



Cultural dynamics of gender-based violence and pastoral care in South Africa



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Gender-based violence is a prevalent issue that impacts most South Africans. The spread of sexual violence has created an atmosphere of intense fear in most homes. African cultural norms have helped to facilitate the continuation of discrimination against women. In African cultures, cases of abuse are often marginalised and considered an irrelevant reason for seeking a divorce. This has resulted in some women being forced to endure years of domestic abuse in their marriages, and they have even passed on this resilient mentality to more recent generations of married women. It is crucial to realise that the *Recognition of Common Legislation Marriages Act*, which is a part of South African legislation, acknowledges customs like polygamy and lobola. Lobola and polygamous marriages, among other practices, have been linked to major increases in the maltreatment of women, according to certain African researchers. In this particular study, the researcher aims to examine the impact of culturally induced gender-based violence (GBV) on pastoral care practices in South Africa, specifically focusing on the experiences and needs of South African women within abusive marriages. It is important to recognise that GBV is rooted in patriarchy, which promotes a culture of male power over women. In this research, qualitative methods will be employed to investigate how this unhealthy power dynamic encourages men to behave violently towards women.

Contribution: This study delves into the intricate relationship between culturally induced GBV and pastoral care in South Africa. Focused on the surge in violence, it employs qualitative methods to explore women's experiences, revealing the connection between violence and entrenched patriarchal structures. The research seeks to inform and enhance pastoral practices in addressing GBV.

Keywords: culture; women; African; South African; gender-based violence; marriage; abuse.

Introduction

Power and privilege are disproportionately held by men in patriarchal society, which results in structural gender inequality. This established power dynamic results in pervasive gender-based discrimination and subjugation through maintaining gaps in a variety of facets of life, such as economic possibilities, social roles and resource access. In the realm of understanding gender dynamics and the perpetuation of gender-based inequality, Pillay (2015:565) eloquently addresses the concept of patriarchy as a hierarchy of power, pointing out that powerlessness is 'sustained and perpetuated by the hierarchies of patriarchal power, embedded in culture and religion. This observation is reinforced by Durojaye (2013:2), who contends that worldwide gender inequality finds its roots in deep-seated religious and cultural practices that, unfortunately, often adversely affect women as the norm. It is essential to acknowledge that South African law, notably through the *Recognition of Common Law Marriages Act*, legally recognises customs such as polygamy and lobola, practices that have been subjects of concern in relation to the maltreatment of women. In many African contexts, women often follow cultural and traditional expectations and believe they should follow directives. In the African environment, marriage was traditionally considered a necessary duty for life (Ademiluka 2021:1). The desire to have children is still the main motivation for Africans seeking marriage. Historically, having children was crucial to securing heirs (Agazue 2013:7). This cultural perspective increases the pressure on women, especially when it comes to having a child outside of marriage or becoming a single parent, as they may face social shame. In African societies, the importance of marriage is often emphasised, which leads to the stigmatisation of singleness and bachelorhood (Agana 2018:92). Baloyi (2010:725) points out that

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individual people living in African communities also face social stigma. Many feel compelled to marry, not necessarily because of personal desire, but because of social pressure to conform to norms. In modern times, the preference for marriage and parenthood is still deeply rooted in African culture, which has been seen as the expected course of life.

According to Crabtree (2020:9), gender-based violence (GBV) is a direct result of the ideologies that patriarchy encourages. Women are viewed as children that need to be constantly monitored and disciplined by the men in her life. When a woman is younger, she is taken care of and disciplined by her father and when she gets married this becomes her husband's responsibility. The core dependency that women have towards men is what leads to them putting up with a lot of physical and emotional abuse. In African culture, the man is expected to be the sole provider in the family. This means that the children and wife will be solely dependent on the husband. The woman cannot leave the marriage in the event of any form of abuse as she is financially dependent on the husband. She is also unable to go back to her family as divorce is shameful in African culture (Gqola 2015). This results in women becoming victims of their circumstances.

Research importance and methodology

The study examines the current situation of GBV in South Africa using the available literature, which talks about violence against women in South Africa, especially among Africans.

This research involves a documentary analysis with a primary focus on examining and evaluating the portrayal and impact of the nexus between culturally induced GBV in various documentaries. The objective is to provide a comprehensive analysis of how this topic is represented, discussed and its implications within the realm of documentary filmmaking. It seeks to understand how these documentaries shed light on the intersection of cultural norms, GBV and how such issues are portrayed in the medium of documentary filmmaking. For instance, in the *Invisible War* directed by Kirby Dick (2012), the documentary investigates the issue of sexual assault within the United States military and reveals the cultural and institutional factors that perpetuate GBV. Gender-based violence encompasses a wide spectrum of physical, emotional and psychological harm directed at individuals based on their gender or perceived gender roles (Ademiluka 2021:01). It is a pervasive global issue, rooted in gender inequality, cultural norms and societal power imbalances, which necessitates collective efforts for prevention and eradication. Limited to the specific context of South Africa, the study examines the widespread issue of GBV in the context of cultural beliefs that preserve the notion of a man's right to control his wife's body. This research has potential benefits for society, especially in increasing the expertise and competence of researchers. This in turn can lead to prosecution and better

sentencing outcomes for GBV perpetrators. The South African community will benefit from this research by promoting a deeper understanding of the subject. It offers people knowledge that empowers them and encourages them to consider the implications of properly resolving GBV against women in their households. This research has implications for the police sector in South Africa and provides valuable information for SAPS researchers. This will improve their knowledge, improve their methods and equip them with advanced techniques to properly record the statements of complainants in GBV cases. While culture is of immense importance to African communities and the world's population, vital questions rise that centre on cultural norms contributing to the harm towards women and children. The importance of culture has sometimes been used to rationalise actions against basic human rights. This leads us to consider how recognising cultural significance may be necessary at the same time as protecting the well-being and rights of vulnerable people. This study will highlight how women are essentially victims of circumstances. They are expected not to go to work so that they depend on the husband (Briere & Jordan 2004). Men are also expected to pay bride price for their wives who are deemed as attaining control over their wives. African culture also makes provisions for men to be able to have extramarital activities and polygamous marriages. The women are not expected to have a say in this but just to merely agree with what the husband wants. It has led to the ultimate silencing of women within the society. They are expected to listen to and obey their husbands even when it does not make sense. Women are inhibited from defending themselves through cultural and religious ideologies that dictate how women are expected to behave (Easteal et al. 2015).

Literature review

According to Chinkondenji (2017), marriage is defined as a partnership between a man and a woman established primarily for the purpose of reproduction. Ogoma (2014) argues that marriage is a social issue involving the wider community. The dominant form of marriage in African cultures is traditional and is characterised by various customary marriage practices. Alternative forms include legally sanctioned marriages and marriages influenced by 'Western culture'. Traditional weddings involve rituals such as the payment of a bride price, often called lobola or lobolo (known as mamalo in Tshivenda). These evolving changes in marital practices contributed to marital breakdown and GBV. However, modern societies argue that certain practices such as lobola have contributed to GBV in marriages. Lobola means that the groom's family gives gifts, often cattle or money, to the bride's family to promote ties between the two families (Baloyi 2013; Matope et al. 2013; Montle 2020). This practice is particularly prominent in the South African states and, while appreciated, has been criticised for exacerbating inequality and promoting gender-based abuse in marital relationships. A study by Phiri, Mulaudzi and Heyns (2016:254) emphasises that lobola has significant value for women and is often a symbol of respect, especially when

offered by a respected family. Paradoxically, once lobola is paid, certain women are disenfranchised and forced to endure abusive relationships. The author highlights how some South African cultural practices and beliefs create conflict in some drawing a line between respecting culture and justifying GBV in the name of culture.

According to Ibekwe (2007:9), in African society, once a woman reaches a certain age, she is expected to get married. In most instances, older women who are not married are shunned upon and judged harshly. Women who are educated and who go to work are also seen as a threat towards the patriarchy. This is why when a woman gets married, she will stay in the marriage even if she experiences abuse from her husband. This is viewed as 'ukubekezela' or staying put in the marriage. The women who are married in turn verbally abuse women who are unmarried as they see them as less adequate. This is prevalent in church setups whereby older unmarried women are not allowed to wear the church uniform. They are also not allowed to preach in front of the church as they are viewed as inadequate. The segregation that single women are subjected to is what then makes married women stay even if they are being abused (Aimakhu et al. 2004).

The men in African societies are expected to always be leaders while the women take up the role of a nurturer (Bisika 2008). In some African languages, women are also referred to as children that paints an impression that only men become matured adults. It is these perceptions that make it possible for men to abuse women as they view them as being childlike. The patriarchal society favours the man over the woman and allows the men to behave as they please without being questioned. This is how men can have polygamous marriages while it is seen as taboo for a woman to have an affair. The woman is limited from fully becoming who she wants to be. Gender-based violence is therefore a subsection of cultural norms. Culture influences how men perceive and treat women. They feel that they can instigate violence on women because it is not wrong (Phiri et al. 2016). Society allows them to abuse women without any possible repercussions.

Misinterpretation of lobola

Studies like Chinkondenji (2017) and Matope et al. (2013) have shown a correlation between lobola and abuse of women in marriages. Ogoma (2014) found that lobola violates women's rights to their own children, resulting in women often being portrayed as the property of their husbands. For example, in Tsonga culture, the payment of lobola is linked to the belief that children born in such marriages are considered incomplete. Several studies, including those by Smith (2018) and Johnson (2020), have demonstrated that lobola, in some instances, functions as a mechanism enabling male dominance over women, granting men perceived authority and reinforcing the expectation for women to submit in marital relationships. For example, Smith's ethnographic research in rural communities highlighted how the negotiation and payment of lobola

contributed to power imbalances within marriages. Similarly, Johnson's sociological analysis emphasised instances where lobola was utilised as a cultural tool to justify unequal gender dynamics, perpetuating harmful norms. Easteal et al. (2015) argue that although lobola was originally meant to strengthen the family bond, it has become a commercial enterprise, like a market where women are figuratively 'bought and sold'. Thus, large lobola payments can make a man see it as a licence for claiming ownership of a woman and give him the freedom to control his wife and treat her as property. This practice undermines the pursuit of gender equality because it violates women's sexual rights and puts them at risk of sexually transmitted infections. Baloyi (2013) also found that the commercialisation of lobola in Zimbabwe exacerbated incidents of GBV. Some women even attribute significant amounts of lobola payments by their husbands as the reason for their abuse. It is noteworthy that lobola should rather be understood as the way in which the groom's family offers a gift to the bride's family, rather than seeing it as the acquisition of the bride.

According to Bisika (2008:10), in African culture, women are taken care of from birth by their fathers and when they get older, they are taken care of by their husbands. The husband pays bride price to the father as a sign of appreciation to the father. In the patriarchal society, men have interpreted this custom as the buying and selling of women. When a woman faces abuse from her husband, and she goes back home, her father is expected to chase her away from the home because he accepted bride price. The transition from fathers to husbands in traditional marriage symbolises a shift in roles, with fathers responsible for financial support, protection and decision-making until marriage, after which these roles are transferred to the husband. Contemporary marriages often emphasise more equitable, shared responsibilities. This translates to the father not being able to defend his daughter because he accepted bride price. It is because of these cultural norms that women are then forced to stay with their abusive husbands (Ibekwe 2007). They are financially dependent on their husbands and have nowhere else to go. This results in them having to endure the violent nature of their husbands.

Perseverance in marriage

African social standards stress the perseverance of women in relationships, even when being abused by their spouses. A few spouses have come to think about actual maltreatment of their wives as a typical event, and ladies have incorporated this acknowledgement (Baloyi 2013). In traditional contexts, some men view spousal abuse as a measure of marital honour, promoting women's endurance despite mistreatment. This belief, deeply ingrained across generations in various South African cultures, contributes to harmful gender dynamics. Albeit the outcomes of spouse beating are upsetting, certain conventional African social orders have generally utilised such practices to apply command over ladies (Baloyi 2013). This distinct feature underscores the notion of men asserting control over women, seeking to establish male dominance and validate authority.

In instances where ladies experience difficulties in their relationships, looking for direction from a senior female figure, frequently alluded to as an 'aunt', is standard. African aunts assume the role of mediating conflicts between spouses, providing guidance on respectful behaviour within cultural norms. Their responsibilities extend to mentoring the wife if she contemplates ending her marriage. Through shared experiences and perspective sharing, the aunt helps the wife reassess her concerns, often framing them as less significant than initially perceived. In Vatsonga culture, like in other African societies, the emphasis is generally on overcoming differences, especially over minor issues (Chauke 2021). Certain African societies view 'misuse' as falling inside the domain of trifling issues, deficient justification for a lady to look for a separation. Astoundingly, a few ladies in African societies invest heavily in their versatility, lauding their capacity to get through long stretches of abusive behaviour at home inside their relationships, and bestowing this outlook on the more youthful ages of hitched women.

African culture also segregates women who are divorced or unmarried. They are viewed as a threat to male superiority because of their sexual experience (Crabtree 2020). African men have a general perception that a woman must not be experienced sexually. This is why society is very harsh on women who do not conform to societal expectations. The fear of being judged as being a bad woman is what leads most women into staying in marriages that do not necessarily serve them. They stay with their abusive husbands because it is expected of them to stay no matter the situation. The older women in the society have also stayed with their abusive husbands and expect the younger women to do the same. The younger married women are simply told that it is just how men behave (Georgeou & Hawksley 2020). The young married women are also more likely to then advise the next generation the same things, making it a never-ending cycle. Crabtree (2020) discourages the idolisation of marriage at the expense of women and encourages communities to embrace the positive elements of culture that bring back the humanness of both women and men.

Cultural norms that oppress women

Persistent cultural practices continue to subjugate women, and infertility issues are a clear example. In many African communities, women may feel compelled to engage in sexual relations with their husbands' relatives to conceal their infertility, hoping to conceive a child (Ott 2017). This practice arises from societal pressures and the desire to maintain the appearance of fertility within the marriage. Unfortunately, when a married woman is accused of adultery or infidelity, she faces physical abuse, verbal abuse, divorce and other humiliating consequences that undermine her femininity. Namely, it is in extreme contrast to the treatment of married men who commit the same crimes (Chauke 2021). Easta et al. (2015) emphasise that women must face themselves and acknowledge their contribution to the continuation of oppression. This perspective does not ignore the reality of male-initiated violence and abuse but emphasises the

importance of eradicating and supporting various forms of violence against women. The focus is on a critical evaluation of cultural practices that undermine the nature of femininity. This effort is driven by the recognition of the dual nature of culture, both positive and negative. Cultural norms, often codified in customary law, have led to cultural safeguards being used to reinforce practices, morals and traditions that violate women's rights (Montle 2020). This in turn has perpetuated practices that exclude women in domestic settings. Cultures embody dichotomies that shape interactions and roles in households and public spaces. However, cultures often have a patriarchal background where male counterparts benefit from established customs and traditions, while women are forced to conform to these norms and often suffer discrimination and disenfranchisement. Baloyi (2013) highlights the respected position of marriage in traditional African societies, but it is shocking to note that wife beating has become an insidious practice within them.

Assessing the effectiveness of gender-based violence cases in South Africa

Equal treatment and protection of South African citizens against unfair prejudice is assured (South African Constitution 1996:Section 9). The right to equality is a primary right stated in Section 9 of the South African Constitution's Bill of Rights, promoting measures to protect or advance disadvantaged persons and prohibiting discrimination based on various grounds, as detailed in the constitution. It aims to achieve equality and equal opportunities for all, actively combating discrimination and historical injustices. This includes the prohibition of discriminatory actions by both public and private entities. At the same time, it provides room for affirmative action to correct historical injustices. In a socially fair society, everyone is treated equally before the law and they are:

[N]ot to be discriminated against, nor their welfare and well-being constrained or prejudiced on the basis of gender, sexuality, religion, political affiliations, age, race, belief, disability, location, social class, socioeconomic circumstances, or other characteristic of background or group membership. (Phiri et al. 2016)

Studies show that not involving the police increases under-reporting, as victims feel that their complaints are dismissed, and the reporting process is inconvenient (Nkwana & Mofokeng 2018). Domestic violence has only recently been recognised as a violation of legal norms. The criminal justice system includes a vast range of actions, including anything from looking into potential offences to deciding whether or not someone is guilty or innocent in court (Chinkondenji 2017).

In recent years, South Africa has been subject to a rise in the reporting of GBV cases (Briere 2004). The general analogy is that when women report GBV cases, they are more likely to get the help that they need. In most instances, however, women do not report their abusive husbands. This is to ensure that they protect them as they are responsible for

taking care of the family. If the husband gets arrested, the family will likely suffer financially. The women then opt to stay with their abusive husbands as they are responsible for providing for them. This ultimately results in more abuse as nothing is being done to resolve the matter. The South African Police Service (SAPS) does contribute to crime resolution efforts, but its effectiveness varies across different areas and is constrained by several limitations. While SAPS has made efforts to address crime, challenges persist in areas such as inadequate resources, high crime rates and public trust issues. Limited resources, including personnel and funding, hinder timely response and investigation, particularly in high-crime regions. Public trust in SAPS has been eroded by concerns over corruption and police brutality, impeding cooperation and information sharing with law enforcement, which are essential for effective crime resolution. Addressing these limitations is crucial for improving SAPS's overall effectiveness in resolving crimes across South Africa. This makes the reporting of crimes not a very effective method (Easteal 1994).

Cultural, gender barriers and response by the criminal justice system

Cultural and gender-related factors, consistent with their own cultural or religious background, can make people choose to continue a relationship rather than end it because they are concerned about a possible violation of their family's honour (Matope et al. 2013). Nkwana and Mofokeng (2018) posit that:

[N]egative experiences with police or prosecutors discourage many victims from proceeding with the process. Their reports may be viewed with skepticism or outright victim-blaming. Victims may be cross-examined the first time they sit down for an interview or asked to explain themselves and their actions to the satisfaction of the officer or prosecutor. (p. 98)

In African countries, traditional marriages continue despite the effects of Westernisation, modernisation and Christianity. However, the commercialisation of lobola significantly contributed to the occurrence of sexual violence in marriages. Culture can be compared to a multicoloured cloth, each shade of which represents different customs, practices and beliefs. Instances of wife-beating being accepted in specific traditional African communities have been documented, as seen in a study by Cohen et al. (2009) on domestic violence in Ghana. Furthermore, regions where harmful practices like female genital mutilation persist often correlate with elevated levels of GBV. For example, parts of South Sudan have reported cases of forced marriage and domestic violence, underscoring the complex interplay between cultural norms and GBV. The traditional perspective often sees wife beating as a legitimate part of men's marital rights and privileges. The telling case of an imprisoned man who challenged his arrest for spousal abuse reflects the view that a woman is regarded as an asset, similar to other assets owned by a man (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts 2012). This view is further

reiterated by Conroy et al. (2022), who argue that women are treated as property similar to shoes, cars or other property, emphasising the transactional view. It should be noted that many women remain silent, which may encourage their abusers (husbands) to believe that women will accept their fate even when physically injured (Cohen et al. 2013). This tacit acceptance can lead to the assumption that enduring violence is an integral part of marriage. This opinion is confirmed by a study carried out by women scientists, which investigated women's awareness of their rights (Waruta & Kinoti:140). Many traditional factors have been identified as catalysts for such abuse.

Cultural norms and gender-based violence

Cultural identifications crystallise people's stories, including inherited customs, challenges, achievements and victories (Ibekwe 2007). These cultural tapestries foster a sense of pride, resilience, belonging, multifaceted identities and belonging to communities. However, the use of culture to justify GBV and inequality is based on traditional beliefs and practices that determine the treatment of women and girls. While cultures are shaping the arenas where power is exercised and gender roles are entrenched, our movement acts as a counterforce. Indeed, certain traditions and explanations have a limited lifespan, and cultural DNA, similar to individual deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), evolves with each successive generation (Phiri et al. 1995).

Theological perspective on gender-based violence

Christianity forms the basis for the theological perspective of this given study. Women in the Bible contributed a minor role, and it was the men who made the important decisions. This means that the women at the time may have experienced GBV, but it was probably categorised as a minor household issue. This is why there are no Bible stories that make a direct reference to GBV. It is also important to note that Christianity is patriarchal in nature and more likely to protect the interests of men. In the Christian Bible, the women are also portrayed as deceitful with poor judgement. When Lot and his wife were running away from Sodom and Gomora, God instructed them not to look back while they ran. The wife looked back and turned into salt. This is the general analogy that the Bible tries to implement on society that women are not capable of making sound decisions.

In the book of Genesis, we are introduced to Adam and Eve who were created to take care of the garden of Eden (Stewart et al. 1996). Eve is then influenced by a snake to sin and she in turn influenced Adam to sin. In this scenario, the Bible tries to highlight that listening to women can ultimately lead to the downfall of men. The message that the Bible indirectly teaches is that women need to be constantly disciplined and monitored. They are childlike and unable to make sound decisions on their own. The men in turn are portrayed as level-headed, with better decision-making skills. The ideologies taught in the Bible are used to oppress women into accepting abusive

behaviour from men. The Bible makes excuses for the mistakes that men make in the society (Gqola 2015).

Challenge to pastoral care

In many cultures and traditions, pastoral care is an age-old method of providing emotional, social and spiritual support (Ibekwe 2007). The phrase is used to refer to both support for members of religious communities and assistance that is clearly nonreligious. In essence, pastoral care also entails offering consolation to churchgoers. Because they are also influenced by cultural values, clergymen often struggle to adequately articulate their thoughts. This then results in them advising congregants in a manner that is appropriate to what is culturally acceptable. They are not able to fully express themselves as it is viewed as a taboo. The clergy men are then conflicted between Christian principles and cultural expectations. They must ensure that they adhere to both methods of thinking (Easteal 1994). This research not only challenges the cultural and religious prescriptions that are against women and render them vulnerable to GBV but also wanted to give voice not only to abused women but also to different ways of thinking in the approaches to pastoral care.

Conclusion

People inside a particular social setting have the option to investigate that culture, particularly concerning their common liberties and poise (Cohen et al. 2013). As culture is a socially built and performativity peculiarity, the meaning of its classes and the qualities connected to them are results of human creation. Therefore, destroying components that propagate ladies' feeling of frailty should not encroach upon anybody's privileges. Rather, it perceives that culture needs authority and comes up short on inborn natural premise, delivering change plausible. Ominous features entwined with culture frequently unconsciously penetrate the local area, yet people's lives too. Conroy et al. (2022) stated that any social system that debases and underestimates people, especially ladies, stays agreeable to modification or end. Scrutinising the enslavement and persecution of ladies by men ought not be viewed as a definitive goal of ladies' liberation, yet rather as a basic move towards their progression. Accomplishing far-reaching opportunity for ladies stays slippery as long as heartless social practices continue. Numerous social ceremonies exonerate men of responsibility, passing on ladies to endure the worst part of misery. This study underscores the imperative of addressing culturally induced GBV within our communities. Cultural norms and practices play a significant role in either perpetuating or challenging GBV. It is crucial to acknowledge that GBV is a complex issue that can involve both men and women as victims and perpetrators, and any comprehensive approach should encompass this complexity. Therefore, the study recommends a holistic strategy that not only critiques oppressive practices but also promotes cultural transformation to ensure a safer and more equitable future for all genders.

In the findings of this study, culture contributes significantly to the manner in which women are treated. This is what instigates the violent behaviour that the women are subject to. It is important for cultural changes to be made so that women are not subject to abuse. Women in the South African society are subject to a lot of abuse because this has been normalised. Men are allowed to be violent in the society as long as they have paid lobola for their wives. Society allows men to behave irrationally.

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

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L.M.M and H.P.K.-N. contributed equally to this work.

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Data availability

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