

## Article

# Gender-Based Violence in Some Pentecostal Churches—A South African Study

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**Abstract:** One of the most devastating practices to be normalised in modern times is gender-based violence. Women and girls in South Africa can no longer enjoy the freedom that was promised by the country's Freedom Charter during the dawn of democracy. Rape, killing and other forms of female persecution have become common practices, and the most worrying part of this is that the perpetrators of this violence seem to enjoy more freedom than their victims. Unfortunately, this kind of violence is no longer a secular issue but something that is now encountered in religious circles, places in which most people would hope to be sheltered and protected. The article investigates these kinds of violence within the parameters of religious institutions, specifically Pentecostal churches, and also makes some suggestions as to what kinds of approaches we need as a country to eliminate this pandemic. This article uses a desktop/secondary approach to gather data and to reach the conclusions made as a bases for the argument.

**Keywords:** Pentecostal churches; gender-based violence; rape; sexual abuse; religious leaders; liberation & constitution



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## 1. Introduction

Gender-based violence is a serious historical and global problem that has been described by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) as "the most pervasive yet least visible human rights violation in the world". It is a social issue that cuts across all people and all groups, and it is prevalent at all levels of social economic standing in human society (Okunola 2021). Women in Asia and the Middle East are killed in the name of honour. Girls in West Africa undergo genital mutilation in the name of custom. Migrant and refugee women in Western Europe are attacked for not accepting the social morals of their host communities. Young girls in Southern Africa are raped and infected with HIV/AIDS because the perpetrators believe that sex with virgins will cure them of their diseases (UNAIDS 2022). In the richest and most developed countries in the world, women are battered to death by their partners (Amnesty International 2004). These are just some of the human rights violations faced by women all over the world, all of them falling under the description of 'gender-based violence'.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between females and males (Mlambo-Ngcuka 2020). GBV is usually characterised by physical, sexual, mental, or economic harm forced on a person. It is usually experienced by women or young girls and includes sexual harassment and violence, female genital mutilation, child marriages, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours (Okunola 2021). Over the past few decades, more males have been coming forward about having experienced gender-based violence, and it is no longer a taboo for men to report being victims of abuse.

This paper discusses the nature and extent of gender-based violence and focuses particularly on the sexual abuse of women and children within Pentecostal religious institutions, on the impact of such abuse, and on survivors' experiences when disclosing it. The study examines the nature and adequacy of institutional responses to gender-based violence within these religious institutions. The researchers utilized previous data, case studies and media reports to build in-depth knowledge about the problem and to make recommendations to prevent sexual abuse—or any other type of abuse—from occurring in religious institutions. In addition, they have suggested effective responses for the organisation and the community at large.

## 2. Research Problem

The escalation of gender-based violence noted during the COVID-19 lockdown seems to increase by the day (Ndlovu et al. 2022). The perpetuation of these unjust practices, where women and young children are persecuted (mostly) by males, is more astonishing when we consider that some of these religious institutions have turned into places where the perpetrators of this violence live, despite the fact that they are usually viewed as a beacon of hope for communities (Washinyira 2022). According to Pertek et al. (2023), research suggests that 75% of people in South African churches experience some form of gender-based violence (GBV). Some say that the church's response to GBV has been complicated by its patriarchal teachings and society and that many churches in South Africa perpetuate GBV through their practices and structure. Others say that religious beliefs can be both a protective and risk factor for GBV, as they can help people cope but also normalise violence (Pertek et al. 2023).

While speaking to We Will Speak Out South Africa (WWSOSA), Ms Tamara Braam, Senior Gender-Based Violence Specialist in the Office of the President of South Africa, suggested, "To end GBV, faith leaders need to ensure their voices are heard for advocacy and working towards solutions, but also for examining themselves as leaders and structures so they don't inadvertently hide or normalise GBV" (WWSOSA 2022). This is evidence that gender-based violence in South Africa is not entirely secular in origin and that as religion is not innocent in this matter.

This study investigates why such activities take place in such sacred spaces and examines the measures that can be applied to combat this behaviour. As an indication that the church in general has not been doing enough to work against GBV, the leader of the South African Council of Churches (SACC), Bishop Malusi Mpumplwana, has been quoted apologising on behalf of the SACC (Rantho 2023). In backing up this apology, the SACC cited the case and trial of Pastor Timothy Omotoso. The report by Nomvelo Masango (2021) entitled "*Abuse in Religious Spaces Still a Problem*" articulates similar challenges that this article aims to unmask.

## 3. Research Objectives

- To investigate the experience of young people who have been sexually abused/violated within Pentecostal religious institutions.
- To determine the role of the church in condemning this behaviour.
- To investigate why religious leaders and members of the ministry in these churches resort to this behaviour.
- To examine how the abuse affects the victims and their families.
- To determine the impact abusive behaviour imposes on the reputation of religious institutions and how this shapes the community.
- To suggest approaches as to how these tendencies can be eliminated: explaining the role of the community, the role of the government and the role of traditional leadership can assist in tackling this problem.

## 4. Literature Review

### 4.1. *The Rise of Gender-Based Violence in South Africa*

Gender-based violence refers to any type of harm that is perpetrated against a person or group of people because of their factual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity. Gender-based violence depends on an imbalance of power and is carried out with the intention of humiliating a person or group of people who feel inferior or making them feel inferior (Council of Europe 2022). Gender-based violence can take many forms, including sexual, physical and verbal abuse. The perpetrator can be anyone, and in most cases, it is someone close to the victim, for example, a current or former partner, a friend, a colleague or a school-mate. Sometimes it is people who act on behalf of cultural, religious or state institutions who inflict abuse on “subordinates” (Anderson 2005).

South Africa is known for its notoriously high incidence of violence against women. Gouwes (2022) reported police figures at the time as showing that 10,818 cases had been reported in the first quarter of 2022. South Africa is listed by Interpol (2020) among the countries with the highest incidences of rape in the world, while gender-based violence against women and girls is a serious global pandemic. According to The World Bank (2019), one in three women is affected by GBV in their lifetime, highlighting the urgent need for intervention. During the second Presidential Summit in 2022, President Cyril Ramaphosa reiterated his concern about the rapes and killings of women in the country, especially the number of such crimes committed against elderly women. The President described the alarming rate of GBV as a “*disturbing story, the story of a nation at war with itself*” (Department of Justice & Constitutional Development 2022).

Additionally, research by Jewkes et al. (2021) found that 56% of men in South Africa admit to having perpetrated some form of violence against women. A study conducted by Interpol (Interpol 2020) provides horrifying data, reflected below, illustrating the magnitude of this problem in South Africa.

- According to Interpol, in South Africa, someone is either sexually abused or raped every 25 s, and this is the reason why Interpol consider the country to be the “rape capital of the world”.
- It is estimated that a woman born in South Africa has a greater chance of being raped than learning to read.
- Two out of five South African male learners say they have been raped, according to a survey carried out in 1200 schools across the country.
- Thirty-five per cent of women worldwide have experienced either physical or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence.

### 4.2. *Pentecostal Churches*

There has been widespread adoption of a new form of Pentecostalism throughout the world over the past two decades, with the growth most significant in Africa. Many young men and women have seceded from their traditional faith communities—whether mainline Christianity, evangelical traditions or classical Pentecostal faith—to pioneer a new movement variously labelled as Neo-Charismatic, Neo-Pentecostal, New African Pentecostalism, or even New Prophetic Churches. These dissenters “believe that their spiritual gifts are choked by rigid structures of ecclesiastical authority” (Resane 2017).

Neo-Pentecostalism is commonly known for its use of “God-talk, a manner of speaking that promises people solutions to their socio-economic issues, such as unemployment and poverty, if they obey the precepts of the so-called ‘prophets’ or ‘men of God’” (Shingange 2023). The Neo-Pentecostal church movements contribute to GBV by distorting theology to fit cultural norms and values (Brokaw 2020, p. 2). The chairperson of the South African chapter of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Nontando Hadebe, asserts the following: “Religion plays a role in the continuation of GBV through traditional teachings about women in the Bible, leaving them feeling like they are subordinate to men” (Landman 2022). Hadebe further claims that some of these religious narratives that have been imposed on women are the root cause of their staying in abusive relationships, as they

believe that they are obeying God by doing so (Landman 2022). Therefore, cultural and religious narratives regarding women's subordination and GBV are linked.

Le Roux and Bowers-Du Toit (2017, p. 32) claim that religious teachings can encourage attitudes that support the justification of GBV and prevent survivors from seeking help to flee from abusive relationships. This suggests, in line with Muyambo (2018), that Neo-Pentecostal Christian beliefs about patriarchy and gender roles can have an impact on family dynamics and finally result in violence. This sometimes occurs because of Pentecostal churches' literal interpretations of the Bible and their fundamentalist teachings, which frequently encourage women to submit to the point that they fail to objectively see instances of gender-based violence around them (Mapulanga-Hulston and Chikoya 2020, p. 106). Nadar (2009, p. 556) concludes that the idea that women should submit to their husbands causes violence when women choose not to do so. According to Nadar, this is made worse by the belief that males are inherently the heads of families, which encourages violence to be allowed to go unchecked and keeps women in abusive situations (Nadar 2009, p. 556). Thus, it is important to examine Neo-Pentecostal spirituality and its views on the subordination of women which causes them to unconsciously ritualise their bodies and sexualities (Kaunda 2020, p. 226).

#### How Pentecostal Ministers Use God-Talk to Manipulate the Congregation/Victims

God-talk serves as a theoretical framework for this article. Shingange (2023) posits that God-talk is also commonly employed locally and abroad in religious and Christian spaces where Christian leaders often use religious cues in their language, sermons, announcements, as well as altar calls to impose and reinforce certain religious beliefs.

Therefore, God-talk is a Pentecostal rhetoric of threats and intimidation used by pastors in the pulpit and can be best referred to as the intersectionality of the rhetoric of "thus says the Lord" (Shingange 2020, p. 125), of "psychological manipulation" (Kgatle 2023, p. 6), and of "touch not my anointed", as well as psychological manipulation. Zimunya and Gwara (2019, p. 124) refers to this as "pastoral power" that cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people's minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets. It implies a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it. In this regard, Neo-Pentecostal pastors use God-talk to exert this pastoral power and to control their followers' responses to their demands. Thus, these pastors use God's cues to manipulate, intimidate and convince unsuspecting congregants to be subjected to GBV.

Sadly, some of these stories come from Neo-Pentecostal organisations in South Africa, where pastors and other church officials are essentially the perpetrators. De Oliveira (2022) asserts that, in Soshanguve, north of Pretoria, a 30-year-old preacher was accused of raping adolescents and young men after persuading them that they were the "selected ones" in his church. These young men were enrolled in his church's ministry school to become pastors after they graduated. In another instance, Meyer (2022) posits that a pastor in Ekurhuleni, the East Rand region of Gauteng, "raped eight and nine-year-old girls, and further sexually assaulted and sexually groomed them when they would go to his house for choir practice and bible study". A seemingly endless supply of accounts such as these demonstrate that GBV is a social and religious issue that affects all segments of society, regardless of gender or ethnicity.

Hence, according to Nduna and Tshona (2020, pp. 1–2), GBV should be viewed as a multidimensional issue that affects both men and women, including gay and transgender individuals. People from challenging circumstances, such as those affected by the socio-economic status of women, and other vulnerable groups, including the youth, persons with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ persons, are the main targets of the perpetrators (South African Government News Agency 2023).

Against the backdrop of the South African News Agency citation above, gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF) is also common in religious spaces and have become a serious challenge. This is why the need to address the contribution of religious bodies

to this very disturbing trend is urgent. This also means that the current interlinking of religious movements and Neo-Pentecostalism in South Africa with GBV needs to be strongly condemned.

#### 4.3. Previous Inquiries into GBV in Religious Organisations

The South Africa Council of Churches (SACC) has a long history of advocacy, care, and empowerment in South Africa. It was formed in 1968 to promote black leadership in mainstream Christian churches and to support the liberation struggle on religious and moral grounds. The SACC is also one of the largest voices for the church and moral reconstruction in South Africa (SACC 2024). The SACC has coordinated an Unburdening Panel to investigate abuse in churches. The General Secretary of the SACC, Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana, works with lawyers and researchers to coordinate the panel. The panel refers people who want to share their stories to lawyers, who then categorize them based on the nature of their case (Unite Behind 2017). The aim of the inquiry was to obtain an understanding of the problems that existed across different types of religious institutions. An additional aim was to examine religious organisations that had the most child abuse claims/allegations against them.

Besides this SACC inquiry, there is not a lot of information revealing other inquiries made by the SACC or any Pentecostal religious institution despite the rising numbers of abuse claims occurring in the religious institutions in South Africa.

#### 4.4. What Causes Religious Leaders/Members of the Ministry to Resort to Abusive Behaviour?

In South Africa, there is a lack of proper regulations and policies that control and monitor religious institutions that operate outside the law (Memela 2018). Therefore, there are many cases of GBV experienced by the youth within the premises of religious institutions. In South Africa, there are many independent churches run by both South Africans and foreign nationals. The lack of effective regulations in the religious sector has resulted in their behaviour not being accountable to anyone. Most Pentecostal religious institutions are run by patriarchal leaders, leading to the so-called “Big Man” syndrome. Men who are leaders within these religious institutions are highly respected and feared. They are looked upon as men of God. Such men are regarded as superior, while women are at the bottom of the church ranks. This causes gender problems because women are seen as inferior to men, which creates a sense that men can control women (Mlambo-Ngcuka 2020). Why is GBV so prevalent in South Africa? Is it because of the way males are brought up to exert power and control over vulnerable women? South Africa is well known as a very patriarchal country, and many cultural and traditional events and activities entrench this patriarchal behaviour reinforcing power over women (Mpuzana and Mofokeng 2023). The justice and police systems shift blame to the victim rather than the perpetrator, with questions such as “Why were you alone?”, “Why were you dressed in that way?”, and “Why were you out so late?” being posed (Gurm 2020). This automatically places vulnerable victims in a difficult situation at a time when they actually need help and are survivors of horrific acts (Govender 2023).

Most of the South African population lives in poverty and South Africa is ranked as one of the countries with the highest unemployment rate and inequality gaps (Hutching 2022). These factors make people desperate to believe the promises made within these religious institutions. Most people who end up as victims of this kind of abuse are young, and this is something that religious leaders take advantage of. Children who have graduated from university but who are still unemployed are preyed on and they often rely on religious institutions for assistance. Due to their poor economic state, they consider religious institutions as places of hope and as havens. It is easy for leaders to exploit girls in this position often by saying “God said this”. One of the witnesses in the Timothy Omotso case (Omotso is a Nigerian pastor who is was, at the time of writing, on trial for the sexual abuse of young girls in his church), stated that the pastor had told her and others that if they did not conform to certain standards, they and their families would die (Memela 2018).

Patriarchy exists in these religious institutions, and it has been reported that boys are also abused and are reluctant to come forward. Their reluctance arises from the way they are treated by law enforcement officers when reporting such cases (Fortune and Anton 2005). When things are not going well within households, mothers usually seek assistance and support from the church, and this is where the problem occurs. The young girls who were part of the Omotso case said that music was the idea that was sold to them. They were told that by joining the worship team, they would be able to achieve success and be of help at home. They were also told that they would travel and experience a different life. This was the dream sold to them that would turn out to be the beginning of their downfall. Abuse is motivated by power and control, and these are also the basis for, patriarchy. It is therefore not surprising that abuse is evident in these circles (Conventry 2022).

The misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the headship of men, as drawn from Biblical texts, also play a pivotal role in gender inequality usually leading to GBV (Baloyi 2008). For instance, “submission” (Ephesians 5:21–22) is a biblical concept, but the way culture and tradition influence the interpretation of the word becomes problematic. This leads to some religious leaders thinking that it is right to put women into submissive positions where they are abused (Baloyi 2008, pp. 4–6). This view is echoed by (Musodza et al. 2015, p. 126) who argue that for some people, the church has become a haven of for those who would perpetrate gender-based violence and that this is condoned it through their misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the Bible. However, the word “authority”, which also appears more than a hundred times in the Bible, is rarely used within relationships between males and females, even within the marital context. This informs Van der Walt’s (1995, p. 8) understanding of the word as referring to a reciprocal kind of authority, rather than a hierarchical one. If authority is to be used appropriately, it is the contention of the authors of this article that the word “authority” should be separate and clearly distinct from the word “power”.

Perpetrators often groom their victims from an early age in such a way that they are unaware of what is happening. McMaster (2020) defines sexual grooming as the gradual sexualisation of a relationship between a person with authority (in this case, religious) and a child or teen. It is described as beginning with non-sexual touching that then progresses to sexual contact over time. In most instances, the child may not even understand the abusive and improper nature of the behaviour. An interesting fact is that the perpetrator earns the child’s trust so, by the time abuse happens, the child feels they have given consent (McMaster 2020). Abusers not only draw on their positions of power and authority, but they also use assertions about God’s will. They manipulate their victims into thinking that what is being done to them is ordained by God (Adams 2022).

It is easy for religious leaders or members of religious institutions to get away with abuse. People’s devotion to the institution shape’s their social identity, especially in the case of more devout individuals. It is challenging for victims to come forward as spiritual/religious leaders are both highly regarded and credible. This leads to members of the institution being both in denial and sceptical of the victims’ claims. In Nigeria, researchers found that pastors had groomed children under the pretext of freeing them from demonic possession, using “exorcism” as a euphemism for sexual assault. The pastors were protected by the absolute trust bestowed upon them by the community (Conventry 2022). It is this kind of mentality that allows perpetrators to carry on with abusive behaviour, as they think they are untouchable and can get away with anything.

#### 4.5. Where the Abuse Occurred

A study conducted by the Royal Commission Inquiry in Australia investigating abuse within religious institutions revealed that child sexual abuse was happening in religious schools, places of worship or at religious activities. Some revealed that the abuse would occur during recreational activities affiliated with religious organisations, such as at church camps (Royal Commission 2017).

- Religious schools—studies show that children who attend religious schools (boarding or day) often experienced some form of abuse (Denney 2021). Victims of this horrific behaviour are girls and boys of primary to secondary school age. Studies have revealed how these institutions have permitted abuse and how they have silenced victims. What is shocking is that such abuse has been experienced in various locations within religious organisations and children have been abused by people serving in religious ministries. According to the Royal Commission (2017), most victims report having been afraid because the church was located next to the school grounds, which meant that it was easy for the perpetrators to gain access to the children. Most of the victims disclosed that the perpetrators were mostly adults who held various positions within the religious organisations concerned. An interesting revelation was that some of the children had been abused by other children in their religious schools. About 29.5% of the children interviewed by the Royal Commission testified to this.
- Residential institutions—residential institutions that were managed by religious organisations included orphanages, children’s homes and missions. These residential institutions were often located in remote areas and the children were often isolated, having little or no interaction with people from outside the institution (Royal Commission 2017). Children who stayed in these residential facilities often came from harsh backgrounds, with some having been exposed to physical brutality, emotional abuse and extreme neglect. These homes accommodated children of various ages, both girls and boys. The children were either orphans, state wards, child migrants or children with disabilities, meaning that they were vulnerable. This made it easier for the perpetrator/s to violate them. Sexual abuse would take place in numerous locations in the institutions, such as in shared dormitories or nearby staff bedrooms. Studies have shown that most perpetrators are male, but cases have been reported against female perpetrators. According to claims made against the Catholic Church, residential institutions were identified as having the most claims of child sexual abuse (IICSA 2021).
- Places of worship and religious activities—abuse takes place during recreational activities affiliated with religious organisations at church camps or at youth groups. In the Omotso case, it was evident that they used being part of the worship team to lure young girls (Memela 2018). Every religious organisation has its own places of worship and ritual activities, often involving children. It has been found that children often experience sexual abuse in places of worship (houses of religious formation, the confessional booth or ritual bathhouses). Most of the perpetrators who attend such religious events are part of the religious ministry. These religious figures are highly respected and trusted within the community and in the ministry. This enables perpetrators to gain access to grooming and abusing children (McMaster 2020). The events at which such abuse occurs are used as a front, and the perpetrators give the impression that they are there to supervise the children. However, behind closed doors, the children are violated.

#### 4.6. What Factors Hinder Victims from Disclosing Abuse?

Looking at previous studies, one of the common themes that has prevented victims from coming forward with abuse claims is the perception that the religious community is “closed”. This means that children might have had limited interaction with the broader community. Some of the victims expressed that growing up in religious communities with little or no education about sex left them vulnerable to sexual abuse (Denney 2021). In rural areas, people who are exposed to little or have no family turn towards the church for guidance. In devout families, parents have a high regard for people in ministry and trust them to supervise their children; indeed, people in ministry may be seen as representatives of God and this creates an image that clouds their judgement. Many parents cannot believe that their religious leaders or other members of the ministry could be capable of sexually abusing a child. In most cases, the perpetrator turns out to have been from within the

religious ministry, often with unfettered access to children, and this is what has enabled the abuse (Dearen and Rezendes 2022).

It is also a common notion that women having been deprived by culture and tradition of exposure to education and working life find themselves perpetually dependent, even today. Their economic dependence, particularly in rural areas, is accompanied by a lack of knowledge about their human rights, making them vulnerable to abuse and causing them to protect their perpetrators.

In his study, Baloyi (2008) discusses how sex hospitality is used as a traditional weapon, not only against the subject but also to oppress, abuse and violate women's rights. Analysing the study and previous scholars' work, it is noticeable that gender inequality is a serious global issue that leads to cases of gender-based violence.

This kind of mentality is often taken from a misinterpretation of the scriptures; for example, Judges 19:24 describes an old man who is ready to offer his young daughter or his own concubine to attackers to protect his visitors. Misinterpretation can arise when the literal translation of the text is interpreted without considering the context and the situation in which it was written. For instance, the fact that this Jewish man was ready to offer his concubine and daughter does not make it a ruling that women and girls must be victimised to please visitors; this is not a biblically sanctioned message, but rather describes the man's particular culture or that of his community. It is for this reason the authors of this article agree with Masenya when he says the following:

"It becomes understandable that male-oriented societies tend to confuse or even equate sexual activity with sexual violence. It is even more disturbing for religious communities, that some sections of the sacred scriptures are interpreted to support sexual violence against women and children. Women's sexuality is often defined and controlled by men both in the churches and in the households. Female bodies become sacrifices at the altars of male power and pleasure" (Masenya 2003, p. 102).

These four points highlight the impact of the patriarchal system and how this structure has silenced many women and young girls and stripped them of their rights. This type of behaviour enables the continuation of abuse in society, and eventually, it will continue to widen gender inequality and more women will be defenceless.

Some women simply hate being single and avoid it at all costs. Certainly, within the African traditional belief, not many people like to be associated with being single. The culture and the socialisation of children to become married people and parents have been constructed so that the value of a single person is reduced to being an abnormality. The fear of being single has been instilled culturally to such an extent that most females do not want to be associated with singlehood. According to Baloyi (2010a), there are various reasons, coupled with taboos, which label singleness as something undesirable. This makes a single person an outcast that no one would want to associate with. Byrne (2005) indicates that the stigma to which singles are subjected even goes to the point of accusing them of being witches and having a lack of intimacy. Marriage is the backbone of society (Phaswana 2005; Kimathi 1994, p. 40) and some women would rather choose to be in a marriage, even if it is abusive, for the sake of avoiding being an outcast.

Most women aspire to have a partner (boyfriend, fiancé or husband) as this gives them validation. It creates a sense of superiority as it shows they can keep a man. Having such a mentality tends to hinder victims from disclosing abuse as they are afraid of what society will think of them if they leave their husbands (Byrne 2005). There is a misconception that women who are married or in relationships are superior, while being single is looked down upon and is considered akin to having some sort of disease that society wants to get rid of (Morgan 2015). Culture places so much emphasis on being in a relationship that people who are single are considered inferior.

Another common factor concerning why some women do not want to be single is the matter of financial considerations. Having a partner means such women do not have to deal with financial burdens alone. In most cases, women depend on their men to take care



of their needs. In remote, under-developed and conservative (culturally) areas, the men are responsible for all financial matters and the women stay at home and take care of the household. The women have no say, and the men are in control. Therefore, a woman is expected to be submissive and not question anything her man does, even when he violates her rights.

Misunderstanding the bounds of lobolo is also an issue. Within many traditional marriages, it is believed that if a marriage is terminated because of certain reasons from the side of the woman, her parents are responsible for repaying the money received during lobolo negotiations when she returns to their home. In many instances, it is difficult to return such money for various reasons, for instance, the breadwinner or the father is dead, and the family no longer has any income.

Marriage represents the joining of two people and becoming one. However, this is not the case for some married women in rural areas as gender inequality remains entrenched due to cultural and patriarchal systems (Malesa and Sekudu 2022). The concept of lobola was introduced to create a relationship of lifelong commitment and mutual support between the families of the bride and groom. Previously, when lobola was paid, a man would attach value to the woman he had paid for. Lobola would make a woman an official wife and would seal her status as a worthy woman in the eyes of all. The man then would protect his woman, but this has changed over the years. When the man pays lobola for the woman, the man gains power over the woman and she loses her freedom and rights. The woman is even further reduced to the level of an acquired property, especially in cases where lobola was set high. As part of the patriarchal nature of society, it breeds inequality and widens the social power gap between men and women, thereby placing women in a subordinate position (Moona et al. 2009).

A study by Hague and Thiara (2009) in Uganda revealed the impact of lobola and showed how husbands would abuse their wives through rape and physical abuse. Women were viewed as property. Lobola has lost its traditional value over time and now the practice reinforces male dominance and female subordination. This creates gender inequality and enables men to abuse women without consequence (Asiimwe 2019).

All the above-mentioned factors contribute to women not being open about their abuse, and in some instances, women are not unaware that they are being abused. They have become numb to this kind of treatment and their dependency on men has silenced them.

## 5. Impact on the Victims

Many people who have experienced child sexual abuse suffer lifelong effects and many of the survivors still experience the ongoing impacts of abuse (Browne and Finkelhor 2022). Due to their traumatic experiences, some victims lose their religious faith and their trust in the religious organisations that were once a fundamental part of their lives. The impact of their traumatic experiences affects not only them but also their parents, siblings, partners and, in some cases, their communities. While victims survive such abuse, others who are not strong enough to deal with the pain, take their own lives. Countless emotional and psychological effects continue to traumatise abused women today around the globe (Rached et al. 2021).

## 6. How Religious Institutions Dealt with Abuse in the Past

Oduyoye and Kanyoro (1992) do not hesitate to point out that religious institutions, through theology, must be at the forefront of the struggle for justice for and the emancipation of women. In the past, religious institutions dealt with such issues internally, which resulted in the continuation of abuse within these organisations. Below, we examine the Catholic Church which, for decades, has been accused of violating young people within its premises.

There have been many cases of child abuse reported within the Catholic Church for many years. The perpetrators are usually priests or other members of religious life. The cases have involved many allegations, investigations, trials and convictions, as well as acknowledgement and apologies by church authorities (Schlumpf 2017). Gender-based

violence within religious institutions dates back even before the 1980s. The abuse has been experienced by the youth, especially young boys between 11 and 14. Some cases reveal that children as young as three have been victims of this behaviour. Many of these cases allege decades of abuse, frequently made by adults or older youth years after the abuse occurred. Allegations against members of the Catholic hierarchy have, in the past, often been covered up by the church. In cases of sexual abuse allegations or abusive behaviour by a Catholic priest, he would be moved to another parish and continue with the abuse there (Schlumpf 2017).

Previous studies indicate that, in most cases, religious leaders have known of allegations of child sexual abuse, yet they failed to take effective action. Some ignored the allegations and did not respond at all. Some treated alleged perpetrators leniently and failed to address the obvious risks they posed to children (Hanson et al. 2004). Some concealed the abuse and shielded perpetrators from accountability. Institutional reputations and individual perpetrators were prioritised over the needs of the victims and their families (Ellerbeck 2019). Religious institutions are often paralysed by not knowing how or whether to respond to allegations of abuse. Most researchers have revealed that having such cases within the church creates a divide, which causes victims to stop attending church. As the congregation is in denial, the victims' families stop going to church because of the fear of being judged by the community.

Historically, religious institutions have dealt with matters internally, especially matters pertaining to abuse. Abusive Catholic priests have usually received sanctions and treatment from Catholic service agencies. As a result, few of the offending priests have become involved in the criminal justice system (Fortune and Anton 2005). However, in recent years, there has been a shift and the Catholic Church has implemented policies promoting disclosure of cases of abuse and sexual offenders among the clergy and these cases have been directed to external agencies.

Commissions and conferences have been formed to tackle abuse within religious institutions and also to determine how the perpetrators can be held accountable and receive help so that this type of behaviour does not continue. Some institutions have implemented child protection reforms, while others have remained reluctant to accept the need for significant internal changes.

## 7. Recommendations (How Religious Institutions Can Respond to GBV)

The recommendations focus on factors that contributed to the occurrence of child sexual abuse in religious institutions and are appropriate institutional responses. The recommendations take into account internal culture as well as theological and scriptural beliefs and practices.

The correct interpretations of the misrepresented parts of the scriptures should be sought. Misinterpreted and misrepresented scriptures need to be studied again so that a better balanced understanding of such passages or verses can change the mind and thinking of a traditional man in this regard. This is where academics and theologians should exploit the opportunity to rewrite and correct that which was wrongly explained to influence the thinking of the people. An example of this is Baloyi's (2010b) work, entitled "A re-reading of John 8:1–11 from a pastoral liberative perspective on South African Women." In this, he reconsidered and explained differently the passage concerning how Jesus treated the woman who was taken to Him and accused by the Jews of adultery. The understanding of the Jews was that a woman should be punished while the man was not. Instead of judging the woman, Jesus asked who was innocent. This would remind those listening of the man she was committing adultery with and whom they had simply left out of the equation (Baloyi 2010b).

Besides reinterpreting scriptures, the church, which is also seen as a haven for these unfortunate practices, should, according to Musodza et al. (2015), emulate what one Zimbabwean church has been trying to implement as a remedy for this problem:

The United Methodist Church, Catholic Church, Anglican among others in Zimbabwe are taking leading positions in mobilising, facilitating and advocating for social equality, fiscal fairness among other values. The church is taking a lead in promoting social mobilization for the purpose of creating Gender awareness, and to foster positive attitude and behaviour change based on Biblical teaching necessary for the maintenance of gender equity (Musodza et al. 2015, p. 127).

There is a strong need for the abusers of women and girls to be held accountable for their behaviour in South Africa. This can be achieved by creating an environment of support for both victims and offenders, allowing congregations to work more openly and effectively. It is important for religious institutions to acknowledge gender-based violence and know that it is a sin. If the members take accountability and want to deal with the issue, it should not occur again. When offering safety to victims, it is also important that the church protects them. It should also work towards finding ways to prevent further violation of the youth and women by providing counselling to victims and reassuring them that it is not their fault and that the church will stand by them.

The church should provide training for staff and volunteers on how to recognise and respond to the signs of abuse. Under normal circumstances, GBV does not just happen, but it occurs as part of an identifiable process that takes place in stages. The neighbourhood, colleagues and friends of the abused might, for some time, be aware of what is going on before the peak of the abuse is observed by everyone. It is advisable that every member of a community who starts sensing or suspecting that a friend or a colleague is experiencing some kind of violence in the home must not keep quiet about it. These days, our communities—even those in the rural areas—are allocated with social workers who may have a good working relationship with local church pastors. Communication can save lives as well as eliminate GBV from our communities. Trained volunteers, as part of the community, will have ways of contacting all these stakeholders and can even anonymously report the signs of abuse if they are afraid of reprisals.

The church should create awareness about gender-based violence by displaying books and brochures on their premises. They should also run campaigns and workshops for the community so that people are also knowledgeable about the situation. The church should also set out guidelines for participation in church life by perpetrators of abuse. Congregations need to have guidelines to use as a minimum standard under which perpetrators of abuse shall have access to the Christian fellowship.

The church should provide counselling to victims of GBV. Both NGOs and pastoral care givers need to play their roles in terms of not only providing shelter for the escaped victims of abuse but also to ensure that their lives, damaged self-esteem and hopes are restored. While counselling will be aimed at empowering the affected individuals and their communities, the mental and psychological disorders arising from abuse demand reconstruction and deconstruction strategies. This is fundamentally the work in which social workers, pastoral counsellors, psychological counsellors and others must play their important part (Baloyi 2022, p. 9). South Africa has bodies that can offer help in this regard, such as Sonke Gender Justice, FAMSA and the Thuthuzela Care Centre, among others. The Council for Pastoral and Spiritual Counsellors (CPSC) could also lend a helping hand. This body has a list of pastoral counsellors who can be contacted online. The counsellors' contact information is available on their webpage ([www.cpsc.org.za](http://www.cpsc.org.za) accessed on 26 May 2024).

Premarital counselling as a preparation for marriage needs to be considered since research also indicates that abuse also takes place within the marital context. It should be noted that, without mentioning the names of the churches, there are challenges that married people in the church are encountering, which is why some pastors render this service within the church. In some countries, like Australia, the importance of protecting the youth and ensuring that religious institutions regain their dignity has been recognised. While certain reforms are underway in religious institutions (Borja et al. 2006), it will be a long time before the community can be confident that all religious institutions in Australia are as safe as possible for children.

The Faith Trust Institute is a national, multifaith, multicultural training and education organisation with global reach working towards ending sexual and domestic violence. The organisation provides communities with the tools and knowledge they need to address religious and cultural issues related to abuse (Adams 2022). Such organisations provide help to all religious institutions (Protestant and Roman Catholic, Anglican, Indigenous along with the Islamic and Judaic faiths and others). These kinds of organisations help spread awareness regarding GBV within religious institutions on a larger platform. The establishment of such an entity is a necessity as gender-based violence is a global issue that needs to be dealt with. The more organisations like Faith Trust are established, the more the message will spread and decrease the tolerance of abuse against the youth and women.

## 8. Conclusions

Through this study, it has been possible to gain an understanding of what gender-based violence is, especially within religious institutions. The study unpacked the experience of the victims within religious organisations and how being exposed to abusive behaviour and sexual violation have altered their lives. Through the study, it is clear how having a lack of regulations and policies within the religious sector has made it easier for perpetrators to get away with abuse. In addition, the way in which religious leaders and members of the ministry have used the congregation's devotion by manipulating them and hiding behind being "representatives of God" to prey on young people and abuse them has been exposed. Many leaders have not condemned such abuse by holding offenders accountable; rather, they have hidden these matters from their congregations, leading to perpetrators continuing with their abusive behaviour. This is evident in the increasing number of abuse cases within churches.

Overall, there has been a shift in the religious sector as this kind of behaviour is not acceptable, and churches are trying to apply rules and regulations to help combat abuse. Many organisations around the world are spreading awareness regarding abuse, not only within religious structures but also in society. Victims of abuse, both male and female, are more comfortable now than before to report cases as people are no longer naïve, especially as regards religious institutions. Although there is still a great deal of work ahead, many religious organisations are committed to making changes and regaining the trust of the people.

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