



Empowerment of women victims of domestic violence in Ntabethemba, Tsolwalana Municipality : An ecclesiastical function of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of South Africa

Thomakazi Mraji
PhD Candidate
Department of Theology
University of Fort Hare
South Africa

and

Dr. Reuben Z. Rashe*
Department of Theology
University of Fort Hare
South Africa
Email: RRashe@ufh.ac.za

Corresponding author*

Abstract

This paper describes a study of rural areas in Ntabethemba, Tsolwana Municipality which is an administrative area in the Chris Hani District of the Eastern Cape in South Africa. It focuses on empowerment of women victims of domestic violence which the Evangelical Presbyterian Church is expected to address. The role of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in empowering women victims of domestic violence is clearly defined and the programmes that can be offered are suggested. The paper is informed by a qualitative approach using a case study design. It also used interviews complemented by a focus group discussion as data collection methods. In this study, thirty-two participants were selected through the use of a purposive sampling technique. The study revealed the following thematic findings: (1) Unreported cases of domestic violence, (2) Negative attitude towards domestic violence, (3) Misconception about domestic violence (4) Lack of resources within EPCSA, (5) Unavailability of support programs of domestic violence (6) Lack of congregants' trust in the Church, (7) fear of clergy to be involved in domestic violence issues and (8) negative effects due to the church's silence. This paper made the following recommendations: (1) Clergy Training on Domestic violence issues, (2) Seminars and workshops (3) Support groups for victims of domestic violence, (4) Fundraising Projects and (5) Referrals. Thus the involvement of the Church in the social development of women victims of domestic violence appears to be a very meaningful way of inspiring hope in them. This involvement flows out of Christ's mission to set the oppressed free (Luke 4:18) which the church is seeking to promote.

Keywords: Evangelical, Presbyterian, women, victims, empowerment, liberation

Introduction

Research has shown that the Presbyterian church has not taken a concrete position on issues of domestic violence against women in rural areas. Almost every day, and on a global level, women are murdered, physically and sexually threatened and humiliated by their partners, actions that threaten their human rights, dignity and self-worth. Therefore, there is a need for the church to establish programs that will help to develop social awareness of women victims

of domestic violence in order to be able to understand and respond or positively react to issues of domestic violence that arise and their serious negative impacts.

Background

Domestic violence is one of the most vicious and widespread challenges facing the church in the twenty-first century. According to Rashe (2008: 25), “the term *domestic violence* is used to describe actions and omissions that occur in varying relationships” Rashe (2008: 26) further argues that “domestic violence is a complex phenomenon that occurs when the abuser exercises power over the victim, who is captive in an intimate relationship”. Iyakaremye (2010: 23) asserts that “domestic violence takes several forms according to the way it is perpetrated” She argues that it is generally a physical act causing harm to the victim such as slapping, punching, kicking, shoving, choking, stabbing and shooting using weapons like guns, knives, forks, sjamboks, knobkerries, harmer or axe. However, domestic violence may come in many forms. Rashe (2008: 26) asserts that there are five different forms, namely, emotional abuse and economic abuse, to name the few. Iyakaremye (2010: 24) concurs with Rashe when saying, “Domestic violence takes emotional, verbal or psychological forms, expressed in a conduct which makes the targeted person feel useless or not good enough” She further states that “Domestic violence takes an economic form when the abuser uses money or other economic property or activity to undermine the targeted person”. Domestic violence is also a serious problem that threatens the lives of people in rural areas as well as in urban areas; at most times, it is believed to be violence carried out by men against women. However, literature reveals that domestic violence is also inflicted on men by women. Hayes (1998: 7) suggests that “domestic violence is not a gender issue; it is a social issue affecting men, women and children.” According to Lynetta (2011:13), “Domestic violence against men occurs every day, but very little is known about the actual number of men who are in a domestic violent relationship.” This study focused on domestic violence against women in rural areas in South Africa.

According to Asay *et al* (2014: XVI), “domestic violence occurs between intimate partners and it is an attempt to control the behavioural, emotional, and/or intellectual life of another person and to diminish or prevent that person’s free choice.” In trying to define domestic violence, it has numerous nuances and it can manifest as domestic abuse, spousal abuse, child abuse or family violence, and the notion of preventing or depriving another person’s human rights or free choice is central, Having understood the consequences of domestic violence, such as: suffering from threats, intimidation, isolation and fear, the Church as the society’s support system which has the social responsibility of dealing with social problems, needs to play its role against this pandemic called domestic violence against women. The role to empower and support women victims of domestic violence clearly depends on how to deal with issues of domestic violence, especially in rural areas where it is almost at ‘epidemic’ proportions in certain areas.

However, the great concern is that the Church has said very little, and not much has been done by the Church for women victims of domestic violence. It has been observed that women victims of domestic violence who are living in rural areas are not aware of domestic violence as a violation of their basic human rights and that most women victims of domestic violence do not know how to respond to issues of domestic violence when these arise. Therefore, it is appropriate for them to be empowered and supported in this issue. The assumption is that if the Church could play its role and make its task to minister to women victims of domestic violence and teach women about domestic violence against women, women would be able to better understand and deal with the issue of domestic violence against them and have better understanding of how to deal with it..

Prevalence of domestic violence

In an unpublished study that we conducted focusing on the prevalence of violence against women in Ntabethemba, Tsolwana Municipality, it appeared that domestic violence against women is a serious prevalent problem in that area. Most women are still victimised by their husbands and partners. The most prevalent forms of abuse in Ntabethemba were the following: wife battering and marital rape, it appeared that most husbands victimised their wives by physically and sexually assaulting them. They physically assault them by hitting, punching and pushing them and sexually assaulting them by having un-consensual sex with them. However, most women in Ntabethemba do not consider wife battering and unconsensual sex as abuse.

Understanding the concept: Empowerment and victim empowerment

In this study, the term *empowerment* is used to refer to the restoration of people's value and strength to handle life's problems. Malinga (2016: 20) explains, "Empowerment is about gaining power by the powerlessness to challenge the ideologies of patriarchy that created inequalities between men and women" She further argues that "empowerment fosters capacity and power in people, which they use to better their lives by acting on important issues". This means that empowerment helps people who have lost their respect, dignity and ethical values in the process of being disempowered. Victim empowerment is used to refer to restoration of people's value, strength and self-worth lost through acts of domestic violence and suchlike.

According to Berns (2009:154), "once someone has been labelled a victim, advocates, social service workers and others aim to help the victim." In this study, *victim* refers to any woman who has experienced domestic violence and those women who have lost their power. Therefore, there is a need of victim empowerment in order for the victims to regain their power. Presser and Sen (2000:5) understand empowerment to mean a "process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives". According to Berns (2009:154), there are three levels of empowerment as described in the social literature, namely: personal, interpersonal and political empowerment.

Berns (2009:154) further states that achieving personal empowerment involves recognising and identifying the power one already has. On the interpersonal type, people increase their skills at influencing others; political empowerment involves social action and a process of transferring power between groups. It is important to empower women victims of domestic violence because once they are empowered, they will gain skills and self-confidence to build support programs which will definitely be useful in bringing about change in our churches as well as help women victims of domestic violence overcome the horrific effects of powerlessness.

Choudhuri (2008:154) describes victim empowerment as a "model that emphasizes respect for victims." Choudhuri (2008:154) states that "along with empowering victims, victim empowerment equips victims for further rehabilitation and provides them with a sense of control over their lives." Finally, Choudhuri (2008:154) states that "the victim empowerment model is committed to equipping women with tools to break the cycle of violence." Therefore, a victim empowerment model should be established by churches to help women victims of domestic violence to regain respect and a necessary sense of control over their lives.

Design and Methodology

The study was conducted in Ntabethemba, Tsolwana Municipality. Ntabethemba is a rural area that lies in the Southern part of the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. It has about eleven rural villages, including Thornhill, Backle's Farm, Zola and Mitford - villages which the study focused on. It was named after a mountain called *Ntabethemba* (*Ntabethemba* is a Xhosa name that means "Mountain of Hope). The name goes back to when the people of

Ntabethemba arrived there after they had been removed from twenty-three villages in Herschel and Sterkspruit to Thornhill between 1976 and 1977.

The study used a qualitative paradigm and an exploratory research style. It also employed in depth one-on-one interviews, with 32 participants complemented by focus group discussions with 65 congregants as methods of data collection. The study used non-probability sampling methodology, specifically the purposive sampling technique. The data was analysed qualitatively through content thematic analysis which used an interpretative approach and textual presentation.

Study findings

The study focused on one main research question which sought to understand the participants' perception on why the church is not fully involved in the ministry of women victims of domestic violence empowerment.

Thematic analysis of findings

Below is a tabular presentation of the study's themes in Table 1.

Table 1: Study themes

Theme & Subtheme No.	Theme Description
1.	Unreported Cases of Domestic Violence within EPCSA
2.	Negative attitude towards Domestic Violence
3.	Misconception about Domestic Violence
4.	Lack of Resources in the EPCSA
5.	Unavailability of Support Program of Domestic Violence
6.	Lack of Congregants' trust in the Church
7.	Fear of Clergy to be involved in Domestic Violence issues
8.	Negative effects due to Church's silence

Unreported Cases of Domestic Violence within EPCSA

It is assumed that one of the contributing reasons EPCSA does not involve itself in issues of domestic violence is that although the Church is aware of domestic violence; women hardly ever come forward to report to the church any acts of domestic violence. Women victims of domestic violence in Ntabethemba are reluctant to seek help from the church. These women do not report violence because of fear of being embarrassed and judged that they are making false accusations. This may lead to social stigmas and blame being placed on women victims of domestic violence for raising such accusations about their abuser/s.

Women victims of domestic violence also fear destroying their husbands' reputation as Holcomb and Holcomb (2014) argue, "Most women are unable and unwilling to report offences because they are ashamed, afraid or simply misinformed. Some Christian women have been wrongly taught that their primary goal in life is to protect their husband's reputation irrespective of treatment and at all costs.

Negative attitude towards Domestic Violence

One of the contributing reasons that EPCSA does not involve itself in issues of domestic violence is the attitude the leadership and the congregants have towards domestic violence; there is a perception that it is the responsibility of social workers and police officers and not that of the Church. By this, EPCSA is shifting its responsibility to demonstrate its relevance to the community's social challenge and social development to other disciplines.

Misconception about Domestic Violence

There is also a misconception that domestic violence is a private or family matter. Instead of helping people gain insight on this phenomenon, EPCSA brings doubt and confusion in the lives of its congregants. This is because the Church is perceived as a place to offload burdens. It is because of this misconception that outsiders, particularly the EPCSA, as the church, is possibly reluctant to become involved in issues of domestic violence.

Lack of Resources in the EPCSA

Lack of resources in the EPCSA is one of the major reasons that hinder EPCSA from being involved in social development of women victims of domestic violence in Ntabethemba. The church is seen as always trying to assist on social issues; however, money has always been a problem because everything, in order to be fully implemented, needs money. This implies that EPCSA has no means to support women victims of domestic violence financially and is highly problematic.

Unavailability of Support Program of Domestic Violence

Another contributing factor is that there are no support programs within EPCSA to empower women victims of domestic violence. The EPCSA has not yet become active in the empowerment of women victims of domestic violence. The Church is aware of this social problem; however, it is not taking this problem very seriously and is not prepared to take responsibility toward supporting these women. Be that as it may, there is also a concern of financial stability within EPCSA that there is nothing they can do without needed vital resources.

Lack of Congregants' trust in the Church

There is lack of Congregants' trust in the Church. It was found that the church cannot be fully trusted by its congregants. People are too sceptic to come forward with their problems because the church today is ruled by social networks and media. Therefore, women victims of domestic violence may feel that their problems may be broadcast and this is an act that will very likely result in a social stigma being placed upon them.

Fear of Clergy to be involved in Domestic Violence issues

Clergy do not respond to issues of domestic violence because of fear in interfering in other people's businesses. They feel that they cannot jump and approach people to ask them if they are being abused in their houses or not, because they will seem as if they are 'putting their noses' where they do not belong. Therefore, they prefer to wait and to be approached by victims. Another contributing factor is the lack of training and education on issues of domestic violence among clergy members.

As much as they are aware of domestic violence, members of clergy are not trained or educated on how to deal with issues of domestic violence. Moreover, there is a concern that members of clergy are also perpetrators or victims of domestic violence themselves; therefore, they cannot respond to issues of domestic violence within their congregations. The reason is that most members of the clergy are acquaintances in Ntabethemba; that is why it is difficult for them to involve themselves in their congregations' problems as they may seem to be judging them. This may lead to clergy not being able to help themselves and the congregants in an effective manner.

Negative effects due to the Church's silence

The silence of the church, EPCSA in particular, leads to serious negative impacts on women victims of domestic violence and their children in rural areas. This silence could lead to excessive drinking of alcohol and drug abuse by both women victims of domestic violence and also their children - thinking that it is the only way to escape the harsh reality of a brutal existence. They can also have suicidal thoughts, thinking that it is better to die than leave their abusers and seek a life apart from them.

Another negative impact is that children who grew up in abusive homes may come to think it is acceptable to behave in an abusive manner to express their emotions; they are also at risk of becoming substance abusers. Furthermore, children who witness violent acts in their homes run away to escape violence and could easily become street kids. Women victims of domestic violence may also lose trust in the church as a place of refuge when encountering such problems.

In addition, the church, EPCSA in particular, can be negatively affected by its silence on issues of domestic violence. This silence may result in the EPCSA losing its value, mission and membership. Looking at these reasons, it is important to come up with a strategic plan to help the Church, EPCSA in particular, to perfectly execute its critical role in society. Breaking the silence will help the church change its ways of doing things and develop a support system that will allow EPCSA empower women victims of domestic violence and ring the bell to shake people's conscience on this matter.

The role of the church in domestic violence against women

The Church is perceived as an important resource in the community to provide guidance and assistance where needed, especially in social injustice issues such as poverty and domestic violence, to name but a few. In order for the Church to perfectly execute its role in the society, it needs to get involved in these issues by establishing programs that will develop social awareness of women victims of domestic violence. Such programs will help them better understand and be able to respond to issues of domestic violence. This would help to preserve the women's basic human rights, dignity and self-worth. The Church, as an agent of change, should be there for the welfare of people and give people hope and inspiring messages. Below are suggested programs that can be offered.

Recommendations

Clergy Training on Domestic Violence Issues

Members of clergy may not respond to domestic violence issues because they lack basic information on how properly deal with such issues. In most cases, members of the clergy do not receive proper training or training at all; even those who went to theological institutions have never received proper guidance on how to deal with domestic violence issues. The church should, therefore, understand its mission of education and send members of clergy to schools where they can get proper training in counselling victims of domestic violence. Members of clergy to schools may be educated on how to deal with issues of domestic violence such as identifying abuse symptoms. They may also attend theological training that has specific modules on counselling and domestic violence to gain insight, wisdom and experience on abuse.

Seminars and Workshops

The Department of Social Development shares a common mission with the Church such as providing counselling, support and guidance to those people in need, generally. Therefore, it would be helpful for the church to work in collaboration with the Department of Social Development to ensure that all members of the Church have basic information on domestic violence issues prior to acts of abuse and have adequate skills to handle domestic violence when it occurs.

Support Groups for Victims of Abuse

The Church, as a healing community, should design support group programs that will provide support, offer stability of the mind and assist in rebuilding self-worth in victims of domestic violence. It is suggested that people who can facilitate these support groups should be women in order for women victims of domestic violence to feel free and comfortable in sharing their stories. This initiative will also help to avoid male domination prevalent in our churches.

Social workers, nurses and other people from disciplines that have the same mission as that of the church should form part of these support groups so they may be able to offer their professional assistance to victims of domestic violence.

Fundraising Projects

Some victims of domestic violence lose their houses while some stay in the abusive relationship because of financial stability. Therefore, the Church, as an institution which follows the mission of Christ to free the oppressed, needs to design projects that will help to raise funds such as gardening projects and sewing projects to assist victims of domestic violence, especially those who have serious financial problems.

Referrals

It is necessary that the EPCSA have, in its database, all domestic violence helplines and all the nearest domestic violence shelters, and build relationships with them for referrals and emergency issues. It is also essential that the EPCSA build relationships with psychiatrists and psychologists for referrals of abused people.

Conclusion

The involvement of the Church in the social development of women victims of domestic violence seems to be a meaningful way of inspiring hope in them. This involvement flows out of Christ's mission to set the oppressed free (Luke 4:18). The paper has summarised the research findings into eight themes as discussed. An outline was given of the role of the Church in empowering women victims of domestic violence. It was pointed out that the Church should work in collaboration with social development to conduct educational workshops for ministers of the Word and congregants at large. It was also highlighted that the Church should form partnerships with relevant governmental institutions and NGOs for referrals when need be, for women victims of domestic violence. Lastly, it was pointed out that the Church should develop carefully planned and effective projects that will help to generate funds to help mitigate women abuse.

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