+ groups to enable African Christian faith to become redemptive rather than violent (West et al., 2016). Similarly, Chitando and Machingura (2022), through their critical examinations in works like *Religion and Sexuality in Zimbabwe*, highlights how biblical texts shape public discourse on homosexuality, impacting identity and rights. Kaoma (2017), in his work titled *Christianity, Globalization and Protective Homophobia*, emphasises liberationist readings that affirm human dignity by exposing how global Christian movements fuel homophobia in Africa. Van Klinken (2018) also highlights the need for developing an African queer theology that challenges silence and taboos around sexual diversity in African Christian circles.

A more compassionate and inclusive interpretation of the Bible is crucial for countering these harmful narratives. The teachings of Jesus, which emphasise love, compassion, and non-judgment, offer a counter-narrative to exclusionary interpretations. In Matthew 22:37–40, Jesus states, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend on all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37–40). This emphasis on love and compassion can serve as a foundation for a more inclusive and supportive approach within the church. West's (2014) work on contextual Bible study, particularly with people living with HIV, demonstrates how communities can re-read biblical texts for liberation, allowing the lament of the marginalised to pose new questions to biblical scholarship (West, 2017). (Duncan 2020) further notes how the

Bible is often used as a “double-edged sword” to both blame and condemn homosexuals, despite African cultures having a more complex history with diverse sexual behaviours.

In addressing HIV and AIDS, adopting a pastoral approach that prioritises the well-being and dignity of all individuals regardless of sexual orientation or health status is essential. This approach involves challenging harmful interpretations of scripture and promoting a more inclusive and compassionate understanding of Christian teachings. By doing so, the church can play a crucial role in reducing stigma, supporting those affected by HIV and AIDS and fostering a more inclusive and loving community. Kaoma (2017) offers an analysis of how Jesus' teachings can challenge dualistic perceptions of creation and affirm sexual diversity, arguing that Christianity can learn to accept non-heterosexuals as full members of the human family.

The insights provided by *Dipolelo tsa Rona* LEGABIBO (2016) and Madigele (2015) highlight the urgent need for this shift in biblical interpretation and pastoral care. Embracing a perspective rooted in love and compassion, as opposed to exclusion and judgment, is vital for addressing the challenges faced by the LGBTIQ+ community and those living with HIV and AIDS. As highlighted in the following section, there must be transformation of the legal sector if these ideals are to be achieved and sustained.

Legal Transformations (2016-2019)

The legal landscape concerning LGBTIQ+ rights in Botswana has witnessed notable transformations, particularly with the decriminalisation of same-sex relationships in 2019. Starting from the decision in the case of Attorney-General v. Rammoge in 2016, where the court allowed the registration of Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals of Botswana (LEGABIBO) as a society, marked an important step toward recognizing the equal right of all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation, to form associations for the protection of their interests. This decision carries significant benefits for the LGBTIQ+ community in Botswana, contributing to legal recognition, protection of fundamental rights, advocacy opportunities, increased visibility, and the establishment of a precedent supporting the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community (Jjuuko, Gloppen, Msosa, & Viljoen, 2022). This also provides hope to reduce the violence faced by the LGBTIQ+ community.

In 2017, Botswana made significant progress regarding the rights of transgender individuals. The landmark case involved a transgender woman, Tshepo Ricki Kgositau, who won a legal battle to have her gender identity recognised on her national identity document. The High Court of Botswana ordered that her gender be changed from male to female on her identification document. This decision was hailed as a major victory for transgender rights in Botswana and set a precedent for similar cases in the country. The court ruled that the refusal to change gender markers violated various rights, including privacy, equal protection, freedom from degrading treatment, freedom of expression, and protection from discrimination (Magashula, 2021).

In 2018, President Mokgweetsi Masisi of Botswana demonstrated a relatively progressive stance on LGBTIQ+ issues. He made statements supporting the rights of LGBTIQ+ individuals, emphasising that they deserve to have their rights protected like any other citizens. In June 2019, the Botswana High Court, in a landmark decision, decriminalised same-sex relationships between consenting adults in private. This decision affirmed that regulating private conduct between consenting adults is a violation

of constitutional rights to privacy and liberty. Additionally, the Court of Appeal upheld constitutional rights related to assembly, association, and expression for LGBTIQ+ individuals, emphasising equal protection under the law without discrimination (Jjuuko, Gloppen, Msosa, & Viljoen, 2022; Magashula, 2021).

In Botswana, societal acceptance of LGBTIQ+ individuals is intricately woven into a complex tapestry shaped by legal frameworks, political dynamics, shared beliefs, cultural norms and influential entities like religion and the media. While positive changes in juridical opinions and public statements, including those from the president, indicate evolving attitudes towards the LGBTIQ+ community, potential discrepancies within the seemingly progressive legal framework emerge over time. Despite legal progress, an exclusive reliance on progressive judicial decisions without a comprehensive legislative or policy framework proves insufficient for safeguarding the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community (Magashula, 2021).

The gender marker case brought to light the intricacies of legal recognition, where the court, while affirming rights, imposed prerequisites like gender-affirming surgery and hormonal therapy for legal gender recognition. This approach, seemingly progressive, raises concerns as it inadvertently excludes individuals without access to such medical services within the national health system. The article emphasises the necessity of inclusive approaches that consider the broader community's lived experiences to ensure the effective and equitable protection of rights. Magashula and Dinokopila's insights further emphasise the need for a holistic perspective in navigating the intersectionality of legal, healthcare, and societal dimensions concerning the rights of the LGBTIQ+ population in Botswana (Magashula, 2021; Dinokopila, 2023). Thus, the ongoing discourse on LGBTIQ+ rights in Botswana necessitates a multifaceted approach that addresses both legal and societal aspects, fostering a more inclusive and equitable environment for all.

Despite the legalisation of same-sex relationships in Botswana in 2019, challenges persist in terms of violence, problematic societal attitudes, and lack of effective legal protections, making it difficult for LGBTIQ+ individuals to fully integrate and be accepted. While legal changes are a positive step, biases and discrimination continue to create barriers to equality and fairness for queer individuals. Instances of discrimination in areas such as employment, healthcare, and education highlight the ongoing impact of societal norms and prejudices on the daily lives of LGBTIQ+ people (Jjuuko, Gloppen, Msosa, & Viljoen, 2022). Additionally, the lack of legal safeguards leaves LGBTIQ+ individuals vulnerable to mistreatment and exclusion, further marginalising them in society. The absence of legal recognition for same-sex partnerships exacerbates these challenges, denying LGBTIQ+ couples important rights and benefits enjoyed by heterosexual couples. These systemic issues underscore the need for comprehensive legal and social reforms to ensure the rights and dignity of LGBTIQ+ individuals in Botswana (Magashula, 2021; Dinokopila, 2023).

Led by the Evangelical Fellowship of Botswana (EFB) and certain politicians, the anti-LGBTIQ+ movement in Botswana is gaining traction, presenting a formidable obstacle to the advancement of equality and inclusion for the vulnerable LGBTIQ+ community. Employing tactics such as lobbying, issuing public statements, and influencing policymakers, these church-led groups wield their religious authority and moral frameworks to shape public perception, sway political decisions, and impede

progress towards LGBTIQ+ rights. By perpetuating discrimination and marginalisation through lobbying efforts, dissemination of negative narratives, and encouragement of political opposition, extremist faith-based organisations underscore the intricate interplay of religion, politics, and societal attitudes in the pursuit of justice and equality (Jjuuko, Gloppen, Msosa, & Viljoen, 2022).

In essence, the legal transformations concerning LGBTIQ+ rights in Botswana, from the decriminalisation of same-sex relationships to the recognition of gender identity, highlight the evolving landscape of acceptance and inclusion. While positive strides have been made through judicial decisions and public statements, challenges persist due to societal attitudes and the lack of comprehensive legal safeguards, necessitating a holistic pastoral approach that addresses legal, social, and relational dimensions. In the face of anti-LGBTIQ+ movements led by religious groups, a pastoral response that promotes understanding, compassion, and advocacy for the rights and dignity of LGBTIQ+ individuals is essential to counter violence and discrimination and to foster a more inclusive and equitable society.

Societal and Religious Influences on LGBTIQ+ Rights in Botswana

The Church in Botswana, particularly represented by the Evangelical Fellowship of Botswana (EFB), plays a pivotal role in shaping societal attitudes towards sexual minorities, including those affected by HIV and AIDS. The EFB's stance on LGBTIQ+ rights has profound implications, particularly in the context of biblical interpretation and its potential for violence.

The EFB represents a faction within Botswana that vehemently opposes LGBTIQ+ rights, drawing on traditional biblical interpretations to justify its stance. This interpretation aligns with verses such as Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, which are often cited to condemn homosexuality as an “abomination” and a sin deserving of severe punishment (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13). The EFB has utilised these scriptural references to argue that HIV and AIDS is a divine punishment for perceived sinful behaviour, thus perpetuating stigma and discrimination against individuals living with HIV and AIDS. Adriaan van Klinken (2014) argues that religion plays a significant role in shaping nationalist ideologies in post-colonial Africa, particularly in regulating homosexuality. He focuses on Pentecostal Christianity in Zambia, where the nation's constitutional declaration as a Christian nation has fostered a form of “Pentecostal nationalism.” Within this framework, homosexuality is viewed as a threat to the nation's purity and is associated with the Devil.

The EFB's public demonstrations, such as the large-scale march in Gaborone in 2018, underscore its commitment to opposing legislative changes aimed at decriminalising same-sex relations (Fortuin, 2023). The organisation's vocal opposition is rooted in a biblical framework that views homosexuality as a violation of divine law. For instance, Reverend Biggie Butale and the EFB President have characterised homosexuality as “unnatural” and “immoral,” grounding their arguments in both theological and cultural terms (Fortuin and Samsam, 2023). These positions contribute to a culture of exclusion and violence, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and deepening the stigma faced by LGBTIQ+ individuals.

The EFB's influence extends beyond theological arguments to political engagement. Statements from political leaders associated with the EFB, such as Bishop Owen Isaacs,

reflect a broader societal resistance to LGBTIQ+ rights, often framed in terms of preserving national and moral values (Guardian and Sun, 2014). Isaacs's depiction of homosexuality as a threat to both Christian principles and Setswana cultural norms highlights the intersection of religious beliefs and political discourse in shaping public policy.

This opposition is not only theological but also political, with the EFB actively seeking to influence legislation and public opinion. The EFB's stance has led to calls for strong measures against LGBTIQ+ rights, based on interpretations of biblical texts that emphasise condemnation of same-sex relationships (Madigele, 2017). Such interpretations and advocacy have contributed to a hostile environment for LGBTIQ+ individuals, particularly those living with HIV/AIDS, exacerbating their marginalisation and reinforcing societal prejudices.

The EFB's approach highlights how biblical texts can be used to justify and perpetuate violence and discrimination. By framing HIV and AIDS because of sin, the EFB not only stigmatises individuals with the virus but also aligns with a broader narrative that uses religion to justify exclusion and violence. This interpretation fails to account for the complex realities of HIV and AIDS and instead promotes a narrative of blame and moral failing.

The EFB's opposition to LGBTIQ+ rights in Botswana, particularly in the context of HIV and AIDS, illustrates the significant impact of biblical interpretation on societal attitudes and political discourse. By relying on traditional and exclusionary readings of scripture, the EFB has contributed to a climate of stigma and discrimination. Addressing these issues requires a shift towards a more inclusive and compassionate understanding of biblical teachings, fostering a supportive environment for all individuals, including those affected by HIV and AIDS. This shift is essential for reducing violence and promoting equality, both within religious communities and in broader societal contexts. The insights provided by Madigele (2015) emphasise the need for this reinterpretation and underscore the role of religious and political discourse in shaping attitudes towards LGBTIQ+ individuals. Embracing a perspective rooted in love and compassion, rather than condemnation and exclusion, is vital for fostering a more just and inclusive society.

Addressing Theological and Cultural Biases: A Holistic Pastoral Approach

In the context of HIV and AIDS, the Bible has often been interpreted in ways that perpetuate violence and stigma, particularly against the LGBTIQ+ community. Traditional interpretations of biblical texts, such as those found in Leviticus, have been used to justify exclusion and discrimination. For instance, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, which describe homosexual acts as "abominations", have been cited to argue that HIV and AIDS is a divine punishment for perceived sinfulness. This interpretation not only stigmatises individuals living with HIV and AIDS but also reinforces harmful biases against LGBTIQ+ individuals.

Holistic pastoral theology, however, challenges these biased interpretations by emphasising the need for cultural awareness and critical reflection in theological practice. Pattison and Woodward (2000) highlight the importance of recognising how cultural norms shape theological perspectives. In pastoral care, this means acknowledging that cultural attitudes significantly influence interpretations of scripture, and thus, may perpetuate stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes.

Holistic pastoral theology calls for a re-evaluation of traditional gender norms and cultural biases that contribute to theological perspectives. The emphasis is on understanding how cultural expectations shape religious interpretations, particularly those related to gender and sexuality. Pattison (1994) and Lartey (2003) stress the need for pastoral caregivers to be aware of cultural influences when addressing sensitive issues such as LGBTIQ+ rights. This awareness allows for a more inclusive and respectful interpretation of biblical teachings, challenging traditional biases that have led to violence and discrimination.

The Evangelical Fellowship of Botswana (EFB), with its alignment to traditional societal norms, illustrates how cultural expectations can reinforce discriminatory theological stances. The EFB's resistance to LGBTIQ+ rights, based on interpretations of scripture and cultural norms, exemplifies how entrenched biases can lead to systemic exclusion and violence (Fortuin and Samsam, 2023:47). In contrast, holistic pastoral theology advocates for a pastoral approach that critically engages with these biases, fostering an environment of acceptance and inclusivity.

Holistic pastoral theology emphasises the importance of advocacy for social justice and inclusivity within religious contexts. This approach integrates insights from scholars like Lartey (2003) and Graham (1992), who advocate for a global justice perspective and a psychosystemic approach to pastoral care. These perspectives highlight the need for culturally sensitive interventions and a commitment to challenging societal prejudices that contribute to resistance against LGBTIQ+ rights.

Doehring's (2004) emphasis on justice and power analysis within pastoral care complements this approach, underscoring the importance of confronting power imbalances and advocating for justice. By addressing these imbalances and promoting a more inclusive interpretation of biblical teachings, holistic pastoral theology seeks to dismantle structures that perpetuate discrimination and violence.

In addressing theological and cultural biases, holistic pastoral theology offers a framework for re-evaluating traditional interpretations of the Bible that have been used to justify violence and discrimination, particularly in the context of HIV and AIDS. By fostering cultural awareness, promoting inclusivity, and advocating for social justice, this approach challenges harmful biases and encourages a more compassionate and respectful understanding of biblical teachings. The insights provided by Pattison, Lartey, and other scholars underline the need for a critical and inclusive approach to pastoral care, aimed at creating a supportive environment for all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or health status.

Conclusion

This article emphasises the importance of adopting a holistic and inclusive approach to pastoral care that respects and affirms the dignity of all individuals. By challenging harmful interpretations and embracing a more compassionate and just understanding of biblical teachings, we can work towards a more inclusive and supportive society. It has highlighted the detrimental effects of traditional theological perspectives, such as those found in Leviticus, which have been used to perpetuate stigma and discrimination against LGBTIQ+ communities. It has also illustrated the role of cultural norms in shaping these theological biases, emphasising the need for a more inclusive and compassionate approach to interpreting scripture. Holistic pastoral theology offers a constructive path

forward by advocating for cultural awareness, critical reflection, and social justice. This approach challenges traditional biases and encourages a re-evaluation of gender norms and theological perspectives that contribute to violence and discrimination. By fostering dialogue and promoting inclusivity, holistic pastoral theology seeks to dismantle the structures that perpetuate prejudice and to support a more equitable and accepting environment for all individuals. The Evangelical Fellowship of Botswana's resistance to LGBTIQ+ rights exemplifies the intersection of theological, cultural, and political influences in shaping societal attitudes. Addressing these biases requires not only a re-examination of theological interpretations but also an active commitment to advocating for the dignity and rights of all individuals, irrespective of their sexual orientation or health status. This will ensure that faith no longer does violence against LGBTIQ+ individuals, but that faith becomes loving, accommodating and supportive to one and all. Building on insights from West, Chitando and Machingura, Kaoma, and Van Klinken, this article underscores the urgency of hermeneutical shifts that dismantle theological violence and promote inclusive pastoral praxis.

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